Ryan Beckman, of Woodstock, Conn., assistant coordinator of households and women’s crafts at Old Sturbridge Village, slices a rutabaga in preparation for a recent Thanksgiving dinner.

Republican file photo by DON TREEGER
A costumed interpreter slices into a fresh Thanksgiving pie.
"When people make traditional foods, it's really honoring their ancestors."

Ryan L. Beckman, assistant coordinator of households and women's crafts, Old Sturbridge Village

A costumed interpreter at Old Sturbridge Village demonstrates how to hearth-roast a turkey on a string.

Photo courtesy of Old Sturbridge Village

Costumed interpreter Anne E. Fisher, of Sturbridge, prepares a pork and apple pie for a recent Thanksgiving meal at Old Sturbridge Village.

Republican file photo by DON TREEGER
Recipes window to America’s past

A holiday table today might reflect both traditions of the wider culture and the traditions of a family’s culture.

By CORI URBAN

You just know the holidays are upon us when the aroma of certain foods wafts from the kitchen.

For Danielle M. Kovacs, one of those foods is her mother’s French-Canadian meat pie, or tortiere. The recipe was passed down from her grandmother, and one day it will be passed down to Kovacs, “although it just tastes better when (my mother) makes it,” she says.

“It’s an incredibly rich meat pie, which we make richer still by melting a pat of butter on each slice,” says Kovacs. “In fact, it’s one of those dishes that is so rich that you almost can’t indulge in it more than once or twice a year.”

Meat pie
1 pound ground beef
2 pounds ground pork
1 ground onion
3 large potatoes, mashed

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1/2 teaspoon cinnamon
1/2 teaspoon salt
1/4 teaspoon pepper
2 cups water
Simmer the meat with the water for 45 minutes. Add onion and seasonings and simmer 15 more minutes. Mix in the mashed potatoes and cool. Put in a double crust and bake in a 400-degree oven for 30 minutes.

Published in “La Bonne Crote by Le Festival Franco-Americain Inc.,” circa 1975

Kovacs is the curator of collections at the W.E.B. Du Bois Library at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst.

The library is home to a cookbook collection between 6,000 and 8,000 volumes. The collection traces the social history of food and food preparation from the end of the 19th century to the present.

“Traditional holiday recipes stir up a lot of emotions, from feelings of family, community and togetherness to national pride and religious devotion,” Kovacs said.

Because holidays often bring families and communities together, the foods people eat to celebrate these occasions become symbols of who they are and remind them of their shared experiences.

Holiday recipes exist for many reasons, Kovacs explained: to make use of seasonal foods available in abundance, to create special dishes to commemorate special days and to celebrate a community’s religious beliefs or ethnic background.

“What we see in the holiday cookbooks in our collection is that holiday recipes are about passing on traditions and bringing families together over a meal to share good food and memories,” Kovacs said. “Whether a humble supper or a fancy feast, holiday meals and the rituals that go along with them mark the day as something special — something
apart from the ordinary – that enables us to reflect back on our everyday lives."

Christmas Fruit Cake
Makes 3 bread pan loaves
1/2 cup molasses
2 cups sugar
1 cup butter
6 eggs
1 cup cold coffee
1/2 cup brandy
4 1/2 cups flour
1 teaspoon soda
1/2 teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon each, cloves, cinnamon, nutmeg and mace
1 1/2 pounds raisins
1/2 pound currants
1 1/2 pound candied peel
1 pound dates
Cream butter, sugar and molasses; beat in eggs. Sift together flour, soda, salt and spices. Stir in coffee and brandy. Blend in fruits. Bake slowly four hours at 250 degrees. Store in air-tight container in cool place to mellow.

Mrs. Edward J. Dostal

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Northampton, from “Favorite Recipes from Hampshire County Kitchens,” 1957.

Ryan I. Beckman, assistant coordinator of households and women’s crafts at Old Sturbridge Village, notes that Christmas was not celebrated in New England until the mid-19th century.

Immigrants brought with them their traditions, like the Christmas tree from Germany. Some brought customs that relate to food, like the Polish wigilia, the meatless Christmas Eve meal that includes appetizers, soup, pierogi, fish, vegetables and desserts.

Holiday recipes that originate from a specific ethnic background remind members of that group that they belong to a community that is larger than their own family unit.

“Even if you’ve never been to Poland or you don’t speak the language, cooking recipes that reflect that heritage reasserts your membership in that community,” Kovacs said. “Ethnic recipes connect us to a shared past and leave a trace of who we are today behind as they are passed on to future generations.”

