

The Upper Crust

BREAKING BREAD AND SAVING SANITY THIS THANKSGIVING

Liz Tarditi

AS WE ROLL INTO NOVEMBER, EVERYONE HAS a lot on their plate before the Thanksgiving table is even set. There are decorations to pack away (so long, Halloween) and get out, lists to make, groceries to buy and, somewhere in there, a feast to cook. This month at Brandywine Table, let's take one thing off that proverbial plate.

Why? Because sometimes it isn't even *your* Thanksgiving table. Maybe someone else has claimed the turkey and you've been assigned a side dish. You want to contribute something memorable without arriving at your in-laws' house with a competing pumpkin pie and starting a family incident.

Bring bread. It plays nicely with everybody else's traditions while leaving room for a little showmanship.

A spectacular bread basket doesn't require making everything yourself. Instead, think like an event caterer and build variety. Mix textures, shapes, colors and flavors: something soft and pillowy, something with a crust that crackles when you tear into it, something savory and something with a touch of sweetness. Add good butter melting into warm bread, and suddenly the humblest part of the Thanksgiving menu doesn't feel quite so humble.



The secret is deciding what's worth making, what's worth buying and where to find the good stuff. Fran McLaughlin of **Brandywine Valley Bread** in Downingtown knows the good stuff. After a career in food service, a trip to Sicily to visit his wife Maria's family sparked his fascination with naturally leavened bread. That fascination eventually grew into farmers markets and the family's Downingtown bakery.

Natural leavening requires patience and precision. Rather than commercial yeast, the baker works with a living culture, responding to time, temperature and place. McLaughlin has noted that over- or under-proofing can make an undesirable loaf. Today, Brandywine Valley Bread emphasizes heritage organic grains and offers naturally leavened loaves alongside bagels, croissants, morning buns and pastries. McLaughlin once summed up local tastes simply: "Here, in Chester County, people want quality."

We do. But quality doesn't require kneading every crumb. Brandywine Valley Bread offers holiday preorders, or visit another favorite local bakery for a crusty loaf. Then have fun with the homemade pieces: Pumpkin-Shaped Dinner Rolls, Cranberry-Walnut Quick Bread, Little Hands Parmesan-Rosemary Drop Biscuits or colorful Flower-Power Focaccia.

For the *pièce de résistance*, there's our Horn of Plenty Bread Cornucopia. Fill that showstopper with everything you've made and bought, add some compound butter and take it to the table. It's a very Brandywine Table approach to Thanksgiving: abundance, local food, a little showmanship — and absolute sanity. Because the best Thanksgiving table isn't the one where the cook made everything. It's the one where the cook gets to sit down and enjoy it, too.

Pumpkin-Shaped Dinner Rolls

Pumpkin purée gives these pillowy dinner rolls their golden color and just a whisper of autumn flavor — not the sweetness or density of pumpkin bread. Kitchen twine creates their festive shape, finished with a pecan stem. Make extra — they're too cute to pass up!



Makes 12 rolls

½ C. whole milk, warmed to about 110°
2¼ tsp. active dry yeast (1 packet)
¼ C. granulated sugar, divided
½ C. canned pure pumpkin purée (not pumpkin pie filling)
¼ C. unsalted butter, melted and slightly cooled, plus more for brushing
1 large egg
1 tsp. fine salt
3–3½ C. all-purpose flour, plus more for kneading
Vegetable or olive oil, for soaking twine
24 ft. 100% cotton kitchen twine
12 elongated pecan pieces, for stems

In a large bowl, whisk together warm milk, yeast and 1 T. sugar. Let stand 5 to 10 minutes, until frothy.

Whisk in remaining sugar, pumpkin purée, melted butter and egg until smooth. Stir in salt and 3 C. flour. If dough is too sticky to handle, add remaining flour, 1 T. at a time.

Knead by hand or with a stand mixer fitted with a dough hook for 6 to 8 minutes, until dough is smooth and elastic. Place in a greased bowl, cover and let rise in a warm place for about 1 hour, or until doubled in size.

Punch down dough and divide into 12 equal pieces. Shape each into a smooth ball.

Cut twine into twelve 24-inch lengths and soak in oil to prevent sticking to dough. Center one piece of twine over a dough ball. Turn ball over, cross twine underneath and bring ends back over the top, dividing dough into quarters. Cross twine again around the ball to

Editor's note: For tips on making better butter and the history of the horn of plenty, go to CountyLinesMagazine.com.

create 8 segments. Tie loosely at the top, leaving enough slack for the dough to expand. Trim excess twine. Repeat with remaining rolls.

