

# Time-strapped families feasting on take-out turkey

TURKEY, from 1D

Thanksgiving Day is Rita Diaz of Cortlandt Manor, who has had A Taste of Distinction in Pomona cater her last three Thanksgiving dinners.

Diaz prefers to have her holiday meal prepared for her so she can spend time with family and guests. "I want to be part of the event instead of being dead on my feet at the end of the event," Diaz said.

Today, she welcomes about a dozen guests — mostly family — into her home. Diaz is paying about \$500 to have A Taste of Distinction cater her dinner.

She'll still have to pick up the order this morning and heat it up.

Aside from pre-carved turkey, Diaz is having cranberry, orange and walnut conserve, stuffing, squash soup, mashed potatoes, and pumpkin and apple pies.

"Quite frankly, I think I'm a good cook," Diaz said, "But you know what? They're better."

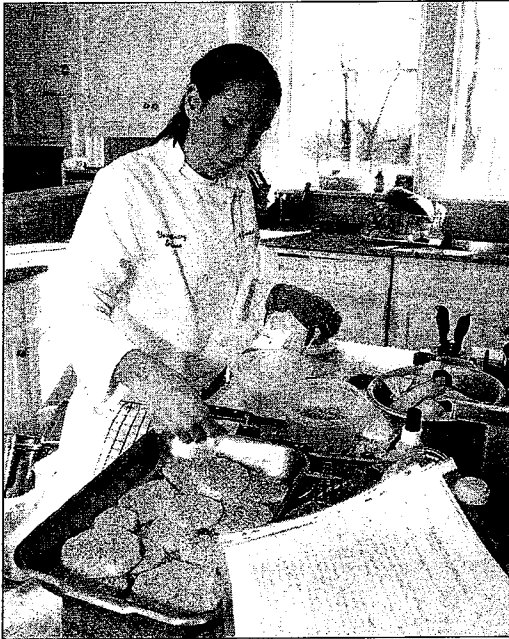
Diaz is just one of the many customers for whom A Taste of Distinction owner Angela Occhipinti and staff are busy this morning assembling meals and desserts.

Holidays are a significant part of her business, said Occhipinti, who also does formal catering in addition to running a storefront where prepared meals can be purchased. Her business caters mainly to busy people who simply don't have time to cook and can afford to have someone else do it.

While Diaz is relying on a caterer for nearly all of her meal, others, such as Estelle Rossan, are content with picking up just a dish or two.

Rossan, who lives in Bardonia, is cooking her own turkey, but she turned to Jill Shaller of Jillchef Inc. in Nanuet for side dishes.

Rossan got turned onto



Photos by Tom Nycz/The Journal News

At left, Danielle Fragala, owner of Cortlandt Manor-based Your Culinary Experience, prepares an eggplant dish in the Bedford home of client Lynn Witz. Above, Witz gives her daughter Natasha, 2, a taste of stuffed eggplant. Fragala is not cooking for the Witzes today — she has the day off — but is creating a Thanksgiving feast for her own family to enjoy. The Witzes, meanwhile, are having City Limits Diner cater their holiday dinner for 17.

Shaller's cooking when attending events that Shaller had catered.

"It's just like eating in the best restaurant in Manhattan," Rossan said of Shaller's food.

Like Diaz, Rossan wants to spend time with family.

"When I do have company, I like to spend time with my grandchild as opposed to being busy in the kitchen doing 9 million things," she said.

Also like Diaz, Rossan will pick up her dishes, which include

roasted vegetable soup, caramelized butternut squash, sweet potato galette, apple crisp and chocolate gnache tarts.

Marta Camacho, owner of Exotic Foods in Ossining, is another one of the many local caterers who is open for several hours today to accommodate customers who want to pick up their meals on Thanksgiving.

Camacho charges \$125 for a 10-person meal that includes a whole turkey with all the trimmings.

While some people rely on caterers, others, more pinched for time, instead hire personal chefs who come into their homes to prepare meals on a regular basis.

They include Ida Morris, a busy stay-at-home mother of two young children who lives in Stamford, Conn.

"I like to take care of my children, I don't like to cook," she said.

So Morris hired Carol Berger, co-owner of Tarrytown-based eat2thebeat.

Berger prepares the family's meals on a weekly basis, charging \$365 for food, preparation and delivery for two adults.

