

Ghost of Christmas dinner past



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Turkey, cranberry sauce and all the usual trimmings are par for the course when it comes to Christmas dinner. But these are very much 20th Century traditions.

JOANNA ROBERTS looks back on the traditions of Christmas dinners past.

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On a cold and wintery Sunday, just after the shortest day of the year, families across Ireland will sit down to Christmas Dinner, the ritual midwinter feast with a menu so familiar that even the smallest family member can tell you what's in store: roast turkey with stuffing, cranberry sauce, potatoes, parsnips and Brussels sprouts. Peek into the house next door and the one next to that, and the scene will be repeated over and over throughout the country.

Turkey is so inextricably linked with Christmas in both our culture and our buying behaviour that despite being available year round, it's very much a seasonal product. Out of the estimated two million turkeys eaten in Ireland each year, around 500,000 will be gobbled at Christmas, with 80% being produced in this country. And of course, love them or hate them, Christmas just wouldn't be the same without that other great seasonal product: Brussels sprouts. 2,300 tonnes are produced in Ireland each year for the domestic market, with more imported from the UK, Belgium and the Netherlands to meet demand.

But was it ever thus? Monica Askay, a cook and food historian, says that while big birds have always been the centrepiece of Christmas tables, it wasn't always turkey. "In the 16th century they ate swan and peacock, which would be served with the

feathers back on. When turkeys came in after the new world was discovered, they became the preferred bird because swan and peacock could be very tough."

However, the banquets didn't stop there. "Up until the mid 19th century, they would have had several dishes, with turkey and goose only being two. Boar's head was a traditional Christmas dish way back and there would be a mixture of savoury and sweet. Mince pies were made from meat mixed with dried fruit and spices." Although it may sound odd to our modern palates, remnants of these traditions remain: ham and sausages are echoes of the boar, we mix savoury turkey with sweet cranberry, and mince pies are traditionally made with beef suet.

By the 19th century, as seasonal vegetables were introduced, Christmas Dinner began to look more familiar, although turkey remained largely the preserve of the wealthy and goose was the bird of choice for most families. Slowly, turkey spread to the middle classes until the introduction of modern farming and distribution methods in the mid 20th century meant it became an affordable option for everyone.

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Darina Allen says small, local producers also contributed to its rising popularity. "On every farmyard people had at least a few turkeys, the bronze turkeys," she says. "Farmers' wives reared turkeys on the side so the tradition and skill of rearing was in the family. They'd go along to the marts, get a few bob and that was the money for Christmas. It's a real shame the turkey marts were discontinued. It was a tradition, part of our food culture."

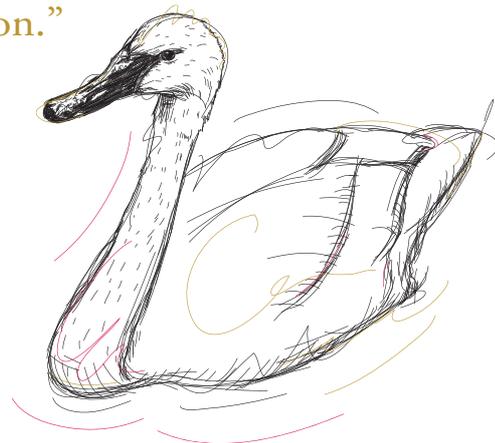
Although we share our love of a stuffed bird with many other countries, some traditional festive dishes – such as spiced beef – are uniquely Irish. According to Allen, who includes a recipe for traditional spiced beef in her book *Forgotten Skills of Cooking*, the dish emerged out of Cork's naval

heritage. "There was a very strong provisioning trade out of Cork because it's the last port of call before ships crossed the Atlantic," she says. "Meat had to last on an Atlantic crossing so it was corned and some was spiced; it was a trading port so they would have had access to spices."

Although spicing beef may be a forgotten skill for many home cooks, Allen perceives a growing demand. "It hasn't died out in this part of the world; in fact I'd say there's a revival. If you ring the butchers there are a lot who are making it now. The artisan thing is gathering momentum and people are looking for food with a story. They're also jaded of the usual menus."

