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In defence of bread sauce – and the other Christmas foods everyone else thinks are old-fashioned

Mince pies, sprouts and now my beloved bread sauce: traditional culinary markers of Christmas may be waning, but they're part of the magic



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Elinor Davies will be pouring lashings of her beloved bread sauce over Christmas dinner this year Credit: Paul Cooper

Elinor Davies

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I love [bread sauce](#). There, I've said it. My family has always been fanatical about it, so it was only in adulthood that I realised it could be as divisive as

[sprouts](#) – a concept as strange to me as learning that some people don't like chocolate.

As a child, in the days leading up to Christmas, I was sent to weave through the crowds in M&S, elbowing the elderly out of the way to secure at least three tubs of the stuff. In recent years, we've made our own to ensure the creamy spiciness is exactly to our liking (and to prevent any more assault allegations). After making at least a litre of bread sauce on Christmas Day, I bury my food under it like a vibrant garden beneath heavy snow; if so much as a carrot tip peaks out from the beige duvet, I reach again for the jug, elbows sharp from my supermarket training.



For Davies, Christmas just wouldn't be the same without the traditional trimmings Credit: Paul Cooper

I love bread sauce for two reasons. Firstly, like many traditional festive foods considered dated and dreary ([Christmas pudding](#), brandy sauce and even [mince pies](#) can fall into this category), I firmly believe that bread sauce has an absolute culinary affinity with [Christmas dinner](#). It offers an excellent contrast to many of the meal's other components: greasier foods such as pigs in blankets, [roast potatoes](#) and [gravy](#) need its rich, almost absorbent texture to counteract what could otherwise be an overly oily plate. Likewise, the head-vibrating crunch of a good roast potato is made even more satisfying when paired with the easy yield of what's essentially baby food. For clueless home

cooks who boil their vegetables with neither seasoning nor compassion, the gentle spices of some well-placed bread sauce mask the taste of boil without silencing the flavour of the vegetables altogether – the perfect kitchen succour.

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Secondly, and totally unrelated to gastronomy, bread sauce has taken on something of a therapeutic role in my life. Since there is no other food in the world that I love yet consume only once a year, it has become a marker of time; the first mouthful transports me back a full 12 months while also prompting me to wonder where I'll be 12 months hence. Maybe I should end this pseudo-therapy and make bread sauce a staple of my diet, just as Brussels sprouts have become an autumnal mainstay in my kitchen. Once a month would do – as frequently as [Richard E Grant](#) enjoys a Christmas pudding, apparently.



Gen Z might prefer a chocolate-based dessert with custard on Christmas Day, but for purists like Davies it's all about a brandy-soaked, fruit-based pudding Credit: Paul Cooper

But while I champion greater bread sauce consumption, I cannot help but notice its quiet and creeping erasure from public thought. There is not a single mention of it when I browse the supermarkets' festive food catalogues, and while their television adverts are piled high with craggy mountains of roast potatoes, towers of [pigs in blankets](#) and mince-pie monoliths, bread sauce is nowhere to be seen. I mentioned this phenomenon to a friend recently and she looked at me blankly – she had never even heard of bread sauce.

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Just as we seem to be collectively forgetting about bread sauce, we are also abandoning traditional [Christmas desserts](#) for tenuously festive replacements. Just browse the supermarket aisles for evidence: a caramelised-biscuit mountain range (I'm looking at you, Sainsbury's), a "classic" chocolate and caramel melt-in-the-middle pudding in the shape of a plum pudding (Asda) and a toffee and honeycomb-filled chocolate mousse gingerbread man (Asda again) are some of this year's alternatives to fruited Christmas creations. Colin the Caterpillar (M&S) has once again expanded his repertoire to appear as a Christmas cracker and add to the gimmick-ification of this country's festive desserts.



Non-traditional desserts are rising in popularity, from cheesecakes to a 'classic' chocolate and caramel melt-in-the-middle pudding Credit: Paul Cooper

In the face of this unclassical pudding proliferation, it's little wonder that, only a couple of years ago, a mere 28 per cent of Brits ate a traditional Christmas pudding on the big day. And, just like the frightful flurries in *Let it Snow*, this trend shows absolutely no signs of stopping: 48 per cent of Gen Z opt for chocolate and salted caramel desserts over Christmas pudding. Thus, mince pies and figgy puddings come studded with chocolate chips and caramel chunks, accompanied by custards or butterscotch and chocolate sauces rather than brandy sauce. But, like the role of bread sauce in the Christmas dinner, there is a culinary science behind the pairing of a plum pudding with a classic

brandy sauce. The pudding – dark, claggy, spicy and sweet – needs the boozy zing to puncture the deep stodge. Custard shatters this balancing act and makes everything too sweet and cloying.

In a world with vibrant international ingredients and dishes at our fingertips, supermarkets must naturally embellish their festive offerings to keep our attention. After all, evolution is inevitable, and always has been: although Christmas pudding has medieval origins, it was only in the Victorian era that it came to resemble anything we'd recognise today. A salty, spiced meat potage with ground almonds served at the beginning of the meal, as per early iterations? No, thank you. Bread sauce, meanwhile, is an 18th-century adaptation of a 14th-century recipe for galentyne, a thick paste of breadcrumbs and spices bound with eye-watering levels of vinegar. Again, I'll pass.



Davies plans to pass on a reindeer-adorned cheesecake this Christmas – but she'll happily feast on mince pies Credit: Paul Cooper for The Telegraph

So, in the spirit of evolution for survival, if subtle changes such as chocolate chips, frangipane toppings or a merry splash of [limoncello](#) keep mince pies in production, so be it; at least people are eating them. But I cannot countenance Christmas cheesecake, no matter how many adorning reindeer might try to convince me it's festive. Likewise, I will not accept parsnips replaced by [Yorkshire puddings](#), Brussels sprouts supplanted by broccoli, or – frankly – anything whatsoever threatening my bread sauce.

Who knows what the future will hold for the Christmas table – maybe turkey [bao buns](#) washed down with katsu gravy, followed by winter spiced

doughnuts slathered in salted caramel, will become the new normal. Just not in my house, where, in 12 months’ time, I’ll once again be savouring my first mouthful of bread sauce.

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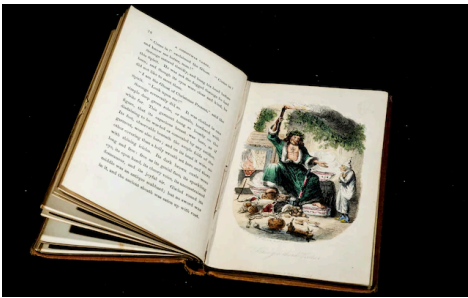


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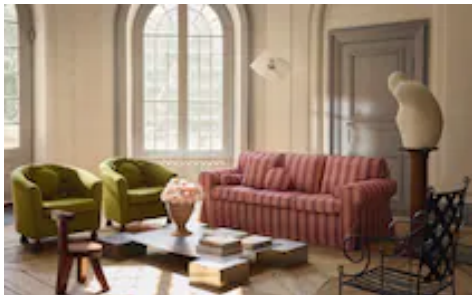
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