

# The Telegraph

## Who needs Nigella? Stir-up Sunday: the idiot's guide to home-made christmas pudding

From cinnamon to sultanas, here's expert tuition on making Christmas pudding.

---



Iain Hollingshead mixes his Christmas pudding, supervised by John Lewis's pastry chef, Mark Sargent Photo: RII SCHROER

---

By [Iain Hollingshead \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/journalists/iain-hollingshead/\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/journalists/iain-hollingshead/)

7:30AM GMT 18 Nov 2011

271 followers



[17 Comments \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/foodanddrink/8896690/Who-needs-Nigella-Stir-up-Sunday-the-idiots-guide-to-home-made-christmas-pudding.html#disqus\\_thread\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/foodanddrink/8896690/Who-needs-Nigella-Stir-up-Sunday-the-idiots-guide-to-home-made-christmas-pudding.html#disqus_thread)

This Sunday, the last before Advent, churchgoers will hear an unintentional reminder from the Book of Common Prayer that it's time to make the Christmas pudding. "Stir up, we beseech thee, O Lord..." starts the Collect of the day.

And yet the tradition of Stir-up Sunday, with the whole family gathering in the kitchen to pummel the mixture and

make a wish, appears to be going the same way as church attendance. A survey in 2007 found that two thirds of British children had never stirred a Christmas pudding mix. It is now thought that more than 90 per cent of families buy pre-made puddings.

John Lewis, the secular Angel Gabriel of Christmas television ads, is doing its best to revitalise this tradition. Inspired by rising sales of everything from whisks to wooden spoons, it is offering cooking classes this Saturday in its Liverpool and east London branches. Earlier this week, I went to the Westfield shopping centre, in Stratford, for a sneak preview.

Mark Sargent, a John Lewis pastry chef who's been in the industry for 20 years, seven of them at the Savoy, is my guide for the morning. I warn him that I might need rather more guidance than most, my culinary repertoire having never progressed beyond alternating red and green pesto with my limp pasta. My contribution to the family Christmas pudding has traditionally been limited to wrapping up 20p pieces in foil and putting them inside once it's already cooked.

"I'd rather take on someone with an open mind than a prima donna who thinks he knows it all," he tells me.

---

[Restaurant recipe: EXO Tower's barbecued chilli squid with Thai basil watermelon salad and chilli caramel \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/europe/uk/london/8896117/Restaurant-recipe-EXO-Towers-barbecued-squid-with-Thai-basil-watermelon-salad-and-chilli-caramel.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/europe/uk/london/8896117/Restaurant-recipe-EXO-Towers-barbecued-squid-with-Thai-basil-watermelon-salad-and-chilli-caramel.html)

['Mean-spirited' restaurants charging £7.40 a slice to cut birthday cakes \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/foodanddrink/foodanddrinknews/8896116/Mean-spirited-restaurants-charging-7.40-a-slice-to-cut-birthday-cakes.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/foodanddrink/foodanddrinknews/8896116/Mean-spirited-restaurants-charging-7.40-a-slice-to-cut-birthday-cakes.html)

[London pub guide: The Cumberland Arms, west London \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/foodanddrink/pubs/8895838/London-pub-guide-The-Cumberland-Arms-west-London.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/foodanddrink/pubs/8895838/London-pub-guide-The-Cumberland-Arms-west-London.html)

[Carrot, chicken and barley soup recipe \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/foodanddrink/recipes/8891260/Carrot-chicken-and-barley-soup-recipe.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/foodanddrink/recipes/8891260/Carrot-chicken-and-barley-soup-recipe.html)

[Priscilla Carluccio: no longer hiding \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/property/interiorsandshopping/8888888/Priscilla-Carluccio-Ive-always-been-a-handbag-to-the-men-in-my-life.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/property/interiorsandshopping/8888888/Priscilla-Carluccio-Ive-always-been-a-handbag-to-the-men-in-my-life.html)

[24-carrot gold roasted carrot, spinach and feta salad recipe \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/foodanddrink/recipes/8891267/24-carrot-gold-roasted-carrot-spinach-and-feta-salad-recipe.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/foodanddrink/recipes/8891267/24-carrot-gold-roasted-carrot-spinach-and-feta-salad-recipe.html)

---

Which is lucky, as I know that I know absolutely nothing. We get on famously.

Fortunately, it turns out that making a Christmas pudding is surprisingly easy. "As long as you can read a set of

scales, you can't really go wrong," says Sargent. I don't even have to do that. Someone has already chopped, weighed and divided all the ingredients into small colourful bowls, stretched out in front of us like a painter's palettes.

Our recipe first appeared in 2004 in the WI Complete Christmas, donated by a WI member from her grandmother's recipe book. The truth, however, is that there is not much variation when it comes to modern recipes for Christmas puddings. Early versions, originally known as Christmas porridge, appeared in the 14th century, incorporating beef, mutton and wine. In 1664, Cromwell banned it as a lewd, sacrilegious custom. In 1714, George I reintroduced it without the meat. Today, it tastes more or less the same wherever you are (normally under the table, very full).

