

Stuffed Turkey and Pumpkin Pie

In, Through and Out of American Contexts

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‘Tell me what you eat and I’ll tell you who you are’ is a Brillat-Savarin quotation that is often interpreted by scholars as ‘tell me what and how you eat and I’ll tell you how your society is organised and given meaning’. This implies that the study of foodways reveals how people identify themselves in the world; their attitudes towards food expose individual and group senses of self and difference from others. Scholars of culture and society have for many years, and from a number of theoretical perspectives, examined commensality—the act of eating together—to understand how people structure, express and experience group cohesion and belonging, and to determine the nature of a variety of social relationships and identities. Studying feasts and feasting has always provided a fascinating glimpse into ritually elaborated commensal activity. Some classic examples include insights into hierarchy and power, as in the study of the Kwakiutl Potlatch;¹ gift exchange and alliance building, as exemplified in Napoleon Chagnon’s ethnographic writing and film on Yanomami feasting;² caste and pollution, as well-illustrated in Selwyn’s study of food transactions in the context of marriage feasts in India;³ or gender roles

and kinship relations, as in Ortner's study of Sherpa hospitality and ritual practice.⁴ Of course, such studies of feasts and commensality were conducted in distant 'exotic' places during an era when we imagined relative homogeneity and immobility in people's 'ethnic', 'caste' or 'community' affiliations; when order and structure were seen as the best means to describe 'local' performances.

Contemporary studies of feasting closer to home have likewise tended to focus upon generalised structures and functions even as they may attempt to include emic or local experience. Melanie Wallendorf and Eric Arnould's study of Thanksgiving (co-produced with one hundred American undergraduates collecting the data) is an interesting example of this, and one of the few ethnographic studies of Thanksgiving available.⁵ It suggests the Thanksgiving feast is, and has always been, a cultural message and celebration of enduring abundance, of material surplus and the satisfaction that 'Americans' get in consuming a standardised *huge* meal, 'ritually' and 'nostalgically'.⁶ The authors provide ample evidence in their sample of such consumer ideology as well as consumer praxis, and focus on how universalising people's narratives of Thanksgiving are. Their interest in consumption (rather than the finer details of production embodied in recipes and the stories of a range of cooks that the present study examines) produces a story of continuity. Structures of continuity also feature in Valerie Wright-St Clair et al.'s study of older women in New Zealand who produce Christmas feasts. The authors home in on the pleasure women feel in 'remaking family and cultural rituals', thereby validating their structured, gendered, position in society as 'nurturers'.⁷

Increasingly, in food studies more generally, with acknowledgement of the mobility, diversity and multiplicity associated with migration and globalisation, scholars have come to consider processes of deterritorialisation, change, hybridity and disjuncture. How these processes are played out in the context of foodways is, I would suggest, particularly interesting, because one can explore how they manifest *alongside* often complex indications of locality and belonging. George Ritzer's study of 'McDonaldisation', for example, offers an interesting vantage point from which one can test what happens when a global/multi-national fast-food chain produces the same (but ever so subtly 'localised') burgers and chips in its outlets around the world.⁸ Richard Wilk takes another approach by focusing on one relatively

'backwater' location in the world, Belize, to study the history of movement of people and food in and through the small island.⁹

Despite the richness of such studies, I would venture that there is an important unattended space they circle but do not fill. The research that looks at global movements and change has not considered the problem of how travelling, migrating people engage with a national feast, while studies of feasting have not contemplated how feasting food recipes are constructed through movement. This study begins to address this gap by focusing on a couple of key components of the American Thanksgiving meal and how they travel, and on how diversity of experience is embodied in the methods and ingredients for producing the bird and the pie.

Stuffed turkey and pumpkin pie are foods prepared almost exclusively for a so-called 'national day of feasting' by a very diverse and mobile population of 'Americans' at home and abroad. Looking beneath the surface of the dishes provides an opportunity to ask revealing questions about some of our assumptions about feasting, commensality and identity. If we know, for example, how the preparation and consumption of feasting food marks boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, how then does it cross boundaries? How does it travel across space and through time? How can its multivocality be manipulated by cooks in order to serve a number of different identity-marking purposes? How can individuality be expressed within the confines of a 'traditional' food, or a 'feast-specific' food?¹⁰ Can diversification meaningfully stand alongside the standardisation of feast foods and, if so, what does this tell us about food and identity? These are some of the questions I will address in the following pages through interrogating recipes produced by people who have travelled.¹¹

Recipes carry tastes and associations that are adapted and transported through time and space and their study usefully attends to the questions above. A classic contribution to food studies by Arjun Appadurai (drawing on the work of Jack Goody and others) documents the way in which cooking is seen to be 'a communicable variety of expert knowledge' that proliferates in particular parts of the world in distinctive ways, drawing lines between 'high' and 'low' foods.¹² In particular detail he traces the development of Indian national cuisines out of their 'regional or ethnic roots', and the way in which recipes, initially orally exchanged between urban middle-class women experimenting across regional (and even caste) borders,

become standardised stereotypes of the 'other' in new cookbooks. What he observed is a paradoxical demand on the housewife for diversification (for example, when pushed by husbands keen to demonstrate their metropolitan savvy) as well as standardisation and traditional cooking (from extended family members craving food made 'in the specialised mode of the region, caste, and community from which they originally come').¹³ The construction of a 'national cuisine', he suggests, has occurred because of, rather than despite, such increasing local diversity and expression. He concludes that 'cosmopolitan and parochial expressions enrich and sharpen each other by dialectical interaction'.¹⁴ The story of national cuisine in (and beyond) a hugely multicultural and mobile America in the present case may demonstrate a similar dialectical interaction in contemporary practice, but the Thanksgiving 'national' food story does not begin with recipes displaying regional diversity as in Appadurai's Indian case. Instead it begins with a myth of single origin.

