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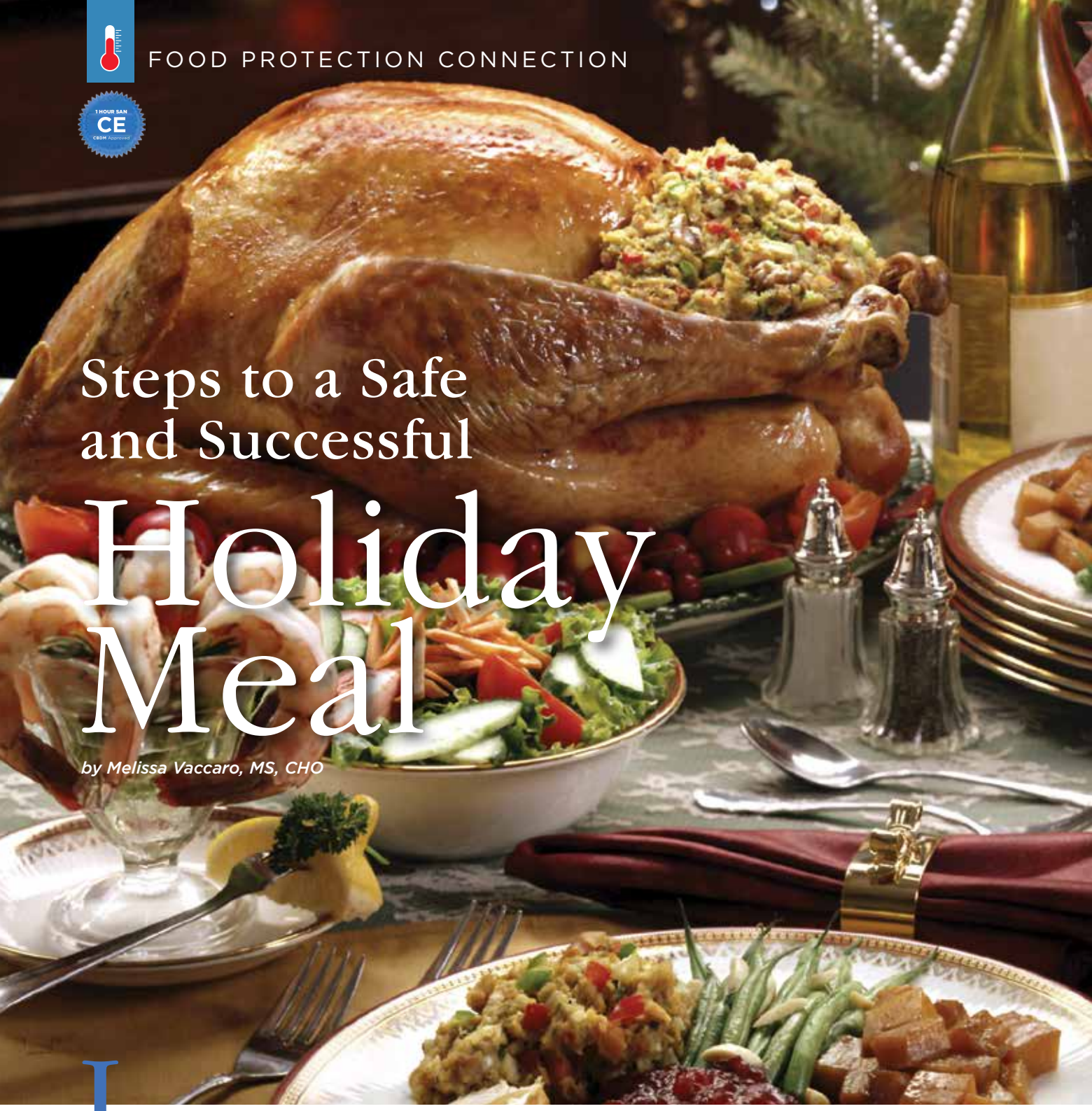

# Steps to a Safe and Successful Holiday Meal

*by Melissa Vaccaro, MS, CHO*

In the foodservice industry, preparing meals on a daily basis is routine. Schools, hospitals, nursing homes, and similar large group facilities are accustomed to preparing food for large numbers of people. There is usually a schedule of rotational menu choices that are prepared and served over the course of the month, with many meals repeated and some made from scratch. Holidays are different. Staff wants to serve a "special" meal for their clients to celebrate in a festive manner with something a bit different from the routine menu items.

You cannot lose sight of food safety when things are changed up for that special meal. Food that is mishandled can cause illness. With large group cooking, it is usually not one person that becomes ill, but instead a large number—and it tends to catch the eye of the media. It is not only bad for your ill customers, it's also bad for your reputation.

Keep in mind a few food safety tips for having a successful and festive holiday meal.


