

bringing TURKEY back

by Dan Bain

I can't remember the exact moment I vowed to break from tradition, but I know it was the Sunday after Thanksgiving and at the time, I was swearing a couple of other things. And I'm pretty sure my mouth was the only thing moving in our car.

Suddenly, Thanksgiving tradition wasn't important anymore. I could see my family on any of the other 51 weekends of the year; why in the world should I choose to do it when every other car in the country was seemingly crammed into the same 12-mile stretch of I-95? I think it took us five hours to move those 12 miles, by the way.

Why is travel considered such a necessary part of the tradition, anyway? The original Thanksgiving celebrants weren't looking for a reason to travel; rather, they were happy to be exactly where they were. And their guests had only to walk a little way through the forest – you never heard of Squanto experiencing hours of onlooker delay due to a de-shoed horse in the breakdown path, did you? Which is why we decided there was no reason we should do anything similar.

This was maybe a decade ago, and the vow has held – no traveling that Sunday, no traveling I-95 during the other three days of Thanksgiving Weekend, if it's avoidable. There are other holidays. Besides, Thanksgiving traditions aren't that important to me and my wife. Neither one of us knows the first thing about cooking turkey, my mashed potatoes are too lumpy, and she hates pumpkin pie. What does that leave?

We've tried alternative traditions. One year, early in our marriage, we had lasagna for Thanksgiving. It was delicious, and it didn't put me to sleep. Turkey, I'm convinced, does. I know, I know – nutritionists have debunked that myth, blah-blah-blah. As our neighboring state to the south would say, they lie.

For years, the theory was that turkey makes people sleepy because it contains the amino acid tryptophan – not only a natural sedative, but one the FDA banned as an over-the-counter supplement. And with good reason. I've struggled with sleep disorders for most of my life, so I remember tryptophan supplements. They helped me sleep, but they gave me weird dreams.

Much worse than the garden-variety dreams of showing up late for finals in my underwear – rather, these were the most vivid, bizarre things to ever come from my brain, and that's saying something. If the Beatles had known about tryptophan, Sergeant Pepper would have been twice as brilliant. Yet millions of Americans willingly ingest it every fourth Thursday of November (not to mention for weeks afterward).

Alleged scientists claim the tryptophan in turkey is inactive as a sedative, instead blaming our sleepiness on overeating and imbibing. Pshaw. So what if we eat roughly ten times our normal daily intake of carbs in one meal? Carbs are supposed to give us energy, not yawns. Besides, I haven't always overeaten on Thanksgiving, but I've always fallen asleep. When I was a kid, I ate like a bird – a cannibalistic bird, but a bird nonetheless – and fell asleep anyway. I remember napping on Thanksgiving as early as age seven, so you can't blame the wine, either – having been raised in a Catholic household, I didn't drink wine until I was at least eight.

Nope, I'm not buying it. I've researched the issue personally, and turkey makes me tired. The year we dropped turkey from the menu, I was actually able to stay awake all afternoon, and you know what? It turns out there are football games on Thanksgiving! Karl Marx knew nothing – religion's harmless, it's turkey that's the opiate of the masses.

Still, I sometimes found myself missing it over the years, especially after we had kids. It seemed unfair to feed them Pop-Tarts on Thanksgiving. It deprived them of the traditions I remembered – the turkey, the pie, the shrimp cocktail. Yes, that last one actually was a tradition in my house when I grew up. This was long before shellfish caused deadly allergic reactions, or required a second mortgage to buy in the grocery store.

Shrimp cocktail was the thing I looked forward to the most as Thanksgiving approached. Some time during the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, Mom would come into the living room with a huge bowl of cold shrimp, complete with a little matching bowl of cocktail sauce clipped to the rim. I think those were the only two matching pieces of serving ware that we had left in the house. Over the years, eight kids and numerous visitors had managed to break, chip or steal other pieces.

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And with dinner guests often exceeding 20, there was no chance of having enough matching plates. Or flatware. Or chairs. That's probably why the concept of the kids' table was invented – it wasn't a way to hide the kids so much as the mismatched chairs. Our makeshift, satellite dining area for the under-13 set had folding chairs, lawn chairs, and even a large cooler gathered around a couple of rickety card tables with maybe seven functioning legs between them. Charlie Brown had nothing on us.

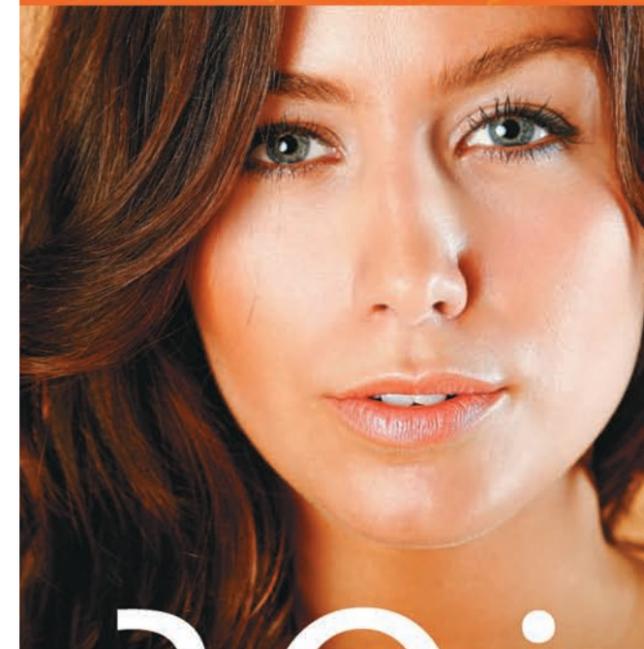
With a family of four, our challenges aren't as great today. It seems like turkeys are becoming easier to cook. I read somewhere that the first Thanksgiving celebration lasted for three days – they probably had to wait for the turkeys to be done. I remember my mom getting up at 3am to start the oven, so the turkey could bake for its requisite 12 hours. Nowadays, it takes about a minute and a half in a decent microwave.

So this year, turkey's back on the menu, and it's game on. You and me, tryptophan – mano amino. Bring it. I have coffee, I have football, I have two sons who make it impossible to nap.

We'll re-instate traditions one at a time. I may stand behind the meal, but I still won't get behind the wheel. ◆



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