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LE BASQUE/COURTESY

Alejandro Mugerza, of Miami, carves a Paletilla, a special ham, for an event by his catering company, Le Basque. Mugerza changes his Thanksgiving dinner every year. His specialties from the Spanish region include sea bream fish with olive oil and garlic and for dessert, rustic cheesecake with fresh figs.

Carving out their place

Immigrants bring a taste of foreign lands to the Thanksgiving table

BY BARBARA CORBELLINI DUARTE
Staff writer

Thanksgiving dinner would not be traditional without roasted quail, some stuffed grape leaves or a gumbo soup. At least that's how some South Florida immigrant families think of the holiday.

These families are creating their own Thanksgiving tradition by pushing the turkey aside to make space for flavors and dishes from their home country. Some adapt the turkey, turning it into a stew. Others keep the turkey on the table but change all the side dishes, and others substitute it entirely with a seafood paella or a shrimp dish.

"The whole world should celebrate Thanksgiving. You don't have to buy anything for anybody. It's not commercial. It's not religious. It's perfect," says Elizabeth Rodeiro, originally from Brazil and currently living in Weston. "It's the best holiday in the world."

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As in most countries, Brazil doesn't celebrate Thanksgiving. Yet Brazilians do eat the oven-roasted stuffed turkey on Christmas.

So Thanksgiving is a day for seafood in Rodeiro's home. She usually makes a traditional Brazilian dish made with shrimp and catupiry, a type of cream cheese, or a Spanish paella, since Rodeiro's family also has a Spanish background.

When the family is at the table, they alternate languages from English to Portuguese.

"It's hard to bring our own culture into something we don't have. So the only thing we can do is bring the food," she says.

Alejandro Muguerra, originally from the Basque region in Spain, moved to South Florida in 1991 to begin his catering company, Le Basque. On his first Thanksgiving, the traditional American dishes at a friend's house surprised him.

"At the beginning, I found the combination of turkey with cranberry shocking, especially people getting it from a can," he says.

Over the years, he began preparing his own dishes and sharing the dinner with other friends who also don't have family in Florida. His Thanksgiving table

never looks the same.

"We change it. We try to come up with something different every year," he says.

And different it is. He has cooked roasted quail with baby green beans, clams with kidney beans and a green sauce made with parsley, or a sea bream fish cooked in the oven with olive oil, garlic, potatoes and onions. For dessert, he usually makes a rustic cheesecake topped with fresh figs.

"America is a culture of immigrants," he says. "To bring something from your own place is American because everything in America is from somewhere else."

Hemat Waziry, originally from Egypt, spends Thanksgiving at her brother's house in Hollywood, where they cook a traditional turkey. But Waziry, of Davie, is in charge of the sides, and she cooks traditional dishes from her country.

"It is very important to incorporate your culture in your daily life. I think it is hard coming from one country and living in another," Waziry said via a translator. "America is our home, but Egypt is still a part of who we are, who our children are and who their children will be."

She'll make stuffed grape leaves, stuffed tomatoes or zucchini, and goulash, which is a type of ground beef and spinach stew.



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"I like to make it a little spicy," she says. "It is rare to see us seasoning something with only salt, so our food is always flavorful and packs

a punch on your tongue."

When the food's gone, they'll add one more tradition to the holiday and drink tea with the basbousa

Hemat Waziry will serve stuffed grape leaves, above, and Egyptian stuffed zucchini, left, along with her Thanksgiving turkey.

dessert, a type of cake. They also may have some belly dancing to accompany it.

"My brother's wife will sometimes play some Arabic music and bring out all of her belly-dancing coin belts and some of us will dance, but all of us will laugh," she says.

Frantz Deralus, of West Palm Beach, mixes dishes from his home country of

Haiti and the Virgin Islands where his best friend, Ricardo Turnbull, is from. Deralus and Turnbull usually cook together and their families share the meal.

From the Virgin Islands, they make a gumbo soup with vegetables, crab meat, conch and some turkey meat.

From Haiti, they cook griot, which is deep-fried pork seasoned overnight, and make a spicy coleslaw to bring up the flavor.

Sometimes they cook the turkey and put in on the table just "to show it's a Thanksgiving feast," Deralus says. But usually nobody touches it and they end up making turkey stew on the next day.

"It's very important to embrace the other culture while also keeping your own identity," Deralus says. "We don't only celebrate American food, we add our own twist to it."

And after drinking some Barbancourt, a rum from Haiti, both families end the night singing karaoke.

"The time is always priceless. We have crazy videos," Deralus says. "The time that we have with family is very important because throughout the year we work a lot, we don't see each other. That moment when everybody is together, having fun, drinking and eating, it's very important to us."

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