—'AS AMERICAN AS PUMPKIN PIE': A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THANKSGIVING FOOD CULTURE

The early settlers in the early to mid seventeenth century in New England apparently filled a pumpkin shell with milk, honey and spices and baked it in hot ashes. This dish has been called the forerunner of the pumpkin pie.¹⁵ About the same time, Francois Pierre la Varenne in *Le Vrai Cuisinier Francois (The True French Cook)* published a recipe for a very simple 'tourte' made with pumpkin, boiled in milk, mixed with sugar, butter and almonds, thinly spread on pastry and baked.¹⁶ In England, *The Compleat Cook* first published in 1658, offers a complex recipe of 'pumpion pie', including rosemary, parsley and marjoram as well as cinnamon, nutmeg, pepper, sugar and many eggs all fried with pumpkin slices and then layered with apple and filled with a custard made from egg yolk and wine!¹⁷ This book is said to be one the settlers brought with them to the New World.¹⁸

Pumpkin pie first appeared in its more familiar form in America near the turn of the nineteenth century in Amelia Simmons' *American Cookery Book*, the first published collection of recipes for foods deemed to be native to America.¹⁹ At the turn of the twentieth century, in a cookbook produced for German immigrants to America, one can find two versions of 'squash pie', made with cooked and sieved squash, sugar, milk, egg, salt, mace and a 'good crust'.²⁰

Regardless of how it evolved into its present form, pumpkin pie is widely understood as a signifier for the Thanksgiving feast. According to Pillsbury, half the United States' total consumption of pumpkin pie takes place during that one week of the year surrounding the fourth Thursday in November.²¹ The pie, along with all the other requisite elements of the 'traditional Thanksgiving feast' (including turkey, stuffing, cranberry sauce and sweet potatoes), are imagined to derive from some sort of equivalent celebratory meal that the first Pilgrim settlers would have eaten with the Native American Indians after their first harvest in 1621. American children learn this myth in school but Siskind documents its falsity and, following Hobsbawm and Ranger, suggests the Thanksgiving meal in its contemporary form was 'invented' at the end of the nineteenth century when it became associated with homecoming—a return to the rural extended family farm—and a metaphor for the renewal of family ties.²² However, she also suggests that this 'traditional' feast allows people to feel part of 'the imagined community' by sitting down to the same sort of meal as these imagined others and thereby creating a sense of national unity and celebration.²³ Surprisingly, she writes about 'imagined communities' without any reference to Benedict Anderson's seminal book by that title.²⁴ A closer reading of Anderson might have influenced Siskind's analysis, for Anderson has made it very clear that imagination and invention are two similar, but distinct processes (in his critique, for example, of Gellner's thesis on nationalism), but it appears that Siskind conflates the two in her discussion about Thanksgiving. Invention implies fabrication and falsity—that something artificial is made out of nothing, while imagination is more to do with creation. To some extent, both processes are at work, as I will demonstrate below.

The idea of sharing a meal with a nation of others (who you will never meet but can only imagine), all on a given day, does happen and does unify some (but certainly not all) people through a sense of *communitas* at both a familial level and a larger community or national level. The idea of the nation is served by celebrations and feasts held in common, as well as the institutional mechanisms that support them—the national holiday break from work, the overflow of poultry and pies in grocery stores, themed television specials and advertisements in magazines. For me, without these public reminders it is much harder to feel American in England or Australia on Thanksgiving Day—nothing external to my own actions supports my

imaginary. My contemporaries (in Schütz's sense of the word as a community of others who are alive at the same time)²⁵ who include fellow Americans across the globe who might be able to collaborate with at least a partially shared notion of what happens at Thanksgiving, are not at hand. My consociates in my long-term state of exile, however, who are at hand and with whom I share space and time directly, are from various places around the world and have no connection with Thanksgiving.²⁶

The idea that one's sense of national belonging is connected to a notion of kinship or relatedness to the settlers who first ate together at harvest time in Plymouth in the seventeenth century, however, simply does not fit with what people today from a variety of ethnic and social positions in American society experience on Thanksgiving. I suggest that not only is this an invented—if often repeated—version of history, but that migrant recipe choices at Thanksgiving reveal a surprisingly free and diverse expression of ethnic and personal memory and taste that often connects people to locales and experiences far from America's shores and with no necessary reference back to the feast's contested roots. By looking beneath the surface of supposedly 'standard' and 'traditional' Thanksgiving fare, one can find that connections to memorable feasting foods experienced in the global ecumene in turn are traced in many ways that can look imaginatively out into the world and forward as much as they look back with longing.

