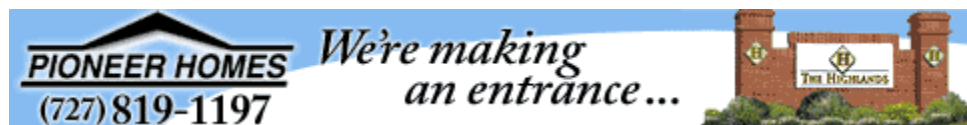


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## Traditional U.S. holiday meal? It's a challenge

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PARIS - Turkeys don't come plastic-wrapped in Paris. I can barely look at my local boucherie where skinned turkeys hang upside down, their necks, heads and glassy eyes intact.

Not for the squeamish. Shoppers wanting lapin (rabbit) for holiday menus find the whole wild hare, fresh from the kill, on ice in display cases. Breaded pig's feet are just that, whole feet complete with hooves. It's a challenge shopping for traditional American holiday foods in the City of Light. For instance, candied sweet potatoes aren't even on the radar screen.

Parisians "don't get sweet potatoes," cracked a student from Sweet Briar College in Virginia, spending her junior year abroad.

A street-market search for sweet potatoes - la patate douce - yielded 15 for 21 euros, about \$24. Don't complain if cranberries cost more this year in Tampa Bay area markets or some stores run low on stuffing mix. Sticker shock sets in every time I walk and ride the Paris Metro in search of U.S. products.

These products lay claim at premiere, yet petite, American grocery stores. At both markets, Betty Crocker and Pillsbury cake mixes sell for about 5 euros. Jiffy Cornbread mix retails for 1.80 euros (about \$2), and cans of Ocean Spray whole berry cranberry sauce sell for a whopping 4 euros (nearly \$5) each.

Canned chicken broth remains nowhere to be found, so I buy whole chickens and make my own. Help springs eternal for the chronically frustrated. The Women of the American Church in Paris annually publish Bloom Where You Are Planted: How to Live in France, now in its 36th printing. I often carry my Bloom when struggling, I mean, shopping. That's how I found out that la cannelle is French for cinnamon and l'ail is garlic.

Even among expatriates, French dining habits die hard. My husband, Jim, and I helped prepare Thanksgiving dinner for 150 people at the American Church. Instead of the ever-present baguettes, brioche was served, the closest thing to parker house rolls in these parts. Butter, a rarity on French bistro and cafe tables except at breakfast, served as an accompaniment. Still some diners looked askance at the brioche loaves, thrown off by the absence of the long, sometimes dry and hard, baguettes.

Don't get me wrong. Paris markets offer grandiose fresh produce: tomatoes that rival the best produced in Ruskin, succulent winter squash, all kinds of lettuce. Boulangeries and patisseries actively outdo each other in creating buttery croissants and to-die-for elegant and expensive desserts. However, this American in Paris finds some foods lacking. I may prepare a standing rib roast for Christmas in my tiny

little oven if I want to pay a king's ransom of 24 euros a kilo. (That's about \$12 a pound.)

Still, I love living and dining here. Fries, the French frite staple, defy description except to say many French restaurants fry them twice, supposedly in duck fat. Tea rooms serve decadent hot chocolate melted from the finest quality candy bars, so rich and thick it must be eaten slowly with a spoon. A green salad with roasted figs and tart vinaigrette dressing has become a favorite. Mashed potatoes blended with Gruyere cheese speak for themselves.

Meanwhile, I'm already making a postholiday wish list. I will visit friends and family in St. Petersburg and Tampa in late January, and dining is high on my agenda.

I yearn for a grilled grouper sandwich at Dockside Dave's, Spanish Bean Soup at Valencia Gardens, regional Mexican cuisine at Red Mesa and a real American breakfast complete with hash brown casserole, buttermilk biscuits and a bottomless cup of coffee at the local Cracker Barrel.

Hold the baguettes and pig's feet, please.

- Pamela Griner Leavy, a freelance writer, moved to Paris from St. Petersburg in April.

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