

# My Perfectly Imperfect Thanksgiving

**Pull up a chair. This laid-back lifestyle expert says the best holidays are the ones that aren't so perfect**

By KATIE BROWN, BROOKLYN, NEW YORK

**R**EMEMBER the first Thanksgiving of your married life? Remember wanting to make it perfect, so you'd make a good impression, especially on your mother-in-law? I'll never forget mine. It should have been a disaster. It almost was.

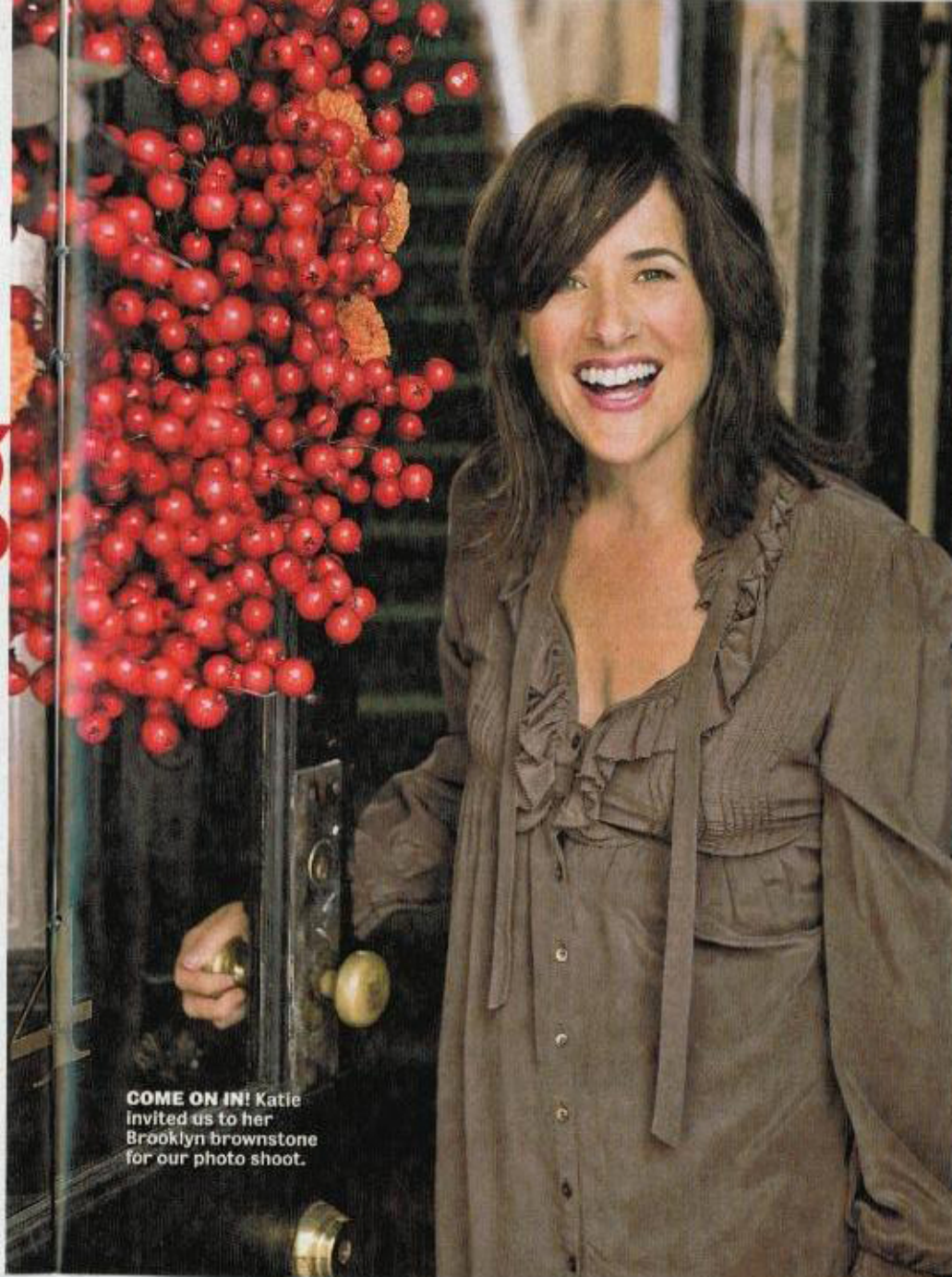
Let me start where every Thanksgiving dinner starts, with the turkey. I'm not a novice when it comes to turkey. On my TV show *Katie Brown Workshop* I talk about cooking and entertaining, and I've given tons of turkey tips—how to keep it moist and

flavorful (I've concocted an herb and salt rub that works wonders), how to make sure the dark and white meat come out perfectly.

