




The winter kitchen

From game and oysters to chicory and chestnuts, this is the foodie's season to be thankful, *says Tonia George*

November

 The game season is in full swing this month, with pheasant, rabbit, partridge, woodcock, grouse and mallard all adding their rich flavour to winter's offerings.

By now, they have all had plenty of time to fatten up, making November the month to enjoy all of these birds. Mallard, a small wild duck, is a particularly good choice for a weekday roast for two. It takes about 40 minutes in a hot oven. Its strong-flavoured flesh is wonderful ripped apart and tossed with watercress, orange and shaved fennel. Partridge has a more delicate, leaner flesh and is a neat serving for one, if roasted. A rich gravy and an indulgent bread sauce are all you need to add. Older birds can be casseroled or pot roasted along with wedges of apples, thyme and cider, before being finished with an overloaded spoon of crème fraîche at the end.

Mussels, prawns and scallops all thrive in cold waters. Local lobster and mackerel are at the end of their season, and though they may have lost their attractive price tag, its worth indulging as you won't see them on the fishmonger's slab until next summer.

November is also the month for British winter-maturing »

Fair game: November is the month to enjoy succulent pheasant and hearty winter vegetables

cauliflower. As well as the ubiquitous cauliflower cheese, this vegetable can be used in creamy soups spiked with English mustard, or preserved as piccalilli (made with other vegetables, mustard, spices and vinegar) in preparation for Christmas leftovers. If you start now, it'll be mature next month.

Good old King Edward potatoes fit the bill nicely on chilly evenings. Their fluffy insides make sublime jacket potatoes, chips and the best roast potatoes – parboil them and give them a shake in the colander before roasting, for fluffy golden edges.

Catch the last of the wild mushrooms before they disappear for the year. Sauté them in butter with garlic and lavish across thickly sliced bruschetta, or add them to game casseroles to give savoury depth to the pan juices.

As well as apples and pears, which provide a valuable source of fruit for much of the winter, November offers medlars, quinces and sloes. These need help in the kitchen, as they are inedible raw. Quinces can be roasted in a hot oven or poached in a sugary syrup of Muscat wine with spices, until they turn a wonderful russet colour. Medlars and sloes are both improved by frost, which softens their astringency. Sloe gin (or vodka), made by adding pricked berries and sugar to the spirit, is a bracing tippie to be savoured after a long walk.

Gloomy afternoons are also greatly improved by baking home-made bread or cakes. Now is the time to make your Christmas cake and pudding, which needs at least six weeks to mature in flavour. Follow a good recipe, but feel free to substitute more interesting dried fruits for sultanas and currants. Dried cherries, cranberries and blueberries all work well. Try using unrefined sugar which has a stronger taste of molasses. It will transform your baking.



A good catch: native oysters are in season – try them raw with a bowl of spicy sausages

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Meat: grouse, mallards, partridges, pheasants, rabbits, venison

Fish: herrings, lobsters, mackerels, mussels, native oysters, prawns, scallops, sea bass, turbot

Fruit: apples, medlars, pears, quinces, sloes

Vegetables: Brussels sprouts, cabbages, cardoons, carrots, cauliflower, celeriac, celery, chards, chicory, Jerusalem artichokes, kale, kohlrabi, leeks, onions, parsnips, pumpkins, potatoes, squashes, spinach, swede, turnips, wild mushrooms

Nuts: chestnuts

December

This is the month to celebrate real comfort food. Due to a distinct lack of home-grown produce it's traditionally been a case of making a silk purse out of a sow's ear. Onions, shallots and garlic harvested earlier in the year are all happy left in the cool right through the winter. We all know most good dishes start with one or other of these alliums, but onions and shallots in particular can also steal the show. The secret is to cook them gently with a scattering of salt, covered with a lid to preserve all their precious juices, for 20 minutes or so in order to draw out their natural sugars. Shallots cooked this way can be glazed with balsamic vinegar and served as a side dish to any meat or fish dish. Caramelised sliced onions can be strewn across a puff pastry tart containing tapenade (a purée of olives, capers and olive oil) and baked. Stilton or matured goat's cheese on top makes a lovely final touch.

Another traditional winter vegetable, which is often relegated to the role of sidekick, is the paler winter celery. Diced and used in an aromatic mirepoix, along with some diced carrot and onion, it provides the backbone of countless wintry soups and casseroles. Take off the stringy outer stalks and use these for stock, and keep the heart for eating raw. Celery can also be stir-fried, along with prawns, sliced ginger, rice wine and stock finished with a nutty drizzle of sesame oil.

Kale, cabbages and sprouts are all wonderfully resilient to the cold December weather. They have sustained our nation through a season when little else that is green and nutritious survives. Kale can be briskly fried with chilli and garlic, and folded into omelettes, or topped with goat's cheese as a side dish. Heavier cabbages,



Bitter sweet: the sprout is loathed and loved in equal quantities but freshly cooked they are rarely bettered

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such as red cabbage, become sweeter with long, slow braising – a dash of warming spices and vinegar help to perk things up here. Chicory, when liberated from the salad bowl, is also wonderful at this time. Slowly braise it in a little stock, or brush with butter and grill until caramelised. Another winter delicacy is the sweet, nutty flavoured Jerusalem artichoke. Its knobbly shape makes it tricky to peel, but you can scrub them, leave them unpeeled, and roast with garlic and pancetta for 30 minutes.

