



Family Food Traditions Worth Keeping (or Tossing Out)

ANNUAL CHECK-IN ON WHAT TO KEEP AND WHAT TO TABLE

Courtney H. Diener-Stokes

JANUARY IS A PERFECT TIME TO REFLECT ON THE holidays, including on our family food traditions. These food rituals generally involve shared time in the kitchen and gathering around the table for a communal meal, often with extended family. There are many reasons we treasure and preserve these family traditions — they connect us with our ancestors and cultural roots, treat us to tastes of beloved recipes, and enhance our closeness with loved ones.

There's comfort in knowing what to expect, and family food traditions help lay that groundwork by engaging our senses. An aroma can evoke childhood memories, talking about the food heightens our anticipation, and the act of creating something together enhances closeness. Plus seeing a table laden with favorite dishes elicits oohs, aahs and smiles.

While the experience of carrying on a tradition should be rewarding, we may feel tethered to one that no longer serves us well. Whatever the reason, it may be time to rethink our collection of traditions, tweak some, switch out others for new ones, or let one or two go altogether. Just make sure you check in with your family — it's often the youngest ones who have the strongest opinions!

FAMILY RECIPES

For years, I strove to duplicate my late grandmother's (Jean Gross, aka G-mom) almond crescent cookie recipe. I followed the handwritten steps on the worn recipe card in her special wooden box to a T. My time spent baking always felt like a connection to her, and my kids loved rolling the delicate crescents in powdered sugar. Sadly, the final product never really tasted like her airy, melt-

in-your-mouth cookies that we all looked forward to devouring over the holidays.

Truth be told, my grandmother *was* known to add an ingredient or technique that didn't always make it into the written recipe. So, after several pitiful attempts — all while hoping my children could experience the same memorable confection — I decided it was time to shelve that ambition and table that tradition.

Instead, I celebrate G-mom by making her decadent peanut butter eggs for Easter or her beloved scalloped potato recipe that's a perfect side dish for Christmas. Both these recipes passed on from G-mom to my late mom, Emily, and have the added bonus that my three kids get to pitch in. For the scalloped potatoes, our youngest, Olivia, is the potato peeler; our son, Julian, the cheese shredder; and our oldest, Maxwell, the potato slicer. The prep time together always serves as a warm and wonderful opportunity to talk about their great-grandmother, keeping her memory alive and strengthening our family bonds.

The final reward is the reaction whenever I serve this dish — now one of my signatures. There's something so gratifying about knowing you're pleasing people with something they look forward to tasting year after year. Plus, you nourish them body and soul.

Another family food tradition is wrapped up in the eagerly anticipated asparagus quiche my mom served at her home along with mimosas for Christmas brunch before exchanging gifts. After a few years of feeling like the kids barely finished opening their gifts at our home before running out the door to Granny-Em's house — often still in pajamas — I acknowledged the need to adjust the timing to give us more breathing room in the morning. The tweak to this tradition was worth it, since we're now able to more fully enjoy the entire food and gift experience of being together.

Another of my tweaks on traditions is letting go of the fantasy of making my own gingerbread dough as my mom used to do. Instead, I buy boxed sets for the houses, since the kids don't care to eat the gingery goodies. Now we focus on the experience of building the house together — that has the real value to our family.

While I do feel a twinge of guilt about this shortcut, I remind myself it's better to invest my time in scratch cooking foods that are guaranteed to be consumed with joy. The simple time-saving measure of using a gingerbread house kit rather than baking from scratch is one of many that help ensure my sanity and good humor. Other key ingredients in family bonding.

NEW TRADITIONS

A few years ago, I was struck with a combination of compassion, envy and gratitude when a friend who has two kids shared that she has no traditions to carry on from her family. So she announced plans to create new traditions for her children, including one involving a tropical getaway each Christmas, with the added benefit of experiencing exotic foods there. (Granted not a food tradition per se, but Christmas piña coladas could be!)



Traditions strengthen family bonds across generations

The compassion was for her feeling of immense responsibility of starting family traditions from thin air, with the hope her children would carry them on. The bit of envy came from thinking about the emotional weight and sense of responsibility my friend didn't have as the standard bearer. Keeping family traditions alive is not for the faint of heart!

Then I had an epiphany that inspired me to reframe my thoughts about the burden of preserving traditions. I realized I took for granted the connection family traditions provide from generation to generation. I mistakenly assumed every family came with their own treasure trove worth preserving.

Instead I realized how grateful I am for the privilege of carrying on — albeit select and tweaked — our unique set of family traditions. And my bonus: starting new family food traditions I hope my children will feel are worth preserving when they're adults. And passing them on ...

Wishing you a New Year filled with savoring and passing on your own curated collection of family food traditions, creating new ones and shedding those no longer serving you well.

Read on for some of my family favorites that I'm very happy to share with you in hopes they might bring your family the same pleasure for generations to come!

Family Favorite Two-Cheese Scalloped Potatoes

The aroma of these scalloped potatoes cooking on Christmas Day envelops our entire house. The scents of garlic, cheese and cream mingle together as a tangible reward for everyone working together preparing the dish. The flavor of this dish intensifies the day after, so breakfast leftovers are another treat. The key is to cook until a fork easily pierces the potatoes — the 1½-hour bake time is worth the wait. Pairs perfectly with ham.

