

Christmas pudding

It's traditional to make this pudding on Stir-up Sunday, the fifth Sunday before Christmas, so that it has time to mature before the big day. However, if you can hold yourself back, eat it the following Christmas, as a year or so of ageing makes the pudding so much richer, darker, gooey and complex. It's definitely worth the wait. This recipe is very loosely based on one by good old Delia Smith, of course, but is boozier and better.



Makes: one large pudding

Preparation time: 1+ hours

Cooking time: 8 hours + 1 hour

Maturing time: 1 month to 1 year

225g (8 oz) currants

115g (4 oz) sultanas

115g (4 oz) dried figs, roughly chopped

115g (4 oz) pitted prunes, roughly chopped

225g (8 oz) raisins

115g (4 oz) candied citrus peel, chopped (preferably home-made – see other recipe)

55g (2 oz) crystallised ginger, chopped

170g (6 oz) self-raising flour

170g (6 oz) white stale-ish bread crumbs

170g (6 oz) suet, cleaned and chopped into tiny pieces (or unsalted butter)

225g (8 oz) muscovado sugar

30g (1 oz) almonds, ground

30g (1 oz) pecans/walnuts/skinned hazelnuts, ground

2 tbsps molasses or dark treacle

4 large eggs

zest of 1 large orange

zest of 1 large lemon

1 cooking apple, peeled, cored and grated

1 carrot, peeled and grated

1 small baking potato, peeled and grated

½ tsp ground nutmeg
½ tsp ground allspice
½ tsp ground clove
½ tsp powdered ginger
½ tsp ground cinnamon
½ tsp (regular table) salt
2 tbsps brandy
2 tbsps Grand Marnier
450ml (15+ US fl oz) Guinness (or barley wine, or a mix of the two)
melted butter for greasing the bowl
3 tbsps orange juice
2 tbsps lemon juice
1 tsp baking powder



1. Measure the first 29 ingredients (down to and including the Guinness) into a large mixing bowl and stir well. Stir again. And again. It should be fairly sloppy. Cover with a tea towel and leave somewhere cool overnight.
2. The next day, prepare an appropriately shaped and sized pudding basin by lining the base with two buttered disks of parchment paper and buttering the sides of the bowl as well. Bring a huge pot half full of water to a boil.
3. Just before it's time to steam your pudding, stir the citrus juices and baking powder into the mixture. Pour it into the prepared bowl and level off the top. Cover the top with two disks of buttered parchment paper. Tightly wrap the whole thing in two layers of foil. Secure it by tying string around the rim and also vertically around the pudding in several places.
4. To steam the pudding you can either place a rack at the bottom of the pot of water, or use a steamer insert that fits, or suspend the pudding with string from a wooden spoon bridge across the top of the pot. I've never had a rack or steamer that fits, and find the wooden spoon bridge method to work just fine. The most important thing is that the base of the bowl does not touch the base of the pot. The second most important thing is that the water level comes to about an inch below the top of the bowl, and is maintained at this level by adding more water from the kettle when needed. And the third most important thing is that the water is kept at a low boil/hard simmer. Steam your pudding like this for 8 hours.
5. Lift out the pudding bowl and let it sit somewhere cool overnight. The next day unwrap it and check there is no water inside. If there is – carefully pour it off and blot the pudding as dry as possible with kitchen paper. Put new parchment disks on top of the pudding, and re-wrap the whole thing in at least two layers of new foil. Secure tightly with string. Leave somewhere cool for at least a month and preferably a year to mature. The flavour and texture will improve *immensely* the longer you keep it.

6. To reheat, simply steam as you did before, but for just an hour or so. Serve turned out onto a plate, ignited with warmed brandy and with brandy butter on the side.

Christmas pudding history:

- Exactly when this particular pudding became associated with Christmas is unclear, but it was probably not until the 18th or 19th century. The suet, carrots and potatoes still found in many Christmas puddings today are clues to its meaty Mediaeval origins. It hails from the family of offal-packed savoury British 'puddings' such as black pudding (blood sausage), haggis (entrails and oatmeal in a sheep stomach casing) and steak and kidney pudding (meat pie encased in suet-rich pastry).
- As tastes changed, and expensive and exotic ingredients became more available, the meat and vegetables in some of these puddings were replaced with increasing quantities of raisins, prunes, nuts, candied peels and sweet spices such as cinnamon, nutmeg, allspice, cloves and ginger.
- The invention of the pudding cloth in the 17th century provided a less meaty alternative to the previous animal gut casings. This prompted the development of a profusion of sweet puddings which lasted at least until my school days, when sticky toffee pudding, treacle pudding, spotted dick, jam roly-poly and summer pudding were all regulars on the menu. Nowadays, ceramic and metal pudding basins are used, which yield a similar bomb-shaped result.
- Traditionally each Christmas pudding ingredient is added one at a time and thoroughly stirred in. Every family member is supposed to have a go - closing their eyes and making a wish while stirring in a clockwise direction.
- The insertion of small, inedible lucky charms into festive foods is a widespread and ancient European tradition. The Christmas pudding is no exception; traditionally it should contain a set of metal trinkets, which bestow various romantic and financial fortunes on those who unearth them in their pudding bowls. The most commonly used of these was the sixpence, later replaced with a 10 pence coin, or, if you were really lucky, the new 20 pence piece. These days most producers and cooks opt to leave them out for safety reasons, which I've always thought a shame. No pudding of mine will ever be empty of treasure.



Sources:

The Taste of Britain, Laura Mason and Catherine Brown, 1999