Roots are another saving grace. Potatoes and carrots can be stored right through the winter. Seek out some unusual varieties, such as the French roseval – unmistakable with their claret skins and yellow-coloured flesh. Being waxy in texture, they're perfect for a fortifying hot potato salad. Slowly sauté halved potatoes

with diced bacon and sliced red onions until crispy and golden, then slosh some sherry vinegar into the hot bacon fat for an instant dressing.

Celeriac, parsnips and swede are all autumn-maturing vegetables. Celeriac is a knarled beast of a vegetable, with the mild flavour of celery. It can be peeled into smooth chunks, boiled and added to mashed potato, or grated and folded into a home-made mayonnaise, streaked with Dijon mustard. Both are lovely with roasted game birds.



Meat: goose, grouse, mallards, partridges, pheasants, rabbits,

Fish: herrings, mussels, turbot

Fruit: apples, pears, quinces

Vegetables: Brussels sprouts, cabbages, carrots, cauliflower, celeriac, celery, chard, chicory, garlic, Jerusalem artichokes, kale, kohlrabi, leeks, onions, parsnips, potatoes, pumpkins, spinach, squash, swede, turnips

Nuts: chestnuts

Christmas

There's a lot more to the month of December than that holy day of feasting, or bingeing, depending on how you view matters. For most of us, though, this is the feast of the year. It's an entirely personal choice as to whether you go for the Americanised version of Christmas and order a turkey. If you do go down this route, roast some wedges of squash or pumpkin with bay leaves and garlic for a side dish. If you have vegetarian guests, the small acorn squash, hollowed out and stuffed with breadcrumbs, herbs and cubes of melting cheese, makes a fitting meal for one. Parsnips can be roasted until crisp and then drizzled with maple syrup for a New England twist.

Imported American cranberries abound, so they are cheap and plentiful, but it's worth sticking a few in the freezer for other times of the year when they are impossible to find. They freeze very well. For a quick sauce, simmer fresh cranberries in orange juice and port, with sugar to sweeten. Add spices, such as cinnamon sticks and nutmeg. Enrich with butter at the end.

Goose is now only a very seasonal Christmas treat, but it wasn't always so. Traditionally, Whitsuntide in June and Michaelmas in September were the months geese feared. Gooseberry, a popular accompaniment to the June goose, may have got its name from the bird. There's not as much breast meat as turkey, but you gain skin as crisp as crackling and an invaluable source of goose fat that adds a meaty richness to roast potatoes, or any other vegetables you choose to roast it with.

At this time of the year, a well-hung rib of beef, with at least four bones, is also hard to beat, and it makes a fabulous centrepiece that gives you an »

excuse to make plenty of puffy Yorkshire puddings.

Parsnips are perfect by Christmas, as the frosts turn their starches to sugar. Their natural sweetness makes them good counterparts to a well-seasoned gravy. Choose slimmer ones, as the thick specimens tend to have woody centres. Any excess parsnips can be chopped and used in soups, or even in risotto with plenty of cheese and rosemary. Any Christmas cook worth his or her weight will buy Brussels sprouts, whether they are a fan or not. Sadly, these brassicas are unlikely to get the same treatment as cute fluffy puppies have in recent years and will remain firmly in the 'just for Christmas, not for life' camp – a great shame because they are another much-needed flash of green in the British cook's calendar. Shred them like cabbages and stir-fry with bacon and chestnuts, or purée and season with cream and nutmeg. This makes a wonderful cushion for some plump griddled scallops, which is a great alternative starter for Christmas lunch.

Another delicacy, which is often neglected for the rest of the year, is the chestnut. You can, of course, buy the convenient vacuum-packed ones, which are ready cooked and peeled, but roasting your own in the embers of the fire has its own charm. Make slits in the shells to allow them to expand. Leave one uncut as a reminder and it will announce when the rest are ready. Chestnuts have a natural affinity with cabbage, and are also delicious with chocolate. Simmer them for 20 minutes, peel while warm, and mash them with sugar and then use in buttercream, or as a topping for a meringue. Alternatively, try chopping and adding them to a breadcrumb stuffing with grated apple and ground cloves.

Apart from the ubiquitous smoked salmon, there are



That old chestnut: the Christmas favourite is delicious roasted but also works well with cabbage or chocolate

plenty of other smoked fish that are worth buying over the festive season. Smoked eel, trout and mackerel all make wonderfully easy pâtés. Simply blend in a food processor with a generous amount of melted butter and spike with horseradish, lemon and a little grating of mace. This makes a good light starter, but you can also spread it on toast as a snack or easy canapé.

Native oysters, which came into season at the end of September, thrive in the cool waters at this time of year. Do as the French do and serve these up raw with a bowl of hot spicy sausages – just right after you've slurped down the briny fresh oysters. It's

a match made in heaven.

Stilton, Blue Wensleydale and Vacherin Mont d'Or are the cheeses to look out for at Christmas. The latter is a Swiss/French cheese made only throughout the winter months. It is traditionally studded with garlic, doused in white wine, baked in its box and then scooped out with bread. Camembert, scattered with orange zest, can be treated in the same way. Use chicory as a scoop in place of bread. Stilton and Blue Wensleydale are both wonderful crumbled and melted into cauliflower and vegetable soups.



Sees the arrival of Barbie-pink forced rhubarb – perfect for crumbles and fools. The ever-reliable purple sprouting broccoli also makes its first appearance