



Memories of Mealtimes: Holiday Traditions

CULINARY CONNECTION



A CLOSER LOOK AT THE LINK BETWEEN MEMORY AND MEALTIMES

The dinner table is at the center of almost every social engagement. Whether we are talking about a first date, an anniversary, a union, a reunion, celebrations, mourning, or the bustling holiday season, the discussion always seems to start with food. Even as you read that last sentence, you probably began remembering those special times in your life. You may recall the smell of your grandmother's apple pie, or that buttery aroma of the fresh-baked dinner rolls just as your family prepares to feast at Thanksgiving. You're not alone, and this is certainly not an uncommon connection between your senses and your memories.

What's probably even more accentuating is that the holiday season in particular is bound with other sensory

perceptions that when combined create long-lasting memories of family, comfort, and warmth. This is why so many people stress out about making the "perfect turkey" or get upset when Uncle Larry has too much eggnog. It's not because the holiday is ruined, but it detracts from our perception of the ideal holiday meal we strive for that's based on memories or aspirations.

Let's look closer at the link between memory and mealtime. In doing so, we'll be able to really make those holiday memories that we all long for stick, and hopefully overlook the imperfect ones.



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THE SCIENCE

Our limbic system comprises a set of structures within the brain that science suggests play a critical part in controlling mood, memory, and emotion. This is often considered the “primitive” part of the brain because these structures exist in nearly all mammals, but can explain why smell plays such an intriguing role. The part of the brain called the hippocampus (one in each hemisphere) is critical for memory, particularly for developing long-term memories that can be recalled. Those with full olfactory (smell) function may be able to recall certain memories based solely on smell. As we age and those functions decline, we have a more difficult time connecting the memory to smell alone. Particularly with Parkinson’s and Alzheimer’s, a diminishing sense of smell can be an early indicator of onset of both diseases (which will occur several years before motor skill problems develop). Even in individuals without these two specific diseases, an obstructed sense of smell can cause a myriad of other emotions. When was the last time you had a cold? Did you notice that when your nose is stuffed up, you can’t really taste food that well? Because of this

connection, your experience is diminished.

THE REAL TALK

Most of us probably don’t think much about our olfactory function or our limbic system. These processes don’t just stop because we aren’t consciously engaged in them. They keep happening regardless of our acute awareness. This is why we lose our appetite when we smell something disgusting like garbage or sewage. The same is true for why we get hungry when we smell fresh bread or BBQ smoke. Why is this? Simply put, we associate the smell of fresh bread or BBQ smoke with the taste of the delicious finished product and the emotion of satisfaction. John S. Allen wrote a book called *The Omnivorous Mind*, in which he examines the cultural and biological truths revealed by our relationship with food. From the diets of our ancestors, to cooking’s role in the evolution of the human brain, to the preoccupations of contemporary foodies, Allen’s take on all things edible is fascinating. He concluded that our evolved psychology may make food one of the more likely things in the environment around which memories are formed and focused.

THE APPLICATION

Let’s take all this science and see what we can use to our advantage as we enter the holiday season. Understanding that the sense of smell is so powerful, it makes perfect sense (no pun intended) that we begin to focus our efforts there. For most Americans, the holidays are very similar in terms of traditions. We grew up with the smells of crisp fall nights, roasted turkey, pumpkin pie, fresh bread, and so on. Because these smells are associated with a lifetime of memories, it’s important that we incorporate a way for those around us to experience them.

Following are some easy, inexpensive ways to remember past holidays while creating new memories this year.

Bake

Seems simple, right? Let’s take it a step further. Let’s bake a few pies throughout the day, and allow them to rest in common areas where their aroma can be fully enjoyed by our clients. Try baking some fresh dinner rolls and set them on the table with a warm cinnamon butter before each meal during the holiday season. Whatever you do, let

Continued on page 18

the warm baked goods resonate with the memory connections of those who smell the delectable fare.

