

HOME DINING RECREATION TRAVEL COMMUNITY HEALTH STYLE

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GIVE THANKS
GIVE BACK

THANKSGIVING *Wisdom*

Local food pros unveil simple ways to take traditional fare from good to great.

BY ELIZABETH TURNER

CHEFS. THEY CAN BE JUST LIKE US: They're happy to cook a Thanksgiving turkey in one of those oven bags from the supermarket, and they like their holiday pie with a side of vanilla bean ice cream. But then they'll pivot and do something spectacular, like roasting winter squash on an aromatic bed of fresh sage or pimping out a pecan pie with whipped cream rosettes and crispy crumbled bacon. Best of all, they're generous and willing to share their wisdom and creativity with the rest of us.

Read on for some serious kitchen advice and recipes for November's No. 1 feast.





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Raise a Glass

PEAR AND CINNAMON COCKTAIL WITH BOURBON
AND CORIANDER HONEY

Makes 6 drinks

Get the party started with a seasonally inspired drink recipe from Alberto Battaglini, bar manager and mixologist at S.Y. Kitchen (sykitchen.com) in Santa Ynez.

- 4½ ounces honey
- 27 dried coriander seeds
- 4½ very ripe peeled pears, each halved lengthwise
Dried cinnamon for muddling and garnish
- 18 ounces bourbon
- 9 ounces lemon juice
- 2¼ ounces pine liqueur, such as Zirbenz Stone Pine Liqueur
of the Alps, optional
- 5 dried figs, such as black Mission figs, sliced or halved
- Ice

Twenty-four hours before serving time, combine honey and coriander seeds in a small bowl. Muddle, and allow ingredients to infuse overnight in an airtight container. Remove coriander seeds before assembling drinks.

To assemble each drink: Place a pear half in cocktail shaker, sprinkle lightly with cinnamon, and muddle. Add 3 ounces bourbon, 1½ ounces lemon juice, ¾ ounce (about 1½ tablespoons) coriander-infused honey, ¾ ounce (about 2¼ teaspoons) pine liqueur, and ice. Shake well, double strain into a glass, and garnish with a dried fig and sprinkle of cinnamon.

The Cozy Starter

BUTTERNUT AND KABOCHA SQUASH SOUP
WITH FRIED LEEK TOPPING

Serves 6 to 8

Emily Harwell, of Valley Soup Mama (valleysoupmama.com), a homemade soup delivery service in Los Olivos, swears by this velvety blend of butternut and kabocha squash. It's easy to make, and it will taste even better if made a day or two ahead. For best results, make the Fried Leek Topping the day of the feast.

SOUP

- 1 butternut and 1 kabocha squash (2½ pounds combined), unpeeled, sliced lengthwise, and seeded
- Olive oil, for brushing squash
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 1 leek, quartered lengthwise, white and light green parts thinly sliced (1½ cups)
- 1 teaspoon salt, plus more to taste
- 4 cups vegetable broth
- 1 cup water, or more if needed
- 2 sprigs fresh thyme
- 3 thinly sliced fresh sage leaves
- 1 bay leaf
- Pinch of cayenne pepper
- Salt and pepper to taste
- 1 cup sour cream, for garnish

FRIED LEEK TOPPING

- 1 leek, quartered lengthwise, white and light green parts thinly sliced (1½ cups)
- 2 tablespoons flour
- Pinch salt and pepper, plus more, to finish, to taste
- ½ cup olive oil

Preheat oven to 350°F. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper. Brush cut sides of squashes with oil, and place facedown on sheet. Bake until squashes are soft to the touch, about 25 minutes, depending on size. Allow to cool, then peel.

Over medium heat, melt butter in Dutch oven or heavy-bottomed pot. Add leek and 1 teaspoon salt, and cook until leek starts to brown, stirring occasionally. Add squash pieces to pot. Add broth, 1 cup water, thyme sprigs, sage, bay leaf, and cayenne pepper. Increase heat, bring mixture to a simmer, and cook about 15 minutes.

