Joan Didion's Thanksgiving: Dinner for 75, Reams of Notes

The author's newly unveiled papers reveal the meticulous planning and devotion to cooking that went into her big holiday meals.

Joan Didion, center, hosting Thanksgiving in 1992. From left, the New York Review of Books editor Robert Silvers, the publisher Sonny Mehta, the novelist Susanna Moore and the record producer Earl McGrath.

By Patrick Farrell

Published Nov. 18, 2025 Updated Nov. 21, 2025, 10:56 a.m. ET

Across six decades as a writer and cultural barometer, Joan Didion persuaded her public to face all kinds of things they might rather not: the crumbling of social norms, the failures of democracy. Boredom. Aging. Mortality.

Even Thanksgiving.

“It has always seemed like such an awful holiday,” a friend wrote her after one dinner, “but you made it something quite wonderful.”

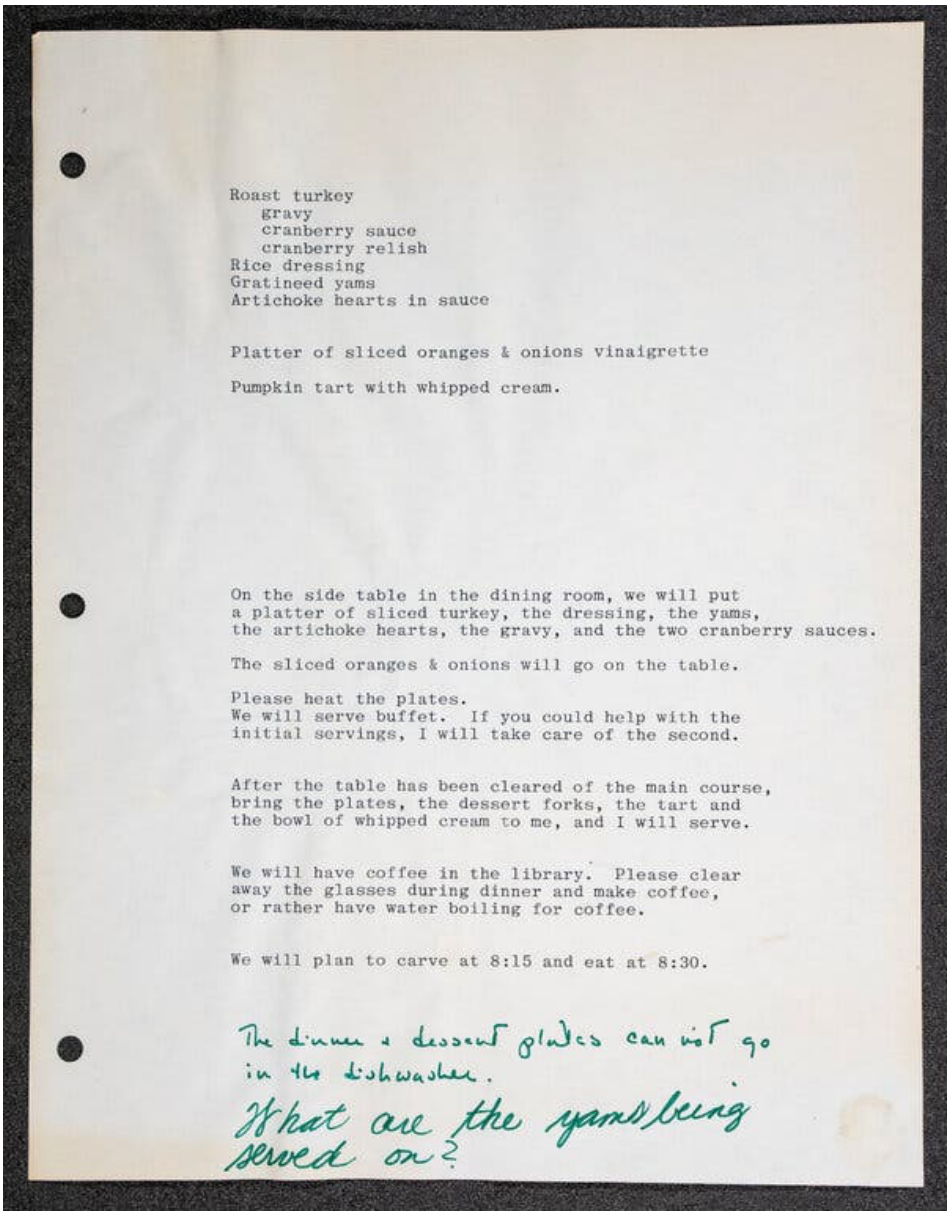
Yes, Joan Didion, the cool-eyed minimalist who savored hard truths and looked as if she subsisted on crudités and aperçus, embraced the great American feast day of food and sentiment. And she staged it the same way she conjured her essays, novels, screenplays and memoirs, with an almost military mustering of planning and ambition.