I'd bought a huge turkey for this Thanksgiving, the first one William and I were hosting as husband and wife. And as parents. Even though our baby girl, Prentiss, was too young to remember this day, I wanted to start building traditions for our new family, traditions as warm, loving and indelible as the ones I grew up with.

We'd invited lots of guests and I was thrilled that my mother-in-law,

PHOTOS FOR GUIDEPOSTS BY MICHAEL WESCHLER



**COME ON IN!** Katie invited us to her Brooklyn brownstone for our photo shoot.





**GRATITUDE IN THEIR ATTITUDE** "Thanksgiving isn't just about the turkey. It's feeling blessed and extraordinarily grateful," says Katie, here with Prentiss.

Patte, was coming. Work on our brownstone was finally finished. I'd be cooking our first Thanksgiving dinner in a fully restored kitchen. No need to worry here about something breaking down.

Prentiss got me up early. I fed her and, juggling her on my hip, preheated the oven. Then I handed her over to William. "You guys go watch football," I said. "I need to concentrate on cooking."

Much as I love to cook and entertain, I have to admit I have a reputation for being a bit, well, scattered as a hostess. Casual, for sure. I've been known to answer the door in my bathrobe and ask guests to put out the hors d'oeuvres while I shower. "And if you don't mind," I'll say, "can you set the table?" I'll come back to

find everybody bonding over where to put the dessert forks. I don't think it's half bad. At least it breaks the ice.

But not this year. This Thanksgiving I vowed to be super-organized. I'd already decorated the table with gourds and small pumpkins and enlisted William and Patte to set it later. I took out my list. I had it all scheduled: when to boil the potatoes, braise the carrots, sauté the spinach, cook the yams, put in the Brussels sprouts, do the asparagus.

First, the turkey. I covered it with my herb and salt rub and popped it in the oven. The biggest challenge for a perfect Thanksgiving dinner is making sure everything is ready to eat at the same time. You want the mashed potatoes to

be steaming, the asparagus to be crisp-tender and the turkey warm with the juices running clear.

**THOUGHT BACK** to my childhood Thanksgivings in upper Michigan. We always went to Aunt Nan and Uncle Hugh's place on Mackinac Island. Mom baked some pies and Dad made his hand-cranked caramel ice cream from his family's secret recipe (even I don't know what's in it). On Mackinac Island no cars were allowed, so we'd be picked up by horse-drawn sleigh. We'd ride off to my aunt and uncle's, the sleigh bells jangling and my sisters and me singing, "Over the river and through the woods..." Talk about traditions!

Well, we'd start our own traditions here in Brooklyn. I could picture us, when Prentiss was a little older, making Pilgrim hats out of construction paper like my sisters and I did. And maybe she'd want to put on plays of the First Thanksgiving like we did (my older sister always had to be the star).

I'd been waiting to host my own family Thanksgiving for a long time. Sure, I'd had friends over for Thanksgiving when I was single, at least till they got married and had kids. I yearned to get married and start a family of my own. Despite my prayers, it hadn't happened, and I was getting close to 40. Just when I thought I'd never marry or have children, when I decided to let go and let God work things out for me, I met William and fell in love. We got married right before last Thanksgiving. And then came Prentiss. What a year of an-

swered prayers and incredible blessings!

