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Collectors give thanks for the perfectly inspired table

BY BARBARA MILLER BEEM

They had survived multiple hardships, from food insecurity and political discord to high mortality rates and an epidemic. Indeed, it was time for a group of English colonists living along the northeast coast of America to give thanks. In 1621, the Pilgrims, along with their neighbors, indigenous people of the Wampanoag Nation, gathered multiple days for a harvest feast. Details of the celebration are sketchy, but thanks to a letter written by Edward Winslow, an eyewitness to the proceedings, it's clear that deer meat was on the menu.

Whether or not this was just the beginning of an annual Colonial tradition remains unknown. For that matter, there are those who question the validity of accepting this celebration as the first Thanksgiving in America. Regardless, come November 27, many Americans will once again be celebrating Thanksgiving Day.

To be sure, the marking of this tradition-laden holiday has evolved over the years. Not that long ago, it was the day when Santa came to town and set up residency in downtown department stores. These days, parades are carefully choreographed televised extravaganzas. Similarly, football matches between local high school rivals have ballooned into the national airing of wall-to-wall football games. As for being the time to begin Christmas shopping, that has evolved into monthlong "early Black Friday" sales.

But in spite of these distractions, some things remain the same. Nothing can get in the way of Thanksgiving dinner, where friends and family meet for a special meal that features traditional favorites. To be sure, there will be plenty of leftovers for sandwiches the next day. And as for the dining room table, it's still the focus of attention. Just ask Jimmie Bucci.

Bucci is a dedicated collector with an



Above: Color-coordinated Fiesta plates provide the perfect background for turkey-themed napkins.

eye for the unique and the unusual. He is also the president of the Vintage Tablecloth Lovers Club, an active online group for likeminded fanciers. A

Massachusetts resident, he understands what it takes to host a memorable holiday meal.

"Definitely, you have to set a good table," he began, even if the guest list is short and the menu is simple. Whether the meal is served family style, with dishes passed around the table, or buffet style, where guests help themselves from a serving sideboard, the perfect tablecloth, along with coordinating accessories, can make all the difference.

For those who, like Bucci, are serious about tablecloths, there are a number of factors to be considered. Strictly speaking, when it comes to vintage Thanksgiving tablecloths, there is not an overwhelming number from which to choose. Why this is the case is a question

Left: Two couples pose with a turkey, not a deer.



Above: Too pretty to burn: candles that resemble Indian corn, as well as themed figural candles.

Below: Gurlie candles, as seen here, are a popular collectible. Be mindful that they are still being manufactured.



open to speculation. Could it be that turkey gravy and cranberry sauce spills resulted in stains difficult to eradicate, and thus the tablecloths were not saved over the years? Or maybe it's due to the fact that, because Thanksgiving tablecloths are used for only one day out

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Thanksgiving

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of the year, fewer were manufactured. Whatever the case, diligent collectors can still be rewarded. As an example, Buccì said that "Turkey Time," a popular rayon cotton tablecloth made by California Hand Prints (CHP), can be procured for less than \$50.

Even if you have the perfect vintage tablecloth, there can be issues, Buccì said. Older tablecloths are often not long enough to fully cover a holiday dining room table, especially when extension leaves have been added. He suggested that this can be easily remedied by layering the vintage cloth over a larger modern cloth, one that is either solid-colored or with a subtle print. Similarly, when setting a smaller table, themed placemats over a solid-color cloth might be a good alternative.

Sometimes, less is more, and this can especially be the case when it comes to centerpiece. As much as Buccì loves to decorate, on the subject of table centerpieces, he strikes a practical note, advising hosts not to overdo it. He suggested removing a centerpiece from the table when the meal commences, especially when serving family style.

But that doesn't mean that the table needs to be devoid of decoration. One option might be to decorate each individual place with "little things." Thanksgiving napkins add a festive air



Above: A perfect Thanksgiving table might include "Turkey Time," a vintage tablecloth made by California Hand Prints.



Above: Somewhat subdued, these side plates picture a Pilgrim woman in a lovely setting - with a dog at her side.

when prominently displayed atop dinner plates. Or, Buccì suggested, look for napkin rings, "a good touch." Thanksgiving-themed Gurley candles are ideal for decorating each place setting. Or set out miniature vintage paper honeycomb decorations to inject a bit of fun to the table, all the while not taking up too much space. Buccì noted that small versions of these whimsical decorations can often be found for less than a dollar a piece; larger versions might be set around the room to create an overall festive atmosphere. However, he cautioned shoppers that many of the same companies that originally sold



Above: These placemats would look handsome on a smaller holiday table.

these pieces years ago are still producing them today. Don't assume them to be vintage.

Don't forget the dinnerware, he continued. Ironically, one of Buccì's favorite Thanksgiving-inspired patterns is by an English company; he considers Johnson Brothers' "His Majesty" to be a "really cool pattern." Regardless of what dishes are chosen for accommodating a large dinner party, Buccì recommended purchasing at least 16 place settings, if possible. On the other hand, attractive tables for larger parties can be set with carefully chosen mix-and-match dinnerware.

Meanwhile, remember the little touches. Don't overlook Thanksgiving-inspired pieces (including cheese spreaders with Thanksgiving figurals on the handles), as well as salt-and-pepper shakers, often made in the likeness of turkeys.

Finally, there's an opportunity for drama when it comes to presenting the "guest of honor," the turkey. Turkey platters are so varied (and plentiful) that many fans of Thanksgiving specialize in collecting them. "There are dozens of designs," Buccì said. In addition to ceramic and enamelware platters, he noted that one of the most unusual examples in his collection is made of bright orange plastic. "It was so bizarre that I had to have it." And even though one platter is sufficient for one holiday meal, others can be displayed throughout the home during the season.

This might be the time to begin the search for next year, Buccì concluded. Look for gravy boats with ladles, turkey candleholders, and sugar and creamer sets ("if you're lucky"). Don't overlook Thanksgiving-inspired what-nots, although serious collectors need to be mindful of reproductions.

Finally, few of us can replicate the lavish meal and beautiful surroundings suggested by a Norman Rockwell



Above: Figural cheese knives are a festive touch.



Above: From side plates to platters, images of turkeys remind diners what they are eating.



Above: Even though it's only one meal on one day, Thanksgiving tableware such as this handsome plate is a rewarding collecting category.



Above: Somewhat different from traditional turkey platters, this one, made of plastic, is bright orange in color.



Above: This colorful platter has a "folk art feel" about it.

Below: Napkin rings are one way to decorate a holiday table without taking up a lot of space. These examples appear to have been handcrafted.



Below: A Thanksgiving tableau that includes the Bobbsey Twins getting into the holiday spirit.