

AT  
CHRISTMAS  
WE FEAST

ALSO BY ANNIE GRAY

*Victory in the Kitchen: The Life of Churchill's Cook*

*The Greedy Queen: Eating With Victoria*

*From the Alps to the Dales: 100 Years of Bettys*

*The Official Downton Abbey Cookbook*

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Festive Food Through the Ages

ANNIE GRAY

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PROFILE BOOKS

First published in Great Britain in 2021 by  
PROFILE BOOKS LTD  
29 Cloth Fair  
London  
EC1A 7JQ

*www.profilebooks.com*

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Typeset in Fournier by MacGuru Ltd  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 78816 819 9  
eISBN 978 1 78283 859 3



For KJ, Rich, Rebecca & M.  
Because it really is all about the Georgian Christmas.



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## Recipe notes

All temperatures are given as conventional oven (top and bottom heat), as this is most useful for baking. For fan ovens, reduce the temperature by 20°C.

All eggs are UK medium, but large won't make a massive difference.

If possible, source high-welfare meat, preferably organic and (for beef) grass-fed. It's better for the environment and tends to taste better.

All ingredients are easily obtainable in the UK. Some may be more challenging elsewhere, but suet is available online or through a good butcher.

Suet is the hard fat around the kidneys of mammals – generally veal or beef suet was used in the past; modern suet is usually beef, but you can also get a vegetarian suet.

No, you can't replace the butter with margarine (except for the wartime cake).

I assume that if you have food intolerances or dietary preferences, you will have ample experience in adapting recipes for your own needs. I haven't tested any alternatives, though, so can't vouch for the tastiness of making vegan trifle from a recipe dependent on dairy. Sorry.

Many of the recipes are unashamedly full of sugar, fat and booze. It's Christmas. It only happens once a year (except if you are writing a book on it, in which case it's a good excuse to indulge in lovely things for a much longer time).



Before we start ...

‘**T**here is one day of the year where English cuisine unfurls all its banners and shows itself in its national colours. This day, waited for so impatiently by the biggest eaters as much as the small, is Christmas Day.’

In 1904 French chef Alfred Suzanne attempted to sum up the importance of Christmas in England to his fellow cooks. It was, he concluded, all about the food. There were ‘hecatombes of turkey ... massacres of fat beef ... mountains of plum puddings and thicketts of mince pies’. Whether you were destitute, poor, middle-class, or the richest lord in the land, you aimed to feast, to have a meal beyond the ordinary, made up, on this one day, of a list of foods so specific to the English Christmas that they were scarcely seen at any other time of the year.<sup>1</sup>

Suzanne was writing at the end of the Victorian era, which we see now as one of the defining periods of the British Christmas. But the Victorians saw the late Tudors as having

defined Christmas, with their own modifications merely returning it to where it belonged.

No one era invented Christmas. No one person changed the way it was celebrated. How it is seen, and the rituals which surround it, have evolved, and, while it's true that much of the surface paraphernalia of the modern Christmas can be ascribed to one or two decades (mainly the 1840s), there are deeper themes which cross the centuries.

Feasting is one of them. We rarely feast now in the old sense, with connotations of hospitality and invited guests eating lavishly at our expense, opting for a more practical modern version, pared back to a few lucky diners, eating lots of food beyond the ordinary. We have eaten and drunk to excess in the middle of winter since before Christmas was a word, and it seems entirely probable that we will continue to do so for as long as we can. But although it can seem otherwise, the things we consume are not set in stone. Our dinners have evolved as much as the context in which we eat them.

Nostalgia, tradition and a sense of time-honoured ritual surround Christmas dinner. We only eat it once a year, so it is unsurprising that its evolution is slow. It plays a marked role in the way in which we build and maintain our relationships, so it is equally unsurprising that we might not want to change it. But for something so many people love, and look forward to, it can be a gargantuan amount of work, out of all proportion to the normal rhythm of cooking and eating. It is also lopsided in terms of workload – women do most of the cooking – and often fraught with tension as families come

together at a time of enormous social pressure compounded by immediate, dinner-related, stress. And yet the love we feel is genuine, the warm and fuzzy feelings real, and the work and indigestion – usually – worth it.

