

## Family Style

The region's top chefs and wine director share their favorite holiday meals and traditions

BY LIZ JOHNSON  
ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOSEPH CIARDIELLO

On Thanksgiving morning, the streets of New York are lined with happy people cheering on the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade. By noon, though, the crowds have gone home to their families and the streets are litter-strewn and eerily quiet.

José Andrés, a Spanish immigrant who is now one of America's foremost chefs, found himself wandering those empty streets in 1991, on his first Thanksgiving in America.

"My first Thanksgiving, in terms of sitting down with a lot of friends and cooking," Andrés recalls, "that didn't happen. And when you are away [from home], you are very lonely. From then on, I made sure for Thanksgiving I was going to be with someone."

Togetherness, of course, is a universal theme for the holidays—regardless of which you may celebrate. But when we asked three of the Northeast Corridor's top chefs and one of its best wine directors to give us advice on making our holiday meals the best they can be, we never thought their answers would lead us back to the camaraderie at our own tables. That's not to say we didn't learn quite a bit along the way.

All four of our food and wine gurus—Andrés, Tony Maws, Michael Solomonov and Belinda Chang—have something to celebrate this year: Each was named top in his or her field or region at the

James Beard Foundation Awards in May. In a competition that is considered the Oscars of the food world, Solomonov, owner of Percy Street Barbecue, Xochitl and Zahav in Philadelphia, won Best Chef Mid-Atlantic; Maws, owner of Craigie on Main in Cambridge, won Best Chef Northeast; and Chang, the current GM and wine director of Monkey Bar in Manhattan, won the Outstanding Wine Service award for her work at The Modern restaurant. Andrés, who owns America Eats Tavern, Jaleo, minibar, Oyamel Cocina Mexicana and Zaytinya, all in Washington, D.C.—and who recently expanded his empire to Las Vegas and Beverly Hills—was named Outstanding Chef.

But even with their quasi-royal status in the food world, these chefs aren't calling for foie gras and truffles. Instead, their holiday meals, just like ours, are based on tradition, culture and childhood memories. Unlike most of us, however, they have the talent to turn a simple family dish into something spectacular.

"I spend pretty much every day cooking for people, and a lot of them I don't know," says Maws. "And that has its own joy—to put a smile on someone's face is the best part of my job. But when I get to do it for people that I really do know and love, then that's a treat, and I really look forward to it."



## Michael Solomonov PHILADELPHIA

Michael Solomonov recently opened a restaurant in Philadelphia called Federal Donuts, and when we spoke to him earlier this year he was testing recipes. The light, fluffy doughnuts bubble away in oil, turning from pale white to golden as they cook. Appropriate, then, that the aroma of frying oil fondly reminds Solomonov of the holidays of his youth. His mother would make oodles of latkes for Hanukkah parties, and afterward the house would smell like oil for a week.

“Which, I guess, is actually the point,” he says. “That’s the point of Hanukkah, is to signify the oil burning for eight nights, and celebrate. So, for our tiny kitchen in Pittsburgh to smell like a deep fryer was a good way for us to celebrate.”

But rather than latkes, he’s taken up the tradition of another of his mother’s signature holiday dishes: brisket cooked in coffee.

“It’s something I’ve been working on for years,” he says. And the variations he’s tried will have you wishing you had a place at his holiday table every year: brisket with Turkish coffee and black cardamom; brisket with espresso and caramel; brisket with dried fruit and prunes.

A variation of that last one is on the menu at Zahav, his modern Israeli and Mediterranean restaurant in Society Hill, a comfortable, inviting place with rough-hewn wood tables, flickering candles and tiles in muted tones. For Passover, Solomonov soaks matzo in water, presses it into a pan, then mixes smoked brisket from his casual barbecue restaurant, Percy Street, with onions, carrots and Turkish coffee.

“It’s the same stuff I grew up on,” he says. “It’s super crunchy on the outside, and on the inside ...” He pauses, imagining. On the inside, it’s moist, succulent and a little exotic.



## Belinda Chang NEW YORK CITY

Match Solomonov’s brisket with a garnet-hued wine that catches the light with a sparkle, and you’ve got the makings of a beautiful holiday dish. Belinda Chang recommends Sustenance, a cabernet franc from Washington state that reminds her of herbs, chocolate and mocha. But, honestly, she doesn’t much care what you drink.

“If your favorite aunt always loved pinot noir from California, have a bottle!” says Chang, whose breezy manner puts you so at ease that you would feel confident unscrewing a peach wine cooler for Christmas dinner. “Holiday menus tend to be filled with such a variety of foods, there isn’t really one answer, and there’s a dish that >>



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might work with any wine you open.”