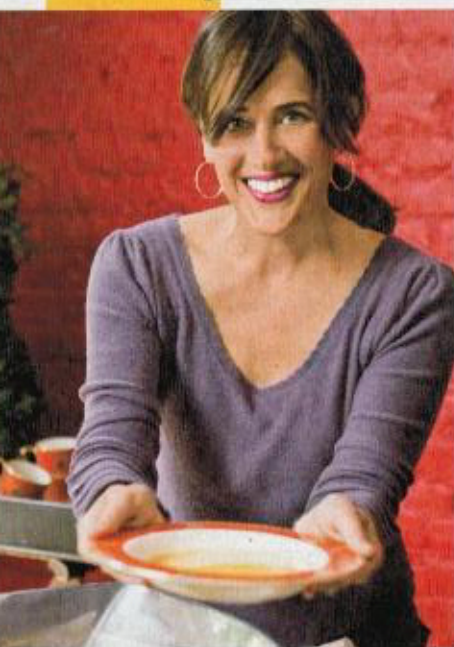
William brought Prentiss in to be fed again. I took her in my arms. Time for a break. Everything was moving along right on schedule. I'd basted the turkey and it was getting that nice golden color. The potatoes were boiled, I'd washed the spinach and was ready to put in the yams. I remembered how Mom made my sisters and me feel special, giving each of us tasks. She'd put my older sister in charge of the salad, get my younger sister peeling potatoes and she'd tell me, "You're my best onion chopper!" I couldn't wait for the day Prentiss would help me make Thanksgiving dinner. "I'm going to say my prayer of gratitude for you," I whispered to her. That was how we did it back home. For our Thanksgiving grace, we went around the table and each person told what they were grateful for. Just one thing. William and I had decided to keep this tradition. But I sure was going to have problems limiting myself to one thing. I was overflowing with gratitude.

William took Prentiss again, and I went back to my to-do list. Pretty soon our guests would be here, the turkey would be done, and I'd need to put the sides in serving dishes. No way was I going to answer the door in my bathrobe.

I worked feverishly, crossing off each item. I showered, put on makeup and answered the door in a nice apron, carrying Prentiss. Our guests tromped through our new kitchen, admiring the cabinets, the stove and the side dishes. I sent everybody to the living room for hors d'oeuvres. The moment I'd been waiting for had finally arrived, the moment every

Katie shares her recipes at [guideposts.com/katiebrown](http://guideposts.com/katiebrown)





**SOUPS ON** Katie dishes out some of her spicy butternut squash soup.

Thanksgiving chef looks forward to. The turkey was ready to come out. It looked incredible, a gorgeous golden brown. I let it cool while I finished the potatoes and asparagus. A perfect feast, just like I planned. Now to test the turkey.

I cut into the thigh joint. Uh-oh. It was still red...not pink, red. *I can serve the white meat*, I told myself, *and put the rest in the oven*. Then I cut into the breast. It was pink too, the juices red. It didn't need a few minutes, it needed *hours*.

What went wrong? I'd given the turkey plenty of time. It just wasn't done. I turned to my beautiful new oven and glared at it. This was one of the first times I'd used it—obviously the temper-

ature controls weren't calibrated right. What a disaster. I stepped into the living room, everybody having a wonderful time, taking turns holding Prentiss. "Honey," I called to William, "could you come in here for a minute?"

What would his mom think? We had to sit at the table because all the sides were ready. But there wasn't going to be turkey. What kind of Thanksgiving feast could there be without turkey? What kind of daughter-in-law was I? I showed William the turkey. "I can't believe this," I moaned. "Everything's ruined."

William took my hand and said, "Sweetheart..." I looked into his eyes. It hit me. Thanksgiving wasn't ruined. It wasn't about the turkey or the sides or singing "Over the river..." in a sleigh. It was about the feeling I'd had all day. Nothing could take away that sense of being extraordinarily blessed and extraordinarily grateful.

Minutes later we sat down to a feast of sides. Before we dug in, I clinked my spoon on my glass and said, "There's a family tradition I'd like to continue here..." We went around the table and everyone told what they were grateful for—good health, new job, anniversary trip, beautiful grandbaby (my mother-in-law). As for the turkey, I put it in the oven and cranked up the heat. Later that evening I sent our guests home with leftovers to feed them for the next week. I know for years to come I'll be telling Prentiss the story of her first Thanksgiving, one I'll always remember. The main course might've been missing but not the main ingredient—gratitude. **Q**

FOR MORE ON THIS STORY, SEE FAMILY ROOM.