She hosted Thanksgiving buffets for as many as 75 guests, a who’s who of notables from the shiny Venn diagram she moved in: literary circles (Philip Roth, Edna O’Brien), the New York media (Jimmy Breslin, Jann Wenner), Hollywood (Liam Neeson, Claire Bloom) and the intersection of all three (Nora Ephron). Years before Friendsgiving came along, she filled her Manhattan apartment with cronies and colleagues, including Thanksgiving skeptics like the writer Calvin Trillin, who has long campaigned to replace the turkey with spaghetti carbonara.

She typed up dozens of menus and guest lists, noting who declined, who arrived at what time, how many ate or did not, and how much food was left over. She drafted instructions for a few hired helpers — and herself — detailing the timing and placement of each course, which forks to use and which plates couldn’t go in the dishwasher.

“Set table,” reads one such drill. “Whip cream. Figure out pies. Start fires. Turkey out — 6 or 6:30.”

We know all this because those schedules, rosters, bread-and-butter notes and the contents of her recipe box were opened to the public in March by the New York Public Library, as part of a vast collection (337 boxes) of the papers of her and her husband, the writer John Gregory Dunne.



Roast turkey
gravy
cranberry sauce
cranberry relish
Rice dressing
Gratineed yams
Artichoke hearts in sauce

Platter of sliced oranges & onions vinaigrette

Pumpkin tart with whipped cream.

On the side table in the dining room, we will put
a platter of sliced turkey, the dressing, the yams,
the artichoke hearts, the gravy, and the two cranberry sauces.

The sliced oranges & onions will go on the table.

Please heat the plates.
We will serve buffet. If you could help with the
initial servings, I will take care of the second.

After the table has been cleared of the main course,
bring the plates, the dessert forks, the tart and
the bowl of whipped cream to me, and I will serve.

We will have coffee in the library. Please clear
away the glasses during dinner and make coffee,
or rather have water boiling for coffee.

We will plan to carve at 8:15 and eat at 8:30.

The dinner + dessert plates can not go
in the dishwasher.
What are the yams being
served on?

Didion wrote, and saved, menus for even the smallest gatherings. For this Thanksgiving dinner, she added detailed instructions for a few hired servers.Credit...Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

It may be hard to imagine there's much new to learn about Didion, whose life and thoughts have been deeply mined — most richly by Didion, who routinely placed herself at the center of her narratives. Last April, three years after her death at age 87, Knopf published "Notes to John," a compilation of diary entries from the library's collection about her often painful sessions with a psychiatrist.

Her prowess as a home cook and host has been celebrated and even fetishized. Her parsley salad recipe (serves 40) lit up the internet when her nephew, the actor and

director Griffin Dunne, offered a cookbook to raise seed money for his 2017 Netflix documentary, "Joan Didion: The Center Will Not Hold." Her set of six well-used Le Creuset pots and pans fetched $8,000 at auction.

But a dive into the newly opened archive reveals the exacting advance work and record-keeping behind the casual entertaining style that she described here and there in her work — and that her guests saw at gatherings large and small.

"It seemed effortless," Mr. Dunne said in an interview. "She probably applied the same discipline to making a meal as to writing a story: being thoroughly researched and in command of her subject. The preproduction for a meal was so meticulous that she could just enjoy herself."

The items in the collection also drive home just how central the kitchen was in Didion's life. The woman who said, "We tell ourselves stories in order to live" might have made the same claim about cooking.

The writer at her seaside home in Malibu, Calif., sharing the spotlight with her Dutch oven. Henry Clarke/Condé Nast, via Getty Images

