



diningout

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Thanksgiving is the one holiday where I prefer to go vegetarian. My dislike of turkey is so great I usually spend the bulk of my time grazing on bruleed marshmallow-clad sweet potatoes, heaps of clove-perfumed greens and plenty of stuffing — boxed, fresh or White Castle variety (admittedly not vegetarian — but sometimes it's what you crave) — I'm not picky.

It's not that I haven't tried. I've roasted, brined, deep-fried, confited and sauteed in pursuit of turkey nirvana. But really the only two forms I've ever kinda liked were the brontosaurus-sized roast drumsticks doused in barbecue sauce served at summer Medieval "fairs" (and really let's be honest, what I really love is the cinnamon spiced glazed nuts and the cheesy jousting exhibitions), and the turkey Tetrazzini when the leftovers were smothered in Parmesan cream — which is to say, the more you drown the bird in some tasty sauce, thus neutralizing its blandness, the more I appreciate it.

And before you harangue me about the drab flavors purveyed by Butterball and promoted by mass-production, yes I've tried Heritage birds, too.



Peruvian-style rotisserie chicken at D'Candela, 4053 N. Kedzie, is another poultry alternative. | JOHN J. KIM-SUN-TIMES

fessing all this, it turns out to do so does not make me un-American. There is no proof that there was turkey at the first Thanksgiving. Venison and eel have been documented, and certain wild fowl, but not turkey. Then again, the first Thanksgiving wasn't at Plymouth Rock, either (historians suggest St. Augustine, Fla., in 1565 or the Virginia colonies in the early 1600s). Really, it seems the whole holiday is a house of cards.

Then again, as Confucius (or maybe the PR team for the Yankee Candle Company) once said, "It is better to light one small candle than to curse the darkness."

Turkey hatred or not, I am a big fan of any holiday that promotes a 12 hour non-stop feast, wine consumption by the barrel, multiple naps and a dose of football. I just think we need to adjust the edible centerpiece a touch.

Toward that end, let me direct you to the choicest Chicago restaurant roast and whole-protein alternatives to turkey to fill out your holiday dining plans.

If the Chinese celebrated Thanksgiving, it would undoubtedly be over the luscious, free-range duck encased in a mahogany-colored sugar-lacquered crackling crust carved tableside by the Cheng sisters and sandwiched with pickled veg and a dab of hoisin sauce between airy pancakes from the **Beijing duck service at Up-town's Sun Wah BBQ** (5041 N. Broadway; 773-769-1254). Add in the soup, fried rice and home-made fruit sorbet that comes with the service and this might be the only thing better than bacon. Though you can usually walk in and order the duck, it's best to call ahead.

Coming in a close second in the roast fowl category is the **Rustic House** (1967 N. Halsted; 312-929-3227) rotisserie Maple Leaf duck l'orange (served Wednesday nights only). It's



Rotisserie roast lamb at Parthenon, 314 S. Halsted. | JEAN LACHAT-SUN-TIMES

WHY TURKEY?

So many options if the big bird isn't your thing



The whole roasted snapper at El Barco, 1035 N. Ashland, will make any diner decide Thanksgiving doesn't have to include turkey. | RICH HEIN-SUN-TIMES



The pork shoulder at Avec, 615 W Randolph, is a luscious feast.

sticky and sweet, almost like a whole roast General Tso's Chicken, but with a meaty umami flavor that runs to the bone. Really, *every* day at Rustic House — where chef Jason Paskewitz features a different roast cut, such as the Flintstonian Kurobuta pork chops (every night) — is Thanksgiving and Christmas.

If you prefer spice to sweet, check out the **pollo a la Brasa** at D'Candela (4053 N. Kedzie; 773-478-0819). Here in Irving Park and neighboring Albany Park, roast chicken shacks outnumber McDonald's, but I haven't found a more succulent or smokier version than D'Candela's pepper-dusted Peruvian charcoal-fired chicken.

And, if succulence is your thing, the **pork shoulder** at Avec (615 W. Randolph; 312-377-2002) in the West Loop sometimes served in a cast iron pan amongst pickled garlic, or as of now, wrapped in pastry crust and roasted in a wood-fired oven, stews in its own luscious juices. From the menu's whole roasted fish (often flaky Branzino) to the full roasted lobe of foie gras dripping with roasted grapes and pancetta, you could make a whole Thanksgiving weekend chowing at Avec.

Speaking of fish, the whole **fried huachinango** or snapper at El Barco (1035 N. Ashland; 773-486-6850) — served face, fins and all — is quite the delight. People like to joke that they'd eat a sneaker if it were deep-fried, and I have seen people pop the deep-fried snapper eyeballs in their mouths like peanut M&M's. If you choose to do so and the act leaves a bitter taste, El Barco offers plenty of Mexican beer by the bucketful to wash everything down.

If you prefer to keep your roasts in the Spanish-speaking world, check out **Mercat a la Planxa** (638 S. Michigan;



The mahogany-colored, sugary crust makes the Beijing duck a winner at Sun Wah BBQ, 5041 N. Broadway. | JOHN J. KIM-SUN-TIMES

312-765-0524) where Food Network Iron Chef Jose Garces has done what few celebrity chefs dropping in from out of town have done, which is create a consistent, inspired, forward-thinking restaurant that Chicago didn't have before. His **whole cochinillo asado** (suckling pig) feast featuring roast scalions, herb roasted fingerlings and rosemary-flavored white beans is a righteous fiesta (requires a 72-hour notice).

The **Parthenon** (314 S. Halsted; 312-726-2407) in Greektown spit-roasts a whole lamb on weekends in the same way liquor companies use billboards. But instead of featuring bikini-clad co-eds playing volleyball, the Parthenon features a dripping carcass licked by flickering flames in their Halsted Street windows.



Jose Jaimes slices gyros at Parthenon, 314 S. Halsted. JEAN LACHAT-SUN-TIMES

From this, they carve big fat fillets of leg for your dining pleasure. I'd be remiss if I didn't point you to their **gyros** as well. Though I haven't done a scientific survey, it's not hyperbolic to say that approximately 99 percent of gyros served in Chicago are commercial, pre-processed frozen cones of beef with a touch of lamb thrown in to settle the Greek conscience. Parthenon still makes theirs in-house, layering hunks of lamb and beef, slathering them with spices and allowing them to cure for a few days before hanging them alongside the lamb. If you look close, you'll still find pink shards and differing degrees of doneness rather than the universal gray shade found on the commodity version.

Not all of these places will be open on Thanksgiving, but for those of you who love turkey, but hate shopping, there's no better alternative to skipping mass crushes on Black Friday than checking out one of these roasts.

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