

# Does an expat turkey make sense during a pandemic? \*



CFlisi 13 hours ago · 6 min read ★



by C. Flisi

Last year at this time, my entire home looked and smelled different. The cabinets were dust-free, the chair covers and pillows were washed and fresh-smelling, the silver candlesticks were polished and gleaming. The kitchen smelled of chocolate cake, browned butter, cornbread, onion with sage. Turkey not yet; that would perfume the house the day before the feast.

One might suppose this was a normal American home

preparing for an onslaught of family for the holidays. But no, not one relative among my 16 guests last year, and only one other American. Eleven people had never been to my house before, and three of them I met for the first time on Thanksgiving Day.

That may sound strange compared to the usual US turkey dinner with family members, spouses, children whom you may see only once or twice a year, but you are related in some way. I mean, you KNOW them.

I am not related to the folks at my table, and may have never met some of them. Some I may never see again after the one dinner. But it's not strange for me. It's the way my expat T-Day tradition has evolved, and by now it seems normal. It's a natural progression for an expat who wants to introduce something that is wonderful and American to people in other countries whose idea of Thanksgiving is based only on Hollywood.

My vision has taken shape over the decades I have lived outside the US (mostly in Italy, my current home, but also in France, Spain, and the UK).

Our first family Thanksgiving abroad, our dining room had a table for eight. I did all the cooking and invited four of my Italian husband's relatives to join my husband, myself, and our two sons. The relatives came politely, ate copiously, but weren't enthusiastic about stuffed turkey. The next year I invited my husband's sister and spouse. Since we had two more places at

table, I asked an Italian friend and her husband to fill out the table. That made the conversation much more stimulating. The next year I invited a friend of my sons at school and his parents. This Italian family was excited to participate in a “real” American Thanksgiving. That enthusiasm for the dinner prompted the mother to offer to bring “something” to the meal. She was an extraordinary cook, so I happily accepted her offer, and the dinner was much richer for her contribution.

When we moved to southern France, we had a smallish kitchen but a *much* bigger house. I was meeting people from many nationalities through my work, and many expressed curiosity about *la fête du dindon*. Since we had plenty of space, tables, and chairs, I decided to invite as many people as we could accommodate: a table of eight headed by my husband, with Italian or French the predominant language, a table of eight headed by me, with English or Italian the predominant language, and a table of four to six for my sons and their friends, with whatever language happened to work best for them.

I issued invites to people who seemed curious about the US. Some were favorably inclined, some less so, and the latter, I thought, might soften their view if they saw the best of America through its most heartfelt holiday. The result was always a *mélange* of nationalities: one year our guests hailed from eight countries and spoke six languages among 23 guests. I decided not to invite the same people two years in a row. That ensured a new mix of viewpoints every time.

By now I had to assign seats at the tables, to make sure that French speakers were near at least one other French speaker, English and Italian idem. The most desirable guests were those who spoke all the predominant languages and therefore could be seated anywhere.

Invitees were always asking what they could bring, or offering specific specialties. So at this point I got organized about who would bring what, to avoid the problem of too many appetizers and not enough desserts, or vice-versa. The dinner was sit-down, but buffet-style for logistical reasons. One table for appetizers, one for the main course, one for desserts. Seconds were encouraged and the buffet turned out to be a good ice-breaker, since guests would ask each other what were cranberries and what was the purpose of *le stuffing*.

By the time we moved from the big villa in southern France to a small apartment in Treviso, Italy, the basics of my expat Thanksgiving were established. Our sons had left to study in the US, so there was no more “kids’ table,” but the rest was canonized: two tables of eight, a mix of guests who preferably did not know each other, as much diversity as possible in professions and backgrounds. My invitees were invariably Italian since tiny Treviso is not international like the Côte d’Azur. But variety was still possible. One year the COO of Benetton was a guest, one of the best-paid managers of Italy at the time, and so was a neighbor who had recently been widowed and was earning money by working at the racetrack of Treviso. There is an Italian expression, *dalle stalle alle stelle* (from the stalls to the stars), and our guest list that year

encapsulated the saying in spades.

When we moved from that small apartment with a large kitchen to a large apartment with a very small kitchen near Milan, I had to adjust. Two tables of eight were easy but the logistics of table arrangement were not. I decided that since my husband and I were at separate tables, and that worked out wonderfully (we didn't have to listen to each other's stories for the umpteenth time), every invited couple would also be separated. That alone ensured lively conversation across the board.

I continued to invite people I had met through work or community activities, and tried to make sure that invitees didn't know each other ahead of time. I sought a range of ages, from 20s to 70s, and professions, with professors, lawyers, and journalists mixed in with animal trainers, executives, and beauty pageant winners.

A printed copy of Mark Twain's description of Thanksgiving and a full menu were left at each guest's place. I wrote a T-Day prayer in Italian, and read it aloud to everyone before we sat down for dinner. Admittedly this "prayer" was more political than you might hear at your average Norman Rockwell table, but it was my way of cueing in non-American guests to an enlightened Yankee viewpoint.

New people each time meant the menu was never the same. Yes, the turkey, stuffing, gravy, potatoes, and cranberry sauce were from my kitchen and didn't change much. Yes, I found a

reliable butcher so was assured a consistently top-quality bird. (That had been an ongoing issue in France. One year there had been a month-long transportation strike, so the turkey I ordered didn't appear. I wound up dashing across the border to Italy and grabbing every package of turkey parts I could find). Yes, I always made one appetizer, one side dish, and at least one cake and cookie tray, because invariably a guest or two would drop out last minute so redundancies for everything were needed. Besides, you can never REALLY have too many desserts.

But all the rest was new each year, and that made the food as stimulating as the conversation. One year a Japanese couple brought precision-cut jewel-like sushi appetizers. Another year a Brazilian writer brought a banana-coconut cake that practically samba-ed off the table. An Argentinian-born Italian brought empanadas from her birth country. A Scottish guest brought authentic Scottish salmon, and he carved it with a flourish, dressed in full highland regalia and kilt.

No Thanksgiving meal from my childhood could match these experiences. I miss my family, but my sons are grown and have created their own traditions in their own homes. Me, I have created a new tradition with a constantly changing family that every year seems to enjoy a slice of expat Americana along with their turkey.

Except not this November 26, 2020. So this year I am sending a note to every one of my by-now hundreds of previous guests, thanking them for having been part of Thanksgiving in the past

and looking forward to sharing turkey with them in a post-Covid future. It is a reminder for them and for me that this holiday is more than the observance of a Pilgrim harvest first celebrated in Massachusetts almost 500 years ago. It is a celebration of the family of mankind . . . in my very own dining room.

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