

DINNER HOUR

## Three Thanksgivings

*Birmingham's immigrant restaurateurs make the distinctly American holiday their own* By Jason Horn Photos by Cary Norton

"If you eat turkey and dressing on Thanksgiving, you baptize yourself in American life," says George Sarris.

The owner of the Fish Market on Southside and co-owner of Dodiys in Homewood and the soon-to-open Pianeta 3 in Mountain Brook Village, Sarris came to Birmingham from Greece in 1969 at age 17. He had his first Thanksgiving dinner that same year. For him, as for many immigrants, celebrating this most American of holidays symbolizes a sense of belonging in his adopted home.

"That first year," Sarris says, "my mother was adamant that we have a Thanksgiving dinner. Turkey and dressing, canned cranberry sauce—these were unfamiliar foods for us, but we ate them anyway."

Everyone knows the story of the Pilgrims and the Wampanoag tribe sitting down to dinner together at Plymouth Plantation in 1621, but basing our celebration on that event is a 19th-century invention designed, ironically enough, to help integrate immigrants into society.

The federal government has been declaring national days of giving thanks in the fall since 1777, but those declarations made no reference to Pilgrims or Plymouth—they were celebrating victory in the Revolutionary War. When Abraham Lincoln created Thanksgiving as an annual national holiday in 1863, his proclamation talked only about healing the wounds of the Civil War.

It wasn't until the late 1800s that the Pilgrim story really started to take hold. It became part of school curricula and "Americanization" classes, designed to teach the huge wave of immigrants from eastern and southern Europe about their new home's history.

For Aman Singh, who runs Taj India along with his brother and several cousins, Thanksgiving is all about family. The restaurant is open every day except Thanksgiving, Christmas and the Fourth of July, so opportunities to bring the whole clan together are scarce. "When we have other gatherings, at least one or two of us is at the restaurant. This is the only day the whole family gets together," he says.

And Singh's personal Thanksgiving celebration is huge, totaling more than 30 people. "We do like typical Americans do," he says.



"Turkey, ham, dressing, sweet potatoes." That big crowd requires a lot of food—they order two of the biggest turkeys they can get well ahead of time from Costco.

Both Sarris and Singh say there is at least a nod to their homelands at Thanksgiving despite the abundance of all-American dishes. Sarris's table usually includes a spinach pie or other Greek side, and Singh's features tandoori chicken alongside the turkey and ham. "It's a similar recipe to what we make at Taj India, but we like it a little spicier," he says.

But that's nothing compared to the Thanksgiving spread at the home of Wu Lung Chen. After cooking professionally in Taiwan since he was 16, Chen came to the United States about 20 years ago. He previously owned and ran the kitchen at the Red Pearl in Homewood before opening Mr. Chen's in Hoover almost two years ago.



The Chen Thanksgiving table doesn't have any American dishes at all—there's roasted duck, spareribs, sticky rice in lotus leaves and a wide range of vegetables including sweet-pea leaves and cabbage.

Chen compares Thanksgiving to the Zhongqiu Festival, a Chinese harvest celebration that falls in September or October and features a similar focus on food: Many people know the holiday as the Mooncake Festival, after the round, sweet cakes with dense fruit or nut filling that are a hallmark of the festivities.

No matter if it's celebrated with turkey and sweet potatoes or duck and sticky rice, Thanksgiving dinner is deeply ingrained in the fabric of American families new and old.

And the food's pretty tasty too: Sarris' sister, who lived in the United States for a while before moving back to Greece, always asks him to bring bags of dried dressing mix when he visits. ●



**Birmingham immigrant restaurateurs George Sarris, Aman Singh and Wu Lung Chen enjoy unique Thanksgiving celebrations.**