

Let's Call the Whole Thing Off

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Most of us are cheerful prisoners of ritual and tradition and even more so during the holidays. In days gone by for me it was the Thanksgiving Day hunt. That morphed into the less strenuous Thanksgiving Day trail ride. Now it's just a group which convenes yearly for turkey, a chance to watch the hapless Cowboys get crushed, and a leisurely postprandial stroll *en masse* around the back pasture.

Our holiday dinner is a sort of potluck with premeditation. I am always assigned the mashed potatoes. Their manufacture is within the parameters of my skill envelope, and I can take out my repressed dressage hostilities on inanimate objects—specifically red-skinned ones which obviate the need to peel.

I have also latched onto a tradition within a tradition. You may be aware that venerable NPR anchorwoman Susan Stamberg on each Thanksgiving eve faithfully reads on air Mama Stamberg's peculiar recipe for cranberry relish. My annual batch pays homage to them both.

The Stamberg recipe requires advanced preparation. It's supposed to be presented in a half-slushy, semi-crystalline state, having been brought to the table an hour out of the freezer. So it was late Wednesday evening on the night before Thanksgiving when I took over the kitchen and set to my tasks. Potatoes scrubbed and hacked into mashable pieces boiling away on the back burner, I addressed the cranberries. Easy enough: a couple of cups of fresh whole berries and half a sweet onion into the Cuisinart. Chop but don't puree. Add sugar, sour cream, and—get this—prepared horse radish. When made properly, it's both chunky and runny and takes on a remarkably lurid Pepto Bismol-ish hue.

As per instruction, I sloshed the mixture into a one quart former yogurt container, capped it, and shoved it into the freezer compartment. All by 11:30. Then disaster struck. Instability turned to avalanche before I could get the door slammed, and Mama Stamberg's finest plunged to the tile floor, its container splitting in two.

Cursing.

A voice from the other end of the house, "What's wrong?"

Petulantly, "Nothing. Everything's fine . . . but don't come in here!

Tired and now grumpy, me surveying the damage: "Well, no *real* harm done. Leakage less than 20 percent. The rest still uncontaminated in its plastic shell."

Spirits rising, I shoveled the salvage into a new container and tucked it away in the freezer as was my original intent. Yes, it took a while and a lot of paper towels to mop up what I'd lost, but it wasn't even midnight when I donned my Mash-Meister cap.

Drain. Some splashes of milk. Dollops of butter. Touch of salt. And mash, mash, mash. No sissy food processor either. An analog, hand-operated masher and some controlled violence is the only way to get just the right quotient of lumpiness.

To backtrack a bit, several weeks prior to this, I had intervened in a scrap between two of our French bulldogs and one had accidentally put a corner incisor through the cuticle of my thumb. He was remorseful and, because dressage breeds toughness, life went on.

Unfortunately, as I was adjusting the cling wrap over the serving bowl now heaped with my excellent potatoes, I noticed—hmmm . . . my week-old band-aid seemed to be missing.

When Susan passed through the kitchen half an hour later on her way to bed, my potatoes were spread in thin layers over three cookie sheets, and I was meticulously and repeatedly combing through them, searching without success for my band-aid.

One problem with mashing red-skins—everything looks like a band-aid.

As the clock struck one, I was ready to give up. I spooned them all back into the bowl and placed them in the fridge, planning to try again in the morning. Later, lying in bed with the light off, I thought, "What if I never find it?" The stores will be closed. I'm out of fresh spuds, and anyway, wouldn't it be wasteful to throw all the mashed ones out?

"Meanwhile, what are my ethical responsibilities? Should I take the chance that during the meal Susan or I will be lucky enough to find the band-aid in the servings on our own plates? Should I be silent and risk one of the old folks pulling it out of his dinner, examining it between his forefingers, and then fainting dead away into the corn pudding and green bean casserole? Or do I 'fess up right after grace is said and perhaps be banished from all future holiday gatherings?" No satisfactory answer presented itself before I drifted off.

At seven am I was back at my countertop, panic building as I resumed harrowing when my mind flashed on the kitchen trash basket. In it—the sobby pile of pinkish paper towels from my Mama Stamberg *faux pas* of the night before.

And that's where I found my band-aid. It had never gotten as far as my fine potatoes in the first place. That abruptly, Thanksgiving was saved, and not even I had to learn how the wrestling match with my conscience would've turned out.

As time passed, my secret periodically emerged—usually late at night somewhere as friends and I were killing a second or third bottle of red wine. The morning after one such merlot-inspired confession, I sat down to breakfast before the third day of an Idaho clinic. The nefarious husband of my student placed a fabulous meal before me: coffee, orange juice, bacon, toast, hash browns, and a cheese omelet . . . over which he had thoughtfully and strategically draped, yes, a band-aid!