Serves 8 to 12 (as a side dish)

2 lbs. (about 10 medium) Yukon Gold potatoes, sliced thin (not too thin)
2 T. salted butter, divided (plus more to grease casserole dish)
2 large cloves garlic, sliced thin
1 pt. heavy cream
Salt and pepper to taste
2 C. white sharp cheddar cheese, shredded
¾ C. shaved or shredded Parmesan cheese

Preheat oven to 350°. Grease a 9" x 13" glass casserole dish with butter.

Layer half the potato slices in the bottom of the casserole dish. Dot with half the butter, cut into small pieces. Arrange half the garlic slices evenly on the potato layer. Then pour half the heavy cream evenly over them. Next, sprinkle one cup of cheddar cheese evenly over the potatoes. Season with salt and pepper.

Repeat with another layer of the remaining potatoes, butter, garlic, cream, cheddar cheese, salt and pepper.

Cover with foil and bake for one hour in the preheated oven (make sure foil doesn't touch the top layer or the cheese will stick). After one hour, remove from the oven and remove the foil before adding a generous layer of shredded Parmesan cheese evenly over the top.

Return to the oven to bake another 15 to 30 minutes, or until potatoes are very tender when tested with a fork and the top is golden brown.

Refrigerate any leftovers in an airtight container up to three days.



G-Mom's Peanut Butter Eggs

This is an heirloom family recipe I was resistant to share for many years. But I ultimately realized my grandmother would love the idea of others enjoying her sweets. The recipe is so simple to make even kids can help — let them form the eggs and dip them in the melted chocolate. My grandmother always used Smucker's Natural peanut butter (with salt) and Ghirardelli milk chocolate, so I do the same. (You can substitute your favorite dark chocolate for the milk chocolate.) These decadent peanut

butter eggs have a soft center that melds with the chocolate coating in each bite. I offer a generous tray of these eggs along with the other desserts at my father-in-law's Easter meal. They also pair wonderfully with milk when "testing" a few with the kids.

Makes about 15 to 20 (depending on size)

4 T. butter (¼ C.), softened
1½ C. powdered sugar
¾ C. peanut butter (I use Smucker's Natural. Stir to combine before using)
½ tsp. vanilla
2 T. milk
1 bag milk chocolate chips (I use Ghirardelli)

In a medium bowl, combine butter, powdered sugar, peanut butter and vanilla. Gradually add in milk and stir to combine (the mixture will be very creamy and soft).

Chill the mixture in the refrigerator for 30 minutes. Remove and shape into small egg shapes. Place eggs on a cookie sheet lined with parchment paper.

Place the cookie sheet in the freezer, uncovered, for 30 minutes to allow the eggs to harden.

While they're hardening, melt chocolate over a double boiler on low heat.

Once the eggs have hardened, dip each one in the melted chocolate, using two forks to submerge it. Once fully covered in chocolate, remove and place back on the parchment-lined cookie sheet to harden.

Serve the chocolate-covered eggs at room temperature.

Refrigerate any leftovers in an airtight container for up to a week.



The Perfect Pomegranate Pear Salad

Inspired by Guy Fieri, this salad became a new tradition at our annual family Thanksgiving dinner. The crispness of the pear, juiciness of the pomegranate and creaminess of the gorgonzola are the perfect match. I use

a huge wooden bowl that makes enough salad for 25 guests, so I usually triple this recipe. A wider bowl with a flat bottom lets the colorful ingredients be more visible. Sometimes I'm lucky enough to have enough greens left growing in my garden to feature them in the salad. This crowd-pleaser goes beautifully with traditional Thanksgiving trimmings.

Serves 8

Salad Ingredients:

8 C. baby spinach or baby romaine lettuce
1 ripe Asian pear
2 oz. gorgonzola cheese, crumbled
⅓ C. pomegranate seeds
Champagne vinaigrette dressing (recipe below)
Fresh cracked pepper
1 T. honey

Dressing Ingredients:

¼ C. Champagne vinegar
1 tsp. Dijon mustard
½ tsp. minced garlic
1 T. freshly squeezed lemon juice
¼ tsp. freshly cracked black pepper
2 T. olive oil

To make the dressing:

Add all ingredients in a mason jar with a secure lid and shake to combine. Refrigerate until ready to use.

To make the salad:

Place half the greens in a large salad bowl.

Cut Asian pear into fans, and then cut again on the diagonal. Sprinkle greens with half the gorgonzola cheese, half the pear slices, half the pomegranate seeds and half the dressing. Lightly toss.

Repeat with another layer using the remaining greens topped with the remaining cheese, pear, pomegranate seeds and dressing. Add freshly cracked pepper and evenly drizzle with the honey.

Not recommended to store leftovers.

**Note: I don't toss the top layer of this salad in order to keep the beauty of all the ingredients. As guests are helping themselves to the salad, it will get tossed naturally. ♦*

Courtney Diener-Stokes is an award-winning journalist, author, food writer, photographer and food stylist. Most recently she co-authored the Kimberton Whole Foods Cookbook and Farmhouse Manna: Nourishing Recipes and Rituals for Head, Heart, Hands & Soul. She lives in the Oley Valley countryside with her husband, three children, two Babydoll Southdown sheep, a flock of bantam chickens and a Bernedoodle named Daisy.



For more great recipes visit
CountyLinesMagazine.com