

An American Holiday Goes Global

By Jessica Leigh Rosier | Photography By Jess Wittrock Jussila

Many households have a predictable Thanksgiving Day "routine." Hours are spent preparing turkey, stuffing, mashed potatoes, gravy, and pumpkin pie. Everyone sits down at a beautifully prepared table, expresses thanks and gratitude for surviving another year, and all enjoy the feast. Then the leftovers are put away and it's time to watch the football game. Some are prompted to take a snooze. Plans are made to scour department stores for Black Friday bargains and thoughts turn to the next holiday, Christmas. This day is rooted in tradition and rarely changes. That is, unless, you're a part of Lois and Dick Hokanson's family.

Lois and her husband have welcomed students from all over the world into their Little Falls home each Thanksgiving Day for the past twenty years. "We became empty-nesters in 1990," remembers Hokanson. It was about that time when she learned about St. Cloud State University's Thanksgiving Program, which is run by the Center for International Studies. Through the program, international students are matched with area families so they can experience this truly American holiday. The Hokansons host two students each Thanksgiving. "People know that if they're coming to Lois and Dick's, they're going to see a new face at the table," laughed Hokanson.

St. Cloud State University welcomed 1100 international students from 85 countries this year. Nearly all of them have never experienced Thanksgiving. "Our students are very curious about Thanksgiving," said International Student Advisor Molly Hoffman. "It's a uniquely American holiday and most of what they know about it comes from television shows or movies. This program is a good way for students to see an American family in action." Hoffman pointed out that many families have their own unique Thanksgiving Day traditions and that it is important for students to learn about American customs from real people, not through a television family.

Over Thanksgiving weekend, the St. Cloud State University campus becomes a ghost town of sorts, since many local students have gone home to their families. Buildings are closed and dining options are drastically cut back. International students will stay in their dorm rooms or apartments during this time and may start to miss home. "In my experience, international students come from large families. They crave being around older people and children," said Hokanson. "One of our immediate goals is to view the student not as a guest, but as a part of our extended family." International student Mikiyas Belay, from Ethiopia, spent last Thanksgiving with a family in New Haven. "The best part of Thanksgiving was to see that Americans have a culture which is deep into family heritage. The family I went to reminded me of my parents back home. I saw unity, love and hospitality in this family," said Belay.

Because each student is treated as a family member by the Hokansons, they are given the opportunity to assist in food preparation, setting and clearing the table, and cleaning dishes as well. "My husband always teaches them how to make gravy," said Hokanson. "They also learn to carve the turkey and mash the potatoes." Hokanson recalls a student who tried stuffing for the first time. She enjoyed it so much she requested that Hokanson teach her how to make the recipe.

Opposite page: A wall sized map is signed by international visitors to the Hokanson's home. *Inset:* Lois and Dick Hokanson keep track of their Thanksgiving guest with their signed tablecloth which is used every year.



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Guests are treated as "one of the family" sharing in cooking duties for the meal.
Photo courtesy of Lois Hokanson.

Hokanson remembers one Thanksgiving where things did not go according to plans. A storm dropped twelve inches of snow on Central Minnesota and her relatives were not able to make the drive to Little Falls. "We were actually welcoming an entire international family that year," said Hokanson. "We had become close with a student whose family decided to visit their child over Thanksgiving." They had never experienced snow before, but they were able to shovel their rental car out of it, inch by inch, and drive to Little Falls. The meal was to be a potluck, with the Hokansons providing the turkey and their own family members contributing the rest of the menu. Since no additional family members joined them, they were left with only their turkey prepared. "Our international guests entered in fully with the preparation that year since we unexpectedly had to make a meal. They prepared veggies in a way they would have prepared them at home," said Hokanson. After cooking and eating their meal, everyone around the table partook in a Hokanson Thanksgiving tradition. They were all given three kernels of corn and asked to share three things for which they were thankful.

Generally, Hokanson said the students are very thankful for the experience and excited to try new food. "Almost every student we have hosted loved the turkey and all the vegetables," she said. "Things like Jell-o, gravy and cranberry sauce are strange to most students, though." Belay enjoyed trying turkey for the first time and said they don't have large birds like that in Ethiopia. In order to increase the student's comfort level, Hokanson suggests having them be second or third in the buffet line. This will allow them to see how the food is served; some students may not realize that gravy goes on top of mashed potatoes, for example.

Occasionally, a student will prepare a dish from their home country with ingredients the Hokansons provide. She enjoys watching the students sort through her spice rack, tasting, smelling, and sampling until they find the right ingredient. "One year, a Nepalese student made a delicious rice pudding dish," remembered Hokanson. "In our family, rice pudding is a traditional Swedish dish that can be difficult to make. Everyone was so impressed that a young person made a perfect rice pudding for us." Hokanson said her own diet has expanded because of her interaction with international students. She has learned proper techniques for preparing beans and stir-fry and those things work their way into her menus year-round. "We are enjoying more spices than our Swedish palettes have before," said Hokanson.