Remove and discard thyme sprigs and bay leaf. Working in batches, puree soup in blender or use an immersion blender, until smooth. If necessary, thin soup with water for desired consistency. Season to taste with salt and pepper.

To make topping: Toss sliced leek in flour with a pinch of salt and pepper.

Heat oil in 12-inch skillet, add half of the sliced leek, and fry until golden brown, about 5 minutes. Using a slotted spoon, transfer fried leek slices to paper towel-lined sheet pan. Sprinkle with salt and pepper to taste. Repeat with remaining leek slices.

To serve, ladle soup into bowls, and top each serving with fried leek slices and a dollop of sour cream.





Sage Advice

SAVORY, SLIGHTLY PEPPERY SAGE IS A CLASSIC INGREDIENT IN HOLIDAY STUFFING, BUT THERE ARE OTHER WAYS TO WEAVE THIS FALL FAVORITE INTO THE MENU.

The Fried Sage Garnish If serving a dish that includes sage in the flavor profile (like the Butternut and Kabocha Squash Soup on page 68), consider garnishing it with crispy fried sage leaves, suggests Emily Harwell, aka Soup Mama. To make them, heat $\frac{1}{2}$ cup olive oil in a 12-inch skillet, drop in a few sage leaves at a time, fry for about 15 seconds, then remove to a paper towel-lined baking sheet to drain. Sprinkle with sea salt before serving.

Sweet Potatoes with Sage Brown Butter Francesco Pesce, chef de cuisine at Mediterraneo (med-rest.com) at the Westlake Village Inn, recommends making a sage brown butter for whipped sweet potatoes. For eight people, gradually heat 4 tablespoons of butter in a pan and add 8 fresh sage leaves. “You will see the butter change color as it heats up,” Pesce says. When it starts to smell nutty and turn light brown, take the pan off the heat, let it cool slightly, and carefully remove and discard the sage leaves. Mix the brown butter and the zest of 1 lemon into 3 pounds of mashed boiled sweet potatoes.

Compound Butter For another twist on sage butter, whip chopped fresh sage leaves into room-temperature butter. “Add a little sea salt to brighten up the flavor,” suggests chef Adrian Giese, executive chef at Mastro’s Restaurants (mastrosrestaurants.com). “You can rechill the butter or serve it slightly soft at the table so it’s easy to spread.” Try tucking $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch pats of this butter between the skin and the breast of the turkey before roasting it, he adds.

Sage-Roasted Delicata Squash Giese loves to roast half moons of delicata squash on a bed of sage. Delicata has a thin, edible skin that’s much easier to cut than butternut. Halve the squash lengthwise, remove the seeds, and cut it into $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch-thick half moons. Preheat oven to 400°F. Cover a rimmed baking sheet with fresh sage leaves, lay each piece of squash on one side, flesh down over the leaves, and roast for 30 to 35 minutes. “You get a nice golden-brown crust on the squash, and they give way on the inside to a tender, sweet flavor,” Giese says. He also suggests cherry-picking a few crispy leaves from the roasting pan to garnish the finished dish.



HOT TIP:
“If you’re
brining, do
not resalt the
turkey before
you put it in
the oven.”

—Phil Kastel,
vice president of culinary
and executive chef,
The Grill on the Alley

Carrot Toppers

Color Theory In fall, carrots appear in farmers’ markets in a rainbow of colors, says 805 *Living* contributor Brigit Binns, a cookbook author and co-owner of Refugio Paso Robles (refugiopasorobles.com), where she teaches cooking classes. “Choose from traditional orange, glorious yellow, dramatic purple, or pale white,” she says. “Or mix it up.” The visual interest pays off with very subtle differences in flavor.

Take the Plunge For an appetizer, serve petite carrots with a purchased aioli livened up with a touch of sweet, gentle heat. Stir in a pinch of piment d’Espelette (dried, ground chilies from the Basque region of France), suggests chef Clark Staub, owner of Full of Life Flatbread (fulloflifefoods.com) in Los Alamos.