A Room of Her Own

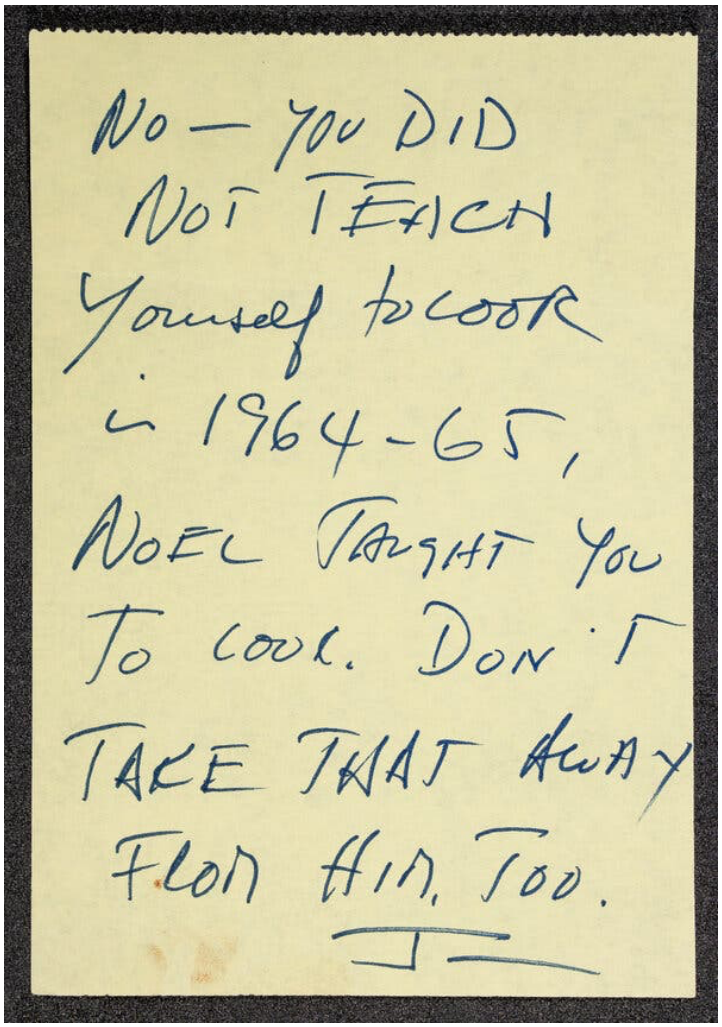
“I taught myself to cook in 1964 and 1965, in a rented and furnished house on the sea with a kitchen that appalled many people who visited it,” she wrote in an undated, unfinished draft, liberally red-penned with her own edits.

That kitchen, in the first of four successive Southern California homes, “had no dishwasher and no disposal and no eye-level oven and no toaster … but it did have a six-burner stove with very large ovens and a big old-fashioned sink and a pantry and a floor of worn and darkened terra cotta tiles and a long rack of extremely professional pots and pans, very old, very heavy, cast aluminum and iron with those flat European lids that fit everything and take up no drawer space.”

“This,” she declared, “was the home in which I was first aware that a kitchen could be a ritual, a meditation, a room and a time of my own.”

Didion often pointed out that memory is selective. Her husband challenged hers.

“No — you did not teach yourself to cook in 1964-65,” he scrawled on a notecard in the archive, “Noel taught you to cook. Don’t take that away from him, too.” Noel was her former boyfriend and mentor, the writer Noel E. Parmentel Jr., who introduced her to Mr. Dunne.



A note from Didion's husband, John Gregory Dunne, in the New York Public Library collection, contests her claim about how she began cooking. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Her trove of recipes — torn from newspapers, typewritten or rendered in her tidy handwriting — is a time capsule, heavy on the showy French dishes that anchored upscale dinner parties in the 1960s and '70s: daubes, crème caramel, soufflés. (At her memorial service in 2022, her daughter Quintana's friend Susan Traylor recalled a birthday party where Didion served hot chocolate soufflés to a group of bewildered youngsters — then patiently showed each child how to eat them — because she didn't know how to make a birthday cake.)

The collection shows Didion's growth as a cook, starting with the enchiladas and albondigas she learned in California, then adding much more: risottos, tandoori, borscht, a Sichuan duck appetizer (for 50) and several recipes for gumbo.

Friends hung on her culinary judgment. “When you looked into the parched and smoking parody of scalloped potatoes I produced on Friday night and said, ‘Well, it’s potatoes Anna,’ I was struck by a fresh avalanche of love for you,” the journalist Barry Farrell wrote in a 1973 letter. “You are the kindest person I know.”

This kindness had limits. “I remember that she was irritated when people, including Ms. Ephron, asked for her recipe for Mexican Chicken,” said the novelist Susanna Moore. “She didn’t want attention drawn to that. Nor did she want to share the recipe.”

Party Politics

Didion traced her domestic pluck to the can-do spirit of pioneer ancestors who migrated to Sacramento over the Sierra Nevadas from Illinois. And several recipes seem to hark back to her upper-middle-class childhood as the daughter of an Army finance officer: salmon loaf, oyster loaf, Aunt Minna’s Chutney Mold.

