



Christmas Dishes

ALL COOKERY WRITERS will have you wading knee-deep in spices and dried fruits this month and haughtily admonishing you for not having the forethought to make your traditional Christmas cake in August like they did. I'm too kind for that.

They are scary things those Christmas cakes. We used to have to make a dozen of them at boarding school each November for the members of the School Council. The quantity of ingredients was dazzling, as was the sight of the brandy — brought out once a year from its double-locked and sealed hiding spot and slurped generously over the six tons of candied peel and dried currants. No chance of sneaking a swig; they were tough people those Home Economics teachers, especially on us boarders.

My grandmother happened to be one of the Council Members to receive a cake each Christmas. She would bring it home, put it on the sideboard in her dining room and sort of, well, forget about it.

Christmas was always held at her home — and all 30 of her children and grandchildren would assemble for an intimate meal of pure gluttony: Eating time about five hours, recovery time ditto (which usually involved popping down to the pool for a swim. It always seemed to be blazing hot on Christmas day in Sydney — no romantic strolls in the snow like here; just good old gasping and panting like beached whales in the shallow end of the pool.)

We never managed to get around to the cake.

December would pass, January, February... and I would go and inspect that cake just to see whether it had turned into something from Miss Havisham's wedding party. The surprising thing was — it never went off. Just sat there smugly in its layers of white almond armory looking edible. We would always make sure it was eaten before the next December came around but that was stretching the Christmas spirit to its limits.

What we need here is a quick festive cake. Something that tastes different, looks Christmassy, but doesn't take lots of time and candied peel. The answer is a very simple variation of the French spice bread *Pain d'épice*.

I know the "real thing" calls for monstrous labors in the kitchen with rye flour, wheat flour, chopped almonds and lots of dark rum. We don't have time for that. This is the Moscow variation (easy).

Pain d'Epice

<i>1/2 tsp</i>	star anise, ground
<i>1 tsp</i>	baking soda
<i>1 tsp</i>	cinnamon, ground
<i>1 tsp</i>	ginger, ground
<i>1 tsp</i>	cloves, crushed
<i>1/2 tsp</i>	salt
<i>5 cups</i>	plain flour
<i>2 tbsp</i>	dried currants (or candied peel)
<i>1/4 cup</i>	brown sugar, firmly packed
<i>3/4 cup</i>	honey
<i>2/5 cup</i>	whipping cream
<i>1/5 cup</i>	milk

Preheat oven to 180° Celsius. Grind up the star anise and place it in a large bowl with the baking soda, cinnamon, ginger, cloves, salt, currants, flour and sugar. Stir well.

In a smaller bowl blend the honey, cream and milk. If your honey is too crystallly from sitting in the fridge, heat it a little first. Very carefully make a well in the middle of the flour mixture and pour in the honey liquid. Stir as little as possible, just so the dry ingredients are moistened. Over-stirring will result in very flat bread. Spread it into a greased loaf tin and cook for 1 hour.

When a skewer comes out cleanly from the middle of the bread it is done. Remove from the oven and let cool for a few minutes.

Turn out onto a rack and let it cool completely.

When cool, wrap it up in plastic or foil and keep it in a coolish place for a day. This helps it take on more flavor and stop you picking at it before the guests arrive.

EVERYONE KNOWS the importance of tradition, and being away from home at Christmas doesn't mean you are going to be glum. Invite over your friends and spend a delicious afternoon gorging yourselves on gourmet treats and revelling in some of the most exciting dishes of the year. Don't skimp however, this is a big event. Here are some recipes to get you into that kitchen and basting that bird and festive ham.

Start with a traditional starter — eggnog. Silly name, but once you've had a few sips, everything will seem silly and you'll be warmed up for the dishes that follow.

Warning: because the eggs are raw, use the ones you trust. You don't want all your guests keeling over and sinking before you've finished the pudding.

Eggnog

6	eggs separated
1/4 cup	sugar
2 cups	milk
1/2 cup	rum
1/2 cup	bourbon
1 tsp	vanilla (or vanilla sugar)
1 tsp	salt
1 cup	whipping cream
1/4 cup	sugar
2 tsp	ground nutmeg

Beat the egg yolks until well blended. Gradually add 1/4 cup sugar and beat until very thick (using an electric mixer is probably best). Stir in the milk, then the rum, bourbon, vanilla and salt. Place in the fridge and chill for at least two hours.

Whip the cream. In a metal or glass bowl (plastic doesn't work very well with egg whites) beat the egg whites until very stiff. Fold the chilled yolk mixture and whipped cream carefully into the egg whites. Serve at once with a sprinkle of nutmeg on each one. This recipe should make about fifteen cups. Halve the recipe if the dinner is intimate.

'TIS THE STUFFING THAT MAKES THE BIRD a festive one at Christmas. And this recipe goes all the way. Best of all, most of the ingredients can be found at the *rynok* (not the eggs please!). If you can't find cranberries (*klukva*) try something similar — any small sour little berry will do.

Chestnuts deliciously called *kashtany* in Russian can usually be found at *Tsentralny Rynok* — but get in quick. Leave the goose overnight in the fridge to defrost it gently if it's frozen.

Roast Goose

2 cups	chestnuts, cooked and chopped
5.4-4 kg	goose
1/2 cup	butter
2	leeks (or onions), diced
1/2 loaf	white bread, crusts removed
5	oranges, peeled and segmented
Rind of 1	orange
1/2 cup	cranberries, whole
1 cup	parsley and chives, chopped
2	eggs, beaten
1/2 cup	dry white wine
1 cup	chicken stock

Preheat oven to 160° Celsius. Make a small incision in each chestnut and cook in boiling water for half an hour. After this the skins should come off easily — but let them cool a little first, then chop. Clean and pat dry the bird.