Every family has its own culinary Christmas customs, joined haphazardly to wider cultural norms. But while we might think we know the origins of what we eat, the stories around Christmas food are confused and murky. Myths cluster thickly around Christmas in general, and there are many attached to its foods. But whether it's the number of ingredients in a Christmas pudding, the shape of a mince pie, or the exact date a pair of breeding turkeys first set foot on British shores, all crumble in the face of logic.

This book is an exploration of the history of the dishes and ingredients that we associate with Christmas: where they came from, how we've prepared them, and how they've come to be part of so many people's Christmases. I've drawn on recipe books, menus, fiction, diaries, newspapers and visual depictions of food and feasting at Christmas. Writing down a recipe doesn't mean it was ever cooked, of course, just as descriptions of meals aren't necessarily accurate. We all edit our own stories, as well as those of others, and recipe writing is as much a form of storytelling as anything else. But when recipes are repeated, in book after book (sometimes verbatim), and tales are told that tally closely with each other, it does add up to a rich and fascinating history.

This is the story of the British Christmas, which, in practice, means the English Christmas. By the late eighteenth

century, it was recognised by both the English and those abroad as distinct from that of any other country. Both in a general sense and a culinary one, it was explicitly tied to notions of Englishness, and proudly promoted as something unique. When the English colonised other countries, they took their Christmas with them, spreading it across the globe in determined ignorance of any local customs or other sensitivities. By the twentieth century its foods were largely regarded as English oddities, embraced as such by those who were aware that this was true, but more often seen as simply normal and universal by those who ate them. Surely everyone, everywhere, spent December in anticipation of their annual plum pudding?

Christmas feasting was, from the outside, remarkably uniform, but viewed from within it has never really been so. Class and wealth have always played a huge role in defining what is eaten for dinner. Regionality once played a role, too.

The foods you'll find here are those which repeated polls suggest are our festive favourites. Sadly, you won't necessarily find everything you most crave at Christmas, or the things your family can't do without. You won't find sections on nuts, or oranges, or sugar mice, for although all of these are part of many Christmases, they are not unique to the season, and don't feature anywhere near the top of lists of Christmas food. I've also resisted the lure of some of the modern abominations, including Brussels sprout vodka, mince-pie flavour pork sausages and mint choc chip pringles (really, don't). But you will find contextualising sections showing how

Christmas dinners have changed, as well as recipes drawn from the past which deserve to be more widely known.

The story of Christmas foods is both global and local, riven by class differences even while appearing to be a cross-cultural norm. And it continues to evolve. We cling to Christmas dinner as a point of stability even as our culinary tastes expand, but it's built on shifting sands. So, let's look again at the foods we think of as festive, let's consider why we love them, and maybe add a touch of the past to Christmases yet to come.



## The Twelve Days: merriment, mischief and mirth

Everything has to start somewhere. In the case of Christmas, it was in the fourth century, when the early Christian Church adopted the period around late December and early January as the time for celebrating the birth of Christ. In doing so it harnessed a broad-ranging set of existing traditions, most of which focused on lighting fires, feasting and drinking. It was the quietest time of the year for farming, thus lending itself to time off. The word Christmas was first recorded much later, in the eleventh century. Two centuries after that, there were already complaints that it was a season of gluttony, groping and having far too much to drink.

Throughout its history the celebratory side of the season has always triumphed over the religious side.<sup>2</sup> That's not to say the religious observance didn't matter, but the Christian Church (or most of its denominations) pragmatically took

the view that wild partying and gustatory enjoyment was all part of the festival. It meant that Christmas was highly successful and widely observed. As a universal festival, it also meant that it quickly became seen as highly traditional, with certain themes – notably hospitality, goodwill and making merry – embedded within it from very early on.

