

WHAT'S ON THE PLANT-BASED THANKSGIVING TABLE THIS SEASON

November 7, 2023



By Jess Powers

As the Thanksgiving holiday approaches, the Park Slope Food Coop is gearing up for the considerable logistics of storing and distributing turkeys and high-volume sales overall. But what are Coop members who eat vegan or vegetarian diets planning to cook? And in what ways do they reclaim the holiday as plant-based eaters?

Why Do We Have Turkey on Thanksgiving Anyway?

The origins of Thanksgiving, of course, trace back to 1620 when the indigenous Wampanoag people aided English Pilgrims who landed at Plymouth, Massachusetts, helping them to survive the winter. Despite myths of a shared harvest feast and friendly relations the following year, Governor Bradford was a colonist who later sent troops to

annihilate a Pequot village.

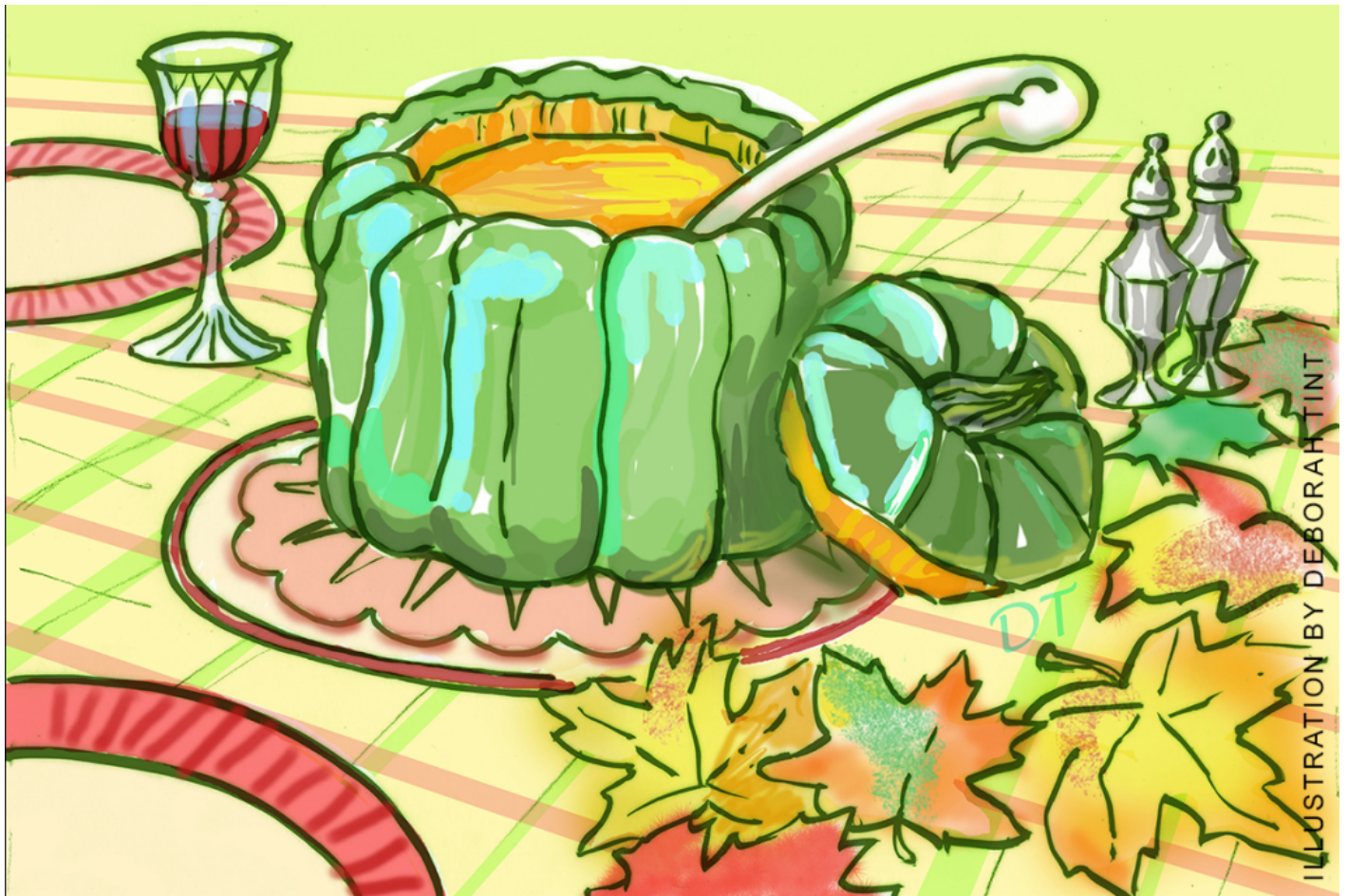
For Jana Cunningham, a Membership Coordinator and 30-year Coop member, Thanksgiving celebration has “been a journey. Not only because I was vegetarian or vegan, but because of the historical aspect for indigenous and African people here in regard to the holiday.”

Thanksgiving is one of the two most-celebrated secular holidays in the U.S.—the other is the Fourth of July—which many people spend with their families of origins (with all the complications that that can bring) and others celebrate with friends, either ahead of the holiday or on the day itself. The term “Friendsgiving” first started popping up around 2007.

Culinary historians point out that venison was likely the protein of choice for a large gathering in Colonial times. It was President Abraham Lincoln who proclaimed Thanksgiving an official federal holiday—roasted turkey became the centerpiece due to culinary trends of the time. The first presidential “pardon” of a turkey is attributed to President John F. Kennedy.

