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# EDIBLE TRADITIONS



## HEIRLOOM RECIPES

*Savoring our culinary heritage requires quality local ingredients.*

BY MICHEL NISCHAN

Granny's fried chicken was once considered a perfect example of true regional American cuisine. Not long ago, we were a place of great home cooking with an abundance of high-quality agriculture and heirloom recipes. Folks would visit America and leave wondering why they had never invented fried chicken. Today, we are viewed as the demons who are dumping fast food on the rest of the unwitting world. In a short half century we've gone from the country of great home cooking to the birthplace of striped buckets and golden arches. Where did we go wrong and how do we fix it?

When considering how our food culture currently defines us, it's hard to believe that America was ever seen as a culinary destination. European nations once invested in long expeditions to the "New World" in search of wonders like corn, tomatoes, potatoes and other goodies that did not exist back home. Between the late 1700s and early 1900s settlers from France, Germany, Spain and other Old World nations brought their culinary techniques and applied them to the regional bounties of their new home. The result was a true regional American food culture.

During these times of early development, presidents and statesmen traded live plants and seeds with other cultures as valuable statements of the new America. Thomas Jefferson believed a live plant was the greatest gift one culture could exchange with another as a sign of true friendship. All of this activity resulted in a regional American food system and international exchange that we now find ourselves desperately trying to rebuild.

On the community level, most families raised their own fruits, vegetables and animals for personal consumption. Chickens, pigs, goats and kitchen gardens could be found even in New York City neighborhoods. Stews, hearth roasts, smothers, dumplings, country corn bread, hams, gentle fry applications, pickles, succotash and the like were commonplace throughout America.

As new technologies emerged, America took a different path from the rest of the world. In Europe, they invented the Robot Coupe, Paco Jet and other cool gadgets that actually made great food even better. In the United States, we went the George Jetson route. It was more important to press a button and have our meal appear than to waste time making food taste good. Superb food, as a defining symbol of our cultural persona, was replaced by two television sets in every home and a car in every driveway. In short, food had become nothing more than fuel. Sadly, industrialization and the quest to become a world power changed the way we farmed and tended to our food. It also eliminated our connection to the act of cooking and

eating the heirloom recipes that once defined us.

Asian cultures exemplify the importance of heirloom recipes by actively protecting the perfection of a peach or a mountain plum, not solely for the sake of the fruit itself, but more importantly as a

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critical recipe ingredient. In Europe, the genetics and rearing of a good pig is essential to the outcome of age-old recipes like lardo, prosciutto, kassler rippchen and so on. In Italy, the humble North American tomato has become so revered through its use in simple pasta sauce that many Americans who visit Italy leave believing tomatoes originated there.

As we work to rebuild our food system, we have to get beyond the simple notion of beholding the perfect peach, plum, pig or tomato. For a new food system to thrive, we need to identify and reinvigorate the kinds of recipes that make the perfect peach, plum, pig or tomato indispensable.

*Heirloom*, by definition, means something valuable that has been in the possession of a family for a long time and has been passed on from one generation to the next. Heirloom recipes would mean dishes cooked at home by skilled home cooks and eaten by families and friends around the same table. The cooks would teach their children how to prepare these dishes in ways that would ensure that Granny's fried chicken could be enjoyed for generations to come.

There is tremendous promise in the work that's been done to date in moving toward more local food systems. Farmers' markets are springing up everywhere, and more people know the flavor of a truly ripe tomato than they did five years ago. Strong public demand for local, organic and natural foods is causing large corporations to consider jumping on board. As scary as this is to many, it tells us that we are living in an important and exciting time. If we wish to be successful in keeping the change focused on local food systems, which many find more satisfying than larger corporate ones, we have to recover, reinvent and reinvigorate public interest in cooking great food for themselves. To achieve this, we should share with our communities the kinds of recipes they will love to cook—just like Granny's fried chicken. Once they're hooked, they'll know there is only one place they can find the best: at home. □

## RECIPE

### ROAST HEIRLOOM TURKEY WITH SWEET POTATO GRAVY AND HEIRLOOM SQUASH DRESSING

Adapted from *Taste Pure and Simple*

(Chronicle Books, 2003)

Serves 10 to 12

#### For the Roast Turkey-

1 16-lb. heirloom turkey at room temp. (see note)	24 cipollini or pearl onions
Salt and fr. ground pepper	6 to 8 small golden beets, peeled, or 8 small purple-top turnips, peeled
4 c. low-sod. chicken broth	5 large carrots, peeled