The medieval Christmas contained many elements we'd recognise today, including carols, plays and time off work. It was built around the Twelve Days, which in Britain ran from December 25th through to the Feast of the Epiphany on the 5th of January (it's a grey area; sometimes they go from December 26th to January 6th). Each of the days had a particular importance, from St Stephen's Day on the 26th, to the Feast of the Holy Innocents on the 28th and the Feast of St Thomas Becket on the 29th. The 1st of January was both the pre-Christian New Year's Day and the Feast of the Circumcision. Some days were fixed across the Catholic Church, others were more local and obscure. In theory, no work was done, and those who could afford it threw open their doors and feasted all and sundry.

The feast element was particularly welcome, coming as it did at the end of a long and dreary period of fast. Advent then was one of the two big fast periods, when no animal-derived products could be consumed. It was twenty-four days of fish, vegetables and almond milk (the latter proving there is little truly new in food, handy tetrapack cartons aside). As ever, the rich transformed their (fresh) produce with spices, imported fruit and nuts and clever cooking, while

the less wealthy subsisted on preserved produce, including stockfish, which needed soaking and hammering over several days to tenderise it and make it edible. For the poor, fasting probably made little difference, since the staple diet contained very little meat anyway, revolving instead around bread, pulses and vegetables – but they would have missed vital protein from milk, cheese and eggs. The rich, meanwhile, put on lavish fish feasts. One fifteenth-century menu included porpoise and peas, baked lamprey, turbot, cream of almond pottage and a satisfyingly large range of fruits in syrup, wafers and almond milk jellies.<sup>3</sup>

Fasting was a huge part of the pre-Reformation Catholic calendar, and over half of the days of the year were nominated as fast days – Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays, plus Lent, as well as Advent – and various other days as well. You could get around the restrictions if you were ill or very young or old, while others paid fines and ate meat anyway. For the Church this could be a valuable source of revenue – Rouen Cathedral's butter tower was paid for with money from otherwise illicit butter-eating in Lent.<sup>4</sup> The royal court led by example by being decidedly lax about the whole thing, especially on Wednesdays. There were also oddities which counted as fish, such as barnacle geese (they hang out on water), beavers' tails (scaly), puffins (dive) and seals (not sure but look fishy), which were deemed to be seafood. However, for most people meat was off the menu. As habitual as it might have been, it was still a hardship, at least for the poor:

We ate no puddings nor no sauce,  
 But stinking fish not worth a louse ...  
 There was no fresh fish far not near,  
 Salt fish and salmon was too dear ...  
 Our bread was brown, our ale was thin,  
 Our bread was musty in the bin.<sup>5</sup>

Add to that the general hideousness of the English winter, and it was little wonder that when the 25th finally arrived, people went a little crazy.

For the rich, the Twelve Days really were time off, as well as time to show off. Lords of Misrule were appointed to mastermind upper-class festivities, which often centred on turning society a little topsy-turvy – appointing boy-bishops to read sermons, for example – but there was plenty of more plebeian misrule as well. Troops of mummers performed plays, generally noisy and happily bawdy, and costumes were very much the order of the day. Then there was the eating. There are records of some gargantuan feasts. In 1213 the court of King John took delivery of 24 hogsheads of wine, 200 heads of pork, 50lb of pepper, 2lb of saffron and 15,000 herrings, among a vast array of other things. No foods were exclusive to Christmas, although by the sixteenth century some were certainly associated with it. They were almost all expensive – thus good for showing largesse and status – or seasonal. Most were both.

At the upper end of society meals were served as two main courses. Each consisted of a large number of dishes, the

contents of which were restricted by sumptuary law. These laws, which were largely abolished in England in the seventeenth century, aimed to regulate spending on luxuries, encourage key industries, and enforce rank, by dictating what any given person could wear and eat according to their status. They were widely flouted and, as with fast days for the Church, became a source of tax for the government, as people paid fines to get around them. But they are very useful in showing what was deemed a luxury for rich Tudors, apparently all desperate to show off by the size of their ruff.

Meals might well be broken up with a bit of performance art. In Stirling in 1594, guests at the Christening Feast of Prince Henry were treated between courses to a 24ft-long model ship surrounded by women dressed as sirens and staffed with burly silk-clad sailors. The ship's cargo was spectacular sugarcraft – sugar oysters, limpets, whittings, herrings, all ‘most lively represented in their own shape’.<sup>6</sup> At the end of dinner, selected dignitaries were treated to more sugar in a final course, known in the medieval era as the ‘void’, but by the sixteenth century usually called the banqueting course.