But she didn’t pick up cooking at home. “If you never learn how,” she quoted her mother as saying, “you’ll simply never have to.”

A young Didion, foreground, in an undated photo from the collection. She later wrote that she identified with a Mary McCarthy character "who located America's decline in the disappearance of the first course." Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

After college in the 1950s, Didion worked in Manhattan for Vogue, where she sometimes proofread recipes. In California, where the Dunnes moved soon after marrying in 1964, they regularly hosted cocktail parties for a Hollywood-orbiting crowd. (Her nephew has written about one where he had hoped to flirt with Janis Joplin but was instead accosted by the director Otto Preminger, then in the grip of a bad acid trip.)

Didion was no bohemian. In an era when many of her peers were seeking freedom from housework, she prized its rigors. In "The White Album," she recalled how disturbed she was, on a group tour of the old California governor's mansion, to hear that none of the other women knew what a marble tabletop was useful for. (Rolling out pastry dough.)

The big apartment on the Upper East Side of Manhattan where the Dunnes relocated in 1988 yielded reams of papers that attest to their dining protocols. Inventories of silverware. Datebooks peppered with reservations at their regular restaurants: Elio's, Shun Lee Palace, Da Silvano. Typed menus for even the simplest meals.

Lunch for four on Oct. 12, 1999: "Shrimp salad, potato chips."

A Holiday Spirit

Didion's Thanksgiving menus from the 1980s and '90s are as classic and streamlined as her wardrobe, and nearly identical from year to year. Roast turkey breast with gravy and dirty-rice dressing. Cranberry sauce and relish. Artichoke hearts in béchamel, gratinéed yams and in lieu of mashed potatoes, a vegetable purée of beet, turnip or celery root. A salad with oranges, and tarts of apple, pecan and pumpkin. Leftover turkey went into a hash she made the next day.

She paid assistants to help cook and serve for these big occasions, and didn't sweat details that could be finessed with store-bought ingredients like frozen artichokes or canned sweet potatoes. But she made most of the dishes ahead of time; the rest of the year, she cooked alone and from scratch, with fierce concentration.

"No one went into the kitchen when she was going there," Griffin Dunne said. "It seemed like walking into her office."

At Thanksgiving in 1990, Didion with her dog Casey, a Bouvier des Flandres. Camilla and Earl McGrath Foundation

Celebrating the holiday in 1992. At left are Mr. Dunne and the bandleader Peter Duchin. Camilla and Earl McGrath Foundation

A scrapbook by the photographer Camilla McGrath shows Thanksgiving in 1993. Writers were plentiful; the right-hand page includes Bret Easton Ellis, Donna Tartt, Jean Stein, Murray Kempton and Frances FitzGerald. Camilla and Earl McGrath Foundation

By the time guests arrived, the obsessing was over. “People had a really good time. It was very informal,” said Sharon DeLano, an editor and literary trustee of Didion’s. “All of the structure she had created — exactly how everything would be prepared and what time — was not visible to her guests. So in a way she was the perfect hostess.”

The invitation list for her largest Thanksgiving buffet, in 1993, was a mixed salad, with the writers Susan Sontag, Bret Easton Ellis and Donna Tartt, the playwright John Guare, the painter Eric Fischl and Detective Thomas Hyland of the New York Police