This is particularly interesting when set against historical treatments of the shifting associated meanings of Thanksgiving over time. There is an extensive historical literature that explores different versions of this story: very little is apparently known about the New England feasts of the seventeenth century (if they even existed), while there is an abundance of description of Thanksgiving dinners in the nineteenth century.²⁷ According to Andrew Smith, the 'driving force behind making Thanksgiving a national holiday' was the published writings of Sarah Josepha Hale (author of much popular verse including 'Mary and the Lamb', later known as 'Mary had a Little Lamb'), whose novel *Northwood* included a whole chapter describing 'a good and true Yankee Thanksgiving' with the turkey at the head of the table.²⁸ Hale campaigned vigorously in the mid nineteenth century to make Thanksgiving a national holiday, believing that it would unite a country torn apart with regional and economic difference and dissent over slavery.²⁹ Shortly after

the North won the Civil War in 1865, Abraham Lincoln declared the last Thursday in November a national holiday of Thanksgiving.³⁰ So while the early Pilgrim settlers of the seventeenth century acted out the Thanksgiving season in search of God's mercy, those in power in the modern era would use Thanksgiving as a secular, civilising and unifying tool in the face of a mobility that confronted them with a threatening population of Catholic and Jewish immigrants, black and white southerners and urban labourers.³¹

Elizabeth Pleck adds that the growth of nationalism in the Progressive era (late nineteenth to early twentieth century) turned Thanksgiving into 'a domestic occasion'; it was secularised and nationalised in such a way that its teaching and practice could embrace the children of migrants for assimilative purposes.³² She further suggests that immigrants 'sought a culinary fusion, which asserted a bit of group identity while embracing many elements of the dominant culture'.³³ These sentiments were encouraged through schooling as well as through widely circulated magazines and other media.³⁴ Smith argues that with the huge burst of in-migration from southern and eastern Europe at the turn of the twentieth century, when some nine million people flooded into American cities, the original myth of the Pilgrim feast became resurrected as an educative story.³⁵

In these various treatments of undoubtedly well-documented historical trends, there tends, yet again, to be a focus on the structures, interests and designs that shaped general social practice (as encouraged through education and media, for example). Such perspectives neglect to examine finer details and variations in performance, attitude and individual experience, especially for those millions introduced to the Thanksgiving phenomenon through migration. These finer details that emerge out of subjective and grounded experience may indeed further enrich our understanding of this social history while at the same time speaking to contemporary analyses of feasting food, mobility and identity.

The grounded examples I draw from have been collected over the past thirty years. I spoke with a range of people from various multicultural contexts about recipe ingredients, their processes of making feast dishes, their personal histories and reflections and stories about such foods, to learn how something as seemingly banal as a pumpkin pie or stuffed turkey that everyone is expected to cook and eat for that feast, can, through its more detailed exposure, reveal the cultural complexity

of people's identities and lived experiences. Food is a field of action, it can be an art form, it can be an outlet to pay homage to a mother, a favorite recipe, a glorious memory, a village or home or holiday villa in the heart.³⁶ Indeed, we should see through these recipes and stories the diversity of people's identifications that may simultaneously be expressed in a single dish; these descriptions are often rich with nostalgia. To look closely at the actual performance of pumpkin pies and stuffed turkeys, we move a long way from the functional analysis of a tribal feast, for example, to encompass fluidity and hybridity of peoples and their creations. Hannertz has suggested that cosmopolitanism is a process by which diversity is organised, rather than by which uniformity is replicated.³⁷ In the case of a virtually formulaic national holiday *menu* that people often do tend to replicate (in providing various 'core' dishes for Thanksgiving), the diversity of their ethnic and personal affiliations is embedded at another level—in the ingredients and methods and associations involved in the making of those dishes—and the initial clues to this are offered in people's recipes. So, let us 'taste' them now to see how layers of replication and diversification offer a revealing critical vantage point from which to examine mobility and identity.

I began my collection of recipes and stories by speaking to my own mother; then I talked to with a number of first- and second-generation immigrants in California about their Thanksgiving recipes.³⁸ I also collected numerous 'American' recipes and articles in cooking magazines, cookbooks and on-line Thanksgiving websites. I wanted to understand how such recipes travel, in contexts outside the United States, so to suggest a few tentative patterns I share some personal examples of stuffed turkey and pumpkin pie performances in the American diaspora.

—A MOTHER'S FOOD IS BEST ... OR IS IT?

