



The fussy eater

Ariel Leve

I can't eat mince pies, and you smother everything in brandy. What is it with the British Christmas?

It should come as no surprise that I'm not a fan of the holiday menu. Everyone gathers to gorge on vast quantities of food, but if you're a vegetarian at Christmas dinner it's a bit like being a non-drinker at New Year. And I should know because I'm both.

When I was growing up in New York, Christmas dinner was Chinese food and dessert was a movie. Everyone still had a food hangover from Thanksgiving and no one cared about cooking. People couldn't even be bothered to make their own egg nog. Around the second week in December, cartons of processed egg nog would begin appearing in the dairy aisle of the supermarket and suddenly thick cream, raw eggs and sugar became a desirable drink. I've never understood the appeal of egg nog. I suppose if you're drinking it for the alcoholic content it has a purpose, but non-alcoholic egg nog? Why not guzzle some buttermilk?

When I got to Britain, I discovered that Christmas dinner and holiday-themed food is a major affair. Every hot beverage gets the hot toddy treatment: served in an Irish coffee glass and loaded with spices. Pumpkin-spiced



cider. Cinnamon-spiced pumpkin-infused hot chocolate. Can I just get a plain cup of coffee without a clove or nutmeg tossed into it? And if it's in a glass with whipped cream it's incomplete without a cinnamon stick. Or a peppermint stick. Or brandy.

The most exciting ingredient of all Christmas food is brandy. It's in everything. Cakes are soaked in brandy. Sauces are stirred with brandy. Who came up with the idea of brandy butter? Did they think it was wasting an opportunity to only get fat from butter when you could get drunk from it too?

I know people get really into their Christmas cooking, but a British friend of mine told me she started making her Christmas cake months in advance. "It's a rich fruit cake," she explained,

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"and I feed it with spoonfuls of brandy every day for weeks." I didn't know whether to be impressed or horrified. Should making a fruit cake take as much effort as raising a child?

Brits take their Christmas food very seriously. I start hearing about Christmas cake in October. When I confused Christmas cake with Christmas pudding, my friend nearly had a heart attack. How different can they be? They both have dried fruit, they both have alcohol, they're both sticky. OK, one's flaming and one isn't. But here's the big difference no one told me about. Christmas pudding is often made with suet. Which happens to be the same ingredient used in mince pies. Those adorable little pies filled with chopped dried fruit and spices that I thought I could eat – after I scooped out the filling to avoid the crust. Guess what? They have beef in them. I learned that one the hard way.

I was invited to a Christmas dinner at a friend's house and it was a disaster. There was nothing I could eat. I thought there might be something – a parsnip perhaps. Nope. Even the brussels sprouts were dripping with goose fat. There was bacon on top of the turkey, which was smothered in bread sauce. It all seemed so medieval. There was not one option for the wheat-free vegetarian – and no one cared. I mean, would a tomato mozzarella salad be sacrilege? It's not like I was asking for a tofurkey. If you're a fussy eater during the holidays, don't expect any goodwill. **OFM** ariel.leve@observer.co.uk

KITCHEN APPS

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Come Dine With Me

What is it? Spin-off from the TV series, which, let's face it, is about

schadenfreude and nosing about in other people's houses rather than food. Price £1.79

Key ingredient? The developers clearly hope it's the "dinner party planner", which is very on message for the brand and all that nonsense. Plus the 100 recipes, spread across starters, mains and desserts are

not bad, drawn from a selection that's imaginative enough to include a dish such as razor clams with blood oranges. But, let's be honest, it's all about the Dave Lamb function.

Who's he? The show's snarky voiceover man, always on hand to say what the viewer is thinking, however waspish. In app form, that means more than 30 pre-recorded Lamb phrases, from nice to nasty, are available at the touch of the screen.

Won't this quickly become tiresome? That's what people said about the TV show, and now look at it.

THE PIE CHART

This month: unpaid bills run up during the "eat and run" spree of Janis Nords, arrested last month for leaving top restaurants without paying

