

## THINKING AHEAD TO CHRISTMAS

If you want to avoid being hijacked by the hob (or even the kitchen sink) this Christmas then start thinking ahead...plan Christmas on a budget you can afford and then whatever you have planned make it a special one! Christmas is a time for enjoying family and friends, but with endless food preparation, you could end up feeling rather more frantic than Saint Nic come the 24th of December!

So what are you having for Christmas lunch this year? Maybe it'll be **traditional turkey**, Christmas **goose**, **veggie nut roast**, **rare rib of beef**, or **well-hung game**. Whatever your choice, it'll be accompanied by all the trimmings and followed by Christmas pudding, and maybe even cheese and biscuits too. **Christmas food is so delicious it's hard to say no.**

**The secret to making a great Christmas dinner lies in the timing.** Get that right and you're more than halfway there. Doing your planning in advance may make it sound as if cooking a Christmas dinner is an army field operation but it really helps. Take that from someone who only discovered it after she'd spent too many Christmases too stressed to enjoy dinner!

**Ideally** try and **grab a quiet moment** a day or two before the big day to sit down and write out the timetable. **Decide** what time you want to **eat** for Christmas dinner and work backwards from there. Lots of people will overcook the turkey simply because they're not used to cooking such a large bird and they're anxious about the dangers of under-cooking, but there's nothing worse than a dry, tasteless bird, especially when you have to eat the leftovers! If you follow recipe instructions carefully, there shouldn't be a problem.

To prepare your palate for this wonderful feast of seasonal Christmas food, the starter needs to be light and fresh, with a flavour of its own that will awaken your taste buds before the main course. The last thing you want is a heavy stodgy starter that will fill you up before you've even begun on the roasties!

So we've found some recipes that will fit the bill. These recipes can all be prepared earlier and finished off just before you're ready to sit down to lunch.

For a very classy fishy starter, with no recipes required!

Simply serve the best quality Irish (or Scottish) smoked salmon that you can afford with thinly sliced brown bread and butter and a slice of lemon.

Or roll smoked salmon around seasoned cream cheese and slice into attractive chunks and serve with a few salad leaves and brown bread.

Or perhaps try some nice fat cooked prawns on a bed of lettuce, garnished with a couple of shell-on prawns, with a side dollop of Marie Rose sauce.

## MARIE ROSE SAUCE

- 3 tablespoons mayonnaise
- 1 tablespoon tomato ketchup
- 3 tablespoons double cream
- 1 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce
- Squeeze lemon juice
- A few dashes of Tabasco sauce (optional)

Mix together the mayonnaise, tomato ketchup, cream and Worcestershire sauce. Add lemon juice and Tabasco (if using) to taste.

*For a retro Christmas dinner starter, try this recipe for Florida Cocktail. It might sound old-fashioned but it uses seasonal citrus fruit and tastes delicious as well as startling the palate into readiness for the main course.*

## FLORIDA COCKTAIL

- 2 oranges
- 2 grapefruit
- 2 oz caster sugar
- 1 teaspoon runny honey

Cut the oranges and grapefruit in half and carefully remove the segments of fruit and place in a bowl. Save any juice that comes out in a bowl and squeeze the skins to extract as much as you can from them.

If you are handy with the kitchen knives you can remove the skin from top to bottom and "segment" the oranges and grapefruit by cutting in between the membrane and remove the full segment, when all the segments are removed you can squeeze the remainder of the juice from the membrane.

Strain the juice into a small saucepan with the caster sugar and honey and slowly heat until the honey and sugar have dissolved. Pour over the fruit segments and mix gently. Refrigerate until well-chilled.

Divide the fruit and syrup between 4 glass serving dishes. The more pith you remove from the fruit segments the prettier the final dish will look. For a real retro touch, before placing the fruit in the serving dishes, run a halved lemon around the rims of the serving dishes before dipping the glass in caster sugar. Allow to dry for a frosted effect.

### The Turkey

Check the weight of the turkey and calculate the cooking time. A 10lb turkey will need to cook for about 3 hours; add an extra 30 minutes for every 2 lbs above that. Allow 30 - 45 minutes at the end of cooking for the turkey to rest.

So if you have a 12 lb turkey and you want to eat dinner at 1.30 pm, you will need to put the turkey in the oven at 9.30 (or a little earlier for extra resting time). Remember to give the oven time to pre-heat to 200 degrees C, gas mark 6, before putting the bird in.

Place the turkey in a large roasting tin, season with freshly ground salt and pepper, and brush all over with melted butter. Cook for 30 minutes and then baste. Cover and completely enclose with foil and return to the oven. Lower the temperature to 180 degrees C, gas mark 4 and continue to cook for the required time, remembering to baste every so often.

The turkey is cooked when the juices run clear. If you're not sure, give a little tug on the leg: it will give easily if cooked. Remove the turkey from the oven, place on a serving dish and cover completely with foil to retain its heat.

### The Vegetables

Prepare the vegetables the night before and leave in iced water. After you've put the bird in the oven you can pre-cook carrots, Brussels sprouts, broccoli or green beans. As soon as they're just tender, dunk in iced water and placed in microwave dishes with butter and seasoning, ready to be re-heated. Alternatively reheat by plunging into boiling water for about 1 minute before buttering, seasoning and serving.

For perfect roasties, peel and boil potatoes for 10 minutes. Drain well and shake in the saucepan so the edges of the potatoes get slightly smashed. About 30 minutes before the turkey is cooked, pre-heat some

olive oil or goose fat (said to make the very best roast potatoes!), or use some of the turkey fat, in a tin. When the fat is very hot, quickly add the potatoes and shake to coat. Place near the top of the oven.

For roast parsnips, peel and quarter parsnips and cook in the turkey tin after the turkey has been removed. They only take about 20 - 30 minutes to cook.

### **The Stuffing**

For a very simple stuffing, combine 2 lbs sausage meat with 2 peeled and finely chopped onions. To this you can add, sage, some chopped apple, chopped roast chestnuts, breadcrumbs, celery or cranberries. Use some stuffing to fill the neck cavity. Roll the remainder in foil and cook separately in the oven.

### **The Sauces**

Prepare cranberry sauce in advance or use a jar of ready-made sauce.

Make bread sauce while the turkey is cooking.

Peel a medium onion and stick 2 cloves into it.

Pour about three-quarters pint milk into a saucepan.

Add the onion and a bay leaf. Bring to the boil, remove from the heat and leave, covered for at least 10 minutes so the milk takes on the flavour.

Remove the onion and bay leaf and add 3 oz breadcrumbs and some freshly ground salt and pepper.

Return to the heat and simmer very gently for about 10 minutes, stirring frequently.

Stir in ½ oz butter and 2 tablespoons single cream.

You can add some freshly grated nutmeg if you have it.

### **The Gravy**

When the parsnips are cooked, drain most of the fat out of the roasting tin, leaving about 2 tablespoons.

Sprinkle on 1 - 2 tablespoons flour and mix to a paste. Gradually add up to a pint of turkey stock (made from the giblets or a cube), and bring to the boil, stirring continuously until the gravy is smooth and glossy.

Season to taste with freshly milled pepper and sea salt flakes.