



# Pass the Recipe

With oven mitt in hand, a son steps up to learn from the master **By Michael Callahan**

**As the only bachelor** among four sons, I mercifully have generous sisters-in-law who invite me to holiday dinners. My mother, now almost 80, happily passed the turkey baster to the next generation years ago.

Mom was never a fancy cook—my father’s pedestrian tastes wouldn’t allow it, encouraging her to produce an endless string of meatloaves and stews and Green Giant vegetables boiled in pouches. Except for Thanksgiving. On Thanksgiving my mother became the matriarch from a Rockwell painting, serving up simple but amazingly turkeylicious fare with the trimmings, including her heady, bready stuffing, which we would have been satisfied to eat by itself.

Last year, it struck me that we were never going to eat it again. Mothers pass their recipes to their daughters, not their sons. Mom’s holiday masterpiece would die out with her, a family heirloom gone missing. “I want you to teach me how to make your Thanksgiving,” I said to her, prompting a bemused look. But I was earnest, and she knew it. I’m a decent cook when I want to be, but I had never prepared a meal with that

sort of weighty tradition attached. I went out and bought a leather journal in which I would write down all of the ingredients and instructions. And so it was that last November Mom came to my house to hand down her tradition.

She barreled into my old country kitchen armed with my grandmother’s roasting pan, loaves of bread (“I knew you wouldn’t buy the right kind”), and various clunky utensils. We were 10 minutes in before the first argument began (Me: “Slow down! I can’t write that fast!” Mom: “You’re making this too complicated!”). She hand-sifted bread crumbs to the texture of fine sand and sizzled onions and celery as I stood feeling alternately useless and intimidated.

Slowly I picked it up. The way you had to pack the stuffing like a snowball, then jam it as tightly as you could into the cavity. How to properly mix the Hellmann’s mayonnaise, white vinegar, and milk with the cabbage for the creamiest coleslaw. Timing the rolls. Where to put the pins to close up the bird, how to whisk the gravy into brown, bubbly thickness. When my parents and I sat down at the dining room table Mom still thinks I overpaid for, the look on Dad’s face said it all: *This was Thanksgiving*. The one true Thanksgiving. It would be up to me now to preserve it, pass it on to one of my nephews or my niece, to whomever I could convince that it was important. Because it is important.

Afterward, as I looked at the roasting pan soaking in the sink, I saw its dings and worn spots where scrubbing pads had removed the traces of Thanksgivings going back to 1950. My grandmother had baked her holiday turkeys in this pan. So had Mom. And now, so had I.

I turned to her as she casually wiped down the stovetop. “Can I have this?” I asked quietly, nodding to the pan. “I mean, will you leave this to me someday?”

Her expression went from puzzled to pleased. “All right,” she said. “If you’d like.”

I began scrubbing it—hoping someday I’d be able to summon the skill and love to produce something worthy in it. ■

*Michael Callahan is a writer and the articles editor at Philadelphia magazine.*