The banqueting course was often held in a separate room, or banqueting house. It was all about the sugar: sugar sculptures, moulded sugar, plus a selection of sweet, expensive titbits eaten as a palate cleanser. These included gingerbread, candied fruit, fruit in syrup, marmalades, biscuits, wafers and comfits. All were ostensibly digestives, but all were increasingly eaten mainly for pleasure, and gained a reputation for hedonism and sexual licentiousness – inevitable with all those

sticky fingers and delicate little treats flavoured with hot spices (although in reality the banqueting course was the only situation where forks were used before they spread to the main part of dinner in the mid-seventeenth century).

The remains of meals were reused or distributed to members of the household or the poor. Feeding the poor was a significant part of the duties of a large house more generally, not just at Christmas, but the season did carry with it an extra expectation of generosity. The hospitable ideal was of an open house, and some establishments did practise this right up to the eve of the Civil War. In 1624 the Archbishop of York held six huge Christmas feasts, feeding hundreds of his parishioners, and there are many examples of landowners holding smaller feasts for their tenants and dependants in the area. But such events were not open to all, rather to those with a relationship to the feast-giver, and the arrangements were often reciprocal. Christmas was well established as a time for gift-giving, and edible gifts were expected from tenant to landlord. Meanwhile, extra beer, beef and fuel went the other way, part of the highly intertwined nature of relations in a pre-industrial society.

Even after the Reformation in the 1540s, the English Christmas remained essentially that of the medieval era. Henry VIII made few changes, apart from banning the Feast of Thomas Becket on December 29th (celebrating a man who stood against royal authority was intolerable). Edward VI, meanwhile, changed misrule and mummers to more organised masques, the start of a steady process of taming

the season, which, outside all the eating, was also an excuse for social upheaval, riotous partying and football (some things don't change). But by the end of the century Christmas had changed, both in broad terms and in culinary ones.

By the beginning of the seventeenth century there were clearly identifiable Christmas foods. Boar's head was one, brawn was another. It was joined by Christmas pies, which were sometimes mince pies, sometimes enormous game pies, but quickly the former gained their own, definite identity. Ben Jonson, in a Christmas masque of 1616, included characters called Minced Pie, Wassail and Baby Cake. The latter was another name for Twelfth Cake, while wassail was a drink whose ingredients varied wildly, but was invariably alcoholic.

Plum pottage, too, made an appearance by name, predated by similar variously named dishes which shared with it rich, spicy flavours and a mixture of meat and dried fruit. Farmed fowl was present in many lists of Christmas fare, and included turkey, goose, capon (castrated chicken) and swan. Turkey, swan and peacock were all true feast birds – big, hard to obtain and with impressive plumage. They could be roasted, head and legs on, but were more impressive as a pie, with the body made from pastry and the fully-feathered head, wings and tail gently baked on skewers to be stuck in the pie. Meat was prestigious and unobtainable for much of the populace, so it was unsurprising that it was in demand. One writer ruefully commented that 'Capons and hennes, besides turkies, geese and duckes, besides beefe and mutton, all die for the

great feast, for in twelve days a multitude of people will not be fed with a little.<sup>7</sup>

As the Tudor dynasty gave way to the Stuarts, and James I of England and VI of Scotland brought these two nations together under his reign, Christmas was thriving. But there were mutterings that it thrived a bit too much. While the vast majority of people looked forward to a period of little work, lots of food, singing and card games, some muttered darkly about losing sight of what Christmas was really all about. There were complaints about profiteering among orange sellers, who were putting their prices up at Christmas. There was also the lawlessness, perceived or otherwise, and the drunkenness. William Prynne, a lawyer and religious puritan, echoed the thoughts of a small, but increasingly vocal, minority when he wrote that, based on the way the season was celebrated, the Saviour might be thought of as 'a glutton, an epicure, a wine-bibber, a devil, a friend of publicans and sinners'.<sup>8</sup>