#### For the Sweet Potato Gravy-

9 c. sweet potato juice	1" piece fresh ginger, peeled and thinly sliced
Reserved defatted pan drippings from roast turkey	2 jalapeños, seeded and minced

1. Juice the sweet potatoes and set the juice aside.
  2. To roast the turkey: Preheat the oven to 300°. Rub the cavities and the skin of the turkey with salt and pepper.
  3. Put the turkey in a roasting pan just large enough to hold it. Add 2 cups of the chicken broth and then tent the bird with aluminum foil. Roast, basting occasionally, for about 4 hours, or 15 minutes per pound. If the broth and pan drippings dry up, add more broth.
  4. After 2 hours, remove the foil and add the onions, beets and carrots. Continue to baste the turkey as the vegetables cook. Check the vegetables occasionally, since one may cook more quickly than another. When the vegetables are tender, transfer them to a warmed ovenproof serving dish and cover to keep warm.
  5. After 3 ½ hours of cooking, begin testing the turkey for doneness with an instant-read thermometer. Raise the oven temperature to 375° to crisp the skin. When the breast reaches an internal temperature of 155° to 160°, remove the bird from the oven and transfer it to a cutting board.
  6. Pour the drippings from the roasting pan into a saucepan. You should have 5 or 6 cups of drippings.
  7. Meanwhile, to make the gravy, carefully remove as much fat as you can from the pan drippings. Cook the defatted drippings over medium-high heat to reduce to 1 cup.
  8. Strain the settled juice through a fine-mesh sieve, being careful to leave the starch behind. You should have about 6 cups of strained juice.
  9. Pour the strained juice into the roasting pan with the defatted pan drippings. Bring to a simmer over medium heat, stirring to scrape up the browned bits from the bottom of the pan. Transfer to a large saucepan and cook over medium heat to reduce until thickened, 30 to 45 minutes.
  10. Remove from the heat and stir in the ginger and jalapeños. Strain immediately. Season with salt and pepper to taste and serve with the turkey.
- Note: A 16-pound turkey will need to be removed from the refrigerator no more than 1 hour before cooking to allow some of the chill to leave it. Do not leave it out any longer.



#### For Squash Dressing-

8 c. rich chicken stock, or turkey stock	2 unpeeled Vidalia or other sweet onions, halved
A 1-pound loaf black bread, such as pumpernickel, cut into ½" cubes	3 unpeeled Granny Smith apples, cored and cut into ½" cubes
1 large butternut or acorn squash, peeled, seeded and cut into ½" cubes	Fresh lemon juice
2 tbsp. grapeseed oil, plus more for coating onions	12 Italian chestnuts, roasted and peeled
Salt and fr. ground pepper	1½ tbsp. minced fresh savory leaves plus 4 leaves, minced

Put the stock in a large pot. Bring to a boil over high heat, reduce the heat to a simmer and cook for 20 to 30 minutes until reduced to 4 cups. Preheat the oven to 350°. Spread the bread cubes on a baking sheet and toast, stirring occasionally, just until crisp, about 20 minutes. Transfer to a bowl. Toss the squash with the 2 tablespoons oil to coat lightly and season with salt and pepper. Spread on a baking sheet and roast for 15 to 20 minutes, or until tender. Transfer the squash to a bowl. Rub the onions with a little oil and season with salt and pepper. Put on the baking sheet, cut-side down, and roast for 30 to 35 minutes, or until caramelized and tender. Remove from the oven, leaving the oven on. Peel the onions and cut into ½" cubes. In a large bowl, toss the bread with the squash, onions, apples, chestnuts, and the 1½ tablespoon savory. Slowly add enough reduced stock to moisten the ingredients so that they form a cohesive mixture (you may not need all 4 cups). Season with salt and pepper and spoon into a lightly oiled casserole. To make ahead, cover and refrigerate for up to 1 day. Bake for about 40 minutes, or until hot and crusty.

**Roasting and Peeling Chestnuts:** Cut an X in the flat side of each chestnut with a small, sharp knife. You will need to apply some pressure to pierce the leathery shell, so take care. Spread them on a baking sheet, X-side up, and roast in a preheated 300°F oven for 15 to 30 minutes, or until the skin around the incision starts to curl.

At this point, take a few chestnuts from the oven and let them cool just until you can hold them without burning your fingers. Try peeling these; if they are too tough, roast them a little longer. The roasting time depends on the age and moisture of the nuts.

In most batches, there are always a few chestnuts that refuse to peel. Drop these in simmering water for about 5 minutes. They should now peel easily, although they will not be quite as flavorful as the oven roasted ones.