Friendsgiving: Beyond the Pot Luck

Join us in celebrating the latest holiday on the block, where we find joy in new traditions, creativity amongst friends ... and a have a booty-shakin' good time.

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As a New England transplant living in California, the holidays have taken on an extra layer of complexity in recent years. With limited vacation time, there's often a choice between going East for Thanksgiving or Christmas — one is usually doable, but not both. There's also the extra pre-planning needed to ship gifts (a particular challenge if you're used to giving away 20+ jars of homemade preserves each year) or a last-minute scramble to do all your shopping in the final days before the holiday. As my grandfather used to remind me, however, it's just these types of challenges that force us to be creative, to re-invent, and to discover a whole world of joy in non-traditional choices. Enter Friendsgiving.

Wait, what? What IS a Friendsgiving party?

As its name suggests, Friendsgiving is, at its core, a Thanksgiving-style meal with your friends. How this manifests itself is as varied as the people who attend. Before we get into what it might look like, let's clear up a misconception. Friendsgiving is NOT a get-together for an ornery group of outcasts who hate their family or don't have anywhere to go for turkey day.

In fact, Friendsgiving is often one of the most joyous, genuine celebrations of the season. For many people, it's a welcome opportunity to host without having to wrestle the honor from Great Aunt Elsie. It's also a great chance to catch up with friends before family obligations start filling everyone's calendars and, in a blink of an eye, it's New Year's Eve. And yes, it's a warm and welcoming way to celebrate if you can't &mdsh; or don't want to &mdsh; go home for the holidays.

Friendsgiving can take many forms: a full-on turkey, mashed potatoes, and pumpkin pie extravaganza on Thanksgiving day itself, a "supplementary" gourmet meal (that may or may not feature traditional dishes) on the Saturday before or after Thanksgiving (although I'd like to think of Friendsgiving as the main event), or a casual backyard barbecue with a football game or your favorite TV show humming in the background.

How to host Friendsgiving (Rule #1 ... there are no rules!)

Sure, you want to make sure that everyone has fun, is full, and eats delicious food. Beyond that, as a relatively new phenomenon, consider Friendsgiving your culinary sandbox. If Thanksgiving dinner at grandma's is time for ritual and tradition, then Friendsgiving is your blank canvas for creative experimentation! You can have fun with your invitation, consider breaking the jello-salad mold with a globally-inspired meal (turkey completely optional), and if you want to have a dance party break before dessert, we won't judge.

There's often an expectation that Friendsgiving will be a potluck dinner ... but it doesn't have to be. Don't feel obligated to serve classic dishes, either (although you can't really go wrong that way). Want to serve buffet style? Go nuts! Try a new recipe that you've never done before? Your friends are likely to be forgiving if it doesn't work out. And who's to say it has to be dinner? Why not brunch?

While a hallmark of Friendsgiving is often a more casual atmosphere, in the spirit of honoring the important friendships in your life, it can also be a great opportunity to bust out your fancy wine glasses and spread out your prettiest tablecloth on the dinner table. At a minimum, it should be a gentle prod to run your vacuum cleaner...

While you're free to create your own new traditions, there are a few practical things to keep in mind to pull off a Friendsgiving dinner to remember — whatever that means to you.

Seven tips for a perfect Friendsgiving party

1. Google is a potluck dinner's best friend.

If you're planning a potluck-style meal, this one is a must. Use Google sheets or another online platform to create a shareable spreadsheet for your Friendsgiving menu planning. If you're going to make the main dish (be it **turkey** or something else), be sure to get that on the spreadsheet before you send out the link. It'll make it easier on your guests if they can anchor their recipe selections around a designated main course. See our recipe roundup below for some main course alternatives to turkey.

2. Pick your own recipes strategically.

If you're gunning for top chef and want to make sure the menu is cohesive from beginning to end, consider cooking the appetizers and main meal yourself and asking your guests to bring alcohol and/or desserts (our **wine guide** can help provide pairing guidelines). Can you say "pie bar"? Or help your guests by creating a list of recipe options they can choose from in case they need help with ideas. As with any get-together, look for make-ahead recipes to cut down on the amount of work you have on the big day. Consider having a signature drink for your party (anything **cranberry**, **apple cider**, or **ginger** themed is sure to complement traditional Thanksgiving recipes), and then farm out the rest of the beverage list to your guests. This allows you to treat your guests to something special without breaking the bank.

3. Create an oven reservation system.

Think about how much oven space — and counter space — you have. If friends are planning on showing up with a pile of ingredients, no pots or pans, and need a whole rack in your oven, you could be in trouble! Add a column to your online spreadsheet to capture oven usage needs and temperatures. For everyone's sanity, it's best to encourage guests to bring food that has been prepared ahead of time (fortunately, many Thanksgiving side dishes are casserole dish-friendly, and travel well!)

