



Inflation on Holiday Menus: How US Consumers Are Responding to Rising Food Prices This Holiday Season *Gardner Survey Panel 3, Part 2*

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December 7, 2022

farmdoc daily (12): 184

Gardner Policy Series

Recommended citation format: Kalaitzandonakes, M., B. Ellison, and J. Coppess. "Inflation on Holiday Menus: How US Consumers Are Responding to Rising Food Prices This Holiday Season, Gardner Survey Panel 3, Part 2." *farmdoc daily* (12): 184, Department of Agricultural and Consumer Economics, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, December 7, 2022.

Permalink: <https://farmdocdaily.illinois.edu/2022/12/inflation-on-holiday-menus-how-us-consumers-are-responding-to-rising-food-prices-this-holiday-season-gardner-survey-panel-3-part-2.html>

Rising food prices impacted Thanksgiving meals across the US this year (e.g., [D'Angelo and Bickel, 2022](#); [Dickler 2022](#); [Pinsker, 2022](#)), and we are only a few weeks away from winter holidays (e.g., Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, New Years, etc.). In this post, we use data from the Gardner Food and Agricultural Policy Survey to investigate how consumers expect inflation to impact their winter holiday meals.

Background

We surveyed 1,011 consumers in November 2022, as a part of the Gardner Food and Agricultural Policy Survey. This was the third quarterly panel designed to better understand consumer perspectives on food and agricultural issues. In this survey we investigate how consumers expect rising food prices to impact their holiday meals and how they plan to manage costs. The survey was conducted using Qualtrics Panels, and respondents were recruited to match the US population in terms of gender, income, and census region (*farmdoc daily*, [December 1, 2022](#)). As expected, we find that most participants surveyed (88.0%) said they typically celebrate a winter holiday with a meal. The remaining consumers said they did not typically celebrate a winter holiday (7.0%) or that their winter holiday celebrations did not typically include a meal (4.9%).

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Discussion

We find that, of those who typically celebrate a winter holiday with a meal, the majority (61.1%) said they expect inflation to impact their holiday meal (see Figure 1). These consumers tended to have lower incomes, were more likely to use nutrition assistance programs, and were more likely to be parents. How these consumers plan to manage rising food prices at their meals has implications for stakeholders along the food system including farmers, grocery store retailers, and restaurants.

Figure 1. Percent of Consumers Expecting Inflation to Impact Holiday Meals



Below, we investigate the ways that consumers expect inflation to affect their winter holiday meals. The discussion is based on the 544 respondents (61.1%) who said they expected inflation to impact their meals and menu decisions. In particular, we asked these consumers about 13 ways consumers might reduce the cost of the holiday meal including reducing the number of guests, changing the types of foods served, etc. The results are presented in Table 1 and are discussed in-depth below. Additionally, using an open-ended question, we asked consumers for additional context and other ways rising food prices would affect their holiday meals. We include some of these quotes¹ in the discussion of the results below.

¹ Quotes with errors in spelling or punctuation have been corrected.

Table 1. How US Consumers Who Expect Inflation to Impact Their Winter Holiday Meals (N=544) Plan to Manage Costs

Coping Strategy	Percent of Respondents
Plan to shop for deals on holiday ingredients	47.1%
Plan to shop ahead of time for holiday ingredients to spread out the cost	43.2%
Plan to reduce the number of foods served at holiday meals	35.1%
Plan to reduce the amount of food served at holiday meals	34.4%
Plan to change the types of foods served at holiday meals	30.1%
Plan to reduce the amount of meat served at holiday meals	25.6%
Plan to reduce the number of guests at holiday meals	24.3%
Plan to reduce amount purchased from restaurants for holiday meals	21.7%
Plan to increase the amount of foods guests bring for the holiday meal	16.4%
Plan to increase use of government food assistance (SNAP, WIC, etc.) to get ingredients for holiday meals	16.0%
Plan to increase use of a food bank or food pantry to get ingredients for holiday meals	12.7%
Plan to ask guests to pay a portion of the grocery bill for holiday meal	9.7%
Plan to cancel the holiday meal completely	8.3%

Note: Only consumers who indicated they expected inflation would affect their winter holiday meals (n=544) were asked about what coping strategies they planned to use to manage costs.

Coping Mechanisms for Managing Rising Costs of Holiday Menus

Buy Cheaper Ingredients

We find that the most common ways these consumers plan to manage costs of their winter holiday meals are at the grocery store (see Figure 2). First, we find that 47.1% of these consumers said they plan to shop for deals on holiday ingredients. Some consumers noted they plan to switch to cheaper versions of the item (e.g., “Buy store brand items”; “Cheaper alternatives”) and some indicated they plan to reduce costs with sales (e.g., “Use coupons and shop sales and deals”).

Second, we find that 43.2% indicate they plan to shop ahead of time to spread out the cost. One consumer noted, “It will require a lot more planning. We are already stocking up on things for our winter meal.” Another said, “It will make me buy cheaper products and wait for sales.”

