

How Three Club Chefs Prepared for Thanksgiving

Club chefs talk turkey in anticipation of a busy Thanksgiving holiday.

By Pamela Brill, Contributing Editor | November 22, 2022



The carving knives have been sharpened, the meats have been procured and the tables are set. As club kitchens get a jump on this year's bountiful feast, they are prepared for the onslaught of members who opted to spend Thanksgiving at the club (and those who simply don't want to cook). With the rising cost of groceries prompting families to forego cooking, chefs are meeting the demand with to-go meal packages and in-person dining options, both of which can satisfy members' appetites for a home-cooked meal.

Ready to Roll

Medinah (Ill.) Country Club members have been devouring holiday meals since the pandemic; this year is no exception. "Last year, Medinah saw significant year-over-year increases in participation in Thanksgiving, Christmas and Valentine's Day offerings," says Executive Chef Matthew Gilbert. "We are trending towards similar numbers for Thanksgiving this year."

The club offers two separate turkey day options to entice members looking to dine either at the club or at home (minus the shopping and prep). A customizable Thanksgiving Feast package lets customers choose from a range of to-go options online, including organic turkeys, maple-roasted butternut squash, sweet potato casserole with cinnamon and honeyed pecans, and mascarpone mashed potatoes, among other dishes.

According to Gilbert, the club typically sells 100 turkeys and assorted sides for up to 12 guests. "We feed around 1,000 people with this option alone," he says. "Even though our kitchens are large, the team comes in at 2:00 a.m. to start roasting birds."

Medinah offers an expansive Thanksgiving brunch menu for those who prefer to feast on-site, usually drawing about 500 diners over two seatings. Carving stations feature slow-roasted turkey breast and leg, orange and brown sugar-glazed ham and roasted-garlic peppercorn roasted tri-tip of beef. Starters consist of creamy kabocha squash soup, five-spice baked acorn squash and kale salad and salt-roasted beet and Wisconsin salad. Sides are made up of classic creamy mashed potatoes, Medinah garden herb bread stuffing, and honey and pomegranate roasted baby carrots, among others. Turkey alternatives include lemon and parmesan-crusting walleye fish and pumpkin tortellini.

"While we are creative chefs and love doing modern versions of classics, we also know when to give our membership refined versions of



Matthew Gilbert, Executive Chef, Medinah Country Club

classics that stay true to our identity,” Gilbert explains of the variety. In total, his staff turns out approximately 1,500 meals.

Crafting an innovative menu that balances traditional fare with innovative twists requires some forward thinking. Gilbert took his cues from the pandemic when product shortages ran rampant and placed his turkey order in July.

“That might seem unnecessary or extreme, but in today’s market climate, we certainly feel better knowing that we are good to go when the time comes,” he says. And while cost of goods remains a concern, Gilbert has found that Thanksgiving does not tax his budget for the most part, with desserts and sides evening out higher-priced organic turkeys.

A dependable team is one of the main ingredients in pulling off a productive holiday—another casualty of the pandemic that prompted Gilbert to staff up by tapping new resources. In addition to relying on Indeed, Zip Recruiter and Culinary Agents, he plucked new hires from local culinary programs and retained some of the 17 students from this past summer. This crew and his full-time staff will be armed and ready for the holidays.

Gilbert is anticipating that Christmas will be even busier than Thanksgiving, with a full month of social events, ranging from family brunches to the club’s annual candlelight dinner series. Take-home, oven-ready dinners that feed 6-12 will also be available, complete with instructions for setting a Christmas Eve or Christmas Day table.

Despite the frenetic pace, Gilbert embraces the season with a can-do attitude that translates to his team. “The month between Thanksgiving and Christmas is a full-on sprint for the food and beverage team, but it is a time of year that is special and enjoyable for every one of our cooks,” he notes.

And to All a Good Night

Consistency is key when it comes to recreating a menu full of classic Thanksgiving dishes and at Desert Mountain Club in Scottsdale, Ariz., that means giving members exactly what they expect.

“Thanksgiving is about tradition, and we follow that in our menus,” says Director of Culinary Operations Bertrand Bouquin. “Most members like to keep it simple out of respect and fondness for those traditions.”



Bertrand Bouquin, Director of Culinary Operations, Desert Mountain Club in Scottsdale, Ariz.

In the main clubhouse, Desert Mountain members will be treated to a buffet outfitted with turkey, prime rib and ham; an ice carving with shrimp, crab claw and oysters; and assorted brunch dishes. Bouquin's menu has something for everyone while relying on tried-and-true favorites for ease of execution.

While Desert Mountain sees its fair share of takeout Thanksgiving meals, in-person dining far outweighs the at-home option. This year's numbers are expected to resemble last year's, with a slight uptick. In 2022, the club did 1,610 covers in its restaurants and 720 takeout meals, averaging 1,600-1,700 covers for the holidays. "So far, we have the same number of reservations for this year," adds Bouquin.

To keep costs down, Bouquin pre-ordered his turkeys using last year's figures as a model. And to ensure his kitchens are running efficiently, he brought in international J1 visa students and H2B seasonal workers, all of whom have been cross-trained. "We try to bring our teams at different times, so they don't work crazy hours," he adds.

And while Desert Mountain's menu requires an all-hands-on-deck approach—from now through Christmas Eve—the staff can rest easy on December 25. "We are closed on Christmas Day, the one day of the year on which all of our restaurants and golf courses are closed, so the staff can celebrate with their families," Bouquin says.

Tried and True

Some clubs find that Thanksgiving isn't one of their busier holidays, giving chefs the flexibility to enhance their menus without straying too far off course. Such is the case at the Atlanta (Ga.) Athletic Club, where members typically travel for the holiday rather than dine on the premises. According to Executive Chef Eric DaRin, the club does 500 covers on Thanksgiving, when members come hungry for the classics.

"I have learned here that you don't get too elaborate or inventive because people expect traditional fare at Thanksgiving," he says.

On AAC's Thanksgiving menu, members will be treated to two carving stations: coffee-crusted New York strip, a slow-smoked and roasted whole turkey, and rosemary and orange-dusted salmon with spiced orange butter sauce.

"Our members seem to prefer staying with the standard offerings, but of course, we like to add a flair or surprise element," he adds. Along with sausage and sage stuffing and cornbread dressing, sides will include French haricot vert casserole with shiitake, cremini and portobello mushrooms; southern corn casserole; and sweet potato souffle with pecan streusel.

While Thanksgiving dinner is buffet-style, it will be offered in two different clubhouse areas. DaRin is not concerned about the logistics, as his staff is cross-trained to handle banquet-style serving. "We try to limit and stagger shifts so as not to burn out our staff," he adds.

Such conscientiousness will bode well for AAC in the weeks that follow when Christmas season is in full swing. Even after planning months in advance, DaRin dubs it "crazy busy," with a slew of private parties and holiday entertaining. However, the annual Christmas Spectacular requires the most attention when the club serves 1,300 members over the course of two days. Last year, the clubhouse was transformed into a winter wonderland, complete with cookie decorating, pictures with Santa, storytime with Mrs. Claus and a host of other activities. "Each room of the clubhouse is decorated differently and has its own activity," DaRin describes. "It's lively, active and a wonderful tradition."

Heaping even more onto its plate, the club also hosts a Christmas Eve brunch and a series of New Year's events, keeping the kitchen staff busy until 1 a.m. when they can call it a night—and usher in 2023.



Eric DaRin, Executive Chef, Atlanta Athletic Club