We are often most comfortable with the foods we grew up with. Over the past decades I have lived abroad, but if I had made the trip to the United States for Thanksgiving and someone other than my mother cooked the turkey or pie, the meal might still be 'traditional' in America's eyes but not in mine. An American informant living overseas agrees that he still expects the tinned gelatinous version of cranberry sauce that his mother served him as a child, wobbling in the shape of the tin on a plate. 'Real', freshly made cranberry sauce, he admits, is far tastier, but on

Thanksgiving it just is not 'real' for him. A person who has learned a culinary repertoire in a foreign country and/or was raised abroad might understandably cook Thanksgiving food in his or her family's culinary culture. My mother, Lore, came to the United States in 1939 as a Jewish refugee from a small town in Westfalia, Germany. She was seventeen years old when she left, and she lived in the United States for over sixty years before her death in 2001. When I first spoke with her about the feast in 1981, on the day before Thanksgiving, she was preparing to serve turkey with stuffing, celery root salad, cranberries, sweet potatoes, green salad, sourdough rolls and home-grown pickles. She was making pumpkin pie for dessert. The menu itself says very little about my mother's background. We have to look closer at how she then made the food and what she had to say about it. The turkey was stuffed with 'old German stuffing' which she remembered gracing every holiday goose. She prepared the bird 'like a German goose'—salted in and out, the skin rubbed with garlic. The bird was loosely stuffed with her own mother's favorite bread, onion, celery, gizzard, parsley and ginger stuffing and covered with cheesecloth soaked in butter to keep it moist until the last stage for crisping. In Germany, she told me, the day after the (secular Christmas) goose feast she would serve what she called the 'little goose' (*gänzeklein*)—a tasty stew made with the wings, neck, feet and gizzards of the bird in which a stuffed neck skin (*gefüllte helzel*) would be boiled—'classic Jewish fare'.³⁹ The following year, when I was visiting at Christmastime, she prepared a goose and, for the day after, a 'little goose': the memories evoked through our Thanksgiving conversations had revitalised her cooking repertoire.

The celery root salad my mother called by its French name, *celeri au remoulade*. She remembered always having celery root in vinaigrette with holiday meals in Germany, but she preferred the taste of the French version she learned when she lived for a few years in Paris in the 1950s, a deeply treasured period in her life. She cooked fresh cranberries with sugar, chopped apple, orange and lemon, just like my grandmother had prepared Lingon berries in Germany. Even the green salad reminded her of her childhood—butter lettuce, dandelion greens, watercress, and fennel. Finally, there would always be a pumpkin pie. That year she was following this recipe:

Michelle's Pumpkin Pie

¾ c sugar
1 tsp each ginger, cinnamon
¼ tsp each cloves, nutmeg
2 cups pumpkin puree
2 tbsp molasses

Mix together. In another bowl, mix: 3 eggs, lightly beaten, 1.5 cups light cream, 2 tbsp brandy. Mix the two mixes and pour into partially baked 10" pie shell (crust from *Vegetarian Epicure*, basic short crust). Bake at 375 for 35–40min til set.

Michelle was a close family friend from California and a fine baker. The simplicity and reliability of the dish attracted my mother, and she wanted 'everyone to be happy'. The year before she had followed 'Jean's Chiffon Pumpkin Pie', which some in my family loved and others did not. For another Thanksgiving I shared with her, she prepared a frozen ice cream pumpkin pie. 'Do you prefer one pie over the other?' I asked. 'Not really—I never heard of pumpkin pie before I came to this country, and I just like to experiment with different recipes each year—why be a stick-in-the-mud.' 'But you never change the turkey stuffing.' 'That's different, the turkey is required for Thanksgiving—I much prefer the taste of goose, but at least I stuff the turkey with a really delicious stuffing—I can taste my childhood, and then it's nice to have a bit of fun with dessert.'

In 2004 the *New York Times* published an article entitled, 'Turkey is Basic, but Immigrants Add Homeland Touches' that demonstrates the same idea with stories from migrants from Colombia who cook turkey with adobo sauce; an Arabic restaurateur in New Jersey who struggles to find turkeys slaughtered by Halal butchers and marinate them to meet with Arabic tastes despite angry Muslim neighbours protesting against the celebration of Thanksgiving in the context of the Iraq war.⁴⁰ So we see how the savoury main dish provides the serious stuff of national, ethnic and family sensory memory and celebration and even protest, while, at least in my mother's case, the pumpkin pie was a frivolous and flexible and creative expression. The salad mixed memories of childhood tempered with preferred tastes collected through adventure and travel.

Another informant, Popi, was born and raised in Athens, Greece. For her first Thanksgiving in America in the 1950s she described how she went to a friend's

parents' home in Indiana. She thought the cranberries were far too sweet and totally out of place with turkey meat—she nibbled tentatively at the sage stuffing but hated the spices. She was used to salty or spicy main courses with no sweetness and then a very sweet dessert, like baklava. This reflects in what she served her family the year I spoke with her about the meal: Turkey stuffed with wild rice mixed with chestnuts and pinenuts and chopped giblets. 'As the Greek Christmas turkey was served,' Popi continued, 'to be festive I have to have it like my mother did it ... No one in my family likes yams or cranberries with the meal, so we have salad, and instead of pumpkin pie this year we'll have chocolate truffles from a fancy shop in Berkeley.' But Popi added a revealing proviso: if non-family guests come for Thanksgiving, she does prepare yams, cranberries and pumpkin pies. Here it is very clear that audience will influence the performance of a ritual meal, and what is imagined as a 'proper' public Thanksgiving meal versus a 'proper' private Thanksgiving meal can vary significantly because they privilege different identifications. These identifications are often, but not always, attached to past experience and memory; sometimes they are attached to a sensitivity of others' desires that is required of a good host. This sensitivity evokes the shared public imaginary that is momentarily privileged over the private personal ritual associated with what Sutton calls 'remembrance of repasts'.⁴¹