Figure 2. Inflation Alters Shopping Plans for Holiday Meals



Put Less on the Table

Another way these consumers said they plan to reduce the costs of their winter holidays was to reduce the food on the table, both in quantity and number of offerings. We find that 35.1% said they plan to reduce the number of foods served at the holiday meals (e.g., “Less desserts at the family meal, less options in general”; “We will make fewer recipes”). Similarly, we find that 34.4% said they plan to reduce the amount of food served at holiday meals (e.g., “Not as big as it used to be”; “Smaller portions”).

It is worth noting that food waste is especially high at this time of year (EPA, 2020; Karidis, 2015). Increased cost of food could translate to reduced food waste. One consumer noted, “We won’t over-buy” and another indicated they will plan meals that would not go to waste after the holiday saying they would “prepare items that can be repurposed into meals for the following week.” However, several consumers noted the reduced quantity meant reduced leftovers – which has implications for traditions of sharing and leftovers, as research has found sharing leftovers and other gift-giving serve important ways of reinforcing ties with family and friends (Cappellini and Parsons, 2012a; Cappellini and Parsons, 2012b; Belk, 2010). One consumer noted, “It will reduce the amount of food made for distribution to family/leftovers.” Another said, “I will not be able to send as much food home with guests.”

Figure 3. Inflation Changes Food Preparation Plans for Holiday Meals



Changing Up the Menu

These consumers also indicated they plan to change the dishes at their winter holiday meals to reduce costs (see Figure 3). 30.1% said they plan to change the types of foods served at holiday meals (e.g., “Cut down on the amount of cheese, seafood, and appetizers”; “Reduced desserts”; “Probably skip the appetizers and snacks we usually serve on Christmas Eve”). One consumer noted, “I will likely completely change up my menu this year.”

Most notably, more than a quarter of respondents worried about inflation impacting their holiday meals indicated they plan to reduce the amount of meat served. In addition to changing the amount, some noted they might change the type of meat dishes they serve (e.g., “Not as big of meat products”; “Chicken instead of turkey”). Some consumers (21.7%) indicated they plan to reduce the amount purchased from restaurants for holiday meals. One consumer noted that despite menu changes, the holiday traditions would remain, “We will have a more simple menu but will gather and celebrate with food.”

