

With rituals upended, Minnesotans rethink Thanksgiving

[startribune.com/with-rituals-upended-minnesotans-rethink-thanksgiving/573078681](https://www.startribune.com/with-rituals-upended-minnesotans-rethink-thanksgiving/573078681)

By **Kristen Leigh Painter** Star Tribune

November 14, 2020 — 9:07pm

A heritage turkey at the Blue Gentian farm in New Richmond, Wis.

Sarah Branion's seven-year Friendsgiving streak is coming to an end.

With her extended family all living in Minnesota where she grew up, she and her family typically go to a potluck-style gathering with about 20 other families near their home in Colorado for Thanksgiving.

But this year, she'll attempt a pared-down version of the traditional turkey dinner. Two previous attempts at cooking a turkey, she says, turned into a bloody mess all over the counter and floor.

"I've never really done Thanksgiving for my kids. So of course I go back to think about what my mom and dad created," said Branion, who is 37.

Like millions of Americans, Branion is reimagining what the holidays will look like during a pandemic. Thanksgiving is a week and a half away and Minnesota's food companies and turkey farmers are trying to anticipate the next move of consumers in a year of uncertainty.

Gatherings may be smaller, but consumer surveys suggest Americans will seek traditions this holiday season as a citadel of comfort.

"We are still hearing consumers unsure exactly of what their plans are. ... Details are still unclear," said Heather Vossler, director of innovation and insights at Austin, Minn.-based Hormel Foods Corp. "Rituals and traditions are going to be a big part of what drives consumers this year."

When it comes to the food-centric Thanksgiving holiday, Minnesota is king.



It's the largest turkey-producing state, with 40 million to 45 million birds per year, or nearly one-fifth, of the nation's production. Hormel's Jennie-O Turkey Store, based in Willmar, is the second-largest turkey brand in the country, barely behind Butterball, followed by Minnetonka-based Cargill Inc.

While people were willing to make concessions around Halloween, they are less so with Thanksgiving and December holidays, like Christmas and Hanukkah. A recent survey by the Hartman Group found Americans' plans for the major November and December holidays are largely unchanged this year.

"It'll be very interesting to see where consumers end up landing. It's really important to them that they aren't sacrificing the holiday magic," Vossler said.

The Hartman survey found that people have two goals in mind with the 2020 holidays: safety and time with family and friends.

But those two goals could be at odds with one another. Hartman's research suggests that if people are going to cheat on their pandemic protocols, it's going to be for the holidays. More than two-thirds of respondents said they will celebrate Thanksgiving as much or more this year. That number climbs to 72% for the December holidays.

Gatherings will likely vary based on whether their climate allows for outdoor dining, what local coronavirus transmission rates and restrictions are in place and if family members have underlying health conditions.

"One thing we are definitely hearing is that even though the holidays will look differently, food will still be very central to that," Vossler said.

With many gatherings limited to immediate family or those within their bubble, industry prognosticators have wondered if there may be a shortage this year of smaller birds, which have been growing in popularity for several years.

There is only so much that farmers can change at this point in terms of bird size, said John Burkel, a turkey grower from Badger, Minn., and member of Northern Pride Inc., a grower-owned turkey processor co-op in Thief River Falls.

The baby turkeys were first placed on farms for this holiday season back in January and February, before the pandemic gripped America.

Northern Pride started slaughtering and freezing holiday birds in April. The co-op, which builds its entire year around Thanksgiving, has already completed several weeks of harvesting and shipping fresh birds for the holiday.

"The narrative floating around COVID is that people are going to be gathering in smaller groups — and that may well be true, but I'm not sure it may be as dramatic as thought," Burkel said. "I think, in the end, everybody is going to fall back on a traditional-type Thanksgiving and will be as safe as they can be."

Consumer research seems to back that up.

In October, sales in the turkey category were up about 30% compared with the same time last year, said Nicole Behne, vice president of marketing at Jennie-O.

Experts expect traditional main courses but fewer side dishes per gathering.

Food companies like Hormel and General Mills have dedicated websites to help first-time chefs cook a turkey, plan out food storage and equip them with recipes for leftovers.

Millennials are often maligned for lacking the cooking skills of preceding generations, but they've largely caught up through having their own kids and the forced learning of the pandemic, said Jeanine Bassett, vice president of consumer and market intelligence for General Mills.

One place they still lag? Carving a turkey. Only 40% of millennials know how, Bassett said.

Hormel Foods added a texting feature to its 1-800-TURKEYS hotline this year in hopes of helping reach those turkey newbies. Those in a kitchen crisis can text Turkey to 73876 should things go awry.

More households buying ingredients could be a boon for certain segments of the food industry.

General Mills, which has seen sales soar during the pandemic, anticipates its refrigerated doughs, like crescent rolls, premade pie crusts and baking products will experience high sales numbers as burnt-out parents seek shortcuts to aspects of the meal.

"This is a stressful time for consumers. There is so much mind space being dedicated to other things. It squeezes out thinking and planning for things like holidays," said Bassett. "It is not the holiday season consumers wanted or asked for, but we think we have the right solutions at the right time."

But the biggest challenge for Branion and many others in similar situations this year is finding ways to make the holidays special without all the usual parties, plays and events.

The absence of these typical holiday signals is a "real emotional hit," said Bassett. "We are already home every day. We are already cooking at home every day. So how to make Thanksgiving feel like not just another Thursday?"

Branion said she'll do that by using her grandmother's fine chinaware for the first time.

"I've always been so afraid we are going to break it, but COVID has taught me life isn't predictable and so why not take that fancy china out and use it?" she said.

All year Branion has been reimagining life's milestones, from drive-by birthday parties, to finding alternatives to their typical week at the family cabin in Wisconsin to her and her husband's anniversary.

"I'm frankly exhausted trying to re-create holidays," she said. "I don't think we have to establish a new tradition that is permanent, but let's just do something that helps us focus on being grateful and find a way to give back. It doesn't need to be Pinterest-worthy."

Kristen Leigh Painter covers the food industry for the Star Tribune. She previously covered growth and development for the paper. Prior to that, Painter was a business reporter at the Denver Post, covering airlines and aerospace. She frequently writes about sustainable food production, consumer food trends and airlines.

kristen.painter@startribune.com 612.673.4767 KristenPainter