Another story: a Russian Jewish woman in her forties was entirely unenthusiastic about Thanksgiving dinner. Her husband had grown up in an orphanage (and without a parent to cook special meals for him). 'We both hate Thanksgiving and don't give a bah-humbug for traditional meals.' This couple made a point of going out for Chinese food or making chili con carne at home. It is perhaps significant that they had no children, emphasising how Thanksgiving is a family festivity that regardless of background continues to be informed by an influential national educational system with its children reciting 'the myth' and demanding certain dishes. Media articles on refugee and other migrant experiences indicate that the pressure to have the traditional meal is often applied by children 'coming home from school with recipes and construction-paper turkeys'.⁴²

Marc moved to the United States from France in his fifties, and he was particularly eager to share his pumpkin pie story with me in 2008.

You know, as a child growing up in the centre of France, I loved eating *tourte a la citrouille*, which is a sort of French version of the pumpkin pie, but I had no recipes from my family. I tasted the pie you buy in the American shops and it was awful. So now I use Thanksgiving as an excuse to try to find the pie I love. I search on the internet and French cookbooks to bake a different one each year. My wife likes this because she likes to make the first part of the meal and not dessert, so we stay friends, you know.

[‘What makes the French pie so much better?’]

It’s everything—the flavour, the texture, the wonderful pastry—we are superior at that you know. Pumpkin tastes like the autumn season and my pies taste like France in November, and I like to be living in America but eating in France, if you know what I mean.

In other words, he wanted to have his pie and eat it too! Ironically, when I spoke separately to Marc’s wife about the pie, she laughed and said:

Marc lives this fantasy about his childhood—his mother was a dreadful cook and I think he only tasted the French pumpkin tarte when we lived near Limoge. But, I do like to get some help in the kitchen on Thanksgiving, and he can always tell guests about his French fantasy when we have the dessert.

This romanticisation of home can also be seen in an interview that the *New York Times* published with pastry chef Pichet Ong.⁴³ Ong is Chinese, but was raised in Thailand and Singapore; had his first Thanksgiving feast at fourteen years of age when his family moved to New York. ‘Chinese people don’t really eat turkey. We eat chickens and ducks. And we don’t eat pumpkin, or pie. For dessert my mother would always make a sweet kabocha squash soup with coconut milk and tapioca.’ In the article, he sang the praises of kabocha, a squash similar to the pumpkin that is ‘a staple in Asian cuisine’ with ‘softer’ texture, ‘mellow’ flavour, and ‘better’ colour. To get a creamy soft texture he suggested steaming the squash rather than following the French who would roast it to concentrate the flavour. He guided the reader through the making of ‘an Asian-fusion version of the holiday’s ubiquitous pie’—a cheesecake-like confection with a lime-scented graham cracker base and served

with ginger butterscotch sauce. The writer added that 'the all-American meal gets an exotic finish'.

On the same day in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, readers were told: 'The first Thanksgiving was fusion—not the sexy fusion cuisine of today's chefs, but the feast meals of the 1621 immigrants were down-to-earth blendings borne of necessity and imagination ... and exchanges between the settlers and natives.'⁴⁴ Historians would take issue with even this representation of the Pilgrim Thanksgiving (as indicated in the historical overview above), but the myth as it appears in many different guises is as useful in the study of identity as the reality. Kathleen Curtin, food historian of a living history museum in Plymouth, referred to the way in which social reformers in the nineteenth and early twentieth century would encourage conformity through the Thanksgiving feast in order to get rid of 'the scourge of heavily scented food' coming into the country through immigration.⁴⁵ Ethnicity continued to be perceived as a handicap, keeping people from assimilating and achieving 'the American Dream'. Only later in the twentieth century has there been a political and social reversal calling for a rising ethnic consciousness and a celebration of the hyphenated-American. Now, in the twenty-first century, such 'sexy fusions' (as they are called in the current restaurant trade) of Asian, European and other flavours are often celebrated, at least among a cosmopolitan, travelled audience, and produce an entirely different attitude towards immigrants and their cuisines.

Allison James has examined similar shifts in British culinary taste and experience, wondering how food can still function as a signifier of identity despite the 'spiralling diversity of foodstuffs' and 'creolisation' of cuisine taking place in shops, homes and restaurants.⁴⁶ She demonstrates how ultimately the meanings are created and manipulated by the individual consumer who might as easily choose to buy an exotic fruit to enhance a traditional English fruit salad as he would to sensorily recreate a far-away home that the fruit's taste evokes.⁴⁷ Diversity does not dilute culinary culture, it elaborates and redefines it.

Such elaboration and redefinition, particularly in the Thanksgiving feast context, speak to both a story of (oft-imagined) continuity and historicity as well as individual and creative expression. Such tension between conformity and creativity revealed through shared menus and diverse recipes demonstrate a way to look at food in the global ecumene.

