

# COMING HOME

A FRIEND CALLED RECENTLY WITH SEASON'S greetings, en route to his family in New Orleans. "So," he asked, "are you going home for the holidays?"

I was gentle but unwavering. "I *am* home," I said. "This is it."

I remember distinctly when the place where my family lives — the house, even the city — ceased being home. It was the first year that my mother visited *me* for Christmas, rather than the other way around. I am the only child of an only child, with the sort of loony extended family that reads well in the novels of Southern writers but has no business in suburban Philadelphia. (At the last gathering of the clan, one cousin exclaimed, "You've gotten so big!" I was 27 at the time.)

But I have conducted a lifelong search for brothers and sisters, and I am a sucker for celebration. So that Christmas my mother came to my home, to celebrate with my family of friends. I lived then in the sort of apartment where an ironing board served as extra counter space in the Pullman kitchen. But we set out the tiny Mexican Christmas tree with quarter-inch bulbs that my mother found in a crafts shop next to her obstetrician's office on the day she learned of my impending arrival, and I played "Ave Maria" on the piano while everyone ate my cranberry relish. It was the genesis of what has become an annual holiday dinner for our reinvented family.

The menu is a work in progress. One year, trying to avoid last-minute preparations, I made red-white-and-green lasagna, with layers of tomato, turkey and spinach. It certainly qualified as do-ahead, but everybody seemed vaguely disappointed, including me. So I've returned to tradition — with a few twists. A curried zucchini soup is ladled into mugs in front of the fireplace as my godchild collects grab-bag gifts and tags them male, female or unisex. (The only rule is that the gift cannot be guessed by its wrapping, and silliness is encouraged; this year I am contributing a pair of ice tongs shaped like dentures.)

The turkey dressing marks my perennial search for the just-right mix of

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STYLIST: KEVIN CRAFTS

JOSHUA GREENE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

*A Christmas trilogy: Brussels sprouts with bacon and pine nuts, a silken winter vegetable purée and a cranberry-ginger conserve.*

For the author,  
going home for the holidays  
means staying put.

# Fruit and corn-bread dressing nets the right mix of savory and sweet.

savory and sweet. And the purée makes homely winter vegetables silken. I've seen classic brussels sprouts haters sneak into the kitchen to clean the skillet, once the crisp sprouts are disguised with bacon and pine nuts. And I always hide some of the cranberry-ginger conserve, to be spooned over vanilla ice cream during a midnight raid on the leftovers.

I used to farm out a few courses, but I gave that up the year I assigned a friend to make glazed onions for 20. She arrived with a pitiful Tupperware containerful that I could have polished off single-handedly. Having never met a naked white onion before, she discovered a lot of brown and green skin, and she kept cutting away until she found a color that she liked.

The guest list is always in flux. We added a colleague recently relocated from California, the one who has the bends in a city where there are no sidewalk Santas wearing SPF-15. We subtracted an ex-Significant Other, the one who sucked all the air out of the room last year. My mother is sous-chef, although I have to buy extra chestnuts for her to roast because half of them disappear as she peels. I haven't completely forgiven her for my only childhood, but on Christmas, at least, I am lousy with siblings.

## CURRIED ZUCCHINI SOUP

- 3 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 2 medium-size onions, chopped
- 1 large celery stalk, chopped
- 1 teaspoon curry powder, or more to taste
- 6 medium-size zucchini, diced
- 4 cups chicken broth
- 3 tablespoons chopped Italian parsley
- Juice of ½ lime
- Salt to taste
- Freshly ground black pepper to taste
- 1 cup buttermilk.

1. In a large kettle or stockpot, add the butter and sauté the onion and celery over low heat until the vegetables are wilted, about 5 minutes. Add the curry powder and cook, stirring, for 3 minutes, to take the rawness out.

2. Add the zucchini and cook for about 5 minutes, until the zucchini just begin to soften.

3. Add the chicken broth. Bring to a boil, then lower the heat and simmer for about 15 minutes, until the zucchini are very soft. Stir in the parsley, lime juice, salt and pepper.

4. Transfer the soup to a food processor in batches and purée a little at a time. Return the soup to the kettle and stir in the buttermilk. Adjust the seasoning. Bring to a simmer over low heat. (Do not boil.) Serve in small mugs or cups.

Yield: Eight to 10 servings.

## TURKEY WITH FRUIT AND CORN-BREAD DRESSING

- 2 cups fresh or canned, peeled chestnuts
- 1½ cups dried apricots
- 1½ sticks unsalted butter
- 2 cups minced yellow onions
- 3 cups chopped unpeeled Granny Smith apples
- 1½ cups pitted prunes, chopped
- 1 cup chopped celery
- 4 cups coarsely crumbled corn bread
- 2½ cups coarsely crumbled whole-wheat bread
- 2½ cups coarsely crumbled French or Italian bread
- Grated rind of 1 orange
- ½ cup chopped Italian parsley
- 1½ cups pecans, chopped coarse
- 2 teaspoons dried thyme
- Salt to taste
- Freshly ground black pepper to taste
- 1 turkey (about 18 to 20 pounds)
- 4 tablespoons melted butter
- 4 teaspoons vegetable oil.

1. If using fresh chestnuts, preheat the oven to 425 degrees. Score the chestnuts on the flat side of the shells with a small knife. Place them on a baking sheet and bake for about 20 minutes, until the shells have loosened. Peel off the shells, including the fuzzy inner membrane, and coarsely chop the chestnuts. Lower the oven to 325 degrees to cook the turkey; if using canned chestnuts, preheat the oven to 325 and proceed.

