

FROM THE COVER

HOSTS | Keep meal seamless by sticking with tried and true dishes

napkins, act as food runners, set up the buffet and even carve the turkey.

"One of our vegetarian friends did it a few years ago," Chris says. "Of course, now he turned [to meat]. Bacon got him."

Everything, including the assignment of those tasks, starts out with lists. The Barrons' living room coffee table is covered in stacks of yellow Puckered Pickle Company stationery featuring shopping lists and daily itemizations of tasks for the four days preceding Thanksgiving.

Starting early is one of their biggest secrets. "If you wait until the last minute, then everything turns out ridiculous," Jill says. "I try to do a dish a day and put it away."

She cooks her cranberry tangerine relish on Monday and lets it set up in the fridge for a few days. As a nod to her childhood summers in Montreal, Jill also does a creton, a loose pork pate or rillette that benefits from some aging.

"There's actually very little done on Thursday," Chris says. "We get up, have some coffee, do some spot checks around the house. Most of the prep is done."

Focus on familiar dishes

Part of the reason they host Thanksgiving is that it is the holiday most centered around food.

As such, it honors the core of their being as chefs, and they see the day as an opportunity to share their talents with their friends and family.

To that end, the one task they don't dole out is the cooking.

(They do allow guests to bring desserts, but ask that they be bite-sized or already portioned.) To alleviate the stress of providing all that sustenance, they make lots of smart adjustments in the kitchen. They pull out all of the serveware and cookery they'll use ahead of time and label what's going where with sticky notes.

They understand Thanksgiving isn't a time to reinvent the wheel or get really lavish. They used to bring lots of limes and lemons from their restaurant and cut them up for their cocktail bar, but found the bowls of garnish always moldering on the counter untouched the next morning.

While they want to be generous, the Barrons understand they're not trying to feed the Chicago Bears' offensive line. They make decent portions of every plate, but they also expect and hope to run out. A little bit of 10 dishes goes a long way.

They also don't get all cheffy and start improvising. They generally focus on the same familiar dishes each year. They do try to accommodate special needs; for example, they took the bacon out of the green bean casserole so the vegetarians would have more options.

But, they also put their foot down a bit, and don't extend themselves for every little need.

"I don't think Thanksgiving is made for vegans," Chris says. "Especially when we did Black Leather [themed] Thanksgiving."

When they make accommodations, they use smart kitchen shortcuts. In a move straight out of Sandra Lee's Semi-Homemade playbook, they make a stuffing out of sauteed vegetables and White Castle hamburgers. Jill cooks twice as much stuffing base, but mixes half with the burgers and half with white bread for the vegetarians.

Jill is quick to point out that such "trashy" recipes are used only if they're also tasty.

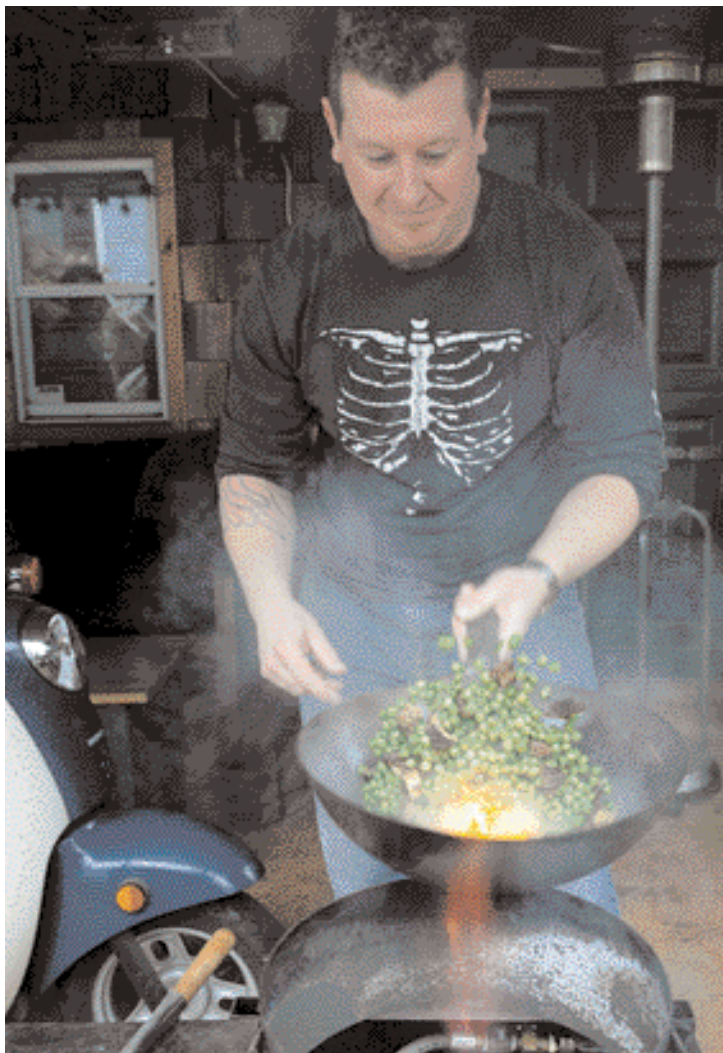
"Someone brought a Tang pie one year. Tang mixed with Cool Whip. Ugh," she says.

Chris uses dried morels from the pantry for his peas and morels dish. He doesn't waste time shucking fresh peas from the farmer's market, but instead pours a flash-frozen bag of the stuff straight into a wok.

