

SEASONAL FEATURE

Celebrating American Thanksgiving in Switzerland

In the '80s, this reporter had a Thanksgiving dinner at a Zurich airport hotel that included "mints meat pie" – a memorably awful thick piecrust with a thin layer of *mint* jelly inside. Back then, it was difficult to find a restaurant meal or the necessary ingredients for a home-cooked one on the big day. No longer.

By Gail Mangold-Vine | Take-away Thanksgiving, anyone? Turkey or goose?

"Enjoy a traditional meal without spending the day in the kitchen!" proclaims the Zurich Marriott's pitch, specifying that if the order is for more than four people they are talking about a whole stuffed bird.

You do need to fetch your bird (and turkey trimmings that include cranberry and orange relish, potatoes, beans, glazed carrots and pumpkin pie), although they sweeten that with a glass of free punch when you get there. But if, come November 26, you'd prefer to tuck into a buffet-style feast in a restaurant setting, the hotel offers that option too.

"For the third year in a row, we are organising the dinner in tandem with Zurich's American Club but it is absolutely open to the general public," the Marriott's Food and Beverage Director Joerg Kroeter told *Swiss News*.

It must be the real thing

Another city hotel known for serving a Thanksgiving meal is the Ramada Park near Geneva International Airport.

"In this business, you can't just decide to do Thanksgiving dinner at the drop of a hat," says José Mondego, manager of the La Récolte restaurant where the Ramada Park's festive meal is a well-established tradition.

You need certain key stateside ingredients, for one thing, he says, and a chef with U.S. training. "Otherwise it doesn't taste like 'the real thing' to the Americans who are your primary client base and they won't come back. Word spreads fast with



things like this, so not only won't you get repeat customers but others are likely to stay away as well."

Executive chef Jean-Baptiste Cassany concurs, adding that he got his training from his predecessor, a Swiss-German who had cheffed in U.S. hotels. "We order proper big 11 kg (24.25 lb) turkeys, we use the giblets to make gravy, and of course the liver goes into the chestnut, sage and bread stuffing. We go all out on the day, peeling the sweet potatoes and vegetables ourselves – no pre-cut stuff – baking different breads like corn bread and pies."

La Récolte has carved a niche market out of the day, Mondego adds, with 110 dinner covers, 70 per cent of which are sold to Americans. "The rest are their non-American guests – Americans are really proud of Thanksgiving, and love to share it – people who have lived in the States, or people who are curious about American food."



The history of Thanksgiving

Tradition has it that the first "Thanksgiving" took place in Plymouth, Massachusetts in 1621 with both pilgrims and Native Americans in attendance. It was essentially a harvest festival, and it by no means became an institution.

Indeed, it wasn't until decades, then a whole century later that other days of thanksgiving (not necessarily for abundant crops) were proclaimed. In 1863, President Lincoln proclaimed a day of Thanksgiving in November, and every president who came after him supported it. The fourth Thursday in November became the legal U.S. holiday known as Thanksgiving Day in 1941.

Canadians also celebrate a Thanksgiving holiday, on the second Monday in October.

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The restaurant goes all out – special decorations, and each diner finds a rolled up menu on parchment paper tied with ribbon at their seat.

For travelling Americans, often alone, the hotel offers a less elaborate – and cheaper – menu than is served in the restaurant. "We serve it throughout the evening in the bar. On your own, you may not feel like so many courses, and in any case corporate travel budgets have been drastically reduced these past few years," says Mondego.

Essentials for cooking your own meal

For many residents though, the big day just isn't quite as special if they haven't spent it slaving away in the kitchen, stuffing and roasting a turkey, making gravy, baking mince-meat and pumpkin pies. So, where do you find the necessary ingredients?

Globus is the best overall bet. Spokesperson Mirjam Schobert told *Swiss News* that branches with a *Delicatessa* section carry, among other relevant items, "turkey (five to 15 kg – 11 to 33 lbs – fresh or frozen, with giblets), marshmallows, sweet potatoes, stuffings, mincemeat, pecan nuts – and from around November 15, canned pumpkin". According to the store's website, there are branches with a *Delicatessa* section in Zurich, Basel, Bern, Chur, Lucerne, Geneva and Lausanne.

Marshmallows are an essential ingredient for those who think Thanksgiving just isn't Thanksgiving without sweet potato and marshmallow casserole.

Throughout Switzerland, Migros sells fresh turkeys starting a week before the day, and some branches have sweet potatoes and cranberries. Coop sells turkeys and marshmallows in larger branches.

In Zurich, Jelmoli's Gourmet Factory sells mincemeat and cranberries, also turkeys frozen and fresh. "We can also stuff the bird for you using an original American recipe," adds manager Nadine Spillmann.

Regarding other options, English-language Internet sites and forums popular with expats in Switzerland buzz with Cranberry Alerts like: "fresh or frozen American cranberries spotted at Coop or Aligro Geneva", "I saw some ..." and "Where can I get ...?" For 10 to 15 kg birds, for example, the word is out to try Manor.