Currents, raisins, sultanas and prunes go in first. Next, you get to add rum. Guinness and brandy work just as well, too. When Sargent worked at Simpson's in the Strand they used to use several cases of the stuff. "Lovely puddings."

Mix it up, ideally the night before cooking to give the fruit time to soak up the alcohol. Then add some muscovado sugar. "It's worth investing in good quality ingredients," says Sargent. "It might be 30p more per kilo, but that doesn't work out as much more per person."

In any case, you can probably make your own pudding for about half the price of a bought one.

Next come the breadcrumbs, cinnamon, ground coriander and ground nutmeg. "Don't be afraid to get your hands dirty," says Sargent gleefully.

One subtle change in our recipe is that we're using a vegetarian suet. Did you know that suet is the fat surrounding a cow's kidneys? I didn't.

But now that I do, I'm rather glad we're using vegetarian suet.

You probably know what comes next: mixed candied peel, grated cooking apple, grated carrot and three eggs. And then the real fun starts. Traditionally, this is when the whole family takes it in turns to stir and make a wish.

This wish is meant to come true, as long as you don't tell people. "I still haven't won the Lottery," confides Sargent, thereby confirming the theory.

So now I put it in the oven and bake it, right? Ah, no. Making a Christmas pudding isn't quite that foolproof. It needs to be steamed, having been carefully wrapped in cling film first. "You've used it before," says Sargent, admiring my technique. Indeed. You can't just throw out the uneaten limp pasta and pesto.

Amusingly, some people even more inept in the kitchen than I mistake the reheating instructions on a bought pudding for cooking instructions on a homemade variety. An uncooked Christmas pudding requires rather longer than three minutes in a microwave. Four hours in a steamer should do it, although Sargent prefers a bit longer. Then you can leave it in a cool place until Christmas Day to develop the flavours.

Of course, not everyone can wait that long. The old children's rhyme had an even more dubious take on the Book of Common Prayer: "Stir up, we beseech thee, the pudding in the pot; And when we get home we'll eat the lot."

Others are more organised and make their puddings a year in advance, allowing their flavours to develop.

Personally, I can't wait long enough. Give me seconds of turkey any day over bloated, heavy Christmas pudding. But making it is a great deal more fun than eating it.

### **A traditional WI Christmas Pudding recipe, courtesy of John Lewis**

Preparation time: 40 – 45 minutes

Initial cooking time: 4½ – 5 hours

Serves 8-10

#### **Ingredients**

125g (4½ oz) ready to eat prunes, chopped

225g (8 oz) raisins

225g (8 oz) currants

225g (8 oz) sultanas

50g (2 oz) mixed candied peel (preferably in large pieces), chopped rind and juice of 1 lemon

50g (2 oz) chopped almonds

1 cooking apple approximately 125g (4½ oz), peeled, cored and grated

1 medium carrot 75g (2¾ oz) peeled and grated

225g (8 oz) molasses sugar

225g (8 oz) suet (I use vegetable rather than beef)

125g (4½ oz) fresh white breadcrumbs

125g (4½ oz) plain flour

½ teaspoon ground cinnamon

½ teaspoon ground coriander

½ teaspoon freshly ground nutmeg

3 eggs

150 ml (¼ pint) strong ale

### Method

**1** Put all ingredients except the eggs and the ale into a large bowl and mix together well.

**2** In a basin put the eggs and ale and whisk together to combine and stir into the mixture. This is the time to stir and make your wishes.

**3** Cover and leave to stand over night in a cool place.

**4** Butter the pudding basin and put a small circle of greaseproof paper in the base.

**5** Pack the mixture into the basin and smooth the top. Leave a 2.5 cm (1 inch) head space.

**6** Cover the top of the pudding with a circle of non-stick paper. Take a large piece of doubled foil – approximately 6 inches all round, larger than the top of the pudding basin. Make a pleat and cover the pudding basin, pressing down the outer edges. Tie a piece of string around the top of the bowl to secure the foil. Take a piece of doubled foil, long enough to sit under and up the sides of the bowl, with sufficient extra to use as a lifting aid to remove the pudding from the pan when cooked.

**7** Put the basin in the top of a steamer which is sitting on a pan of simmering water and steam for the required time. Remember to top up with boiling water every hour. Do not allow to boil dry.

**8** Alternatively, put the basin on a trivet (or an upturned saucer) in a large heavy-based saucepan. Pour boiling water around the edge until it comes 2/3 of the way up the side of the bowl. Cover with the lid of the pan and simmer for the required time. Remember to top up with boiling water every hour. Do not allow the pan to boil dry.

**9** Remove the basin and allow to cool. Put on a new foil cover and secure around the top of the basin.

**10** Store in a cool dark place until Christmas. It will keep for up to 6 months.

**11** Steam for 1½ - 2 hours before serving.

**12** Turn out on to a warm serving plate. Warm 2 table spoons of rum in a small saucepan. Set alight and carefully pour over the pudding. Place a sprig of holly on the top and serve.