Whole in Thyme “Served whole and tender, carrots add a rustic feel to any repast,” Binns says. She suggests peeling whole carrots and simmering them in salted water for about 8 minutes, until just tender. Drain well, then shock carrots in ice water, she says. Melt 1 tablespoon butter with 1 tablespoon olive oil in a pan and add carrots and a few sprigs of fresh thyme. Sauté over low heat until carrots are golden. Season with salt and pepper to taste.



Turkey Tips

Everybody Brines Elaine Andersen Morello, co-founder with husband Alberto Morello of Olio e Limone Ristorante, Olio Pizzeria, and Olio Crudo Bar (oliocucina.com) restaurants in Santa Barbara and Westlake Village, favors a wet brine with an Italian twist. “We use Sicilian sea salt only (no dried herbs) and filtered water, and the large brining bags you can get from Sur la Table,” she says. “Two full nights of brining in the refrigerator, flipping the bag over on the second day.”

Adrian Giese does a 12-hour wet brine with brown sugar, kosher salt, parsley, sage, and thyme.

Phil Kastel, vice president of culinary and executive chef for The Grill on the Alley restaurants (thegrill.com), is a huge fan of dry brining. He concocts a dry rub of salt, pepper, sugar, lemon zest, pink peppercorns, bay leaf, and oregano. “I put everything into a mortar and pestle, and I *smoosh* it all together,” he says. He rubs the mixture on his turkey, leaves it on 6 to 8 hours, then wipes everything off the next morning to make sure there isn’t too much salt.

Divide and Conquer Kastel likes to order a disassembled turkey from the butcher, so he can give the dark meat a head start in the oven. “That gives you even cooking and perfectly moist turkey,” he says. “I buy my turkey from Whole Foods, and when I place my order I ask the butcher to disassemble the leg and thigh, and they have it ready for me. I’ll roast my legs and thighs first, for a good 45 minutes, and then I add my breast.”

Bag the Bird “I like to use the bag, I feel like it makes the most juicy turkey,” says Giese of the roasting bags sold in supermarkets around holiday time. “It almost self-bastes the turkey,” he says, explaining that the moisture from the turkey rises to the top of the bag and continually drips back down over the bird. “The last 10 to 15 minutes, I do a low broil to get the skin crispy on the outside.” Cut the bag open with scissors to expose the skin, taking care to avoid the escaping steam, and make sure the turkey sits low in the oven as it broils. “It also helps you make a gravy at the bottom of the bag,” he says. Put celery, carrots, onion, and fresh herbs in with the turkey. When it’s done, transfer the juices from the bottom of the bag to a small pot. Add a roux (a browned mixture of butter and flour) to make gravy.



Next-Level Mashed Potatoes

The key to great mashed potatoes is to really salt the cooking water, according to Kastel. “The water should taste like the sea, because that’s your only chance to season and penetrate the potato when cooking,” he says. After draining the boiled potatoes, let them sit in the colander for 5 minutes before mashing them, he advises. “The steam is still escaping from the potato,” he says. “If you mash them right away, your mashed potatoes can become watery.”

What kind of potato is best? Depends on whom you ask. “We like to use a Yukon gold potato. It seems to be less starchy and has more of a nice buttery flavor,” says Kastel. Giese favors russets because they are starchy, but he echoes the soggy warning: “Boil them in water, but don’t cut them up too small.”

The other trick, according to Kastel, is to heat the butter, cream, and any other add-ins before mixing them into the potatoes—this helps keep the dish warm. “We’ll actually heat up our cream in a little pot, put some butter in there, and whatever seasoning we’re using—roasted garlic, salt, pepper, whatever it is.”

