

Are you struggling with meal planning? Looking to change up your traditional Thanksgiving Meal?

I used to think a home-cooked Thanksgiving was like the clothes you change into at the end of a workday. Comfy, favored over time. But the analogy only goes so far, and inedibility of flannel is the least of it. Foodwise, you’re fond of what is familiar, and perhaps what is borne of family tradition. You develop a taste for it.

Even if you’ve never made a single Thanksgiving side dish before, a seasonal highway of recipes points the way. Therein lie the potential opposites of familiar: Can newfangled mashed potatoes measure up to memory? How crucial is it, really, to reproduce the burnished turkeys you see plastered across Instagram?

Here’s what I know: You will be cooking for others, and the tendency to rely on the classics makes all kinds of sense. Except . . . when you can be persuaded that a slight change in ingredients or preparation truly elevates the food — and that doesn’t mean topping it with shaved truffles.

Take those mashed spuds, for example. Even the most basic recipe has its limitations. The potatoes are often boiled till soft, then whipped with dairy. I’ve tested a few dozen variations over the years, and it wasn’t until I turned to this technique — roasting them, seasoned, with fat cloves of garlic on a sheet pan — that I realized that lots more potato flavor is retained rather than being drained away.

In this [**Garlicky Roast Potato Mash**](https://www.washingtonpost.com/recipes/garlicky-roast-potato-mash/16690/?utm_term=.2c6a63efb0b4), the potatoes are dry enough to be mashed right away, either with butter and milk or with a combo of vegan butter and vegetable broth. One roasted batch can be divided to accommodate all guests.

Garlicky Roast Potato Mash

Tested size: 8 servings

**Ingredients**

* 4 pounds medium-size Yukon Gold or yellow-fleshed potatoes, cut into chunks
* 4 to 6 large cloves garlic (peeled, left whole)
* 1 1/2 teaspoons celery seed
* 1 1/2 teaspoons powdered mustard
* 1 teaspoon sweet paprika
* 1/4 cup extra-virgin olive oil, or more as needed
* Kosher salt
* Freshly ground black pepper
* 4 to 6 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into small chunks
* 1/2 to 3/4 cup heavy cream or whole milk

**Directions**

Position a rack in the upper third of the oven; preheat to 400 degrees.

Combine the potatoes, garlic (to taste), celery seed, powdered mustard, sweet paprika and the 1/4 cup of oil in a large mixing bowl; toss to coat evenly, then spread on a large rimmed baking sheet, including all the oil. Season lightly with salt and pepper.

Roast (upper rack) for 40 to 45 minutes, stirring them once or twice, until tender, sizzling and lightly browned.

Immediately transfer the potatoes, garlic and all the pan drippings to a mixing bowl; use a potato masher to break it all down.

The mix should be seasoned well enough; add the butter and the cream (both to taste), then stir until melted and well incorporated. Serve warm.

VARIATION: As soon as you have mashed the mixture, add 1/2 to 3/4 cup no-salt-added vegetable broth and up to 4 tablespoons vegan butter, stirring until well incorporated. Drizzle with more oil, just before serving.

I looked for a centerpiece recipe that offered the same kind of ease, and found one in this [**Herb-Slathered Turkey**](https://www.washingtonpost.com/recipes/herb-slathered-turkey/16689/?utm_term=.9a027059af66). It’s a no-brine bird that gets slathered with lots of chopped fresh herbs stirred into . . . mayonnaise. Stands to reason that it would keep the meat as moist and juicy as the mayo-coated bluefish fillets I grill in summer.

By the time the turkey emerges from the oven, all visual trace of the mayo has disappeared. But its effect is unmistakable in thigh and breast.