Create the Appetite

This is an old trick that many restaurants have used for years. The idea is to create an appetite with particular smells before any food hits the table. For the holiday season, I like to place ingredients in a smoking hot saute pan and just walk through the dining room. The aroma of

items like rosemary, garlic, pecans, cinnamon, allspice, cloves, etc. will have you longing for the holiday season to last all year!

Deliver the Nostalgia

It's one thing to discuss "what" our memories have created a fondness for, but another entirely to deliver that memorable meal. I recommend sticking to the basics. Don't reinvent the wheel! We (and our clients too) long for the classic roast turkey that's stuffed with aromatics like apple,

cinnamon, and herbs. The side dishes like mashed potatoes and giblet gravy, green beans, cranberry sauce, etc. should never be deconstructed (or whatever other term TV has taught you to do to great, time-tested recipes). Trust me on this one, stick with the classics...that's where the memory is!

Think Beyond Thanksgiving/Christmas

It's easy to focus all of our efforts on two meals each holiday season: Thanksgiving Day and Christmas Day. I challenge you to really create a memorable season where you are. This is very simple to do. Probably the easiest way is to add some of the ingredients to your menu starting as early as October. On my menu, you'll begin to see beets, Brussels sprouts, cranberries, greens (chard and escarole), sweet potatoes, pumpkin, pomegranate, nuts, and a variety of seasonal spices beginning in the last few weeks of October. You don't even have to create an entirely new menu; just add some of the ingredients to existing menu items. For example, pomegranate makes a great vinaigrette for a salad (even add pecans or walnuts); incorporate a Soup of the Day that utilizes seasonal squash, pumpkin,



Bon Appetit

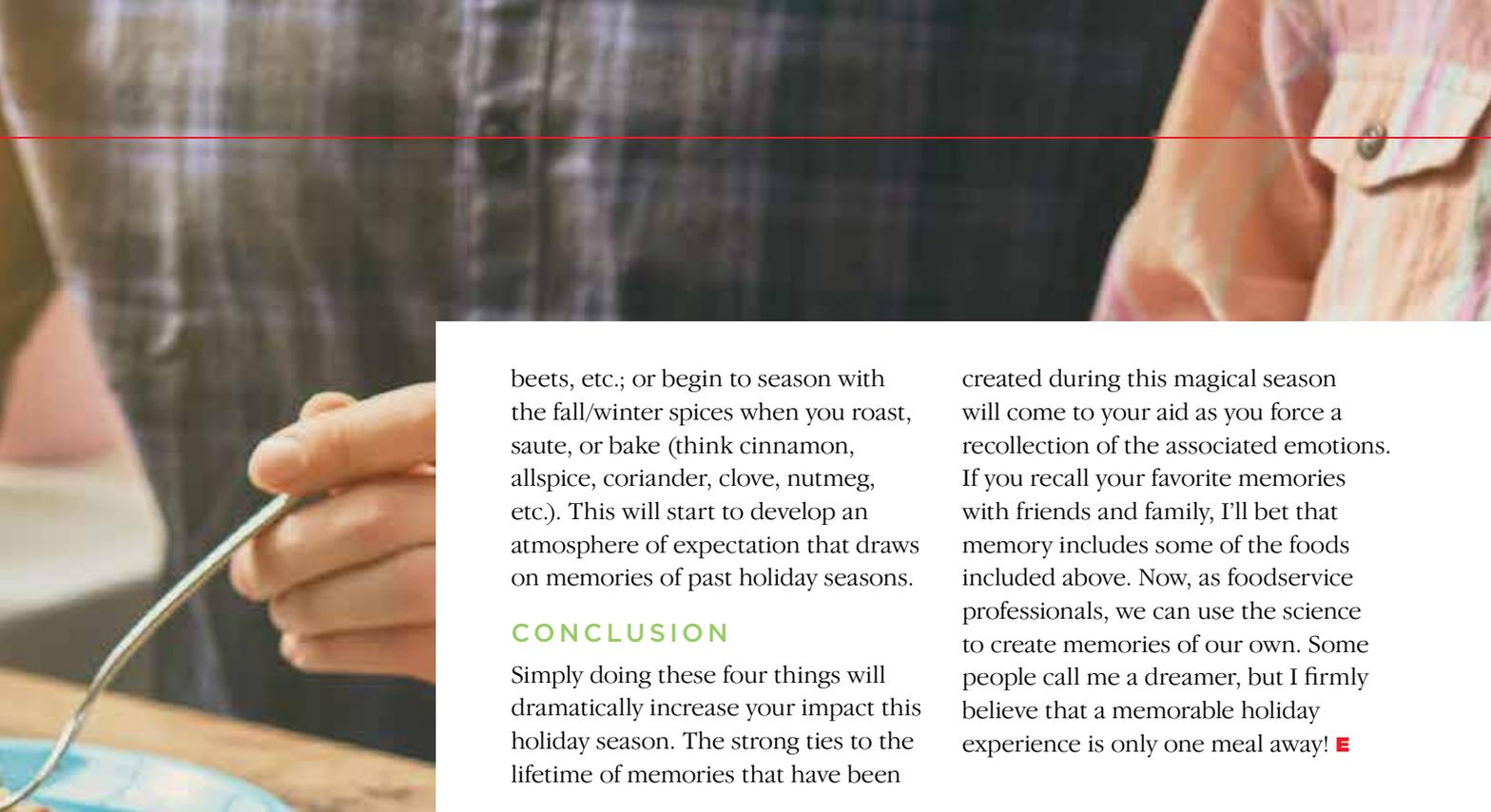
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beets, etc.; or begin to season with the fall/winter spices when you roast, saute, or bake (think cinnamon, allspice, coriander, clove, nutmeg, etc.). This will start to develop an atmosphere of expectation that draws on memories of past holiday seasons.

