

Stirring the pot

On the last weekend before Advent, families gather to make Christmas pudding—but they probably don't serve it with roast beef. Neil Buttery sheds light on Stir-up Sunday

*Stir up, we beseech thee
The pudding in the pot,
And when we get home,
We'll eat it all hot!*

THE tradition of Stir-up Sunday is peculiarly British—nowhere else, apart from some Commonwealth countries, knows what a Christmas pudding is, let alone what Stir-up Sunday might entail, yet both pudding and ritual are fundamental to British food identity. The idea is that every member of the family takes part by adding an ingredient to the bowl or stirring. All rituals have their superstitions: the mixture must be stirred from east to west (the path of the sun across the sky, as well as the direction of travel by the Wise Men) or clockwise (never anti-clockwise, which is going against Nature and, therefore, bad luck).

‘If feelings were being stirred up, why not stir up the pudding?’

One might think that such a tradition would go back to time immemorial, yet this practice didn't become well known until the 1920s. Stir-up Sunday had existed before then, but as a day for stirring up emotions to ready oneself for Advent, a period of prayer and fasting. It was the late Victorians who hijacked it as they attempted to create what they thought a traditional Christmas should be—and if feelings were being stirred up, why not stir up the pudding and make it a family event? They even adapted the accompanying hymn (‘Stir up, we beseech thee, O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people’) to fit this change in focus.

The mixture was left to macerate overnight, before being boiled and stored for Christmas. Some puddings reached gargantuan size,



The proof is in the eating: superstition dictates that stirring should be from east to west

requiring a 15-hour boil, and it is because of its long boiling time that few people today make a Christmas pudding. In the 2010s, its popularity dropped so low that some feared it might become extinct. However, the covid pandemic saw pudding popularity soar as consumers hankered for traditional comfort food.

The richness of Christmas pudding may be off-putting for some, but it can take a plainer form and, bearing the name of plum pudding, may be eaten outside the festive period. The core ingredients have remained the same: stale breadcrumbs, flour, suet, raisins, currants, some sugar or treacle and spices, all combined with milk, booze and sometimes eggs. Notice that there are no plums—from the 18th century, the word ‘plum’ applied to the fruit (and the prune), but also to dried fruits in general.

To make a classic Dickensian, cannonball-shaped pudding, the mixture has to be wrapped in a piece of just-wet muslin dredged with flour, tied up tightly and plunged into simmering water. When cooked, it's turned out, plump and yielding—and, when broken into, a delicious, dark, steamy and soft interior is revealed, like a huge ripe fig, reflecting its other name: figgy pudding.

Its heyday was the 18th and 19th centuries, when it was served as a main-course

accompaniment to roast beef. This combination was the national dish, a marriage of home-reared beef and a pudding made from ingredients of the Empire: sugar, spice and dried fruits, the ultimate dish of patriotic pride. It didn't become associated with Christmas until the Victorian era, when recipes for Christmas pudding began to appear. In the first edition of Eliza Acton's 1845 classic *Modern Cookery for Private Families*, there are two recipes for Christmas pudding specifically, all essentially the same as her plum puddings, except for lashings of fruit, booze and sugar.

Because of all the extra sweetness, the pudding started to slide to the end of the meal, detaching it from the roast beef of old England. Some say a Christmas pudding should have 13 ingredients (for Jesus and his 12 disciples) and it possibly did for a while, but, once we hit the 20th century, there were more; in the 1930s, George V had an ‘Empire Pudding’ made for him containing 17 ingredients and, since then, rich puddings have been the norm (rationing during the Second World War aside).

If you enjoy sweet things, but find the shop-bought, over-rich Christmas puddings too much, you should hunt out one of Acton's simpler recipes and get back to your pudding roots—you won't be sorry. 🍷

Watch your teeth

No pudding is complete without treasure buried within it. For the finder, a sixpence signified wealth and prosperity. Those who found a ring could look forward to romance, but those who found a thimble would remain a spinster.