Chang has a vast knowledge about and passion for wine, including a “freakish love” for German Rieslings, which may have been instilled by the bottles of Blue Nun her parents used to serve at parties in her childhood home in New Jersey in the 1970s. She doesn’t even mind a bottle of it every now and again.

“You serve it with enough chill, and you have a little Chinese takeout,” she says, “it’s perfect. Sure, I’d love to have some venerable cru, but this will do in a pinch.”

Chang’s parents are immigrants from Taiwan, so wine was never a big part of their culture, but they did have a bottle of wine on the top shelf of the fridge for what felt to Chang like a decade: a “brown, crazy-looking” bottle of Mateus rosé.

“That’s the one bottle that sticks in my head,” she says. “And it was opened for a holiday and served in etched glasses that are kind of horrifying to me today.”

Her childhood holiday meals were more Peking Duck than roast turkey, and the sides were stir-fried noodles or fried rice. Today, she would recommend a sparkling shiraz for such a meal, but to get the most out of wines served at your own holiday meal, Chang says not to think too hard.

“You think about who you’re typically spending time with during the holidays and it’s family—you might not spend time with voluntarily—but also friends and treasured loved ones,” she says. “You’re trying to make everybody happy.”

For her dinner parties with friends, Chang asks everyone to bring a bottle and then plops them all on the table.

“Someone might say that the Spanish Tempranillo is great with the carrots and you have to try it,” she says. “It adds another layer of fun to loosen the ties a little and stop being so type A about it. Just be relaxed and enjoy.”



## Tony Maws BOSTON

“The whole point is to have fun with your friends and family,” says Tony Maws. “Who doesn’t want to sit around the table with family and friends and have a great time and a lot of laughs?”

To make cooking less of a chore, he suggests thinking like a chef in a restaurant: Do as much as possible ahead and edit the menu well.

“Don’t be overly ambitious. How many times do you have so much food left over? We don’t need 12 things on the table.”



Between 15 and 25 people gather at Craigie on Main, his bustling, warm bistro. A few of his relatives and in-laws come from as far as Persia, Africa “and all over the map, so there’s a whole bunch of things that can come to the table at any one time.”

Maws has loved being around food for as long as he can remember, and his childhood holidays became even more important in retrospect because he was spending time in his grandmother’s kitchen.

“Cooking was a way to be close to her, which was very special to me,” he says. “The smells and the thrill of being asked to help—it made the holidays more fun to look forward to because you get to do all this great stuff.”

And today, he can’t help but do great stuff. He makes one traditional roast turkey each year, but “the other one, I’m always screwing around with,” he says. “I’ve smoked it. I’ve cooked it sous vide.”

The family pulls together all the tables at the restaurant to make one long one, and the dishes are served family style.

“I don’t want to dis the kids’ table,” he says, “but there’s something that’s really

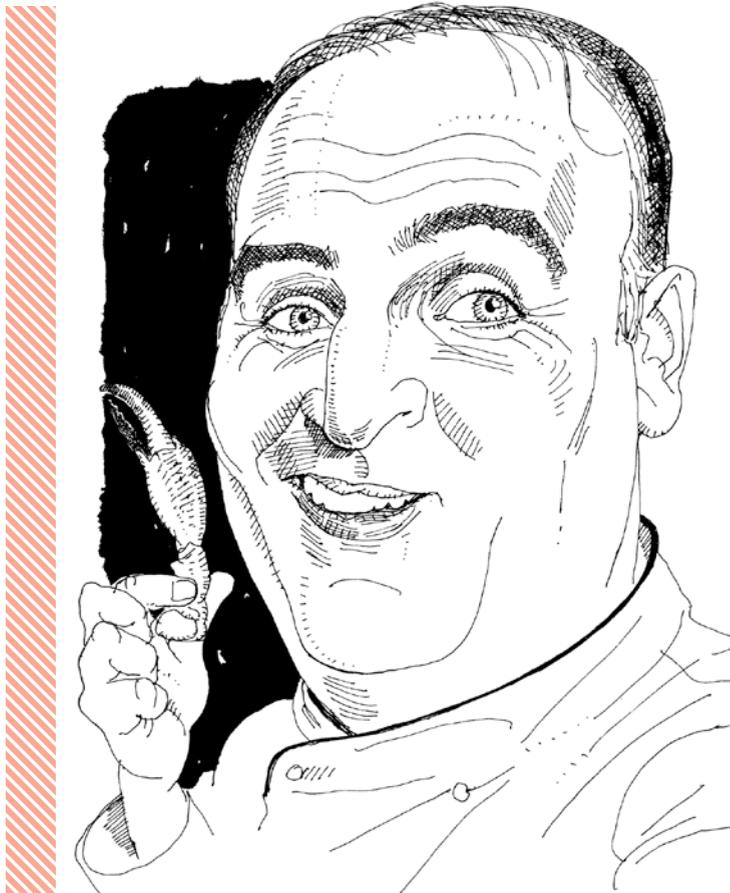
emotional. Here I am at the end of the table, I’m looking down and looking at all these phenomenal people all together, all the people that have meant so much to me over the years—it’s a great moment.”