Because many holiday recipes maintain a tradition, “to keep grandma’s recipe alive as a delectable treat” is special, Beckman said. “When people make traditional foods, it’s really honoring their ancestors.”

Holiday meals today hearken back to early days and the fall harvest season when items like pumpkins, squash, apples and turnips were fresh and abundant with dishes like pumpkin pie and apple pie.

“In the past, pies were often served as part of the meal – in a second course – alongside meat and other vegetable dishes,” noted Claire C. Carlson, education program coordinator at Historic Deerfield. “They were not considered dessert.”

Spices that people today think of as “holiday” spices would have been available year-round in Deerfield in the 18th century and into the 19th century, when they were in stock at the local store. A local merchant would go to or order from merchants and traders in port cities like Boston to obtain imported ingredients like sugar, cinnamon, pepper, allspice and nutmeg.

“Certainly the English Puritans who settled in colonial Deerfield did not observe holidays the way we do today,” Carlson said.

But people who come to visit Historic Deerfield come with their ideas, experiences and history of celebrating the holidays with their families according to their family tra-
ditions.
“One connection we can make to the past here in

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Deerfield is that families did pass down recipes – called 'receipts' – for the dishes that they made, often from mother to daughter,” she said. Girls learned to cook from their mothers and grandmothers, and they learned the recipes by making them together.

It was rare that a woman in the 18th century consulted a published cookbook. “She might have recipes written down on scraps of paper or in a little hand-made book. These today are quite rare, and if they do survive, are very important to food historians,” Carlson said.

Many of the holiday recipes Kovacs comes across in the cookbook collection don’t necessarily include expensive ingredients.

“What is so special about most holiday recipes is the way they transform common, everyday ingredients into something really special,” Kovacs said, adding that most holiday meals wouldn’t be complete without a show stopper like a roast goose or rack of lamb.

Roast Goose
with Apple-Prune Stuffing
Serves 10 to 12

1 10- to 12-pound goose
Salt
Stuffing:
1 medium onion, finely chopped
3/4 cup butter, melted
2 cups tart apples, peeled and coarsely chopped
2 cups cooked prunes, diced
6 cups day-old bread crumbs
1 cup walnuts, coarsely chopped
2 teaspoons salt
2 tablespoons lemon juice

Glaze:
1/2 cup honey
1/2 cup orange juice

Prepare stuffing: In a large skillet, sauté onion in butter until translucent. Add to remaining ingredients and combine well. If stuffing seems too dry, additional butter may be added. (Remember that stuffing will absorb fat from goose.)

Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Wipe bird well with damp paper towels and rub inside with 1 1/2 teaspoons salt. Stuff with prepared stuffing. Rub outside with additional 2 teaspoons salt.

To truss, press wings to body and tie down by running twine around entire upper portion of goose; turn neck skin backward; tuck under twine. Tie legs together. Prick goose all over a 1-inch intervals with two-tined fork to allow fat to be released.

Place goose on rack in an open roasting pan. Immediately reduce oven tempera-

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ture to 350 degrees and proceed to roast goose for 25 minutes per pound (approximately 4 1/2 to 5 hours), draining fat from pan several times as it accumulates. Baste frequently. During last 30 minutes, glaze with honey-orange juice mixture.

When done, skin should be very crisp and meat tender and juicy. Remove from oven; remove twine and any skewers used. Serve on heated platter.

Note: Some people feel that because of the high fat content of goose, it should not be stuffed. If you concur, bake separately and roast the goose stuffed with apple quarters.

“Christmas Memories Cookbook: 350 Favorite Christmas Recipes” from Mystic Seaport Members (1985)
“These main dishes are treats simply because they are prepared so infrequently,” she said. “Indulging in a few less common, and perhaps more expensive, dishes is yet another way of setting the (holiday) apart from other days.”

Soft Gingerbread

4 1/2 cups flour
1 tablespoon ginger
1 tablespoon baking soda
3/4 cup butter
3/4 cup cream
2 1/4 cups molasses

Preheat oven to 300 degrees. Sift together flour, ginger, and baking soda. Cut butter into dry ingredients and blend thoroughly. Stir cream into molasses. Grease two 8-inch or 9-inch square pans. Bake 45 minutes.


Spices that people today think of as “holiday” spices would have been available year-round in Deerfield in the 18th century and into the 19th century, when they were in stock at the local store. A local merchant would go to or order from merchants and traders in port cities like Boston to obtain imported ingredients like sugar, cinnamon, pepper, allspice and nutmeg.
Ellen Zale is a guide and open hearth cook at Historic Deerfield.