CONCLUSION

Simply doing these four things will dramatically increase your impact this holiday season. The strong ties to the lifetime of memories that have been

created during this magical season will come to your aid as you force a recollection of the associated emotions. If you recall your favorite memories with friends and family, I'll bet that memory includes some of the foods included above. Now, as foodservice professionals, we can use the science to create memories of our own. Some people call me a dreamer, but I firmly believe that a memorable holiday experience is only one meal away! ■

CE Questions



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Reading *Memories of Mealttime: Holiday Traditions* and successfully completing these questions online has been approved for 1 hour of continuing education for CDM, CFPPs. CE credit is available ONLINE ONLY. To earn 1 CE hour, purchase the online CE quiz in the ANFP Marketplace. Visit www.ANFPonline.org/market, select "**Publication**," then select "**CE article**" at left, then search the title "*Memories of Mealttime: Holiday Traditions*" and purchase the article.

1. What system is suggested to play a critical role in memory?
 - A. Limbic system
 - B. Skeletal system
 - C. POS system
2. Our sense of smell is scientifically called what?
 - A. Snouterly
 - B. Olfactory
 - C. Smellinious
3. What is the title of John S. Allen's book on our relationship with food?
 - A. The Omnivorous Mind
 - B. Food and Family
 - C. Cuisine: The Experience
4. What are four ways to recall or create memories during the holiday season?
 - A. Bake, roast, boil, and steam food
 - B. Entertain, sing, dance, and mime
 - C. Bake, create the appetite, deliver the nostalgia, think beyond Thanksgiving/Christmas
5. What is the strongest sense tied to memory?
 - A. Sense of security
 - B. Sense of smell
 - C. Sense of sight
6. What does the hippocampus do?
 - A. Applies motor skills
 - B. Nothing, it's dead space
 - C. Critical for memory
7. When should I begin using holiday-type ingredients?
 - A. When they are in season...usually around October
 - B. Whenever I want, ingredients are available year-round
 - C. On Thanksgiving Day and Christmas Eve