Dave Lang from the Association of Craft Butchers agrees. "I gave away 8,000 samples of spiced beef at the Taste of Christmas in Dublin last year and 90% of people had never tasted it before. But it's becoming popular as a starter, particularly sliced thinly like smoked salmon."

People might tinker with their starters but when it comes to the main Lang doesn't see our taste for turkey changing. "Some people are buying beef or legs of lamb for Christmas. But 90% of people will buy turkey."



Tom O'Driscoll, Chief Executive of Grove Turkeys, which supplies turkeys to all the Irish supermarkets, says that while the mass market is still fresh whole birds and turkey crowns, a couple of trends are emerging. "There is increased demand for free-range and organic produce, together with a growth in demand for products such as stuffing,

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garnishes and butchered products. It's convenience, yes, but maybe you're also a small family and only want enough turkey for Christmas Day.”

There's also a sense among some that turkey is no longer different

enough for a celebratory meal. Pat Whelan, who runs James Whelan butchers in Co Tipperary, says: “The change in food type at this time of year is what makes it special, a celebration. You can have turkey at any time of the year. Although the tradition is being maintained in terms of turkey and ham, we're getting new interest in rare breed animals such as the bronze turkey and goose.”

Whatever variations and preferences individual families may have, it seems our love affair with turkey is still in full swing. But just as turkey was introduced to our shores from the new world, could other outside influences

make their mark in the future? Ireland's 60,000-strong Polish population, for example, eat their Christmas feast on 24th December once the first star appears in the sky. Their tables don't contain meat, but twelve dishes to represent the twelve days of Christmas, which include carp and borscht – beetroot soup with ravioli.

It's not so far from our own traditions as you might imagine: Darina Allen points out that Irish people used to eat salt cod when they came home from midnight mass on Christmas Eve. So, if we were visited by our own Ghost of Christmas Dinners Yet to Come, who knows what we'd see?

Coping with Christmas: The turkey farmer

Christmas preparations start early at East Ferry Free Range in Midelton, Co Cork: March, in fact, when owner Robert Fitzsimmons receives his first batch of goose chicks.

Turkeys arrive between the second week in August and the second week in October. They're bought in at five weeks' old to ensure their viability. “Once you get them to an off-heat stage they're fine,” says Fitzsimmons. “But from a day old to five weeks' of age, turkeys can be extremely good or extremely difficult.” The staged arrivals mean they'll reach a range of different weights by Christmas, although Fitzsimmons says rearing the turkeys to a customer's desired weight is probably the hardest part of his job.

East Ferry is a free-range farm. “We have a specialised turkey house that opens down one side. In the morning we open the doors and the turkeys are left to roam in a grass field from morning to night.” The turkeys are fed on turkey feed which has added vitamins and minerals, while the geese eat grass supplemented with rolled barley. Fitzsimmons says lots of effort goes into the rearing but it's worth it. “They're a lot more flavoursome,

heavier in weight, a lot better quality. We aim for the top end of the market.”

Throughout the year, Fitzsimmons bread and butter is chickens: he sells 400 a week to customers including Ballymaloe House. But with 850 bronze and traditional turkeys and 250 geese heading for Christmas tables around the country, there's a definite seasonal peak to his workload.

Naturally, December is his busiest time of year. The turkeys are electronically stunned, killed and dry plucked by machines which remove around 70% of the feathers. The remaining feathers are removed by hand, for which Fitzsimmons has between 15 and 20 helpers. His day begins at 5am when he goes into the yard to begin feeding and finishes around midnight.

Commercial orders are filled by 23rd December and then Fitzsimmons parks two fridge vans

outside his house to distribute turkeys and geese to between 80 and 100 private customers. And then it goes quiet. “All of a sudden the turkeys are gone and the all the people working with us are gone. Christmas Eve the yard becomes extremely silent. You get the sense that the job's almost complete for the year.”

