

Have Yourself a Very British Christmas



Since I'm coming home for Christmas, I thought I would bring a bit of my new home back to my old home. After all, even Scrooge experienced the London Christmas, so why can't we?

Most Americans seem to say Christmas should not begin until after Thanksgiving. Maybe since the British don't have Thanksgiving, they decided to go all out and start even earlier. While it's not quite Christmas in July, the Brits come quite close. By the end of September, many stores started to carry Christmas products and advertise the perfect gift ideas for the year. Pubs even get in on the early holiday bandwagon, posting advertisements encouraging people to book their Christmas parties in the pub. By October, the Christmas hype kicks up even more. Full shopping catalogues are printed, each with multi-paged sections devoted to the different buying categories. Searching for a nice present for your neighbor? Marks and Spencer have already begun advertising their Christmas hampers (gift baskets).

Not all aspects of a British Christmas are heavily commercialized, however. Many British traditions center around being with family and friends while enjoying a jolly good party complete with good food. Most people love their large family get togethers, where family members gather to eat, drink and be merry!

A very British Christmas tradition is the Christmas Cracker---a cardboard tube wrapped in brightly colored crepe paper, crinkle foil or even wrapping paper. This tube, which often contains a toy, game, puzzle, hat (called a 'cosaque') or motto, is often opened at the dinner table.

Created by the British baker Thomas Smith in 1840, the cracker started when Smith added little messages to his bags of bon bons as a sales incentive. When that did not work, he added an 'exploding strip' which makes the snapping noise. Now a popular tradition, the crackers are the perfect personalized gift. The outsides can be wrapped with different colors, and personalized name tags can be added for each cracker.

When it comes time to open the crackers, two people each pull on one end of the cracker, and whoever ends up with the largest part of the cracker gets the prize inside! Everyone ends up with a prize, and wearing the paper hat is an essential part of the Christmas experience. Reading the jokes or mottos is often a big conversation topic around the dinner table. The jokes are often cheesy, such as this one: "Did you hear about the two ships that collided at sea? One was carrying red paint and the other was carrying blue paint. All the sailors ended up being marooned." Or try: "Why did the lobster blush? Because the seaweed."

After opening the cracker, the feasting begins. The British, in spite of their food reputation, pull out all stops for Christmas dinner. An average of £1.6 billion pounds is spent each year on food and drink in Britain (that's nearly 3 million dollars).

Look to the next page for traditional British recipes!



Feasting Reconciles Everybody....

For a traditional British Christmas dinner, follow the menu below. So go ahead, and don't forget to make some Christmas Crackers for your British Christmas dinner party. Enjoy!

The First Course

Try something like a Melon and Cranberry Basket, a cantaloupe cut out in the shape of a basket and filled with melon balls and cranberries tossed in vodka. Start with the melon, cut the melon like a basket and scoop out the melon flesh into balls using a curved knife. Put the cranberries, 4 tbsp water and 1/4 cup water in a small pan, bringing it slowly to a boil until the fruit is tender but not bursting. Allow the fruit mixture to cool and remove the cranberries with a draining spoon. Add the cranberries in a bowl with the melon balls, stir in 4 tbsp vodka, cover and allow to chill.

The Vegetables *Serving size: 8*

Caramelized carrots and button (pearl) onions makes for a nice side for the festive dinner. To make the side, put 1 1/2 lbs of carrots, trimmed, scraped and cut into thin rings with 8 oz of peeled button (pearl) onions into a pan. Cover with salted water and bring the mixture to a boil over a high heat for one minute, then drain the vegetables. Return the vegetables to a pan, then add 1 1/2 oz butter, 6 tbsp chicken stock, 1 tbsp sugar and bring the mix to a boil over a moderate heat, stirring occasionally. Cover the pan and simmer over a low heat for about 10 minutes until the vegetables have absorbed all the liquid and are glossy and dry. Season the vegetables with salt and pepper and transfer them to a warm serving dish. Cover with foil and keep warm until ready to serve.

The Main Course

Most people seem to have a roast turkey for their main course of the Christmas dinner. Making a Chestnut stuffing for the turkey is fairly easy too! Heat 3 tbsp butter in a pan and fry 1 large chopped onion over a moderate heat for about 3 minutes until it is translucent. Remove from the heat and mix it with a 1 lb can of unsweetened chestnut puree, 1 cup fresh white breadcrumbs, 3 tbsp orange juice, grated nutmeg, and 1/2 tsp caster (superfine) sugar. Season the mixture with salt and pepper, then allow it to cool. Use the mix to pack the neck end of the turkey.

The Dessert: Christmas Pudding

In a large mixing bowl, mix 8 oz raising flour, 1 lb breadcrumbs, 1 lb suet, 1 lb dark brown sugar, 1 tsp allspice, 12 ozs currants, washed 24 ozs raisins, washed 12 ozs sultanas, 6 ozs mixed peel, 2 ozs ground almonds, grated rind of 2 lemons, 1/4 grated fresh nutmeg, 1 grated carrot, 1 grated cooking apple, and 1 grated baking potato. Make a well in the center of the bowl. Whisk the 8 eggs together well with 3 Tbsp black treacle, and place into the well. Start binding the ingredients together (best done by hand). Once well bound, add 2 cans guinness, 1 measure of brandy (in a brandy glass) and the juice of 3 oranges to the bowl and mix very well. The mixture should be of a 'dropping' consistency. Add more liquid of your choice to adjust to taste. Allow the puddings to soak overnight. The next day add a teaspoon of baking powder and also some extra alcohol. Place in a well greased pudding basin, allowing about an inch space from the top for the pudding to rise slightly. On the top of the pudding, place a double layer of greased greaseproof paper and finally seal the top with a layer of tin foil secured with an elastic band. Steam the Christmas Pudding in a double steamer initially for 10 hours. Let the pudding cool and store until required. When serving, place the pudding in a double steamer for another 5 hours. Flame with brandy (warm the brandy slightly before pouring over the pudding). Don't forget to top with rum butter!

My Favourite Things...

I asked a couple of native Britains what their favorite parts of Christmas were... here's what they said!

I remember being too excited to sleep because I wanted to see Santa Claus!!! My favourite part of Christmas is feeling close to my family.

- Sarah Greene, London

I'd love to be really traditional and have lots of things we do at xmas that are set in stone, but unfortunately my family are far too disorganized!...Sometimes we go to relatives' houses (my favourite). My aunt and uncle have a huge, 10 bedroom place up north and we all descend on them and drink far too much.

-Abby Rudland, London

One of the best things about being half English/half Norwegian is that you get two awesome meals. Norway celebrates the 24th as the big day, so we have presents and a big feast of a meal, whereas England it's the 25th! Two days means two big meals...I was full up until New Years it felt like!

-George Motum, Shapwick

"Happy, happy Christmas, that can win us back to the delusions of our childhood days, recall to the old man the pleasures of his youth, and transport the traveler back to his own fireside and quiet home!"~Charles Dickens