Gently melt a third of the butter and cook the leeks until soft. Add to the combined breadcrumbs, chestnuts, orange segments, finely chopped rind, cranberries, herbs, beaten egg, wine and enough melted butter to bind. Mix well. Loosen the skin around the goose breast and legs and gently push some of the stuffing underneath, then fill the body cavity with the rest of the stuffing.

Truss the goose with string. Pour hot stock into a baking dish. Find a rack large enough and place bird on this.

Melt remaining butter and baste the bird. Season with salt and pepper. Cook in the oven for 30 minutes, then cover with foil and cook a further 1 1/2 hours, or until the juice runs clear when the thigh is pierced with a toothpick.

Serve the bird piping hot, with juices from the pan that you have reduced a little by fast boiling. A goose this size should serve six.

WHY NOT TRY something really different this Christmas; how about a baked ham? Choose a big cooked one (ideally about 8 kilos and on the bone — but most meals are compromises here — so by all means adjust the recipe and use a small ham that has already been boned).

Preheat oven to 160°Celsius. Make a small incision in each
thigh and cook in boiling water for half an hour. After this
the skin should come off easily — but let them cool a little
first, then chop. Clean and pat dry the bird.
Gently melt a third of the butter and cook the leeks until
soft. Add to the compound breadcrumbs, chestnuts, orange
segments, finely chopped and cranberries, herbs, beaten
egg, wine and enough melted butter to bind. Mix well.
Loosen the skin around the goose breast and legs and gently
push some of the stuffing underneath, then fill the body cav-
ity with the rest of the stuffing.
Tie the goose with string. Pour hot stock into a baking
dish. Find a rack large enough and place bird on this.
Melt remaining butter and baste the bird. Season with salt
and pepper. Cook in the oven for 50 minutes, then cover
with foil and cook a further 1 1/2 hours, or until the juices
run clear when the thigh is pierced with a roasting
stick. Serve the bird piping hot, with juices from the pan that you
have reduced a little by fast boiling. A goose this size should
serve six.

Baked Ham

8-kg	leg of ham, cooked
1/4 cup	light soy sauce
1/4 cup	brown sugar
1/2 cup	orange juice
12	star anise

Preheat oven to 180° Celsius. Peel the skin from the ham (if there is one) and trim the fat to an even layer — about 5 mm should be enough. Next with a sharp knife make small incisions in the fat in a diamond pattern all across the top side of the ham. Mix the soy sauce, sugar, orange juice and 2 tablespoons of water in a small saucepan and gently heat the mixture until the sugar dissolves. Drop in a few star anise to add flavor to the sauce.

Place the ham on a baking dish and brush liberally with the mixture. Cover it with a good sized sheet of aluminum foil and bake it for 1-1/2 hours.

Pull it out of the oven every half hour or so to brush with more of the soy mixture. When an hour is up, uncover the ham and let the surface brown.

When done, place on a large serving platter and garnish the ham with the extra star anise. Drizzle a little of the soy mixture over the top if there is any left. For a ham of this size, you should be able to serve 12.

MOST PEOPLE WILL SAY the desserts are the best part of the meal (I do for one) and nothing beats Christmas pudding. At most Christmas parties there is usually someone who will always "do" the puddings. But this time you're on your own. Surprisingly, they aren't difficult. Just fiddly. Plan to start this two days in advance.

You will need 18 small pudding cloths for this dessert. A thin Russian sheet will do the trick — just cut it up into small squares and plunge them into boiling water for a few minutes, then wring them out.

Christmas Puddings

<i>2 cups each</i>	sultanas, raisins, dates, currants
<i>2 tbsp</i>	mixed peel (orange, lemon)
<i>1 medium</i>	apple, peeled and grated
<i>Rind of 1</i>	lemon, grated
<i>1/2 cup</i>	brandy
<i>1/2 cup</i>	butter
<i>5</i>	eggs
<i>5/4 cup</i>	brown sugar
<i>1 cup</i>	stale breadcrumbs
<i>2 tbsp</i>	plain flour
<i>1/2 tsp</i>	nutmeg
<i>1 tsp</i>	bicarbonate soda
<i>1/2 tsp each</i>	cinnamon, nutmeg
<i>5</i>	eggs
<i>18</i>	pudding cloths

Roughly chop all dried fruit and combine with apple, lemon and brandy. Cover and stand for at least two days.

Beat butter and sugar together. Add the eggs one at a time, beating well after each addition. Combine the butter mixture with the fruit mixture and breadcrumbs. Stir well and add to sifted flour and spices. Dust one side of each pudding cloth with flour and shake off excess. Put two tablespoonfuls of pudding mixture in the center of each cloth (on the floured side), draw the edges up and tie them with string. Don't tie them too tightly because they will expand when cooking.

Boil a pot of water. Place them on a rack in a single layer and then place the rack in a baking dish. Pour the boiling water in the pan so that it almost comes level to the rack. Cover with foil and on the stove top, steam them for an hour. After an hour you will need to hang the little puddings to dry in a well-ventilated spot. Before serving, give them another half hour steam. Repeat the same procedure and then open them up (they will be hot) and place heaped on a large serving platter. Serve them with lashings of brandy sauce.