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Thanksgiving, With or Without Turkey

LOS ANGELES — FOUR centuries after the pilgrims, families are still celebrating their successful arrival on North American shores with a big meal at the end of November. But the big roasted turkey doesn't always have the starring role.

In the family of Margoth Abrego, a 56-year-old Salvadoran immigrant, the whole bird never makes it to the dinner table. Instead, two turkeys (one cooked in the oven, the other on the stovetop) are picked apart in the kitchen, then stuffed in bread to make a Salvadoran dish called pan con chumpe. The pan con chumpe is served alongside arroz con gandules (rice with pigeon peas), a traditional Puerto Rican dish. For the Abrego family, Thanksgiving is a celebration of their roots in distant places — and a reminder of the long struggle to keep the family united. For 14 years, Ms. Abrego grew up in El Salvador without her mother, who had left to work in Los Angeles hotels and remarried into a Puerto Rican family.

“My mom can't talk about her childhood without crying,” said Ms. Abrego's daughter, Leisy Abrego, a professor at the University of California, Los Angeles. “She's still trying to make up for all those years she lost with her mother.”

A "traditional" Thanksgiving dinner. Credit Travis Dove for The New York Times

This Thanksgiving, five generations of the Abrego family will be seated together. In an age when America's borders are harder to cross than ever, not every immigrant family is so fortunate.

Thanksgiving, we're told in school, began as an encounter between cultures. Abraham Lincoln formalized it as a national celebration during the Civil War, seeking to bind together a divided and

wounded people. Today, with ample apologies to our Native American friends, the fourth Thursday in November is our most widely embraced and beloved gathering.

American airports do not fill to the brim on July 3 with people trying to make it home in time for Fourth of July barbecues. Christmas is a religious holiday. But Thanksgiving goes well with a prayer from any faith, and is now enjoyed with an increasingly multiethnic cuisine. It's a celebration of the force that binds our diverse country together: family.

You can easily find recipes for Bengali Thanksgiving feasts, Chinese turkey steamed buns and accounts of Armenian family Thanksgiving reunions. Ask a rabbi, and he or she will probably tell you not to worry: Thanksgiving can be kosher, too.

For most ethnic groups that have settled in America over the past century, the "traditional" Thanksgiving meal was once something foreign and exotic. My Guatemalan immigrant parents didn't truly embrace it until they divorced and remarried into Jewish and Mexican-American families. (My own verdict: The tamales are great, but I still prefer plain old turkey and stuffing.)

For those young immigrants lucky enough to be reunited this year with parents or other relatives, this Thanksgiving will serve as an introduction to the promise, and the complications, of life in the United States.

"They're just trying to reconnect with their families," said Professor Abrego, whose immigrant experiences led her to write the book "Sacrificing Families: Navigating Laws, Labor, and Love Across Borders." They will sit at tables across from parents they haven't seen for years — or who have remarried.

"For someone who grew up with that desire to be connected with the parent who was gone for so long, being able to share space in the kitchen and make a meal together is a big deal," Professor Abrego said.

For others, Thanksgiving is a time to pray for reunions long delayed by the complications of their immigration status.

"With my friends, we made tamales last year, and a turkey, too," said a 60-year-old housekeeper from El Salvador, who requested that I not publish her name because she's living in Los Angeles with an expired visa.

The housekeeper has been here 15 years, but has never celebrated a Thanksgiving with her two adult children, who have remained in El Salvador. Instead, she's spent her Thanksgivings in California with the friends, neighbors and co-workers who have become her adopted family.

The days off are a welcome break from the long, mostly silent hours of labor as a live-in domestic near the beach at Malibu. Her wages, she says, help her son make ends meet and keep her daughter in graduate school.

“I’ve been struggling to keep them going over there and to pay our debts,” she said. “I’m proud of that, even though I’m really lonely.”

The highlight of an ordinary week is when her employers allow her to use one of their computers to make a video call to El Salvador. Her 7-year-old grandson, whom she’s never met in person, recently won a second-place medal for academic achievement in the second grade, she said.

For her friends, she dishes up a curtido, or relish, with fresh vegetables and mustard. If she could have all her own family together for Thanksgiving, she’d make a sopa de gallina india, a traditional Salvadoran chicken soup.

“That would be marvelous,” she said. “If I could spend time with my family on any day.”

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