

Christmas Pudding



City/Region: England

Time Period: 1845

FROM HISTORY

To three ounces of flour, and the same weight of fine, lightly-grated bread-crumbs, add six of beef kidney-suet, chopped small, six of raisins weighed after they are stoned, six of well-cleaned currants, four ounces of minced apples, five of sugar, two of candied orange-rind, half a teaspoonful of nutmeg mixed with pounded mace, a very little salt, a small glass of brandy, and three whole eggs. Mix and beat these ingredients well together, tie them tightly in a thickly floured cloth, and boil them for three hours and a half. We can recommend this as a remarkably light small rich pudding: it may be served with German, wine, or punch sauce.

—Eliza Acton, *Modern Cookery for Private Families*



Whenever I take a bite of Christmas pudding, sometimes called plum pudding or figgy pudding, I intone those immortal words of Tiny Tim: “God bless us, every one.” This usually gets old by the fourth or fifth bite, which is why I’m no longer allowed to bring Christmas pudding to my family’s holiday dinner, but I digress. Sweet, fruit-filled boiled puddings have been a staple of the English holiday season for centuries. They became particularly popular when the English left their island to settle in places around the globe, because a boiled pudding makes a perfect long-distance gift. You can make it in June, then ship it to Canada, India, or Australia, because a journey of six months is but a blink in the life of a well-boiled pudding. An 1887 article in *Good Housekeeping* talks of a man named Colonel Hazard who received a pudding while he was gone on holiday and it sat for two years before he returned to eat it, after which he mused “that a good plum pudding, like the wheat found in the old Egyptian mummy cases, would keep all right for a thousand years.”

These puddings followed soldiers across the seas so often that they became a symbol of the British Empire itself, often being depicted in political

Opposite: *The Family Plum Pudding* by Robert Seymour

Right: *The Plumb-pudding in danger - or - State Epicures taking un Petit Souper* by James Gillray



cartoons of the day. One called *The Plumb-pudding in danger* shows William Pitt and Napoleon Bonaparte carving up a pudding in the form of the globe, Britain receiving a noticeably larger slice.

In 1843, only two years before Ms. Acton wrote her recipe, Christmas pudding played a starring role in the most famous Christmas story ever, when Mrs. Cratchit prepared her family's holiday feast.

Hallo! A great deal of steam! The pudding was out of the copper. A smell like a washing-day! That was the cloth. A smell like an eating-house and a pastry-cook's next door to each other, with a laundress's next door to that! That was the pudding! In half a minute Mrs. Cratchit entered—flushed, but smiling proudly—with the pudding, like a speckled cannon-ball, so hard and firm, blazing in half of half-a-quartern of ignited brandy, and bedight with Christmas holly stuck into the top.

—Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*

If your pudding turns out to look like a speckled cannonball, then you've done it correctly, but one thing to keep in mind is choosing when to make the pudding. Mrs. Cratchit was boiling hers on Christmas Day, but surely that was its second boiling, because a good pudding must age. In England, there is a specific day to make the pudding and it's over a month before Christmas.

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Christmas Pudding

continued

1 heaping cup (170 g) dark raisins

1 heaping cup (170 g) dried currants (see page 12)

1½ cups (170 g) shredded suet or frozen and grated butter/shortening, plus more for cloth

¾ cup (145 g) dark brown sugar

3 large eggs, beaten

⅓ cup (80 ml) brandy

¾ cup (90 g) all-purpose flour, plus more for cloth

¾ cup (85 g) dry bread crumbs

½ teaspoon ground nutmeg

¼ teaspoon ground mace

Pinch of kosher salt

1 small apple (120 g) peeled, cored, and finely chopped

¾ cup (60 g) candied orange peel

“Stir Up Sunday” is the last Sunday before the season of Advent, when we open calendars filled with old chocolate. It’s the day that you stir up the ingredients for your pudding, though the name of the day comes not from the baking done that day, but a line from *The Book of Common Prayer* that would be heard in Anglican churches all over England that morning: “Stir up, we beseech thee, O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people.” After that, everyone would head out of church for the kitchen to stir up their Christmas pudding.

MAKES 1 LARGE PUDDING (12 SERVINGS)
COOK TIME: 4 HOURS 30 MINUTES

1. This pudding can be made in a pudding basin and steamed, which is much easier, but here we are following Eliza Acton’s instructions for boiling. You will need a large piece of calico or muslin at least 24 inches (60 cm) square, but preferably a little larger, as it will shrink. Do not use cheesecloth, as its weave is too loose. If the cloth has never been used to boil a pudding before, boil it in water for 20 minutes, then remove it from the heat and let it soak overnight. The next day, fill a large pot half-full of fresh water and boil the cloth again for 20 minutes. If the cloth has been used previously for puddings, only this second (20-minute) boiling is necessary.

2. While the cloth boils, soak the raisins and currants in warm water for 10 minutes, strain them, and then prepare the pudding.

3. Add the suet, brown sugar, eggs, and brandy to a large bowl and beat until smooth. In a separate bowl, whisk together the flour, bread crumbs, nutmeg, mace, and salt. Add the egg mixture to the dry ingredients and stir until just combined, then stir in the raisins, currants, apple, and candied orange peel until well incorporated. Set it aside as you finish preparing the pudding cloth.

4. Using tongs, remove the pudding cloth from the boiling water; leave the water boiling. Allow the cloth to cool to the point that you’re able to handle it without burning yourself, or use rubber gloves. Lay the pudding cloth flat and rub a 16 x 16-inch (40 x 40 cm) square in the center of the cloth with a coating of suet/butter. Coat this with a heavy layer of flour, lightly pressing the flour down into the cloth. The goal is to make a watertight skin of butter and flour between the cloth and the pudding, so use more than you think is

A family sit around a table eating their Christmas meal and greet the arrival of the plum pudding which is being carried in on a large tray by Cecil Aldin



necessary, especially in the center. Once it's well floured, place the cloth, flour side up, in a medium bowl and spoon the pudding batter into the center of the cloth. While this can be done without putting it into a bowl, the curved sides will help keep the pudding shape as you form it into a ball. Once the pudding is shaped, gather up the ends of the cloth and twist to form a tight seal at the top of the pudding. Then take cooking string and tie it tightly around the cloth as close as possible to the pudding. Tie two ends of the cloth together to form a handle. Lift the pudding, give it one final shaping—we're aiming for a cannonball—and carefully lower it into the pot of boiling water. The water should come $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way up the sides of the pudding, no more. Cover the pot and boil for 4 hours. Every once in a while, check to make sure the water level hasn't dropped below halfway up the pudding. If it has, add more water that has already been boiled in a kettle; do not add water that is not already boiling.

5. Remove the pot from the heat and, using gloves, carefully remove the pudding from the pot and set it in a colander. Cut the string, untie the cloth, and peel it away from the pudding. Let it sit for 20 minutes before serving or place it in an airtight container in a cool place, or preferably the refrigerator, to age for up to 2 months. Every few days, pour a tablespoon of brandy over it to soak. When ready to serve, reboil the pudding, using the same floured-cloth technique, for 1 hour before serving.