## PLANNING

Planning is a key component of a safe and successful holiday meal. Once you have prepared your menu and determined the quantity of food you need to accommodate your guests, make sure you actually have enough storage space to hold and prepare that amount of food. Here are some things to think about:

- Plan the menu and note the volume of cold foods, frozen foods, and shelf-stable foods.
- If your food is being obtained frozen, does your freezer have the capacity to hold the volume you are planning on? Will the large capacity of food over-task your freezer?
- Is your refrigerator large enough? If so, is there adequate space to hold your special meal without creating a cross-contamination event? If you need 25 raw turkeys, do you actually have space in your coolers for 25 turkeys? If you need to thaw 25 frozen turkeys, do you have the space to do so in a safe manner?
- Were you planning to cook the same day of service, or a day or two prior? Pre-preparation may require cooling. Do you have enough cooler space to safely cool these cooked foods?
- Do you have enough cooking equipment to make large volumes of food at the same time? Most foodservice facilities have large capacity ovens, but remember that turkeys, roasts, and hams are usually large in size and therefore take up more space not only in your refrigerator and freezers, but in your cooking equipment as well. If you cannot cook all food at the same time, do you have the ability to properly hot hold cooked food while the next batch is cooking?
- Is your work space large enough to meet your needs? What foods will be prepared at what times to utilize work space efficiently? Is your work space adequate to avoid any chance of cross-contamination of raw to ready-to-eat (RTE) foods?
- Do you have enough staff to meet your needs for preparation?

If you are very sure your facility can accommodate this large volume of special foods, contact your vendors and place your orders. Let the holiday festivities commence!

## STORING FOOD

Proper storage of food, especially large amounts of non-typical foods, is essential.

- Make sure you have the space for every food item.
- Store in a manner to avoid cross-contamination of raw and RTE foods.
- Keep all foods stored 6 inches off the floor.
- Maintain freezers at or below 0°F.
- Maintain refrigeration units at or below 41°F. The colder the better if these units will be used for cooling purposes as well.

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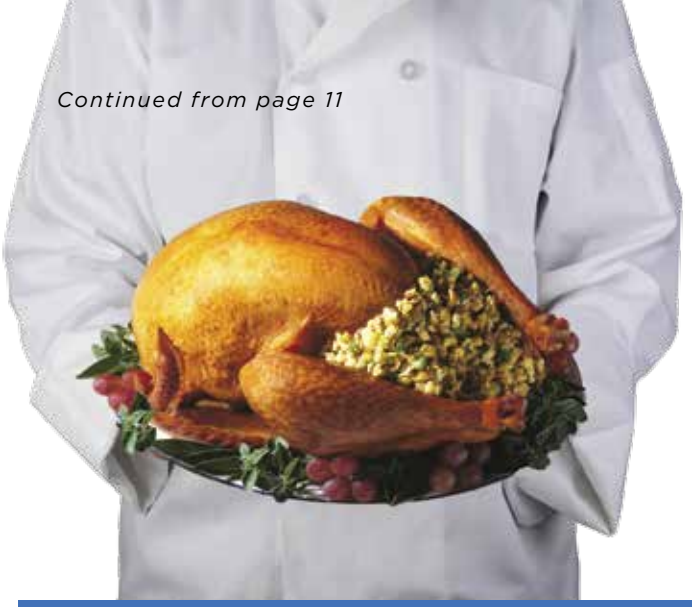

**TO STUFF** or not to stuff? It's best not to stuff a bird, however if you choose to stuff your turkey, chill all wet ingredients ahead of time.

## PREPARATION

Many steps can be involved in the preparation of a holiday meal, depending on the extravagance of the menu. Preparation not only includes preparing the food, but the staff as well. Are they ready for this large, out-of-the-ordinary meal? The last thing you need is chaos in the kitchen when you are preparing for your holiday meal. Make sure all staff members know their roles and responsibilities, and apply good food safety techniques.

- Ensure employees understand their specific tasks for the holiday meal.
- Use good personal hygiene, including hair restraint, hand washing, clean outer garments, and lack of jewelry.
- Make certain all deliveries of time-temperature controlled for safety (TCS) foods are either refrigerated or frozen promptly upon delivery.
- Assure all equipment has been cleaned and sanitized properly.
- Find separate preparation spaces in the work area for raw and cooked food.
- Avoid cross-contamination at all times.

## THAWING

If you are preparing turkey, roast, or ham from a frozen state, be sure to allow enough time to thaw the product safely. Not planning adequate time for thawing is a common mistake which leads to very unusual and unsafe thawing methods that could cause foodborne illness.

- Plan ahead. In the refrigerator, generally allow 24 hours for every 5 pounds of meat.
- Thaw under cool running water. This typically will not work for large foodservice facilities as there are only so many preparation sinks to use.
- Never thaw TCS foods on the counter.

## COOKING

Many foodborne illnesses are caused by improper cooking. When you have a large group of people waiting for their special holiday meal and the turkey is not *quite* done yet, 'it's close enough' is *not* good enough. Again, plan ahead! Obtaining an accurate final internal food temperature is a critical control point in your preparations. There is no way to tell if a food was properly cooked without using a food thermometer, especially with roasts and larger food items such as turkeys.