Richard Wilk's ethnography, *Home Cooking in the Global Village: Caribbean Food from Buccaneers to Ecotourists*, homes in on market-driven movements of global resources and their subsequent free mixture ('creolisation') at local levels to persuasively demonstrate how local culture in Belize has, through history, been produced through this flow, rather than destroyed by it.⁴⁸ Wilk suggests that 'we' (in the US-dominated 'Western' world), in our privileged positions of global power, do not care where our plethora of exotic ingredients come from, but accept that they all drain from the 'edge' to the 'centre', as through a funnel into our mouths for our health and pleasure.⁴⁹ This rings true, perhaps, from the perspective of Wilk's ethnography that studies how such a small country's diet interacts with the world through tourism, consumerism, colonialism, and so on. However, the first-hand experienced view of a first or second generation migrant in America (who may likely have migrated from 'the edge') provides a different angle; the ingredients required to adapt or belong to a nation *and* express one's story of migration, memory, taste and travel are very much valued—the metaphor of 'hand-picked with care' is perhaps more apt in this case, over the metaphor of a greedy, blind funnel.

Obviously, there are many layers of culinary knowledge and choice that go into the production of any food. Global communications, trends and concerns affect the menu of these choices made at 'local' levels. Immigrants may ignore these foods or produce them for the holiday in such a way that they taste of 'home', or even a multitude of 'homes'. The meaning is in the detail—the steamed squash, the French pastry ingredients, the familiar stuffing, the close friend who is memorialised in the recipe's title, and so on. The choices made when the recipe is produced, consumed and talked about allow for the proliferation of additional meanings that enhance and reposition 'local' surface ones trapped in the core ingredients and an imagined shared history.

Consequently, the turkey and the pie do not get sent out into the world so easily. Pumpkin pie, in particular, does not travel well outside the North American continent, even if it has absorbed foreign elements quite easily into its custard at home. There are expatriate communities that bake the pies all over the world, but these are Americans abroad who might gather together for Thanksgiving, sequestered away in private dining rooms and military bases. I am one such American—I have made a Thanksgiving feast (usually the weekend before or after

the genuine holiday because of work schedules on the day) for many of the years I have lived abroad. I tend to choose, with adjustments because of the difficulty of getting exact ingredients, my mother's stuffing, fresh cranberries, *celerie au remoulade*, my favorite spinach recipe adapted from my mother, and Michelle's pumpkin pie. It is a very important day because I remember the fabulous feasts my mother made—it becomes a day steeped in memory of family feasts and frivolity. My production of the feast of my childhood (with some unique twists I have picked up on my travels in the world), demonstrates what Sutton calls an 'embodied apprenticeship' that produces tastes and textures made memorable and intimate by their seasonal repetition.⁵⁰ The 'Americanness' of the meal means less to me now as does the 'horizontal comradeship' one is meant to experience on the chosen day; for me, Thanksgiving is an excuse to cook, to have a dinner party, to eat, and to commemorate my youth. The pie is the pinnacle of the meal, but I have discovered that it does not always sit well on foreign palates.

—PUMPKIN PIE ABROAD: SWEET SQUASH—SAVOURY DILEMMA

For twelve years, I baked ten pumpkin pies every November. I served them to over one hundred first year undergraduate students at the University of Durham in the northeast of England at an introductory lecture on ethnicity that I engineered to always fall on the Thanksgiving Thursday. I followed my mother's favorite recipe from Michelle for the pies, labouring well into the night before the class and, after dishing out the small slices with a dab of whipped cream, I watched the students' faces and asked for their honest opinion on the taste. Only a very small proportion of the students over those years had ever tasted pumpkin pie before, although they had all heard about it and were eager to try. After the first bite, many pulled pained faces and reluctantly proclaimed that it was just 'too different'.

The problem is, of course, one of classification. The people who did not like the pie insisted that it was because they felt it was wrong to be eating a sweet squash—all taste buds revolted because a savoury food was masquerading as a sweet food. The word 'savoury' has, of course, several meanings, including 'tasty' and 'appetising' which are more common popular translations in the United States, but in the United Kingdom, 'savoury' is simply the antonym of sweet and these classes of food generally belong on different plates. I first discovered this years ago at the

International House of Pancakes in Philadelphia when a British friend nearly fainted to see me eat my pancakes, bacon, eggs and maple syrup all together: ‘you’re mixing your sweet and savoury!’ he exclaimed with horror. So in a British university context, it would make sense that a savoury-sweet pumpkin pie might not impress.⁵¹ The students would not try it again, because they would not have the opportunity or, probably, the desire. Eating sweet pumpkin pie for a non-American in England is not a marker of any importance, as it is to US residents in November—there is no sociocultural investment in either learning to like it, or learning to transform it into something more familiar in flavour, sweetness or spice. A UK *Sunday Times* article I read was devoted to cooking pumpkins, and the title for one recipe was ‘Pumpkin Tarts’, but a closer look at this recipe revealed how it is cooked with feta cheese and is thus a savoury dish. In a fashionable café in inner city Melbourne, a colleague of mine reported eating a pumpkin and haloumi pie, which was topped with a runny fried egg and herbed salad (delicious, yes, but not a ‘real’ pumpkin pie.). At the time of writing, also in Melbourne, you can buy a large sweet pumpkin pie in a shop called Costco, an American wholesale store that was introduced to Melbourne in 2009. Interestingly, the pie is extremely economical to purchase compared to other more ‘familiar’ desserts, less than a third of the cost of a tiramisu or chocolate cake, and indeed less than the cost involved in acquiring all the requisite ingredients to bake it from scratch. This, I would venture, could easily be a reflection of prospective purchasers’ lack of knowledge or an inherited European apprehension of a sweet squash. ‘Great deal, but no thanks’, said my Australian shopping partner.