Turkey is so synonymous with Thanksgiving that some people refer to it as “Turkey Day.” There’s the Butterball Turkey Talk-Line helping people avoid cooking mishaps, the iconic Norman Rockwell painting “Freedom From Want,” and trends that come and go such as deep-fried turkey. A lot of fuss, it seems, for a dish that is often dry and induces a “turkey coma” from tryptophan. For vegans and vegetarians, traditions centered around meat can further complicate this already loaded celebration.

Thanksgivings Past as a Vegan or Vegetarian



Megan Davidson, a member of the Animal Welfare Committee (AWC), recalls Thanksgiving being a “relatively significant battle” during her childhood. She had never enjoyed the taste or texture of meat. A chance encounter at age 10 with animal rights activists sharing materials about vegetarian lifestyles at the mall made her realize that a meatless diet was even a possibility. “Sign me up!” she laughs as she recalls the realization.

Jennifer Kupinse, also a member of the AWC, started working as a coat check at a local restaurant to avoid the holiday. She snuck anti-fur literature into fur coats. When the host got a call from a patron complaining about finding something in her coat pocket, she looked at teenage Kupinse, “shaking her head and laughing.” (Kupinse didn’t get in trouble.) Kupinse also recalls a mild-mannered aunt removing the innards from a turkey, directing her to learn how to prepare the bird if she wanted to be married. These days her brother and father are pescatarians, making her less of an outsider during the holiday.

“One year, all I could eat were the rolls,” recalled Membership Coordinator Jacquelyn Scaduto, a native of Texas. She resolved that was never going to happen again and decided to focus on creating a “luscious, delicious vegan meal.”

A shift came for Cunningham, who has long kept a plant-based diet after becoming a parent. She would celebrate with her family, but believed she had “a duty to educate [on the history] even as we participated in it.”

Re-Imagining the Holiday

Suzannah Schneider, a Coop member and farmer in the Hudson Valley, feels “a lot less pressure to follow some script for a big meal to make.” Being vegan creates “less pressure around that holiday generally,” they add, and it’s an opportunity to prepare “a bunch of sides that happen to be seasonal.” Picking vegetables directly out of the soil only adds to the appeal.



PHOTO BY CHRISTIAN DIAZ

Plant-based Coop members describe lovingly preparing seasonal dishes for the holiday with careful attention to color and presentation. They make mashed potatoes with mushroom gravy, green bean casserole, sweet potatoes, roasted chestnuts, rolls and cranberry sauce. Brussels sprouts are popular, whether roasted with chile and honey or with pecans, cranberries, orange juice and orange peel.



Not just “brown foods,” Scaduto emphasizes: “I want it to be colorful and vibrant looking, but I also want comfort, Southern and hearty.” She uses the mushroom vegan gravy found at the endcaps of the aisles, adds cremini mushrooms, makes a roux with vegan butter, flour and whatever unsweetened non-milk she has on hand and enhances the flavor with cumin. This is the base of a vegan green bean casserole (many non-vegans use cream of mushroom soup); Scaduto adds blanched and shocked green beans, fried onions on top and bakes it in the oven.



Cunningham prepares dishes like wild rice stuffing, roasted chestnuts, cranberries, stuffed acorn squash, zucchini stuffed with quinoa, string beans almondine and collard greens.

Coop members share a sense of pride in creating dishes that impress their omnivore friends and family. During a mac-and-cheese competition at a Friendsgiving, Schneider's vegan version beat out her partner's vegetarian one. Scaduto makes stuffing, occasionally a cornbread version, and uses Imagine No Chicken broth. It gives the "yummiest, most pleasing result to the meat eater's mouth," she adds. Eaters didn't realize Cunningham's wheat gluten with peppers and onions wasn't steak.



“It’s really an excuse to make pie—a lot of pie,” Davidson says, “better than anyone’s store-bought pie.” Traditional options like pecan, pumpkin, and apple may be topped with vegan ice cream. “In a pinch,” Wholly Wholesome’s frozen apple pie is excellent, adds Scaduto. But chocolate or bourbon pecan pies evoke happy memories.

Cunningham brought fresh fruits to holiday celebrations for years. More recently, she roasts seasonal fruits, usually pears, with cloves and cinnamon and has picked up her mother’s tradition of baking. She makes olive oil cake with roasted figs and candied lemons. It’s gluten-free, made with almond flour and cassava.



Holiday Options at the Coop

The nine-member AWC produces an annual guide to Thanksgiving options that provides details on both turkeys and turkey alternatives on offer at the Coop. Anyone who has tried Beyond Burgers knows that meat alternatives have vastly improved in flavor profile over the years. But many Coop members who eat plant-based diets don't eat highly processed foods often. Kimberly Curran, frozen goods and ice cream buyer for the Coop, shared that a couple dozen Tofurky holiday feasts were sold last year. The Field Roast Celebration Nugget with sage and garlic is carried regularly. There are a few newer veggie/vegan proteins available, such as Eat Meati mushroom root cutlets, Akua kelp burgers and Actual Veggies green burgers with kale.

Perhaps the greatest satisfaction for vegan and vegetarian Coop members is shifting people's perspectives about what the Thanksgiving meal can be: a gathering with people we care about, consciously celebrating, eating wholesome nourishing foods, challenging old traditions and, of course, creating new ones.

For more holiday vegan inspiration check out Isa Chandra Moskowitz's *The Superfun*

Times Vegan Holiday Cookbook: Entertaining for Absolutely Every Occasion, Timothy Pakron's *Mississippi Vegan* and our own Cunningham's baking on IG @lit_vegan.nyc.



Jess Powers works in emergency management and enjoys adventures in nature and cooking. She's on IG @foodandfury.