

Thanksgiving thoughts: Finding peace through corn

MUSCATINE, Iowa - With U.S. troops in Iraq and Thanksgiving right around the corner, I was thinking recently of the years I spent away from home in the Middle East. Although it was hard to be away from my family, as a teacher at an American school I had the opportunity to take part in a different type of tradition: feeding the troops.

The idea of providing a homemade Thanksgiving meal to those serving their country while stationed in Kuwait seemed the perfect diversion from my inevitable homesickness. It wasn't long before a "what-if" discussion at a faculty meeting turned into lists, phone trees and debates about the proper components of the perfect homemade Thanksgiving meal.

As it turns out, not every American looked forward to the

same side dishes. Although we could agree that we needed to make a lot of turkeys, the specifics surrounding the potatoes, corn and desserts were up for a lot of negotiation. In the end, we decided that the best way to be as American and efficient as possible was to invite everyone to make as many favorites as they could, and then send our 200 guests through a buffet.

PERSPECTIVE



The Good News
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One of the side dishes that many did not seem to value as much as I did was scalloped corn. In my family, we often call

it "Becky Corn" because one of my cousins has a big fit if we forget to make it for big events. Perhaps everyone has a non-cooking Becky in the family that can flatter their way into the hearts and egos of the cooking types, often resulting in the menu marked with their favorite foods, despite their lack of contribution.

Over the years I've learned that even making scalloped corn can be controversial because many have strong opinions about how to make the crunchy top. Some add crackers to the innards and many take complete spicing license, resulting in different taste sensations over the years. With the combined pressure of providing my misguided friends and honored soldiers with the proper corn side dish, I panicked. The many ways to make scalloped corn were overwhelming and I had a deadline.

I couldn't help but think of what my dad would recommend. Although his place in the family had always been one of a secondary, perhaps more "specialized" cook, scalloped corn was a subject he had strong beliefs about and often felt the need to make himself. Perhaps this gave him the feeling he was helping, and perhaps it was his way of ensuring it was done right. It's a toss up. Regardless of the intent, sometimes it resulted in discussions of needing a house with two kitchens.

In the meantime, getting advice from my dad was complicated by the fact that it had been awhile since we'd spoken. There had been no fight, just a quiet pulling away, perhaps resulting from the fact that I had decided to move to Kuwait. Although I was 27 to most of the world, I was still his little girl living a

long way from home in a part of the world that he had heard very little good about. Let's just say he was in a silently supportive stage, perhaps feeling a little left behind.

When I never seemed to catch him at home, I resorted to calling him at work. Catching him in the middle of payroll seemed to give me the surprise element I needed to break the ice and get the scoop on proper corn cooking. We talked, I wrote down his recipe, and another father/daughter chapter seemed completed. I learned the best way to make scalloped corn and he learned I still needed him and was happy. For that, we were both thankful.

Later that week, while carefully browning the saltine crumbs as directed, I smiled, thinking of my dad, my cousin

Becky, and the many others I wouldn't see that year. As thankful as I was for all of them, I was also very grateful to have the new opportunities of this new adventure. I'm sure that not everyone ate my corn that year, but I enjoyed the familiar smell and the warm feeling of it cooking in my little apartment as much as the taste.

That Thanksgiving everyone seemed to find some old favorites, new friends and peace of mind. Hopefully, this year we will bring another opportunity for everyone to make some new memories and enjoy the freedom of creating our own version of the perfect Thanksgiving. Just be sure to have the scalloped corn.

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