

Who would possibly think that this solid, fruit-packed, spicy pudding started its life as a fragrant pottage. But just like so many British dishes it has evolved over the centuries from a simple peasant's meal to a revered celebration dish.

Today, no Christmas dinner in the UK is complete without a flaming Christmas Pudding, widely regarded as one of the highlights, not only of the main celebratory meal, but also of the entire Christmas festivities.

History

Originally a meat based dish dating from the Middle Ages, Christmas Pudding evolved over the years as various ingredients were added and dropped until we have the non-meat, dried-fruit based pudding that we all enjoy today. Though eaten in some shape or form for hundreds of years, it was only established as a Christmas 'must' in the 1800s when Queen Victoria's husband, with his insatiable appetite for 'plum duff', made it fashionable throughout the country. Prince Albert's stomach clearly has a lot of cases of indigestion to answer for!

Stir up Sunday

The Sunday before advent is known as 'Stir up Sunday'. Advent is the month before Christmas and the time of preparation prior to the birth of Christ. We now associate this Sunday as the time to make your Christmas pudding because the prayer that is said on this particular day begins with the line 'Stir up we beseech thee' (the real essence of this prayer is the organisation and preparation for the coming of Christ). Stir up Sunday is now our reminder to hurry home and make the Christmas pudding. It needs to be made on this day, so it has a month to mature. And Christmas pudding really does benefit from this maturing, the flavour of the spices mellow and deepen, the fruits plump up and soften, and if you enjoy feeding the pudding with copious amounts of rum, you'll find that it does indeed taste superb. A pudding that has been allowed to mature for a whole year is even better - so make two now and have one ready for 2008!

Make a wish!

When you have gathered all your ingredients, and as you are creating this delicious concoction, get each member of your family to take a turn at stirring the mixture. As they do, they can each make a wish. This is an old tradition, and another one was to place an old sixpence in the pudding. Nowadays most people use a pound coin, big enough to find and small enough not to be a nuisance.

Tradition Trivia

There are many and varied traditions associated with the pudding and its actual making, here are just some of them!

- It is traditional for Christmas Puddings to be covered with brandy just before serving and for the brandy to be set alight and carried into the dining-room as a flaming pud!
- it should be made with 13 ingredients to represent Christ and His Disciples

- every member of the family should take a turn to stir the pudding with a wooden spoon from east to west, in honour of the three kings
- setting the brandy alight is said to represent Christ's passion
- a sprig of holly is often used to top the pudding as a reminder of the crown of thorns worn by Christ on the cross
- holly is supposed to bring good luck and have special healing powers; and it is often planted near houses in the belief that it protects the inhabitants
- some families add coins to the pudding for luck - everyone then stirs the pudding and makes a wish
- whoever gets a coin in their serving on Christmas Day will get wealth, health, happiness and all their wishes will come true
- some people even add gold rings to the mixture in the belief that the finder of the ring on Christmas Day will get married in the coming year
- in some families, the father or grandfather (honours to the eldest) of the family carries the Christmas Pudding to the dining-room where he has to knock on the closed door. The rest of the family have to shout 'Hurrah for the Christmas Pudding' as loudly as they can, at which point the bearer of the pudding teases that he cannot hear anyone calling for the pud and he is therefore going to take it away as clearly no-one wants any. He knocks again three or four times, each time saying that he cannot hear one or other member of the family, before he eventually agrees to enter the room and dish out the once-a-year treat