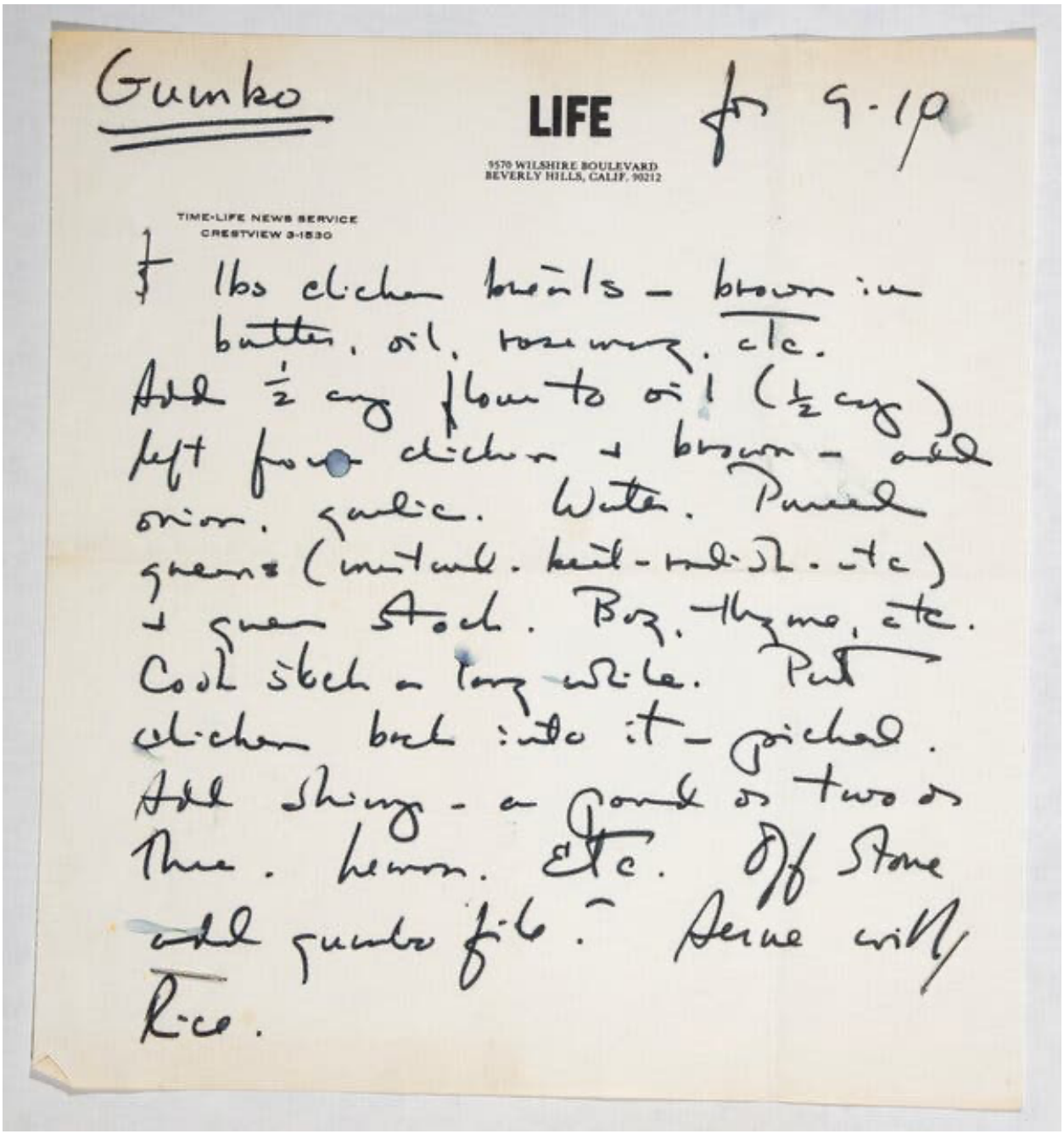
Department. Children scampered around. There were out-of-town friends staying in the city for work, and New Yorkers without their own holiday tradition, like Mr. Trillin and his wife, Alice.

“We were sort of wanderers at Thanksgiving,” Mr. Trillin said. (He couldn’t remember eating Didion’s turkey, but noted that “sometimes when we roamed to a friend’s house for Thanksgiving, a small dish of spaghetti carbonara was presented to me, as a symbol.”)

Ms. DeLano, who wrote the thank-you note calling the holiday “awful,” said Didion cherished Thanksgiving, Christmas and Easter.

“I’ve always said that Thanksgiving was about genocide and greed,” Ms. DeLano said. “And she didn’t agree with me. She was very sentimental about these things, they were important to her. And so you have someone who was so intellectually austere in ways, and yet she had this side of her where it was kind of a real conventional sentimentality.”

If the holidays called for strict control, everyday cooking was something else. For a writer who steeped herself in bad news, it could be a way to let go.



The archive contains several recipes for gumbo, one of Didion's favorite dishes. She wrote for Life magazine in the late 1960s.

"Yesterday I made a gumbo, which is something I like to do," Didion wrote in longhand on one undated page in the archive. "I like the thrift of it, and the ritual."

She described making the roux, stirring slowly with a wooden spoon "until the flour turns the color of a dark pecan," then casually adding ingredients as the day went on: bacon strips left over from breakfast, the stock from a chicken roasted the day before, "the bay leaf from the tree in front, the cilantro from the sea wall."

She apparently never completed the essay, which seems apt. The point was not the finished dish, but the making.

“Yesterday I made a gumbo, and remembered why I love to cook,” she wrote. “Intent is everything, in cooking as in work or faith.”

Patrick Farrell is deputy editor of the Food and Cooking sections at The Times.