



## MY WEEK

# Alvin Hall



## Giving thanks for wonderful food and people

Thanksgiving, for me, has always been about the food. When I was in elementary school, cutting out orange and black construction paper silhouettes of turkeys, pumpkins, Pilgrims, Native Americans, and clusters of maize to represent the holiday, I was full of gustatory fantasies – my grandmother’s stuffing, my cousin Alberta’s bread pudding with raisins, my mother’s sweet potato pone, and the array of autumn vegetables, especially rutabagas (swedes) and fresh string beans, that made the meal so savoury and satisfying.

On Thanksgiving Day, when the meal was finally put on the table in the mid afternoon, I would eat and eat and eat some more. Invariably, my grandmother would comment that my eyes were bigger than my stomach. She knew I would feel overstuffed and lethargic, but happily full for the rest of the day. A nap soon followed.

Having been raised on a subsistence farm in Florida where we grew everything but the turkey and the dry goods (flour, meal, sugar, etc), I had little idea how the outside world celebrated Thanksgiving, except for the wholesome American

myth we saw pictured in magazines. This changed when I went to college in Maine. What I didn’t know, until they started to leave, was that virtually all my fellow undergraduates headed home by car, bus, and plane for the holiday. It was during this first freshman year exodus that I became aware that more people travel to family gatherings at Thanksgiving than Christmas, because it is a non-religious, family oriented national holiday. However, I could not afford to fly back to Florida to celebrate Thanksgiving with my family.

I remember someone referring to me as a ‘Thanksgiving orphan’. For me, there was no pity or shame in this. In fact, over the years I learned there was an upside – it made me available for invitations. These experiences became milestones in my personal and social development. They also deepened and expanded my understanding of family in America. That first Thanksgiving away from home, my college chemistry professor essentially told me that I would be having Thanksgiving dinner with his family – his wife and their three children.

He picked me up at my college dorm. I remember feeling so welcome when I arrived at their home in the Maine countryside. Everyone, even the children, was interested, interesting and excited to share their family’s meal with me. I deeply cherish the memory of this meal. There was a very traditional Thanksgiving dinner. I remember the vegetables were different from those I had grown up eating. They served roast potatoes and carrots with gravy, and, for dessert, there was pumpkin pie.

My family served a Southern potato salad and we always had sweet potato pie. When the turkey was done, my professor’s wife took a picture of skinny me taking that big turkey out of the oven. After graduation, I stayed in touch with my professor and his wife, and a couple of years ago after he died, his wife sent me that picture. A fond memory.

When I first moved to New York, far from my own family, for a few years a close friend and I made Thanksgiving reservations at restaurants, usually in fancy hotels. We loved every minute, especially having flutes of perfectly chilled Champagne placed in front of us as soon as we sat down. It felt so luxurious – and it was! I most remember the couple of times we pre-ordered roasted goose with potatoes cooked in the fat. The flavour was so extraordinary and bewitching that, to this day, neither of us recalls the rest of the meal.

At some point, probably when I was travelling for work and frequently not in New York for Thanksgiving, I went from being a ‘Thanksgiving orphan’ to a ‘Thanksgiving stray’. My best meal as a stray was, without doubt, at the home of long-time American friends in South Kensington, London. For years, they’d invite eight to 10 strays (mostly expats from different backgrounds) to their embracing Thanksgiving dinner.

Several people brought dishes made from cherished family recipes, such as mac and cheese, a green bean casserole, or an apple pie or bourbon pecan pie. My friends’ food always had a touch of Cajun spiciness. That same spiciness describes the warm, delight-filled conversations, reminiscing, and storytelling, lubricated by bottles of Rioja, that often went on until well after midnight.

Most of the Thanksgiving meals I’ve had – whether as an orphan, a stray, or that I made myself – have been traditional, with many recipes from Rombauer and Becker’s *The Joy of Cooking*. However, my go-to cookbook has long been *James Beard’s American Cookery*. One friend got so bored with roast turkey that he started smoking one for Thanksgiving instead. The flavour was delicious beyond expectations, especially when served with caramelised roasted Brussels sprouts. Trying to be kind has got me – and my waistline – into trouble. For a four-year period, I ate two meals every Thanksgiving Day. I couldn’t say no to either of the welcoming families without causing disappointment. So, I ate the first big meal in the middle of the afternoon in New York City, then a second, even bigger meal, in the early evening in New Jersey. I carefully managed what I ate – and drank – so I could get through the day without triggering indigestion and lethargy.

I have friends who can’t stand turkey. They usually roast a prime rib or bake a whole side of salmon. My vegetarian and vegan friends create plant-based dishes with robust, savoury, soul-satisfying flavours, often with recipes from *The Greens Cookbook* by Madison and Brown as well as the festive *Plenty* by Ottolenghi. This year, Thanksgiving feels even more meaningful. During last year’s celebration, there was caution, even fear, casting a dark cloud over the holiday and celebrations were smaller. This time, that pervasive dread will, I hope, be less.

Today, when I dine with long-time friends at a favourite restaurant that is due to close, I’ll think about and be thankful for the families who embraced me and fed me good food over the decades.