Of course, it's not just any wok,



Chef Jill Barron of MANA Food Bar and her chef-husband Chris crank out Thanksgiving dinner for 60 from their Logan Square kitchen every year by planning smartly and cooking some dishes in advance. They ask guests to bring bite-sized desserts that are easy to serve. | JOHN J. KIM-SUN-TIMES PHOTOS



Chris Barron sautes peas and morels on an outdoor wok. Extending the kitchen to the garage and backyard keeps the flow going.

but a 70,000 BTU patio wok that extends like a F-14 jet turbine when it's fired.

Spread out

This is just one more canny move, the extension of the kitchen to the backyard.

Because the Barrons have only one standard kitchen oven and cooktop, they use the wok, a backyard rotisserie and occasionally the grill to expand their arsenal.

Cooking equipment management is key. All casseroles and stuffings are prepped and ready, so they can be cooked immediately once the turkey is removed from the oven to rest.

Once dinner is served, they

also use the backyard as an extension of their condo, running a fire pit and using a patio heater to provide more warm spots for people to nosh and congregate.

Inside, there's lots of folding chairs, but people mostly improvise, sitting on stairs, the futon, even the floor.

At the end, when the turkey's been gutted and the buffet rifled through, all the organization and planning should be in the service of one final principle: having a blast.

"It's not easy going to work the next day," Jill says. "I'm not gonna lie, there's always some element of hangover involved."

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PEAS AND MORELS

MAKES 12 SERVINGS

- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 2 ounces dried morel mushrooms, soaked in warm water until tender, about 15 minutes (you can substitute any brown mushroom)
- 1 (2-pound) bag of frozen peas (if using fresh, blanch)
- Salt and pepper
- 2 tablespoons truffle oil (white preferred but black will do)

Heat a large saute pan or wok until very hot. Add butter and olive oil. When butter and oil are foamy, add mushrooms and saute for 1 to 2 minutes.

Add peas and saute for another



2 minutes. Add salt and pepper to taste, place mixture in a serving bowl and drizzle with truffle oil.

Jill and Chris Barron

Nutrition facts per serving: 116 calories, 7 g fat, 2 g saturated fat, 5 mg cholesterol, 10 g carbohydrates, 4 g protein, 102 mg sodium, 3 g fiber

WHITE CASTLE STUFFING

MAKES 12 SERVINGS

- 4 tablespoons butter
- 1 large white onion, peeled and diced
- 1/2 head celery, diced
- 1 pound brown mushrooms, sliced
- 1/2 ounce fresh sage, chopped
- 1 tablespoon paprika
- 1/4 teaspoon fresh grated nutmeg
- 18 White Castle hamburgers (no pickles), chopped into 1-inch pieces, or 1 small loaf white bread, cubed and toasted
- 1 cup chicken stock
- Salt and pepper

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. In a large saute pan, heat butter until foamy. Add onions and celery and cook until tender but still slightly crisp. Add mushrooms and some salt. Cook until mushrooms are brown and liquid is gone.

Add sage, paprika and nutmeg



to the pan and cook until spices are fragrant.

Pour the mixture into a bowl and add diced White Castles; toss together. Put the stuffing in a baking dish and drizzle chicken stock over. Toss again and season to taste.

Bake for 20 minutes, uncov-

ered, until the top is brown and crispy.

Jill and Chris Barron

Nutrition facts per serving: 162 calories, 10 g fat, 5 g saturated fat, 22 mg cholesterol, 13 g carbohydrates, 6 g protein, 259 mg sodium, 1 g fiber

CRANBERRY TANGERINE RELISH

MAKES 12 SERVINGS

- 1 pound fresh cranberries
- 3 tangerines, zested and juiced
- 2 cups sugar
- 2 tablespoons Grand Marnier

Place all ingredients in a saucepan. Bring to a boil, then reduce heat and simmer just until cranberries start to pop, about 5 minutes. Chill before serving.

Jill and Chris Barron

Nutrition facts per serving: 160 calories, 0 g fat, 0 g saturated fat, 0 mg cholesterol, 41 g carbohydrates, 0 g protein, 1 mg sodium, 2 g fiber



ROASTED TURKEY

MAKES 12 SERVINGS

- 1 (16-pound) fresh turkey
- 3 to 4 onions, cut into 1/2-inch thick slices
- Kosher salt and pepper
- 1 bunch each fresh sage and thyme
- 1 head garlic, cloves separated
- 1/2 of 1 (750-milliliter) bottle dry white wine

Preheat oven to 300 degrees. Remove giblets and neck from cavity, reserving both for stock.

Wash turkey thoroughly inside and out.

Scatter 2/3 of sliced onions across the bottom of a heavy roasting pan. Season turkey inside and out with kosher salt and fresh cracked pepper. Put sage, thyme, garlic cloves and the rest of the sliced onions in the cavity. Place the turkey on top of the sliced onions in the roasting pan.

Add white wine to the pan. Cover turkey loosely with enough aluminum foil to reach from side to side.

Place pan in oven and bake for about 12 minutes per pound

(about 3 hours). Remove foil from turkey, raise temperature to 500 and bake for 30 to 45 minutes, until nice and golden brown (the Barrons use the color of the turkey, not temperature, as their guide).

Remove turkey from oven. Let rest 15 to 20 minutes before carving.

Jill and Chris Barron

Nutrition facts per serving: 1,149 calories, 68 g fat, 19 g saturated fat, 478 mg cholesterol, 5 g carbohydrates, 112 g protein, 450 mg sodium, 1 g fiber