

# How Thanksgiving Lasagna Became an American Staple

The Italian American tradition has been adapted by other immigrant families into delicious takes on the classic.



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Justin Pichetrungsi is having lasagna this Thanksgiving, carrying on a tradition his parents started. But he'll be making his from scratch. Thanksgiving was a rare day off for his parents, who ran a Thai restaurant, and they weren't really turkey people. For the holiday, they often bought lasagna from the nearby Costco and served it with the store's bagged Caesar salad tossed with its packaged Chinese chicken salad dressing. The spread was rounded out with a Cantonese seafood feast from a beloved local restaurant.



The chef Justin Pichetrungsi makes a lasagna sauce inspired by nam prik ong, a meaty Thai dip of pork, tomatoes and chiles. Michelle Groskopf for The New York Times

“Our table always had something Anglo-leaning and something Asian-leaning,” said Mr. Pichetrungsi, who is now the chef of the family’s restaurant, Anajak Thai, in Sherman Oaks, Calif.

In place of lasagna straight from the freezer aisle of the bulk food store, Mr. Pichetrungsi now makes one inspired by the flavors of nam prik ong, a meaty Thai dip made of pork, tomatoes and chiles. He uses both Thai basil and Italian basil for freshness and flavor, and Thai pantry staples like shrimp paste and soy sauce — but also a hefty amount of cheese, which he calls the “glue” of the dish.

## Recipe: Nam Prik Ong Lasagna



Fresh basil and chili crisp top this cheesy lasagna. Ghazalle Badiozamani for The New York Times. Food Stylist: Brett Regot.

Mr. Pichetrungsi's Thanksgiving table is not the only one that will feature a tray of lasagna this year. The layered pasta, bubbling with sauce and cheese, can be found across the country in proximity to mountains of mashed potatoes, pans of stuffing and large turkeys. Though lasagna started out as — and remains — a fixture at many Italian American Thanksgiving meals, it's also found a home on the tables of many immigrants, particularly those from Asia.

Lasagna was at the center of Calvin Eng's family feast in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, when he was growing up. "We ate Chinese food every other day of the week, so Thanksgiving was the one day we actually ate American food," Mr. Eng said. An owner and the chef of Bonnie's in Brooklyn, Mr. Eng said his family would always bake a traditionally American lasagna with "whatever jarred sauce was on sale," but would cook the meat sauce in the wok.

“The tomato sauce was so acidic, the wok would be silver and glistening after,” Mr. Eng said.

According to the food historian Amy Riolo, lasagna first appeared at Thanksgiving — often as a point of pride — in the late 1800s with the large-scale arrival of Italian immigrants to the United States. Many immigrants were advised by social workers and doctors to not openly eat Italian food and to adopt a more American diet of meat and potatoes. Ms. Riolo said they would celebrate Thanksgiving to show that they were assimilating as Americans, but would serve American dishes alongside beloved Italian dishes like lasagna “to honor their Italian roots.”



Chile crisp gives an herb-flecked ricotta filling punch. Michelle Groskopf for The New York Times



Mozzarella is the glue that holds this lasagna together. Michelle Groskopf for The New York Times

“There is definitely always pasta with Thanksgiving,” said Adam Erace, a food writer who grew up in a large Italian American family in Philadelphia. More often than not, it’s lasagna, given how well it can feed a group and adapt to dietary restrictions and seasonal ingredients. At the first Thanksgiving he hosted with his wife, Charlotte, Mr. Erace spent the day preparing a white lasagna with a butternut squash and quince purée to serve alongside the turkey.

Newer Italian immigrants (“those who came on airplanes,” Ms. Riolo said) often skip the turkey all together and just have lasagna as their main dish. “Lasagna is associated with celebrations in Italy. That’s when people will splurge and make such a luxurious thing,” she said. Built from scratch, it’s a dish best made on a day off.

Mr. Eng said in many ways, perhaps because he was raised in Brooklyn, Italian food was most commonly seen as the exemplar of American food. It would explain how lasagna made it to his Cantonese American family’s Thanksgiving dinner, and baked ziti to their Christmas table.

Ken Concepcion, the owner of Now Serving, a cookbook store in Los Angeles, said Mr. Eng is not alone in his experience. He was born into a Filipino family and raised in New Jersey, where Italian dishes were the “American recipes” his family would turn to, including a Bolognese- and ricotta-heavy lasagna at Thanksgiving.

A new generation of chefs, most often those raised in America by immigrant parents, have started to experiment more with lasagna, creating Venn diagrams of intersecting flavors and textures. Mr. Pichetrungsi said there are overlaps with Thai and Italian cuisines: chiles, tomatoes, garlic, basil and “an entirely matriarchal vibe when it comes to culinary techniques.”

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## Recipe: Saag Paneer Lasagna

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Paneer gives this spinach-filled lasagna a savory cheese flavor. Ghazalle Badiozamani for The New York Times. Food Stylist: Brett Regot.

The chef Mei Lin gained national acclaim at her Los Angeles restaurant Nightshade for her mapo tofu lasagna, where she swapped a traditional Bolognese for one inspired by the beloved Sichuan dish. When the chef Christine Lau cooked at Kimika in Manhattan, she made a lasagna that swapped pasta for tteok, chewy Korean rice cakes, and used a sauce made with Italian sausage and gochujang.

Because lasagna can be a vegetarian-friendly main that still feels special, it has found its way into South Asian households, including my own, where I prepare a lasagna layered with the spiced spinach and savory cheese of saag paneer.

Mr. Pichetrungsi is considering trying a version with rice noodles in place of standard wheat-based lasagna noodles in the future. Regardless of which pasta he uses, he knows lasagna will remain a staple on his Thanksgiving table.

“Lasagna is one of the few dishes you can pass through any cultural lens and it would be pretty good.”

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