Herb-Slathered Turkey

Tested size: 8-10 servings

##### Ingredients

* One 12- to 14-pound turkey, giblet packet removed
* 1 tablespoon kosher salt
* 1 tablespoon freshly ground black pepper
* 8 large sage leaves, coarsely chopped
* Leaves from 4 large sprigs thyme
* Leaves from 3 sprigs rosemary
* Leaves from 3 sprigs oregano
* 1 1/2 cups mayonnaise of your choice (do not use nonfat)

##### Directions

Position a rack in the lower third of the oven (remove the upper racks); preheat to 450 degrees.

Pat the turkey dry. Tuck the wings under by bending them back and folding them beneath the bird. Season with salt and pepper, inside and out. Place in a shallow roasting pan, preferably on a flat rack that fits inside the pan.

Coarsely chop all the fresh herbs; together is okay. Place in a bowl, then stir in the mayo until well incorporated. Use your hands to rub the herb-mayo mixture all over the turkey to coat it completely (even the underside).

Roast (lower rack) for 30 minutes, then reduce the temperature to 350 degrees and rotate the pan 180 degrees. Continue to roast for about 2 1/2 hours, rotating the bird 180 degrees once or twice, until the internal temperature of the breast meat registers 165 degrees on an instant-read thermometer, and the thigh meat registers 165 to 175 degrees (taken away from the bone). If the skin looks like it’s getting too dark, you can partially cover the turkey with aluminum foil.

Let the turkey rest for at least 30 minutes before carving. Strain the pan juices for pouring over the meat.

Tart Cranberry Relish

Tested size: 12-16 servings; makes about 2 1/2 cups

**Ingredients**

* 12 ounces fresh cranberries
* 12 to 14 fresh gooseberries, rinsed (see headnote)
* Flesh of 1 navel orange, coarsely chopped (no pith)
* 1/3 cup granulated sugar
* 1/2 cup packed light brown sugar
* 1/2 cup pine nuts, toasted (see NOTE)
* 1/3 cup Grand Marnier or cherry heering (may substitute 3 tablespoons pomegranate molasses mixed with 2 tablespoons water)

**Directions**

Combine the cranberries and gooseberries in a food processor. Pulse just long enough for them to be coarsely chopped, then transfer to a mixing bowl.

Stir in the orange, both sugars, pine nuts and liqueur, until well incorporated. Let sit for at least 15 minutes, then stir again before serving or storing.

NOTE: Toast the pine nuts in a small, dry skillet over medium-low heat until fragrant and lightly browned, shaking the pan to avoid scorching. Cool completely before using.

Roasted Red Pepper Mac n Cheese

Tested size: 10-12 servings

**Ingredients**

* Kosher salt
* 1 pound dried elbow macaroni
* 8 tablespoons (1 stick) unsalted butter
* 1/2 cup flour
* 6 cups warmed milk (in a microwave for a few minutes)
* 24 ounces white cheddar, shredded
* 3 jarred, roasted red peppers, drained and pureed (use a blender or mini food processor)
* 2 tablespoons Dijon mustard
* 1 tablespoon Spanish smoked paprika (sweet or hot)
* Freshly ground black pepper
* 1 1/2 cups crushed Cheez-Its, for garnish

**Directions**

Bring a pot of water to a boil over medium-high heat. Add a generous pinch of salt and the macaroni; cook to al dente (a little underdone), according to the package directions. Drain well, then return to the pot.

Meanwhile, melt the butter in a deep saucepan over medium heat. Sprinkle in the flour; whisk constantly for a few minutes to form a smooth paste (roux). Increase the heat to medium-high; gradually add the warmed milk while you continue to whisk, forming a smooth sauce. Cook for a total of 3 to 5 minutes, then add the shredded cheddar in two or three additions, allowing the batches to melt each time.

Add the pureed red peppers, mustard, smoked paprika, and a pinch of black pepper, stirring to incorporate. The sauce should be a deep orange color; taste, and add salt, as needed.

Pour the sauce into the macaroni, stirring to coat evenly. Cook over low heat for a few minutes, to meld the flavors and warm the pasta through.

To serve, transfer to a warmed serving dish and top with the crushed Cheez-Its.