4. Know your audience.

Be sure to ask if any of your guests have dietary restrictions, and be mindful of guests who don't drink. Communicate upfront whether children or dogs are welcome (or if anyone has pet allergies), and make sure everyone knows where to park. Setting expectations ahead of time is the best way to avoid day-of chaos.

5. Be a thoughtful guest.

On that note — if you're a Friendsgiving attendee, don't come empty-handed! No matter how informal the gathering, it's never a bad idea to come with a bottle of wine or bouquet of flowers for the host. Want a DIY gift for your host? Try making some spiced nuts! (I'm partial to **this Yummly recipe**, myself).

6. Get into the spirit of giving.

If you're planning on sharing leftovers, let your guests know in advance so they can pack storage containers! Want to feed more than your friends? Partner with a **charitable organization** to raise money for hunger or your favorite cause.

7. Have fun!

Put together a special Thanksgiving playlist — or better yet, delegate this task to that friend with impeccable music taste. In a pinch, you can always try a ready-made list on Spotify or Pandora. Whether your idea of fun is breaking out board games, busting a move on the kitchen-turned-dance-floor, or setting up a craft station to make adorable DIY place cards, be sure to take pictures! Join the Friendsgiving trend and hashtag your photos #friendsgiving on social media.

Friendsgiving ideas for a stunning centerpiece

If you're going with a traditional Thanksgiving turkey for your party, we've got you covered! Check out this post for 36 Terrific Thanksgiving Turkey Recipes. But if you're looking for something more off the beaten path, try one the recipes below:

Butternut Squash Rose Tart

This impressive centerpiece makes a magnificent main dish for vegetarians (sorry, vegans, it does contain butter and cheese), or can be slipped in as a side dish stunner that might just steal the show!

Butternut Squash Rose Tart by The Kitchn

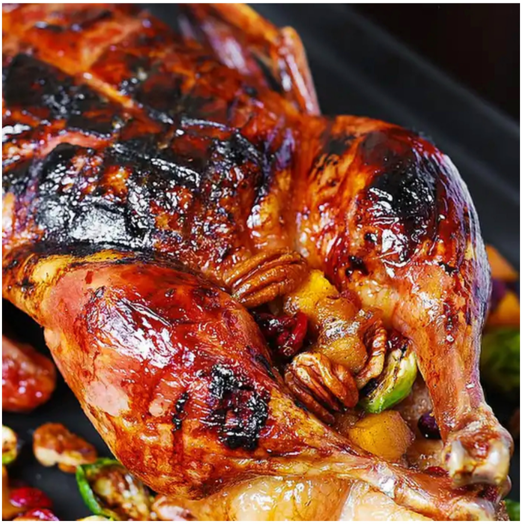
Prosciutto-Wrapped Pork Loin with Roasted Apples

Think you'll miss out on that "wow" moment if you're not bringing a golden brown turkey to the table? Not with this Proscuitto-wrapped pork loin. Stuffed with deep green kale, savory mushrooms, and herbs, then nestled in a bed of roasted apples, this showstopper is brimming with porky goodness ... times two.

Prosciutto-Wrapped Pork Loin with Roasted Apples by **Bon Appétit**

Roast Duck

If you can't let go of the idea of golden-brown poultry on the table, but maybe want something a little smaller to fit in your oven, try this luxurious roast duck, perfect for an intimate dinner for four.



Roast Duck by **Julia's Album**

Classic Lasagna

Want to avoid carving altogether? Lasagna is a great Friendsgiving option: serves (and pleases) a crowd, can be made in advance, and you can tweak the recipe to your tastes. While **vegetarian** and **vegan** lasagna recipes abound, I prefer this meat-laden version from Girl and the Kitchen, filled with both beef and sausage.

Classic Lasagna by A Family Feast

Instant Pot Short Ribs

Most people think of Thanksgiving meals as the ultimate labor of love: getting up at 4:30 in the morning to pull the turkey out of the refrigerator, spending hours with peeler, knife, and grater in hand, punching down bread dough and rolling out pie crusts… If the mere thought of that makes you more tired than a heavy dose of tryptophan, a pressure-cooker recipe may be more your style! These rich short ribs with their deeply-flavored sauce are done in just 45 minutes, and you'll still get your beloved mashed potatoes, even without the turkey.

How to Make Instant Pot Short Ribs by Girl and the Kitchen

Classic Rack of Lamb

If you're hoping to deliver a feast for the senses in addition to the stomach, consider a classic herbed rack of lamb. As the air fills with the smell of herbs, rendered fat, and roasted bone, the anticipation grows, and your guests will find themselves drawn into the kitchen to see what's going on. Finally, a few bottles of chilled white wine are popped open and the roast comes out of the oven amidst a wave of savory scents … everyone will be rushing to their seats for an elegant meal that lingers in the memory for years to come.

Classic Rack of Lamb by **Simply Recipes**

Want more ideas for your Friendsgiving menu? Check out our annual **collection of Thanksgiving recipes**, from cranberry sauce to sweet potato pie.

Dinner Fall Party Food Thanksgiving Turkey Friendsgiving