- The danger zone is between 135°F and 41°F. Meats have different final cook temperatures. Turkey and other poultry's final cook temperature is 165°F.
- Do not rely on pop-up temperature indicators. Use a properly calibrated stem thermometer.
- Always take the temperature in the thickest part of the meat without touching a bone. Check several locations to be sure the entire product has reached the proper final internal temperature.
- Do not partially cook food for finishing later. This will increase the risk of bacterial growth. If this is something you are interested in doing (par cooking), please discuss it with your regulatory authority before using this technique.

To stuff or not to stuff? It is always best to not stuff a bird. It is not that it cannot be done, it simply creates another layer of temperature checking and will increase your cooking time. Whether cooked inside the bird or outside the bird, stuffing must reach 165°F. When stuffing is in the bird, it is difficult to reach the center-most section of the stuffing to check the temperature. The stuffing in the far back of the cavity near the innermost part of the bird will cook the slowest.

- If you choose to stuff your turkey (or any meat), chill all wet ingredients ahead of time (butter, celery, onions, broth).
- Do not combine wet and dry ingredients until just before stuffing.

- Make sure the stuffing is moist. Heat destroys bacteria more in a moist environment than in a dry environment.
- Fill the cavities loosely.
- The final internal temperature of the stuffing should be 165°F.

Meat is not the only food item to be concerned with for your special holiday meals. There are lots of other TCS foods such as potatoes, cooked vegetables, egg-based dishes, and gravy that all must be cooked to the proper temperature. Don't overlook these foods!

## HOLDING HOT OR COLD WHILE SERVING

Proper hot and cold holding while awaiting serving is a very important step in the production of food for large groups. Do you have enough space for holding all of your foods hot or cold?

**MEAT** is not the only food to be concerned with for your special holiday meals. Potatoes, cooked vegetables, egg-based dishes, and gravy all must be cooked to the proper temperature. Don't overlook these foods.

- Cold holding should be at 41°F or below.
- Hot holding should be at 135° or above.
- All TCS food should be held properly. Don't forget about items like cut leafy greens, cooked vegetables, and starches.
- Hot TCS foods should be placed in hot holding units as quickly after removal from the cook step as possible. If preparation is needed after cooking, such as slicing, keep in mind that this is additional time added to the time the food will be in the danger zone. The time in the danger zone should not exceed 2 hours (2 hour rule).
- Good personal hygiene is critical during serving. Post-cook contamination by foodservice workers is very common and has led to many foodborne illnesses. Wash your hands. Do not contact RTE foods with your bare hands. If you wear gloves, wear them properly. Do not allow your gloves to be the source of cross contamination. Gloves are no substitute for handwashing.

## COOLING

Cool foods quickly. Probably the easiest method to remember is to get food through the danger zone in 4 hours. The FDA recommends a more detailed approach, however.

- **FDA 6 hour method:** Cool foods from 135°F to 70°F in 2 hours *and* cool foods from 135°F to 41°F in 6 hours. This means if you can cool your food from 135°F to 70°F in 1 hour, you have an additional 5 hours to cool the food all the way to 41°F.
- A cooling step may be necessary during preparation. Be sure to figure this cooling time into your total preparation time.
- Confirm you have enough cooler space to cool products safely. Do not overfill a cooler with hot foods.
- Food should be in shallow pans and uncovered while cooling. Large quantities should be divided into smaller amounts.
- Consider using cooling aids such as water baths or cooling rods. Stir often to help transfer heat out.

## TRANSPORTATION

Many foodservice facilities transport foods to satellite locations for serving. During transportation, foods must not only be transported in a safe manner to protect the items, but should be maintained out of the danger zone as well.

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Any time spent in the danger zone must be considered. Remember the 2 hour rule? If the food enters the danger zone, be sure to heat it up (165°F or above) or cool it down (41°F or below) as soon as it arrives to the serving site and before it is placed in hot holding or cold holding units to maintain the temperature.

## REHEATING

Reheating foods that were prepared ahead of time or reheating leftovers must be done safely if you intend to hot hold them.

- Re-heat TCS foods for hot holding within 2 hours to 165°F.
- Once re-heated, TCS foods can be held hot at 135°F.

## CLEAN-UP

As important as it is to make sure the kitchen is clean and sanitized before preparation begins, it is equally important to clean the kitchen and food contact surfaces properly after the big celebration. A large quantity of food equals lots of pots, pans, and dishes.

- Wash, rinse, properly sanitize, and air dry all food equipment.
- Be sure sanitizers are at the proper food-safe levels. Use test strips to verify concentrations.
- Follow the manufacturer's instructions on all chemicals, including rinse agents, detergents, and sanitizers.
- Food contact surfaces, such as preparation tables and serving lines, must be cleaned and sanitized.
- If using a dishwasher, be sure it's working properly before you run it.

If you are planning a spectacular holiday celebration in your foodservice facility, have a wonderful time—but be sure to make it a safe food event as well.

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