Things that fall outside expected cultural and linguistically marked categories and become ‘matter out of place’, particularly in a ritually meaningful context, can come to wield power and to draw attention to themselves, as Mary Douglas’ classic structuralist study of food consumption rules outlined in the Old Testament chapter Leviticus clearly demonstrates.⁵² Thus, pumpkin pie appears to startle some people; it is matter out of place for many a migrant’s palate, but it is also very squarely matter in its proper place when producing a meal that is required to service one’s nationalist identifications as an American.

—A TURKEY STUFFED WITH SIGNIFICANCE

Stuffed turkey, one might presume, is less likely to be positioned as a category error—it does not appear to struggle as much with adaptation or classification, from the examples offered above. Indeed, the turkey is often referred to in the literature as the most symbolically loaded item in the Thanksgiving standard menu—both as the centrepiece physically and aesthetically, but also as the most powerful signifier for the national homecoming feast and its associated, if contested, history. An apt illustration of this significance is symbolically (and indeed a bit ironically) enacted in the ‘invented tradition’ of the US presidential public pardon of a larger than usual farm-raised turkey in the buildup to Thanksgiving. In November 2011, for example, President Barack Obama ‘spared’ a 45-pound turkey named ‘Liberty’ as the official Thanksgiving bird, as well as its understudy named ‘Peace’. The public, televised (and YouTube displayed) ‘parable of mercy’ allowed him to stand with his daughters on the steps of the White House and express the ‘meaning of Thanksgiving’ for Americans who should be mindful of those who are less fortunate as well as to thank ‘members of our military serving overseas’.⁵³ Magnus Fiskesjö has written a marvellous thought-piece about the significance of the US head of state’s ritualised sparing of a turkey that, he points out, would have been killed alongside the forty-five million that perish in aid of the annual feast.⁵⁴ Fiskesjö persuasively traces one version of the history and process of the pardon in order to comment on the huge symbolic load, the ‘deep and terrible significance’ around modern state sovereignty that the extension of mercy from the ‘high priest of pardon’ in the United States enacts:

It is not unthinkable that the turkey pardon was introduced into the existing national ritual cycle after World War II to reassure the people that their imagined community was still, ‘after all’, a good and godly one, just like before, despite the awful mass killings perpetrated on legions of defenseless civilians ... It would mirror the many Thanksgiving prayers from the post-conquest era in which European immigrants said thanks to their god for aiding them by exterminating the native Indians and thus clearing the land for themselves.⁵⁵

Interestingly, while media lore (that Fiskesjö was clearly evoking in his analysis) annually locates the beginning of the presidential pardon ‘tradition’ in 1947 with Harry Truman (‘a sentimental reprieve from the man who dropped two atomic

bombs'),⁵⁶ media archives would suggest that Truman was just publically receiving a gift from the National Turkey Federation, a gift that would probably end up stuffed and cooked for his Thanksgiving table. The same presentation took place for subsequent presidents until 1989 and George W. Bush's first Thanksgiving as president, when his turkey gift was given 'life', for no apparent reason.⁵⁷

The imagined origin and 'meaning' of the turkey pardon (much like the imagined origin and significance of the pumpkin pie) might intrigue historians but is not something that is generally known about or associated with the build up to the contemporary feast. It does, however, contribute something to our more local recipe-and-experience-embedded considerations of how American citizens, residents and expats imagine themselves to belong to a national community. This happens through the production of a meal, through commemorative consumption as well as through the larger ritually transmitted yet ever-shifting symbolic associations of power, nostalgia and mobility that can be identified in its study.⁵⁸

—CONCLUSION

A few general observations emerge from the various cases of Thanksgiving feast production shared above. Generally, no matter how liberated they might have been in their culinary arrangements during non-feasting days of the year, women frequently seemed to take main responsibility for the preparation of the holiday meals. For example, my father's nostalgic memories of elaborate Thanksgiving meal fare from his youth in Indiana had no part in my mother's preparations of the meal. Popi's husband was raised in West Virginia. He remembered loving his grandmother's turkey, but he did not know how it was prepared, and although he disliked nuts, Popi's Greek nut-rich stuffing was always served. In the cases I have charted, holiday recipes tend to be inherited matrilineally. Men married out into the new matrilineal family holiday cuisine (or in some cases, as exemplified by Jean and Pichet Ong, they would go out 'hunting' for appropriate recipes to adopt as their own). Whatever the gender of the cook, the quest for nostalgia that was often exposed in his or her choices had to be partly balanced by a desire to meet at least some of the needs of the gathered audience. Thanksgiving in the twentieth century indeed became a 'domestic occasion' in a 'quasi-sacred space over which the mother as homemaker presided' and in which middle-class ideologies of the nuclear and

affectionate family were enacted.⁵⁹ Producing an exotic Caribbean or a nouvelle Asian feast 'for a change' when family travelled far for the expected turkey and cranberries could spell disaster. I am reminded here of an insightful study that Mars and Mars conducted on airline food and the various constraints chefs deal with in trying to provide for and titillate a huge diversity of eating publics in a small confined space.⁶⁰ They demonstrated that it is not just the menus that must be considered, but the modes of preparation, presentation and even names given to dishes. The cook on Thanksgiving Day has to go one step further to consider the audience while simultaneously satisfying her own nostalgic and aesthetic and creative desires.