For Thanksgiving, the family has planned a six-course meal for 14 people, for which Berger has prepared most of the sides that

will accompany the turkey that Morris' husband preferred to cook himself.

Lynn Witz, a part-time lawyer and mother of three with one on the way, also relies on a personal chef. She hired Danielle Fragala, owner of Cortlandt Manor-based Your Culinary Experience.

Witz's husband gets home very late, she said. And eating take-out food consistently wasn't ideal.

"So in an effort to prolong his life, I had Danielle come in and cook," Witz said. While it's not cheap, the food Fragala prepares is fresh, delicious and better for her husband, she said.

For Thanksgiving, however, Fragala will get the day off from preparing meals for the Witzes, who are instead having their feast for 17 prepared by City Limits Diner, which they'll have to pick up and warm themselves.

Nonetheless, personal chef Fragala will be cooking.

"But at least it's for my family, and I'm with them," she said.

For those whose budgets don't permit the costs associated with personal chefs or caterers, there are still plenty of economical alternatives.

Boston Market responded to the demand for prepared traditional holiday meals this year by offering pre-cooked whole turkeys and bone-in spiral-sliced hams.

Last year, the company tried out the new offerings in test markets and found that holiday sales

increased 85 percent.

Both meats are fully cooked, chilled and given to customers with reheating instructions upon pickup. "They can basically stick it in the oven, warm it up and fill their homes with the wonderful aroma of a freshly cooked meal," said Boston Market's Hammond.

For \$44.95, Boston Market's whole-turkey dinner feeds 12 people, including an 11-pound turkey, mashed potatoes, stuffing, gravy and corn bread. Vegetable side dishes and even cranberry "relish" cost extra, but the deal works out to a relatively cheap \$3.75 a person. Orders can be picked up on or prior to the holiday, but Boston Market advises the turkeys or hams should be eaten within three days of purchase.

Boston Market isn't the only place where a bargain can be found. Many area supermarkets offer a prepared holiday feast. ShopRite, for example, offers a menu similar to Boston Market's for as little as \$34.99.

A step up, Whole Foods Market in White Plains offers free-range birds with all the trimmings, including two vegetables and dessert, at \$189.99 for 12, about \$16 a head. And, for those whose guest list is limited to one, Whole Foods offers a traditional Thanksgiving dinner for two priced at \$39.99.

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## Meal planning

While Pacifico Restaurant in Port Chester is closed today, owner Rafael Palomino for the first time is offering a Latin-inspired Thanksgiving menu. Among the items: Roasted turkey, lobster and saffron mashed potatoes, quinoa, plantain and roasted pepper stuffing and a cheese cake made with dulce de Leche, or sweet milk, for \$27.95 a person.

Nanuet-based Jillchef Inc.'s special holiday menu features braised turkey with sage stuffing or a roasted turkey basted with pomegranate juice for about \$45 a person. Also included are appetizer, soup, two vegetables, stuffing, potatoes and dessert.

A Taste of Distinction in Pomona offers a broad menu of à la carte holiday menu items that include roasted whole turkey (\$5.50 a pound) or turkey breast (\$11.95 a pound), vegetable or cheese lasagna (\$38.50 each for a tray) and sweet potatoes and apples with brown sugar and maple syrup (\$7.95 a pound).

Whole Foods Market, with stores in Westchester and Greenwich, has a "traditional" Thanksgiving dinner priced at \$129.99 for eight or \$189.99 for 12. Included is a free-range, herb-roasted turkey, New England stuffing, two vegetables, mashed potatoes and dessert. In addition, there's also a Thanksgiving for Two menu for \$39.99 that features an herb-roasted turkey breast.

Boston Market offers a holiday menu that consumers can pick up and then reheate. The whole-turkey meal cost \$44.95, serves 12 and includes mashed potatoes, stuffing, gravy and corn bread.

City Limits Diner, with two locations in White Plains plus one in Stamford, Conn., offers a "complete" dinner for 12 priced at \$285 plus tax. It includes an 18-20 pound turkey, two kinds of stuffing, mashed potatoes, candied yams, cranberry relish, salad, gravy and dessert.



Carucha Meuse/The Journal News

Kathy Mantilla, left, manager of Boston Market in Mount Kisco, serves customers during the lunchtime rush this week. Mantilla will be working today at Boston Market, which is offering pre-cooked whole turkeys and bone-in spiral-sliced hams.