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CULTURE

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An expatriate Thanksgiving

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Wednesday, November 25, 2009

Rich Carriero, First Person
ISTANBUL - Hürriyet Daily News

Assembling a Thanksgiving dinner in Turkey requires a combination of selective shopping, technological savvy and hard work. The holiday dinner is an elaborate culinary affair that tends to leave stuffed and unconscious celebrants in its wake. The cornerstone of the feast is turkey – a wild bird that, in America, is cheap and plentiful



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and some expats – like me – gather to honor the day with massive feasts.

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Unfortunately, my wife and I, like most Istanbulers, have a rather small oven that cannot accommodate a whole bird. Our solution is simple – dismemberment; we buy numerous turkey parts and cook them in an oven bag. Last year, we served two breasts and around twelve drumsticks this way. Any full-sized Migros or Carrefour will usually have enough turkey cuts to supply a moderately large dinner.

Most traditional Thanksgiving side dishes – stuffing, mashed potatoes, corn, green beans with almond slivers and dinner rolls – can be prepared from ingredients found at your local supermarket and neighborhood bazaar. There are a few dishes, however, such as sweet potatoes, pumpkin pie or cranberry sauce, which typically require imported ingredients.

Pumpkin pie can be made from some kinds of squash and many people (me) don't like sweet potatoes. Cranberry sauce is an important Thanksgiving dish, but they don't have cranberry bogs in Asia Minor. There are two potential solutions: have friends visiting from the States bring you a can or try to find one at the higher end şarkuteri delicatessen/import shops of Bebek, Etiler or Beyoğlu.

Americans share a patchwork culture gleaned from their immigrant forebears. There are, however, some original American holidays. Thanksgiving, a harvest festival that falls on the fourth Thursday of each November, represents a time of homecoming and thankfulness.

For Americans in Istanbul, it's a hard holiday to miss

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The next step in organizing a Thanksgiving do is inviting friends. These days, sending out mass invites to any kind of party is breathtakingly easy. Just about everybody in Istanbul has Facebook. By filling out an invitation template, uploading a clever picture and inviting your fellow Facebook friends, you can spread the word. By using a Google Maps function you can even provide a map and directions to your home.

Of course, living in Istanbul, most of your friends are probably not Americans but that's perfectly OK. Last year, our Thanksgiving was very much an international affair and this year's guests are Turkish, American, Canadian, British, Irish, Austrian, Dutch and Russian. Although it's an American holiday, everybody seemed to get into the spirit of things quite easily; since time immemorial people have been celebrating harvest feasts.

For non-Yanks who will be attending a Thanksgiving dinner and want to know a bit more, here's the history. What most people associate with Thanksgiving stems back to the colonial period. In 1620, Puritan pilgrims from England landed in Massachusetts and founded a small colony at Plymouth. The Native Americans that lived in the area had been decimated by smallpox epidemics and were in no mood to fight their new neighbors, so they helped the Pilgrims get through their first harsh New England winter. After a full harvest in 1621, the Pilgrims invited their neighbors to a dinner at which they gave thanks for the food that would sustain them through another winter. For the next 250 years or so, Thanksgiving continued as an informal religious observance following in the footsteps of that first meal.

The official federal holiday of Thanksgiving is a more recent innovation. In 1863, the American Civil War had been raging for two bloody years. After a series of Union victories that summer and fall, the tide of war turned and President Abraham Lincoln declared a day of national Thanksgiving in November. Ever since Lincoln's proclamation, Thanksgiving has been a national holiday.

Due to America's religious diversity, Thanksgiving, not Christmas, is actually the most widely celebrated holiday in the United States. The Wednesday before Thanksgiving is typically the heaviest traffic commute of the year. The day after has also achieved notoriety as Black Friday, widely regarded as the biggest retail shopping day of the year, marked by jam-packed malls filled with customers drawn by mammoth discounts.

Today Americans have many traditions, other than the massive dinner, that honor the Thanksgiving holiday. Thanksgiving is widely promoted as a time of charity – thus citizens organize food drives, donate money or volunteer to work in soup kitchens and homeless shelters.

College students also enjoy Homecoming, a semi-formal dance the night after Thanksgiving at which returning alumni are invited back to their old high schools.

Another major event is the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, which marches down the west side of Manhattan. People flock to the city or watch on television as massive floats, balloons and performers promenade down Central Park West to the cheers of spectators. The last float in the parade is always Santa Claus, who comes to usher in the Christmas Season.

Here in Istanbul, my wife and I do all that we can to participate in the Thanksgiving tradition. Our day is filled with Skype calls to family and friends back home. We spend our afternoon preparing food in anticipation of our guests.

Finally, once everyone has arrived, we can all sit down, eat, and participate in one last Thanksgiving tradition – American football. Although NFL games typically fall on Sundays, there are always three games each year on Thanksgiving Day. With a paid subscription to NFL.com, we are able to play them on our laptop.

Thanks be to the Internet!

8 Comments

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READER COMMENTS

Guest - guest-guest (2009-11-27 02:13:15) :

dude, you really need to research more about american history because you are wrong about thanksgiving. im sure what you think is what you were taught up north, complete lies and wrong.

Guest - 7 Hills (2009-11-26 17:34:09) :

@ asker - if you read the article, you will know why the celebrate Thanksgiving and eat turkeys and the meaning of thanksgiving.. @ Tim - you must be a Canadian.. unfortunately when the name was made up for the United States, they did not think of what to call the people living there. Hence Canadians, Mexicans, maybe they should call themselves Ex-europeans.. hehe

Guest - the answer (2009-11-26 17:30:12) :

Wikipedia explains Thanksgiving Day: Essentially, we thank God for all he has given us. "Thanksgiving or Thanksgiving Day, presently celebrated on the fourth Thursday in November, has been an annual tradition in the United States since 1863. It did not become a federal holiday until 1941. Thanksgiving was historically a religious observation to give thanks to God, but is now primarily identified as a secular holiday The First Thanksgiving was celebrated to give thanks to God for helping the pilgrims survive the brutal winter.The first Thanksgiving feast lasted three days providing enough food for 53 pilgrims and 90 Indians. The feast consisted of fowl, venison, fish, lobster, clams, berries, fruit, pumpkin, and squash. However, the traditional Thanksgiving menu often features turkey, stuffing, sweet potatoes and pumpkin pie." The turkey is a native american bird which became the traditional dinner; maybe since 1863.

Guest - Rich Carriero (2009-11-26 13:01:08) :

In response to Tim's comment: Thanksgiving is, indeed a holiday from the United States--as the author of the piece I should, perhaps, have specified and not assumed people understood what I meant--however people from the US do, colloquially, refer to themselves as 'Americans.' There is no other convenient name for denizens of the United States.

Guest - John (2009-11-26 12:08:20) :

Any recommendations for where a mildly homesick American can get a decent Thanksgiving dinner in Istanbul?

Guest - asker (2009-11-26 11:58:43) :

why they celebrate thanksgiving..eating turkeys? why? what is the real meaning of thanks giving?

Guest - Tim (2009-11-26 10:19:41) :

I would like to ask for a more accurate use of the language. The thanks giving dinner is celebrated in the United States of America, which is a country located in the northern part of America, which is a continent. It is normal that people get confused and use the name of the continent to refer to the country, but the journalistic speech should be precise, in my opinion.

Guest - Unsal (2009-11-26 07:51:34) :

Happy Thanksgiving !!!

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