We know that a recipe, an example of material or oral culture, may tell us something about the people who cook the food, about their 'family traditions', their life histories, their ethnic and travelling backgrounds, their audiences and their tastes. Through turkey and pumpkin pie recipes and the stories that people tell about them, one can learn how 'traditional' American Thanksgiving cuisine is understood, as well as ideas of how 'holiday food' should be prepared which are a product of one's personal and familial experience. People make sense of the world through objects, symbolic associations they constantly refigure in their relations with these objects, and memories distant and near. A prepared dish like a stuffed bird or a pumpkin pie, embodied in a recipe, is indeed a 'flexible symbolic vehicle for self identification'⁶¹—an artefact 'of culture in the making'⁶²—a cultural site of fragmentation and the reconstruction of wholeness through the evocation of memory.⁶³

I would posit that the dialectical relationship between diversification and standardisation and the potential for stereotyping both an imagined 'classic' or 'traditional' version as well as an exotic 'other' is demonstrated clearly in the making of even a small variety of stuffed turkeys and pumpkin pies, at home and abroad. As other scholars have argued, traditions are creations that change through time and are moulded anew through each practitioner. I have argued here for a mobile framing that allows us to heed both replication and manipulation in the production of a culinary 'traditional' or 'national' fare. Through this framing, revealed in the small details of ingredients and techniques, we see free, sensory expression of both commonality and distinctiveness, the display of public as well as private symbolic

associations, a platform for national as well as ethnic, personal, 'exotic' expression, and the search for taste with changing palates that can simultaneously thirst for the familiar and hunger for change.

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—NOTES

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⁷ Valerie Wright-St. Clair, Clare Hocking, Wannipa Bunrayong, Soisuda Vittayakorn and Phuonjai Rattakorn, 'Older New Zealand Women doing the Work of Christmas: A Recipe for Identity Formation', *Sociological Review*, vol. 53, no. 2, p. 346.

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- ⁹ Richard Wilk, *Home Cooking in the Global Village: Caribbean Food from Buccaneers to Ecotourists*, Berg, Oxford, 2006.
- ¹⁰ There is a wealth of material in food studies that critically explores notions of 'tradition' alongside 'authenticity', 'home' and 'nostalgia' in relation to how people identify themselves through the production of food within a national community; see Bob Ashley, Joanne Hollows, Steve Jones and Ben Taylor, *Food and Cultural Studies*, Routledge, London, 2004, pp. 80–9 for a useful starting point or Jean Duruz, 'Home Cooking, Nostalgia, and the Purchase of Tradition', *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2001, pp. 21–32.
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- ³² Ibid., pp. 778–9.
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- ³⁴ Ibid., p. 141.
- ³⁵ Smith, pp. 84–5.
- ³⁶ Mary Douglas, *Food in the Social Order*, Routledge, London, 2002, p. 30.
- ³⁷ Ulf Hannerz, 'Cosmopolitans and Locals in World Culture', *Theory, Culture and Society*, vol 7, 1990, pp. 237–51.
- ³⁸ I use the words 'spoke with' and 'talked to' instead of 'interview' here to evoke the discursive character of my interactions with migrant Thanksgiving cooks.
- ³⁹ My mother's family were not religious and did not celebrate Jewish holidays (such as Passover), so their goose was served at Christmas-time and identified in my mother's memory as 'German', while the 'little goose' with the stuffed neck (historically associated with poor Ashkenazi Jewish cuisine) was remembered as a Jewish dish. See Gil Marks, *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food*, Wiley, London, 2010, p. 261.
- ⁴⁰ Kim Severson, 'Turkey is Basic, but Immigrants Add Homeland Touches', *New York Times*, 25 November 2004, p. A25.
- ⁴¹ David Sutton, *Remembrance of Repasts: An Anthropology of Food and Memory*, Berg, Oxford, 2001.
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- ⁴⁶ Allison James, 'Identity and the Global Stew', in *The Taste Culture Reader: Experiencing Food and Drink*, ed. Carolyn Korsmeyer, Berg Press, Oxford, 2005, pp. 372–84.
- ⁴⁷ James.
- ⁴⁸ Wilk.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 2
- ⁵⁰ Sutton, pp. 135, 103.
- ⁵¹ This is quite ironic, of course, if one considers the seventeenth-century English cookbook recipe mentioned above that mixes more sweet and savoury ingredients than I would even dare to combine, but this all goes to show how tastes change.
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- ⁵⁸ Abigail Carroll, 'Forefathers' Day Dinners and Martha Washington Teas', *Food, Culture and Society*, vol. 12, no. 3, 2009, pp. 335–56. See this reference for a consideration of the place of commemorative feasting during the nineteenth-century colonial revival (clambakes, centennial picnics, and so forth).
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- ⁶¹ James, p. 375.
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