Arrange rolls on a parchment-lined baking sheet, leaving space between them. Cover loosely and let rise 30 to 45 minutes. Preheat oven to 350°. Bake rolls for 18 to 22 minutes, until golden brown and centers register 190°. Brush hot rolls with melted butter, if desired.

Cool until comfortable to handle. Snip twine at the top and gently pull it away from each roll. Press a pecan piece into the center of each roll to form the pumpkin stem.

Make ahead: Rolls may be baked a day ahead. Cool completely, store airtight at room temperature and warm briefly before serving.

Cranberry-Walnut Quick Bread

Called a "quick bread" because it relies on baking powder and baking soda instead of yeast, this festive loaf requires no kneading or rising. Cranberries, walnuts and a hint of orange make it right at home on the fall table.



Makes 1 loaf

2 C. all-purpose flour
¾ C. granulated sugar
1½ tsp. baking powder
½ tsp. baking soda
½ tsp. salt
1 C. fresh or frozen cranberries, coarsely chopped
½ C. chopped walnuts
1 large egg
¾ C. orange juice
¼ C. unsalted butter, melted and cooled
1 tsp. grated orange zest

Preheat oven to 350°. Grease a 9x5-inch loaf pan or line with parchment paper. Note: use a smaller 8x4-inch pan if a taller loaf is preferred.

In a large bowl, whisk together flour, sugar, baking powder, baking soda and salt. Stir in cranberries and walnuts and coat thoroughly with the dry ingredients. In a separate bowl, whisk together egg, orange



juice, melted butter and orange zest. Add to dry ingredients and stir just until combined. Do not overmix.

Spoon batter into prepared pan and smooth top. Bake for 50–60 minutes, until golden brown and a toothpick inserted in center comes out clean. Cool in pan for 10 minutes, then remove loaf and cool completely on a wire rack before slicing.

Make it your own: Substitute equal amounts of your favorite nuts, seeds or chopped dried fruit. Try pecans and figs, pistachios and apricots, or pumpkin seeds and dried cherries.

Little Hands Parmesan-Rosemary Drop Biscuits

Bringing children into the culinary arts is all about capturing their natural energy and turning it into pride. When my daughter was little, managing her ADHD meant finding recipes tailored to her pace — fewer ingredients, simple steps and a fast, delicious reward. These effortless drop biscuits are the perfect way for little hands to make a big contribution, sparking a true love for baking.



Makes 12 biscuits

2¼ C. Original Bisquick mix
½ C. freshly grated Parmesan cheese
1 T. finely chopped fresh rosemary or 1 tsp. dried rosemary, crushed
⅔ C. whole milk
4 T. unsalted butter, melted, divided

Preheat oven to 450°. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper. In a large bowl, stir together Bisquick, Parmesan and rosemary. Add milk and 2 T. melted butter. Stir just until a soft dough forms. Do not overmix.

Drop dough by 12 generous spoonfuls onto prepared baking sheet, spacing about 2 inches apart. Bake for 8 to 10 minutes, until biscuits are risen and golden brown. If a child is helping with the final step, remove biscuits from the hot baking sheet and cool to a safe temperature.

Brush biscuits with remaining 2 T. melted butter. Serve warm.

Flower-Power Roasted Red Pepper & Olive Focaccia

Garden focaccia is undeniably gorgeous, but by November, woody rosemary and thyme stems can ruin the bite. Rather than fighting tough winter herbs or slicing straight through intricate dough landscapes, this recipe maps out the artistic fun with the final slice in mind. Individual, picture-perfect florals bloom across the dough so that every single cut portion yields its own beautiful, self-contained work of art.

Makes 1 (9x13-inch) focaccia



3½ C. all-purpose flour
2¼ tsp. instant yeast (1 packet)
1½ tsp. kosher salt
1½ C. warm water
5 T. extra-virgin olive oil, divided
½ C. mixed pitted olives, drained and halved
1 C. roasted red peppers, drained well, patted dry and cut into strips
½ tsp. dried oregano
Flaky sea salt, for finishing

In a large bowl, stir together flour, yeast and kosher salt. Add warm water and 2 T. olive oil. Stir until a soft, sticky dough forms. Cover and let rise in a warm place for about 1 hour, or until doubled.

