

Food



PIE TIME | PAGE 3

Upper crust

The Chopping Block's Shelley Young shares her secrets for pie crust perfection. One trick: let the dough chill for 24 hours.

SWIRLSAVVY | PAGE 6

Toast to tradition

From classic Zinfandel to light-bodied Riesling, options abound for wines that will balance the Thanksgiving meal.



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THE THANKSGIVING TABLE

TODAY: Turkey Day time management. COMING SUNDAY IN FOOD: How to fix, or prevent, Thanksgiving dinner disasters. (Food will not publish on Wednesday, Nov. 25.)

HOSTS WITH THE MOST



Careful planning — and a dash of whimsy — carry this chef couple through holiday

BY MICHAEL NAGRANT

Though Jill Barron has “pork!” tattooed on her inner lip, she’s one of Chicago’s best vegetarian chefs.

It’s precisely this kind of revelry in contradiction that also has the chef and owner of Wicker Park restaurant MANA Food Bar indulging in the tough feat of cooking for 60-plus people every Thanksgiving.

She has done it for the last 15 years in her tiny Logan Square condo. For the last 10 years, she’s also gotten some help from her husband, Chris Barron, the executive sous chef of Market in the West Loop.

Oh great, you think, just what I need — another holiday story about professional chefs who whip up a 20-course course meal of caviar whipped potatoes and foie gras-basted organic turkeys for their coterie of beautiful friends without breaking a sweat, while toasting with magnificent cordials for the cameras, and then sending everyone off on their merry way with goodie bags and homemade doilies copped from a Martha Stewart episode.

At least that’s what I thought this could turn into, but if you couldn’t tell from the pork tattoo, the Barrons aren’t like everyone else.

Their modest condo, the bottom of a typical Chicago two-flat, is stuffed with what has to be one of the city’s most prolific velvet painting collections, reclaimed tools and tchotchkes from the Maxwell Street Sunday Market (think clothespin Christ on a crucifix).

Their party guests range in age from 6 to 90 and include a heavy dose of cooks, tattoo artists, bikers and, as Chris Barron says, “a whole host of folks, both straight and gay. The more open the better.”

Their Thanksgivings also are themed. There have been Think Pink, Cowboys and Indians and Plaid Bondage turkey days. This year, it’s Leopard Print — everyone has to incorporate leopard print in some part of their wardrobe.

Most importantly, the Barrons might be less equipped to hold the big day than you. You probably have a full-size dishwasher. Theirs is only 18 inches wide. And they’re not especially good home cooks.

Says Chris Barron: “We have a hard time cooking for two people. It never seems to work out. The question around here is often, which box of macaroni and cheese do we open?”

The way they pull off the whole thing is a combination of careful planning, creativity and sheer will, something the rest of us really can learn from.

Start early and assign tasks

Consider their tiny dishwasher conundrum.

Jill says, “We got a good male friend of ours who doesn’t cook, so we set him up near the sink with a really hot chick to keep ’im happy. He’ll wash all day.”

This is an extension of their philosophy that you should always find ways to get your guests involved.

As soon as people start arriving, they tag different people to roll silverware in

Chefs Jill and Chris Barron strike a pose in preparation for Thanksgiving. The couple hosts dozens of guests at their Logan Square condo every year. | JOHN J. KIM/SUN-TIMES PHOTOS

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JILL AND CHRIS BARRON'S COUNTDOWN TO THANKSGIVING

Two weeks out

Make grocery and prep lists
Order Ho-Ka turkey
Start detailing house
Assign duties to working guests
Confirm theme

Monday

Shop for groceries
Make Cranberry
Tangerine Relish
Pull out silverware and dishes
Give stinky dog a bath
Check grill for gas and fire pit for firewood
Clean patio and backyard

Tuesday

Make Pork Creton
Slice sweet potatoes
Make spice mix for gratin
Check wine supply

Wednesday

Pick up turkey and any last-minute needs
Clean house and put away anything of major importance (financial papers, breakables, etc.)
Prep for vegetable dishes, potatoes and stuffing — assemble gratin and parbake for 2 hours, prepare and cook stuffing base, slice brussel sprouts, soak chestnuts
Set out dishes with Post-It notes
Pick up folding chairs
Make iPod playlists

Thanksgiving Day

Pick up White Castles in the morning for stuffing
Assign early guests tasks such as rolling silverware in napkins, setting out appetizer buffet, setting up chairs
12 p.m. Turkeys go in the oven
4 p.m. Pour cocktails as guests arrive. Assign food running and dishwashing duties to other guests.
5 p.m. Turkey out of oven to rest. Potatoes, stuffing and any other oven dishes go in.
6 p.m. Cook peas and morels on backyard wok
6:30 p.m. Raise glasses in a toast to friends and family. Carve turkey. Dinner is served!

