

THE COUNTDOWN TO CHRISTMAS

You won't have time to do everything from scratch but pick and choose what you can manage making yourself. Have a kitchen clear-out before the festive period and make separate lists for different shops you might visit: the butcher's, wine store, greengrocer's, florist, supermarket and department store. Putting the lists on your fridge door will make them easily accessible. The priority is to get all the food planned and organised as far in advance as possible, freezing where you can. With lots of shops closed around this time it's harder to nip out and get last-minute goods so getting ahead will allow you to put your feet up after Christmas Day.



END OF NOVEMBER Advent calendar: buy or make (page 115). Cards: gather addresses, buy or make (page 115). Christmas pudding: buy ahead, or make on the last Sunday in November (page 112). Browse online for stocking fillers and present ideas.

4 WEEKS TO GO Crafts: buy or make wrapping paper and crackers (page 115), tree decorations (page 123) and wreath (page 119). Christmas tableware: use the 5 C's checklist (crockery, cutlery, candles, crackers, centrepiece); check linen and napkins, then buy any extra supplies you need.

3 WEEKS TO GO Write and send Christmas cards. Order turkey, meat and other food, such as cheeses, for collection the week before Christmas.

2 WEEKS TO GO Plan meals and order non-perishables and drinks for delivery. Christmas tree: buy on second weekend in December. Decorate the tree and house (page 120). Make berry ball (page 119), edible gifts (page 116) and mince pies (page 112).

1 WEEK BEFORE CHRISTMAS Collect turkey and buy food perishables, plants and flowers. Prepare ahead: freeze meals for the period between Christmas and New Year, and any food for New Year's Eve (page 162). Wrap presents and stocking fillers.

A FEW DAYS BEFORE CHRISTMAS Sort seating plans for Christmas meals. Set out a corner for a jigsaw puzzle and some other games. Make ahead any food for Christmas Day.

CHRISTMAS EVE Set out stockings, a mince pie for Father Christmas and reindeer food (page 134). Last-minute wrapping. Set the table (page 138) and chill relevant drinks. Pour yourself a large glass, and put on Christmas carols.

PREPARE - AHEAD FOOD

These recipes can be frozen or prepared ahead, so you won't feel quite as stressed when it comes to entertaining over the Christmas period.

STORE COOKED FOR UP TO 6 MONTHS

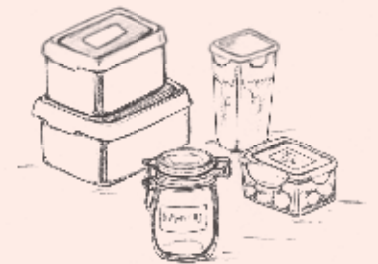
- **Christmas pudding** (page 112): keep covered in a cool, dark place, and reheat before serving.

FREEZE UNCOOKED FOR UP TO 3 MONTHS

- **Mince pies** (page 112): bake from frozen, adding 5 minutes to the cooking time.
- **Cheese biscuits dough** (page 130): allow to stand for 10 minutes, slice into rounds and then bake, adding 5 minutes to the cooking time.
- **Gingerbread dough** (page 116): defrost thoroughly before rolling out.
- **Pheasant goujons** (page 130) and **pigs in blankets** (page 147): defrost thoroughly before cooking.
- **Stuffing** (page 147): freeze in balls and bake from frozen, adding 5 minutes to the cooking time.
- **Brandy butter** (page 150) and **spiced Christmas butter** (page 137).

FREEZE COOKED FOR UP TO 1 MONTH

- **Twice-baked cheese soufflé** (page 143): freeze this after first cooking. Bake from frozen to complete second cooking.
- **Chocolate yule log** (page 150): freeze the sponge only for up to a month. Defrost, unroll, fill and decorate with chocolate ganache.
- **Giblet gravy** (page 146): defrost, reheat until piping hot and add the roasting juices from the turkey on the day.
- **Bread sauce and cranberry sauce** (page 146): Defrost thoroughly before heating through.
- **Parsnip soup espresso** (page 130): cook and freeze before adding the milk and cream.



UP TO 3 DAYS IN ADVANCE

- **Peppermint creams** (page 116): store in an airtight container.
- **Crostini and toasted bases for Christmas canapés** (pages 129–30): store in an airtight container, then assemble the toppings on the day of serving.
- **Boxing Day ham** (page 154): store cooked but unglazed in the fridge before roasting.
- **Stilton** (page 154).

24 HOURS BEFORE SERVING

- **Celeriac remoulade** (page 129).
- **Smoked trout paté** (page 143).
- **Shellfish tian** (page 143): prepare the base mixture ahead, but finish on the day.
- **Brussels sprouts** (page 147): blanch and refresh in iced water, store in the fridge and finish cooking on the day.

ON THE DAY

- **Canapés** (pages 129–30): prepare toppings and assemble.
- **Drinks and cocktails** (page 133).
- **Pear, walnut and Roquefort salad** (page 143).
- **Roast turkey** (page 144), **roast potatoes** (page 54), **honeyed carrots and parsnips** (page 147).