Aside from trying new food, students are given a chance to learn about holiday traditions. Mustafa Khambatta, from India, spent Thanksgiving with a family from St. Michael last year. Khambatta was pleased to learn that this

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family reached out to the needy by donating to the food shelf and serving the homeless in their area. He also learned about a traditional event in many households across America. "I didn't know about families watching Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade on TV; it was quite interesting and very artistic," said Khambatta.

Hokanson believes that Thanksgiving is a good time for families to become involved with the program. "This is a one-day commitment so it's the perfect time to jump in," said Hokanson. "Thanksgiving is a great holiday to celebrate with International students because it is non-religious," said Hoffman. She also mentioned that dietary concerns are at a minimum for this holiday, since most students eat turkey. And, if not, there are typically plenty of vegetarian options on the table during a Thanksgiving meal.

Over time, the Hokansons began expanding their involvement with the Center for International Studies. They host students at other times of the year, taking them to area events and they will attend cultural programs at St. Cloud State University. "We took a group of students to the county fair last summer," remembered Hokanson. "We weren't there ten minutes when a tornado warning was issued. We all had to huddle into the fair's restroom for over an hour; it was a truly American experience for the students." This



Guests to the Hokansons' Thanksgiving often share recipes from their home country's culture at the feast. Photo courtesy of Lois Hokanson.

past summer, the Hokansons invited a group of students to their home, where they slept in tents, made s'mores and played a classic American game, Capture the Flag.

As Thanksgiving approaches, the Hokansons are preparing to host a new set of international students through the program. They will be welcomed into an American home and meet new friends, old and young. The students will be treated as a member of the Hokanson family. Sitting around the dinner table with their three corn kernels, they will know they are not the first

international guests to be welcomed there. The Hokanson's table will be draped in a tablecloth bearing signatures of all the previous students who dined with them. Students are asked to sign the cloth, which is later painted in a different color for each year. Hokanson refers to the tablecloth as a "glorified guest book" and it compliments the nearby wall-sized world map. The first Thanksgiving was a cross-cultural experience between Native Americans and colonists. The Hokansons are honoring this holiday by initiating their own cross-cultural experience in their Little Falls home.

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Visit www.stcloudstate.edu/internationalstudents/ and click on "Culture Sharing Programs" and then "Thanksgiving Program." Download the Community Member Application and return it to the Center for International Students by November 8, 2010.

For more information contact:
Molly Hoffman at 320-308-4287

Lois shares her famous dressing recipe along with some new favorites introduced by international guests.

Phirni

An Indian dessert
Courtesy of Mustafa Khambatta
2 liters milk
100 grams soaked rice
1/2 cup sugar
1/2 tsp cardamom powder
1/2 cup pistachio nuts
Soaked saffron strands

Grind soaked rice to make a paste. Boil the milk. Add sugar and rice paste. Cook it till it turns thick. Mix cardamom powder and saffron. Stir it for a while. Place it on a plate and keep it in the refrigerator. Serve it chilled with pistachio nuts.

Ethiopian Tibs

A beef dish (traditionally served to welcome guests or show respect)
Courtesy of Mikiyas Belay

Beef
Oil to coat skillet
Garlic clove, chopped
Medium onion, chopped
1 green and 1 red pepper
2 tbsp berbere (this is an Ethiopian spice, but can be substituted with red curry)
1 tbsp butter

Prep beef by washing and cutting up into bite size cubes. Set aside. Heat oil in a large skillet. Add garlic and onion and cook on medium heat until onion appears clear. Add green and red peppers. Stir in first tbsp berbere spice. Cook until vegetables are all soft. Add meat and tbsp of butter. Stir in second tbsp of spice. Continue to cook on medium heat, stirring often. Salt and pepper to taste. Serve over prepared couscous or with pita bread.

Thanksgiving Dressing

Courtesy of Lois Hokanson

This recipe is for a 10-15 lb. turkey
3/4 cup butter
1 cup chopped celery
1 1/2 cup chopped onion
3 tbsp chopped parsley
12 cups dry bread chunks or cubes (approx. 24 bread slices)
1 tbsp poultry seasoning
1/2 tsp pepper
1 tsp salt
1/2 cup hot milk

Melt butter in a heavy pan. Add celery, onion, and parsley. Cook for a few minutes. Add dry bread chunks or cubes, poultry seasoning, pepper, salt, and hot milk. Mix together well. Stuff turkey or bake separately in a buttered pan, covered for 20-30 minutes at 375°

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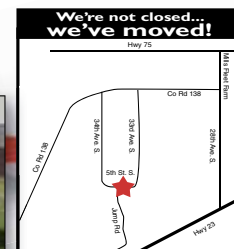
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