Want to try something a little different this year? Consider these tricked-out variations:

Lobster Mashed Potatoes It’s easy to dress up classic mashed potatoes with lobster, says Kastel. “You can get cooked lobster meat from Whole Foods,” he says, “and then sauté or heat it up in a little bit of butter because, again, you want to keep the lobster the same temperature as the mashed potatoes.” Fold the lobster into the mashed potatoes along with some chopped chives. Plan on at least 4 ounces of lobster per person.

Goat Cheese and Chives Soft goat cheese would be really nice because it’s creamy and would melt into the potatoes, notes Kastel. “Chives would be great with goat cheese as well,” he adds.

Spinach and Nutmeg Fresh spinach and a touch of nutmeg is an awesome combination in mashed potatoes, Kastel says. To 8 servings of potatoes, add a very light grating of fresh nutmeg to the warmed cream and butter, and mash in. Then fold in a bag of prewashed baby spinach and let the heat of the potatoes wilt the leaves.

The Italian Job In the Morello household, mashed potatoes get flavored with vegetable broth, dried Sicilian oregano, thyme, and rosemary, onion powder, freshly minced garlic, Sicilian sea salt, white pepper, and butter, says Elaine Andersen Morello. Garnish with chopped fresh Italian parsley.

Pie Tricks

Quite a few of our chefs advocate for keeping dessert simple, like serving pie with homemade whipped cream or a good vanilla ice cream. “When you’re eating pie, you don’t need a lot of extra flavors,” says Renee Linn, creator of pie recipes for Linn’s Fruit Bin (linnsfruitbin.com) in Cambria. “I love McConnell’s Vanilla Bean ice cream—McConnell’s is absolutely the best. It has very high butterfat content. It doesn’t have a ton of air whipped into it.”

If serving whipped cream, skip the can, and make it from scratch. “I like to sweeten my whipped cream with just a touch of honey because that actually gives it more body,” says Linn. And then whip in some cinnamon and a pinch of nutmeg.

Want to take it up a notch? Try these ideas:

Whip Up a Mascarpone Topping Giese suggests going all-in on richness with an amaretto- and nutmeg-flavored mascarpone cream. Whip two 6- to 8-ounce tubs of mascarpone cheese in a standing mixer using the paddle attachment, then add 2 tablespoons of amaretto and a light sprinkling of nutmeg. Sweeten to taste with powdered sugar. “That way, you won’t have that graininess that you get from granulated sugar,” Giese notes.

Dress Up Pecan Pie With Bacon or Coconut For pecan pie, capitalize on the bacon trend, suggests Brandi McClellan-Toback, pastry chef at Lido at Dolphin Bay (thedolphinbay.com/lido) in Pismo Beach. “Use a little five-claw star tip to make 8 to 12 whipped cream rosettes around the edges of the pie, then crumble crispy bacon over the top.” Just make sure the bacon is very crispy. Or take some inspiration from German chocolate cake, and top a pecan pie with lightly toasted coconut flakes. “Those big coconut flakes are just gorgeous for presentation,” she says.

Pumpkin Picker-Uppers McClellan-Toback suggests garnishing a pumpkin pie with crumbled pumpkin-seed brittle or any nut or seed brittle. At Linn’s, pumpkin pies are garnished with a little piecrust leaf (cut from pie dough with a leaf-shaped cookie cutter) and a handful of Craisins. Add to that some good whipped cream.

Sky-High Apple Pie McClellan-Toback likes to use homemade apple chips to add visual interest to the all-American classic. Cut an apple into paper-thin slices with a mandoline, taking care to pop out the seeds with a paring knife while retaining the full shape of each slice. Soak the slices in lemon water for a few minutes. Arrange the slices on a parchment-lined sheet and bake at 200°F for about an hour.

They’re done if they pull easily off of the parchment, she says. “If you do them right, they should be nice and crisp, and the seed casings in the center make a pretty star shape. You can do whipped cream rosettes around the edges of the pie, and stand the apple chips in the rosettes to get some height and color on top of the pie.” ♦

Vintage tabletop props courtesy of Agoura Antique Mart.

