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The Stuffing Theory

by MONIQUE TRUONG • NOV. 21, 2011



Damijan SaccioConcepción and Rosario’s Stuffing includes golden raisins, mushrooms and ground pork.

“He who controls the stuffing, controls the universe!” In a recent Thanksgiving-themed episode of “South Park,” these portentous words came from the mouth of Myles Standish, the military leader of the Plymouth Colony. If you missed the episode, the Pilgrims and Indians were both from outer space, and had a long-held but recently broken truce over their respective rights to “the stuffing caves” — and mayhem and hilarity ensues.

I too have a theory about stuffing. It doesn’t involve domination and space aliens but does involve immigrants and adaptation. (That sentence explains why I’m a financially strapped writer of literary fiction and not a television writer with a house in the Hollywood Hills.)

For many years, my family, newcomers then to the land of milk and honey, sat down to our

Thanksgiving feast with mixed emotions. With every bite of turkey, sweet potatoes, cranberry sauce and pumpkin pie, we were joining in a celebration (some would say “myth”) of nation building and a ritual of family gathering. These were American rites that we wouldn’t dream of ignoring or skipping, even if this country didn’t yet feel like our home and our extended family was, in fact, a world away.

I remember one year when my emotions weren’t mixed at all. I was 10, and my mother, a registered nurse, had to work the third shift on Thanksgiving day and night. She left in the oven two perfectly roasted Cornish hens for my father and me. I sobbed when I saw them. I was devastated, but not for the reason you might think: there was no stuffing.

My mother usually made a stuffing that included ground pork, chopped onions and shallots, roasted chestnuts, lots of ground black pepper, a hint of nutmeg and a splash of Cognac. (The stuffing was very French, though we were all very Vietnamese.) The little bodies of the hen wouldn’t have been able to hold more than a quarter cup of this mixture. I suppose she thought, What really was the point?

My theory was born on that sad afternoon: stuffing is where the heart is. As I grew older, I also understood its corollary: the heart is often elsewhere.

Usually at my prodding, as — oddly — most people don’t often share stuffing stories at parties, I’ve heard about families, recently and not so recently rooted in the United States, who stuff their turkeys with Eight-Treasure sticky rice; glass noodles with wood ear mushrooms; an aromatic mixture of rice, ground beef, toasted pine nuts, slivered almonds, turmeric, cinnamon and cardamom; or ground pork studded with nuts and dried fruits and singing with white wine. That inspired list was courtesy of the culinary traditions of China, Vietnam, Palestine and Spain, respectively. You’ll find the recipe from Spain and the family story behind it below.

The stuffing recipe that I’ll use for my apple-cider-brined turkey this year? A bag of Pepperidge Farm stuffing mix. As in past years, I’ll add some sautéed chopped celery, apples, onions and lots of fresh parsley to it, but it’s basically preseasoned and pure supermarket fare. I used that brand the first time I ever roasted a Thanksgiving turkey, which was in my junior year in college (when most people made their first turkey, right?). I adored the flavor of that simple stuffing and still do. I’ve never felt it necessary to venture further afield into the recipes full of sour cherries, chanterelle mushrooms or homemade brioche crumbs. Home is a relative concept and an unwavering taste.

According to the instructions on the bag, this recipe makes enough stuffing to fill a turkey weighing 16 to 20 pounds. I usually double the amount so that there is both stuffing and dressing (baked in a casserole dish), as they each have beguiling qualities to recommend them.

Junior Year and Thereafter Stuffing

6 tablespoons of salted butter
1 cup chopped onions
1 cup coarsely chopped celery
1 cup coarsely chopped apples (peeled or unpeeled)
½ cup chopped Italian parsley
½ teaspoon fleur de sel
½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
2 cups chicken broth
1 14-ounce bag of Pepperidge Farm Herb Seasoned Stuffing mix

1. Melt butter in a large saucepan over medium-high heat. Sauté the onions until soft and translucent. Add the celery and apple to the pan and continue sautéing for about another 3 minutes. Remove from heat.
2. Add broth and stuffing mix to pan and mix. Add the chopped parsley, salt and pepper.
3. Spoon the stuffing into the turkey and also into its neck cavity, allowing enough room for the stuffing to expand during roasting.
4. If there is extra stuffing, place in a buttered casserole dish and dot the top with butter. Bake at 350 degrees for 30 minutes. Leave the dish uncovered for a crunchy top.

Concepción and Rosario are mother and daughter. When Rosario left Mexico City to study in Cambridge, Mass., her mother sent along a carefully typewritten recipe for this relleno, which was traditionally for a Christmas turkey. Rosario celebrated her first-ever Thanksgiving by making this stuffing for her dorm's potluck turkey dinner. Rosario graduated, married her college sweetheart and has long since called Cambridge home. She also has never stopped making and modifying her mother's recipe. Concepción was born in the town of Cardelle in northwestern Spain, so this recipe traces its culinary roots to Galicia.

This recipe makes a luscious, very meaty stuffing that is enough for a turkey weighing 20 to 25 pounds.

Concepción and Rosario's Stuffing

8 slices bread
1 cup whole milk
1 ½ cup chopped onion
1 pound bacon
1 to 2 tablespoons salted butter, if needed
2 pounds ground pork

¾ cup raisins
¾ cup golden raisins
2 cups coarsely chopped mushrooms
½ cup slivered almonds, toasted
½ cup pine nuts, toasted
¾ cup coarsely chopped walnuts, toasted
½ cup chopped parsley
1 ½ teaspoons salt
1 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
2 cups white wine (an Albariño would be perfect)

1. In a large bowl, soak the bread slices in the milk. Set aside until Step 4.
2. In a frying pan over medium heat, toast the three kinds of nuts. (Do not combine them but rather do it in separate batches, as the nuts take different times to become golden and fragrant.) Set the toasted nuts aside.
3. Cut the bacon into ¾-1-inch pieces. In a very large frying pan, fry the bacon over medium heat until crispy but not dry. Remove the bacon pieces with a slotted spoon, leaving the bacon grease behind in the pan.
4. Carefully spoon half of the bacon grease into a second large frying pan, preferably nonstick. Depending on how much grease you have, you may have to add an additional tablespoon or two of butter to the pan. Squeeze the excess milk from the bread slices. (It's O.K. if they break apart as you'll be breaking them into pieces anyway.) Discard the excess milk. Over medium heat, fry the bread slices in the bacon grease for about 3 minutes. The goal is not to get crispy bread slices but rather slices that are nicely coated and infused with the flavor of the bacon grease. Set aside.
5. In the first very large frying pan with the other half of the bacon grease, add the chopped onions and sauté over medium heat until soft. Add the ground pork and sauté, breaking the meat into pieces, until no longer pink.
6. To the pork and onion mixture, add the chopped mushrooms and sauté for another 5 minutes.
7. Tear the sautéed bread slices into bite sized pieces and add to the pan, along with the toasted nuts, the two kinds of raisins and the wine. Stir and continue cooking for another 15 minutes. Turn off the heat and add the parsley and salt and pepper.
8. Spoon into the body and neck cavities of the turkey.

9. Spoon any remaining stuffing into a buttered casserole and bake at 350 degrees for 40-45 minutes.

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