Like most people in the hospitality business, Maws also gets a great deal of satisfaction from feeding people who really appreciate it. Last year, he walked a homemade turkey across Massachusetts Avenue to his neighborhood firehouse. He says that to make your own holiday meal even more special, there’s nothing like helping others enjoy one, too.

“It’s a treat to be able to walk into a firehouse and bring turkey to a bunch of guys with dark circles under their eyes because they were up all night.”

## José Andrés WASHINGTON, D.C.

José Andrés knows the feeling. One Thanksgiving, Andrés found himself with a lot of turkeys. He had been trying to order heritage-breed turkeys online, and when he checked



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out, instead of buying one of each, he pressed 11.

"I had 14 or 15 boxes of turkeys!" he says. But the situation was a little serious, too. "I'm a guy who doesn't like waste, and I'm always thinking about hunger." The extra turkeys went to feed the hungry.

Andrés' holiday stories are full of happy accidents. Like the time he was celebrating with a family in San Diego and they put the potatoes in the oven and went out for a walk in the warm sunshine.

When they got back, they realized the oven temperature had been set too high.

"The potatoes were the best potatoes I ever ate in my life," he says. "Outside they were unbelievably brown and crispy, and inside they were soft and yellow. We call them the walking potatoes. You walk, and when you come back, they are almost cooked to perfection."

Or the time he and his wife were up until the wee hours stuffing 24 tiny quails with a heavenly recipe of sausage, pine nuts, almonds and sausage mixed with apricots, prunes and raisins soaked in brandy.

"And then we made the pecan pie," he says. "It was 4 or 5 in the morning and we fell asleep on the floor." When they awoke, the pie was as hard as a rock and "fragile like a diamond," he says. He cracked it and tasted it. He had accidentally created the most elegant brittle he'd ever tasted.

You could take Andrés' stories as good advice: Don't fret, because even so-called holiday disasters can be fortuitous. Indeed, your



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next accident might become your family's lifelong tradition.

In Spain, where Andrés grew up, his family would gather in the picturesque home of his grandparents in Catalonia to make stew every Christmas.

“Potatoes, cabbage, carrots, three or four different meats—like cow’s feet and a little bit of shank,” he says. “And we’d make a big meatball with pork and veal and garlic and cinnamon and parsley and salt and egg and bread. And this was a big family tradition—on the

25th. And this one, I re-create in the States. But I don’t do it every year. I’m a guy who gets bored sometimes.

“My culinary traditions are very broad,” he says. “Maybe because I’m a chef, everyone knows I cannot sit still. But what has always remained true and strong is the understanding of Thanksgiving to unite people and unite cultures.”

And to unite families.

Not too long after that first Thanksgiving in New York, Andrés was in Miami to open a restaurant. He was already “madly in love” with his wife, Patricia, but work was forcing him to spend the holiday away from her. He bought three or four dozen stone crab claws for his holiday meal.

But his memories about the Thanksgiving he spent alone were too strong, and at the last second he decided, “What the heck.” Wearing his summery clothes—a short-sleeved shirt and flip-flops—he got on the plane to D.C. with the crabs in his arms.

He arrived right before dinner. 🍴

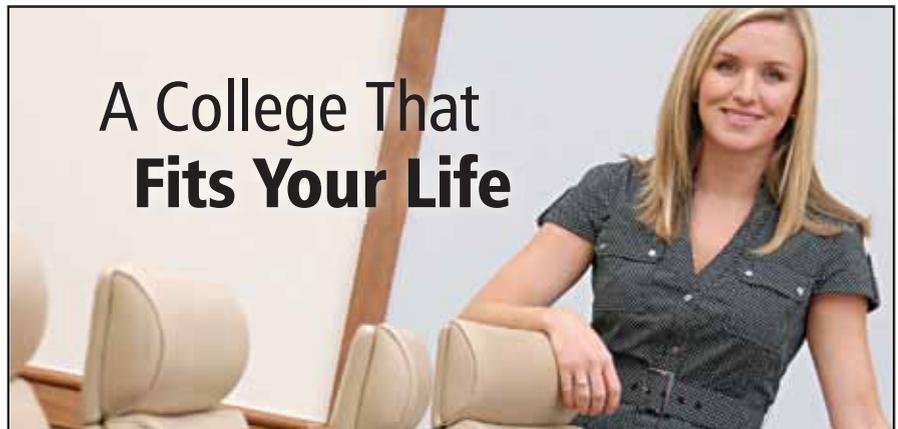
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