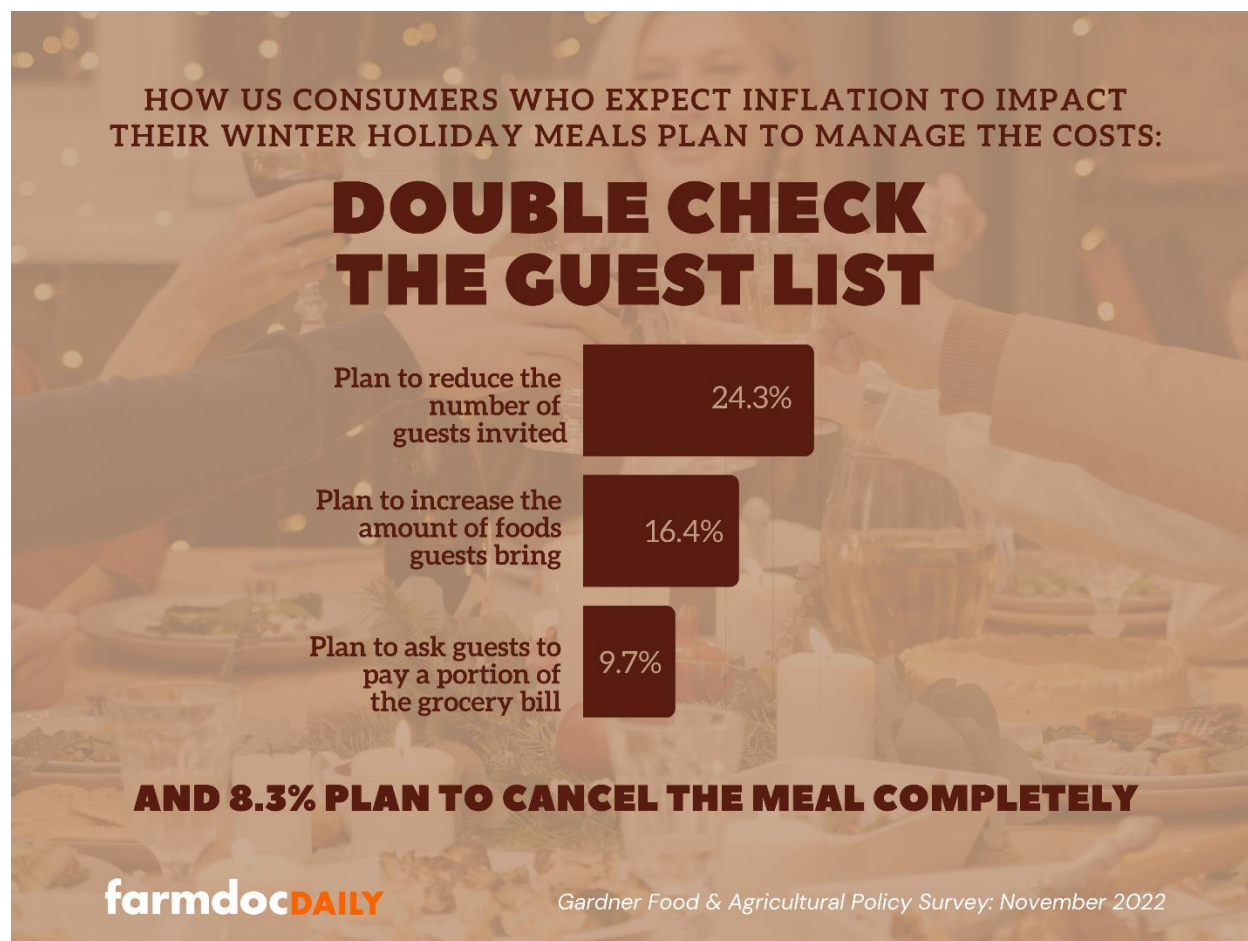
Double Check the Guest List

The cost of holiday meals has gone up (FB, 2022; BLS, 2022; CF DAS, 2022) and hosts often handle much of the bill. Here, we find that 24.3% of consumers concerned about inflation affecting their holiday meals indicated they plan to reduce the number of guests (see Figure 4). Consumers noted, “Inviting only immediate family to holiday meals” and “I will not have as many family members over.” One noted that the reduced guests would impact their feelings about the holiday, saying, “Less people, not as fun.”

Although whittling down the guest list is one option, others opted for increasing the responsibility of guests. 16.4% said they plan to increase the amount of food guests bring for the holiday meal. One consumer noted, “I will have a potluck dinner, where everyone brings something to share.” Similarly, 9.7%

said they plan to ask guests to pay a portion of the grocery bill for the holiday meal. Requesting guests share part of the bill may be more difficult with social norms (e.g., [CBS, 2017](#)). One consumer said, “Makes me weary to host in fear of having to pay the bill alone.”

Figure 4. Inflation May Change Who Is Invited To (Or Who Pays For) the Holiday Meal



Other Changes

Despite the increased costs, the vast majority of consumers will still engage in their holiday meals. Only a small minority (8.3%) indicated they would cancel it. This is in line with news reports from Thanksgiving, which noted many consumers continued as usual despite higher prices (e.g., [D’Angelo and Bickel, 2022](#); [Dickler, 2022](#)). One consumer in the survey noted, “I will try to do everything possible to make sure the meal doesn’t change.” Another said, “Food will just be more expensive.” Others noted they plan to cut down on other aspects of holidays, but meals would remain the same. For example, reduced travel, fewer gifts, etc.

These options are not available to all consumers. In particular, consumers struggling with food security are likely to use a combination of strategies and make more use of assistance. In particular, we find that 16.0% of consumers who expected inflation to impact their holiday meal said they plan to increase their use of government food assistance (e.g., SNAP, WIC) to purchase ingredients for holiday meals and 12.7% said they plan to increase use of food banks or food pantries to access ingredients for holiday meals. The holiday season tends to be a busy time of year for food banks and food pantries and rising food prices have also been difficult on food banks themselves (e.g., [Kelley and Kulish, 2022](#); [Feeding America, 2022](#)).

Others indicated that the increased costs affected their emotions about the holidays. One consumer noted, “More grateful for what I have” and another said, “Will make my winter holiday meals less jolly.”

Conclusion

The results from the third panel of the Gardner Food and Agricultural Policy Survey find that the majority of US consumers that typically celebrate winter holidays with a meal expect rising food prices to affect their meal plans and perhaps their traditions. We asked those who expected inflation to affect their holiday meal plans what strategies they plan to use, if any, to manage costs. The most common strategies used were shopping for deals on ingredients and shopping ahead of time to spread out the cost. Consumers also commonly reported they plan to reduce amount and numbers of foods served, which in addition to affecting holiday plans and traditions of leftovers, may reduce food waste. Consumers also indicated they plan to change up the menu, including changing the types of foods served, reducing the amount of meat, and cutting down on restaurant purchases. As the winter holidays are important times for food spending, expectations about holiday menus have implications for suppliers all along the food system. Despite rising food prices, only 8.3% indicated they planned to cancel the meal completely – and, in line with reports from Thanksgiving meals, many consumers indicated they planned to pay higher prices but attempt to leave holiday meal traditions unchanged. Although consumers' plans for winter meals are not perfect measures of what they will actually do when meals occur – these results help us understand how consumers expect inflation to affect their holiday dinner tables.

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