CHRISTMAS CRAFTS

In the build-up to Christmas it can be fun to make a few things: Christmas is, after all, about the exciting sense of anticipation. Buying cards sold in aid of charity is a good way of supporting worthy causes but children might enjoy making them. Similarly, it's nice to add a personal touch to Christmas wrapping using various ribbons, accessories and even potato printing on to plain paper.

RED ROBIN CHRISTMAS CARDS AND GLITTER PEGS

Red robins are symbols of Christmas, but you can experiment with other seasonal motifs and designs. Use images from old cards as well as lace, buttons, felt, cotton wool for snow – the possibilities are endless. Glitter pegs add a little sparkle to cards pinned on to ribbon. Hang the ribbons on either side of doorways.

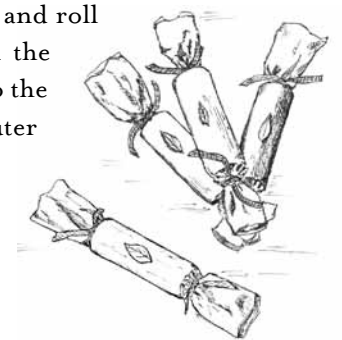
1: Cut a bird shape from some pretty paper and glue it to folded card using a glue stick. **2:** Glue a button for the eye and coloured card for the red chest and draw feet. **3:** To make glitter pegs use a brush and coat one side of a wooden clothes peg with PVA glue. Dip it into a shallow plate filled with glitter and shake off the excess, leaving to dry on a sheet of newspaper.



CHRISTMAS CRACKERS

It's lovely to make your own Christmas crackers and for the recipient to find personalised gifts inside.

1: For each cracker, cut two 30cm x 35cm sheets of crêpe paper and roll around 3 loo-roll tubes (lined up end to end), gluing down the seam to prevent unravelling. **2:** Place a gift, joke and a snap into the middle roll and tie a ribbon at either end. **3:** Remove the 2 outer rolls and fluff up the end of the crêpe. Decorate the top of the cracker with a dried leaf stuck on with a glue stick and write your guest's name on it.



A MATCHBOX ADVENT CALENDAR

I first came across this idea when a schoolfriend's mum made her a matchbox advent calendar. It's amazing what you can fit into a matchbox – this is all part of the challenge!

1: Number 25 matchboxes. Add a button or a short split pin to each drawer as a handle. **2:** Fix the matchboxes together, drawer-side out, using double-sided tape. Stack the boxes in 5 tiers, with number 25 at the top. **3:** Glue a strip of wrapping paper round the edges.

CHRISTMAS PUDDINGS

It's a wonderful piece of theatre when the Christmas pudding (page 112) makes its grand entrance, lit with burning brandy. Serve it alongside brandy butter or cream and warm a batch of mince pies. A chocolate yule log might be a welcome alternative to Christmas pudding, decorated with woodland symbols or perhaps covered with white chocolate icing to create a snowy scene. Bring out a cheeseboard and biscuits or one large wheel of cheese to complete the feast.



BRANDY BUTTER *Serves 8–10*

Mix 250g softened, unsalted butter, the zest of 1 orange and 80g soft light brown sugar until thoroughly combined. Gradually add 80ml brandy while mixing, until you have a creamy, smooth paste. Once made this will keep in the fridge for up to 4 days.

CHOCOLATE YULE LOG *Serves 8*

Preheat the oven to 190°C/gas 5. Grease and line a 33cm x 23cm Swiss roll tin. Separate 4 eggs. Beat the egg whites with an electric whisk until stiff, then gradually add 50g caster sugar while whisking continuously. In a separate bowl, beat the egg yolks with 75g caster sugar, add 80g self-raising flour and 2 tablespoons cocoa powder, then fold in the egg whites. Pour the sponge mixture into the tin. Use a spatula to spread the mixture evenly, then bake for about 10 minutes, until the top is springy. Remove from the oven, place a damp tea towel over the top of the tray and set aside to cool. Whip 200ml double cream to stiff peaks, then add 1 teaspoon of vanilla extract.

Remove the cooled sponge from the tin and turn it upside down on a plate. Soak the sponge with 8 tablespoons of cherry liqueur (optional), then turn it back over on to the baking parchment and spread the whipped cream on top. If not using liqueur, simply spread the cream all over the sponge. Holding the baking parchment with the longer side towards you, roll the sponge up, keeping it nice and tight. To make the icing, beat 120g softened, unsalted butter until smooth and then gradually beat in 160g icing sugar and 100g cocoa powder. If using, add another splash of cherry liqueur and mix well. If the icing needs thinning, add 4 tablespoons whole milk a little at a time, then spread it over the entire cake with a palette knife, making markings to resemble bark. Sift icing sugar over the cake, then decorate with chocolate shavings (page 32) and Christmas cake decorations.