Coat a 9x13-inch baking pan with 2 T. olive oil. Transfer dough to pan and gently stretch toward edges. If dough springs back, let rest 10 minutes, then continue stretching.

Cover loosely and let rise 20–30 minutes, until puffy.

Preheat oven to 425°.

Before adding toppings, think about how you'll cut the finished focaccia and design around the individual pieces. Arrange olives and peppers so each serving gets a little of both.

Drizzle with remaining 1 T. olive oil. Using fingertips, press deep dimples over the surface, pressing toppings securely into dough. Sprinkle with oregano and flaky sea salt.

Bake for 20–25 minutes, until focaccia is deeply golden brown with a crisp bottom crust.

Cool in pan for about 10 minutes, then transfer to a wire rack. Serve warm or at room temperature.

Make ahead: After mixing dough, cover tightly and refrigerate for 12 to 24 hours instead of letting rise at room temperature. The next day, transfer cold dough to the well-oiled pan and gently stretch toward edges. Cover loosely and let stand at room temperature for 2 to 3 hours, stretching again as dough relaxes, until it fills the pan and becomes puffy. Top, dimple and bake as directed.

Horn of Plenty Bread Cornucopia

This is the showstopper! A golden, bread-woven horn spilling over with rolls and biscuits brings instant abundance to the Thanksgiving table. If you've never made one, consider a dry run a few weeks ahead. And if your practice cornucopia turns out perfectly, congratulations! Wrap it well, freeze it and you won't have to make another one for Thanksgiving.



Makes 1 large cornucopia

Heavy-duty aluminum foil, nonstick heavy duty preferred
Nonstick cooking spray
3 cans Pillsbury Original Breadsticks refrigerated dough, pre-scored into 1-inch strips
1 large egg
1 T. water
Sesame seeds, optional

Line a baking sheet at least 17x14 inches with parchment paper. Tear off a 30x18-inch sheet of heavy-duty aluminum foil. Fold in half to make an 18x15-inch rectangle. Roll diagonally into a hollow cone about 18 inches long with a 5-inch opening. Stuff firmly with crumpled foil until mold is rigid and holds its shape — sturdy enough to wear as a hat to next year's Blobfest. Bend narrow tail up, then curve tip slightly downward to create a classic horn-of-plenty shape.

Place mold on prepared baking sheet and set it in cold oven before preheating to make sure it fits comfortably. Adjust shape if necessary, then remove from oven.

Preheat oven to 350°. Coat outside of foil mold thoroughly with nonstick cooking spray.

Keep breadstick dough refrigerated until needed. Open one can and separate three strips along pre-scored lines. Pinch ends of strips together and braid loosely. Pinch opposite ends together to secure braid. Place braid on a plate or small baking sheet and refrigerate while assembling cornucopia.

Working with one can of dough at a time, keeping remaining dough refrigerated, separate strips along pre-scored lines.

Beginning at pointed end of mold, wrap dough strips around cone, slightly overlapping each row. When joining strips, overlap ends, pinch together and brush with a little egg wash to seal. Continue until mold is covered, leaving wide opening uncovered. Remove braid from refrigerator and wrap around opening to create a finished edge. Gently pinch ends and seams to secure. Whisk together egg and water. Brush cornucopia lightly with egg wash and sprinkle with sesame seeds, if desired.

Bake about 45 minutes, or until deeply and evenly golden brown. Begin checking at 30 minutes. If some areas brown faster than others, shield loosely with small pieces of foil and continue baking until evenly browned. (Individual ovens vary.) Let the clock tell you when to look, then trust your senses to tell you when it's done.

Cool completely on mold. Once cool, gently loosen foil at wide opening, carefully collapse foil inward and remove from baked cornucopia.

Fill just before serving with dinner rolls, biscuits, breadsticks or other breads, allowing them to tumble generously from opening.

Make ahead: Cornucopia may be made ahead and frozen. Cool completely, leaving foil mold inside to support its shape. Wrap carefully and freeze. Thaw completely at room temperature before gently collapsing and removing foil mold. If desired, refresh in a 300° oven for 5 to 10 minutes. Cool before filling. ♦



Liz Tarditi is a chef and wine specialist with more than 30 years of experience in food, wine and event planning. She holds degrees from Villanova University and from a Seattle culinary arts program founded by a Certified French Master Chef, where she trained in a classic brigade-style kitchen. Liz later ran her own catering company and has worked as a wine specialist in Pennsylvania. She brings her training and lifelong passion for seasonal, approachable cooking to Brandywine Table.