2. Place the apricots in a bowl and cover with boiling water. Set aside for 20 minutes.

3. Melt half the butter in a skillet. Sauté the onions over medium heat until lightly colored, about 15 to 20 minutes. Place them in a large mixing bowl and set aside.

4. Melt the remaining butter in the same skillet over medium heat. Add the apples and cook, stirring, until they start to soften, about 5 minutes. Place the apples and the chestnuts in the bowl with the onions.

5. Drain the apricots, chop them coarsely and add. Add the prunes, celery, crumbled breads, orange rind, parsley, pecans, thyme, salt and pepper. Mix gently but thoroughly.

6. Rinse the turkey and pat it dry. Season the cavity, inside and out, with salt and pepper. Loosely place the stuffing in the cavity. Combine the melted butter and the oil and brush the mixture all over the turkey. Truss the turkey.

7. Place the turkey breast side down on a rack in a roasting pan. Bake the turkey 12 minutes for every pound. Baste every 20 minutes with the butter-and-oil mixture, until there are enough pan drippings to use for basting. Turn the turkey breast side

up after 1½ hours. (The turkey is done when the leg can be moved easily and the juices run clear.) Remove and let sit for at least 20 minutes before carving. Reserve pan drippings for the gravy (see recipe).

Yield: Eight to 10 servings.

Note: If you prefer a crispy dressing, or if there is any leftover stuffing, spoon the dressing into a buttered casserole dish. Set the dish in a large roasting pan and pour hot water in the pan to a depth of about 1 inch. Bake at 325 degrees for 30 to 40 minutes until the top browns. Baste occasionally with the cooking juices from the turkey or with some chicken stock.

## GIBLET GRAVY

- Turkey gizzard, heart and neck
- 1 teaspoon dried thyme
- 1 small onion
- Salt to taste
- Freshly ground black pepper to taste
- Turkey liver
- 2 teaspoons butter
- ¼ cup pan drippings reserved from 1 roasted turkey (see previous recipe)
- 3 tablespoons flour.

1. Place the turkey gizzard, heart and neck in a saucepan and cover with about 3 to 4 cups of water. Add the thyme, onion, salt and pepper. Bring to a boil, then lower the heat and simmer for 45 minutes. Strain and reserve the broth. Discard the neck and onion. Finely dice the gizzard and heart, trimming any fat. Set aside.

2. In a skillet, cook the liver in the butter over medium heat for 5 minutes. Dice and set aside.

3. Place the roasting pan with the drippings over low heat and cook, stirring up all the browned bits from the bottom. Stir in the flour and cook, stirring, for about 3 minutes. Pour in 2 cups of the reserved giblet broth and cook, stirring constantly, until the gravy is smooth. Simmer for about 10 minutes, stirring in up to 1 additional cup of the broth, if necessary, for desired consistency. Stir in the diced gizzard, heart and liver.

Yield: About three cups.

## WINTER VEGETABLE PURÉE

- 1½ cups peeled and diced carrots
- 1½ cups peeled and diced turnips
- 1½ cups peeled and diced rutabagas
- 2 cups peeled and diced celery root
- 2 cups peeled and diced parsnips
- 1 medium-size sweet potato, peeled and diced
- 1 stick unsalted butter, softened to room temperature

- 3 tablespoons heavy cream
- 3 tablespoons brown sugar
- Freshly ground black pepper to taste
- Salt to taste.

1. In a large saucepan, bring 6 cups of water to a boil. Add the vegetables and cook until they are tender, about 30 to 40 minutes. Drain.

2. Transfer the vegetables to a food processor and purée until smooth. Add the butter, cream, sugar, pepper and salt. Process until the mixture is smooth and serve. The vegetable purée may be made up to 24 hours in advance and refrigerated. To serve, place it in a buttered casserole and reheat in a 350-degree oven until the purée is hot.

Yield: Six to eight servings.

## SHREDDED BRUSSELS SPROUTS WITH BACON AND PINE NUTS

- 5 pints brussels sprouts
- ½ pound bacon, diced
- ½ cup pine nuts
- 3 scallions, minced fine
- ¼ teaspoon freshly grated nutmeg
- Freshly ground black pepper to taste.

1. Using the point of a sharp knife, core the sprouts. Place them in a food processor to shred coarsely.

2. Fry the bacon in a large skillet until it is crisp. Remove and drain on paper towels. Add the pine nuts to the fat remaining in the pan and stir over medium heat until lightly browned, about 2 to 3 minutes.

3. Add the shredded sprouts, the scallions and nutmeg. Cook, stirring, over medium heat, until the sprouts are cooked through but still crisp, about 6 to 8 minutes. Stir in the bacon and pepper and serve.

Yield: Eight to 10 servings.

## CRANBERRY-GINGER CONSERVE

- 1 cup white wine
- 1 cup sugar
- 1 12-ounce bag cranberries, rinsed
- Grated rind of 1 large lemon
- ½ cup golden raisins
- ½ cup ginger preserved in syrup, finely chopped, and 2 to 3 tablespoons of the syrup.

1. In a stainless-steel or enamel saucepan, mix the wine and sugar with ½ cup of water. Bring to a boil.

2. Add the cranberries, cover and simmer for about 5 minutes, until the berries pop open. Add the lemon rind, raisins and ginger with syrup. Simmer 2 to 3 minutes. Remove and let cool. Refrigerate overnight before serving.

Yield: About six cups. ■