



Facing page: Christmas carp terrine with dried figs. This page: A selection of Christmas cookies and candied fruit.

Festive Feasts

Robin Lynam takes us on a Christmas culinary tour around the world.

All over the world Christmas is regarded as a time to eat, drink and make merry and the traditional Christmas staples of the English speaking countries – roast turkey, hams studded with cloves, Christmas cake, Christmas pudding and mince pies – have been adopted internationally as festive fare. There are, however, many other traditional Yuletide dishes specific to particular countries, some of which can come as a bit of a shock to the uninitiated.

Reindeer meat, which is both tasty and nutritious, is popular throughout Scandinavia, Greenland and Alaska.

In Germany, goose – the most popular Christmas bird internationally until the early twentieth century when turkey became fashionable – is still likely to be the centrepiece of a meal, generally stuffed with apples and prunes. Also

a traditional Christmas food in France, goose is regaining some of its seasonal popularity in other countries because many people feel turkey meat tends to be too dry, or that the bird is too large for a small family gathering.

Since the middle ages, wild boar has been a festive meat of choice and ham remains essential to the season. In the Philippines lechon (spit roasted pig) is served, accompanied by Edam cheese, instead of turkey.

In Korea, the turkey has been replaced by the ubiquitous kimchi, along with hot peppers and bean paste served with either hot-pot or Korean barbecue.

In Australia and New Zealand, where Christmas falls in the middle of summer, the day is also marked with a barbecue, usually mixed meats, perhaps supplemented by the well loved shrimp.



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Above, from left to right: Roast turkey with cranberry stuffing, a traditional Christmas feast in much of Europe, the US and Canada; Eggnog is a popular seasonal tippie. Below: The Buche de Noel or Christmas Log is enjoyed in France and French speaking countries.

Seafood is eaten alongside or instead of meat at Christmas dinners in many countries. In Iceland the centrepiece of the table is as likely to be skate as reindeer, lamb or pork – the traditional meat favourites there. In France oysters and smoked salmon are traditional elements of the *revéillon* – a long dinner served on Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve consisting mostly of luxury foods including foie gras – while in the Czech Republic families sit down to fish soup followed by fried carp with potato salad. Carp may also be served as a Christmas dish in Germany and Poland, particularly

on Christmas Eve. The Scandinavian countries, where Christmas Eve is usually the date for the main Christmas meal, serve special smorgasbords – known in Sweden as *Julbord* – in which smoked, cured and pickled fish play an important role. The Lithuanians celebrate with herring.

In North America, Christmas menus in different parts of the country reflect historic patterns of immigration. In Quebec Christmas is celebrated by a French style *revéillon*, while the descendants of Scandinavians in Minnesota will dine on jelly-like lutefisk and mashed swede which they call rutabaga. Notwithstanding those regional preferences, Americans and Canadians – even though both sit down to large turkey dinners only weeks before Christmas as part of their Thanksgiving celebrations – still mostly go back to the bird for Christmas as well.



For centuries, Christmas has been a particularly enjoyable time for the sweet of tooth. Mince pies, which were originally baked in the shape of a crib, have been a traditional English Christmas food since at least the 16th century and according to Northern English custom one should be eaten on all of the 12 days of Christmas, each in a different household. This is believed to bring luck for the 12 months of the coming year.

In Germany Christmas would not be Christmas without stollen – a richly flavoured fruit bread that was originally a local speciality in Dresden, but is now popular throughout central Europe and further afield. The shape of the stollen – or Christstollen as it is sometimes called – is supposed to resemble the baby Jesus wrapped in swaddling clothes. Denmark's fruit loaf equivalent is the julekage.

GOURMET

In Italy Christmas is a time for panettone, a traditional cake from Milan, and pandoro, a golden coloured cousin to panettone that originated in Verona and is shaped like a star. The Spanish equivalent is a shortbread called polvorón from Andalusia – also still popular at Christmas in the Philippines, reflecting the country's Spanish colonial history.

One advantage of baked foods is that they can be prepared early and served throughout the Christmas period, which for practical purposes lasts from early December to early January. Christmas cakes – usually fruit cakes, sometimes preserved with brandy or whisky – are often made well in advance but decorated with thick icing closer to Christmas Day. They remain popular in Britain, North America and elsewhere – including Asian countries. During December gourmet food shops and some supermarkets in cosmopolitan cities such as Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Hong Kong and Bangkok stock up on Christmas cakes, as well as mince pies and such traditional accompaniments as brandy or rum butters.

Above right: Carp is a popular replacement for the Christmas turkey in many countries. Below: In Korea, the festivities are celebrated with a Christmas hot-pot.



The Philippines has its own interpretation of the Christmas Cake. The Filipinos celebrate Christmas with a pound cake preserved with a mixture of rum or brandy and palm sugar.

Christmas puddings, decorated with holly and aflame with brandy, traditionally have one or more lucky coins stirred into the mix, but in Denmark a “Christmas rice pudding” is served instead, containing a single lucky almond. The person who finds it is entitled to an extra Christmas gift.

In France and the French speaking countries dessert tends to be the *Buche de Noel*, a Christmas “log” made of sponge cake with a sweet coating coloured and textured to resemble bark, while the Christmas dessert of choice in Australia or New Zealand is the ever popular Pavlova meringue cake – a speciality which both nations claim to have originated.

Ice creams flavoured with some of the ingredients of Christmas pudding are another popular choice in Australasia and can be found in Singapore and Malaysia as well, while the Goanese layered pudding *Bebinca*, though not specific to Christmas, is a popular seasonal dessert not just in Goa but in Portugal, the Philippines and Macau.

Christmas drinks also vary internationally. Champagne is an international choice as well as a characteristically French one and various types of mulled spiced wine are associated with Christmas in Scandinavia, central Europe and English speaking countries worldwide. Eggnog, usually made with brandy or rum, is also a popular seasonal tippie in Britain and North America, as is Black Velvet, a cocktail of Guinness stout and champagne.

Whatever the dish or the libation, Christmas is a time for hospitality and the sharing of good food and drink. Other traditions may differ around the world, but that one is universal. Long may it so continue. **P**