The expat stores that have been springing up in the past decade or so are a good bet for everything but the turkey and fresh produce. U.S.-educated Mexican expat Carmen Diaz who took over Taste of America, a Swiss-based mail order business, seven years ago says she always carries Libby Easy Pumpkin Pie Mix, Stove Top Savory Herb Stuffing, Ocean Spray Jellied Cranberry Sauce, Keebler Graham Cracker Ready Crust and Kraft Jet Puffed Marshmallows.

The American Market, which runs a mail-order business and shops in Geneva and Nyon, stocks Little Becky Marshmallows, jellied and whole berry cranberry sauces, Campbell's brand Clam Chowder and Turkey Gravy, Stove Top stuffing mixes and Pepperidge Farm Herb Seasoned Stuffing.

A lot for a few

But why this alacrity to supply items to a U.S. population in Switzerland that after all, according to Swiss Federal Office for Migration figures for 2008, only numbers 15,983 – up 1,127 from 2007?

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This is the number of American citizens registered in Switzerland, and that number is significantly lower than for citizens of most western European countries including the UK (topped by Italy at over 290,000), a handful of eastern European countries, Turkey and Sri Lanka. Add to that the number of Americans who have acquired Swiss citizenship, so are counted as Swiss in the statistics.

The number of U.S. tourists who visit Switzerland each year, estimated at one million, fell off by an estimated 15 per cent in the first six months of 2009, which still allows for a significant number to be present at any time – but if seeking a Thanksgiving meal, these would likely head for a restaurant.

We asked Stéphane Crocetti for his take. He joined his father's food business in the posh Geneva suburb of Cologny in 2006, and in 2008 opened the American Food Avenue shop and mail order business next door. "First of all, you can run a few successful small grocery businesses with a lot less than 16,000 customers, that's a big pool!" he says.

"Secondly, not just Americans buy U.S. products – many people, Swiss and other nationalities, have lived in the States and gotten used to them, or enjoy observing Thanksgiving. There are also plenty of locals who just like trying new things" – and who will pop into an American grocery store the way one pops into a local Asian, Middle Eastern or other specialty store.

Among the 750 items American Food Avenue presently stocks, of particular relevance to Thanksgiving are Campbell's Chunky N.E. Clam Chowder, Jet Puff Marshmallows, Libby's Pumpkin mix, Borden None Such Mincemeat, various corn-

bread and stuffing mixes, and Ocean Spray whole berry and jellied cranberry sauces.

"We also carry turkey oven bags," adds Crocetti, observing that most Swiss home ovens, however, can't accommodate larger-size turkeys. "Make sure you don't order a bird too large for your cooker! It may be advisable to check with your supplier if they can stuff and roast the bird for you" – a service the Crocetti family firm offers.



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Celebrating in Switzerland

For the second year running – October through November at Kloster Dornach in Basel – cultural and religious historian Mike Stoll is giving a German-language talk about Mormons, the Amish and other religious groups unfamiliar to most Europeans over a three-course Thanksgiving meal of corn chowder, roast turkey with chestnut and onion stuffing, cranberry sauce, sweet potato and squash casserole, and cranberry and pear pie.

Lunch seven days each week; dinner Monday through Saturday. A minimum of 20 participants is needed for each event to take place. SFr 105 per person (excluding beverages). "This is popular with locals, but also people from neighbouring Germany," an organiser told *Swiss News*.

More at: www.visitbasel.ch

Restaurant and take-away options

Zurich

Marriott: 18:00 to 23:00, Millennium Ballroom, SFr 79 per person (including apple and mulled wine). Take-away turkey dinner available from November 26 to December 24, SFr 53 per person (excluding beverages). Reserve two days ahead at: 044 360 70 30.

More at: www.coolinary.ch

Cheyenne: From 18:00, four courses for under SFr 60 per person (excluding beverages). Manager Reto Schmid told *Swiss News* the meal includes "soup, salad, turkey and all the trimmings and a pecan or other typical pie. But diners are free to order just soup or salad with the main course, and we'll be doing something like pumpkin ravioli instead of turkey for vegetarians."

More at: www.cheyenne-oerlikon.ch

Hooters: Manager Nick Silvestri says if he gets enough registrations by November 12, he'll go ahead with a classic turkey dinner adding "we show NFL football on a really big screen!" Email reservations to nicholas.silvestri@gmail.com. More at: www.hooters-zurich.ch.

Geneva

Ramada Park: 18:00 to 22:30, SFr 72 per person (including cider aperitif, but excluding other beverages). A less elaborate meal is served in the bar throughout the evening. Enquire about take-away. More at: www.ramadaparkhotel.ch

Montreux Jazz Café: Arrivals Hall, Geneva International Airport, is going to serve a turkey dish on November 26 says marketing manager Barbara Hasenboehler of SSP Food Travel Experts that runs the establishment. More at: www.mymontreuxjazzcafe.com

American clubs across Switzerland are a good bet to find out if anything is happening in your neck of the woods. The American International Club (AIC) of Geneva is organising Thanksgiving dinner, non-members welcome, www.amclub.ch. And the American Women's Club of Bern will be having a Thanksgiving Luncheon at the Bärtschihus in Gümligen, non-members welcome if they are a guest of a member, www.awcbern.org.

Expat stores

Taste of America: www.tasteofamerica.ch

American Market: www.americanmarket.ch

American Food Avenue: www.afoodave.ch