



Is it possible to have a completely British Christmas?

It's perfectly feasible to avoid supermarket shortages – and keep it green – by eating domestic produce this festive season

By Clare Hargreaves

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I don't know about you, but for me the exotic aromas of cinnamon and cloves are the smells of Christmas. This year, though, I'm going to mull my English wines and ciders

with spices I've gathered from hedgerows and gardens: hogweed seeds will do as cardamom; wood avens – the pesky weed invading my flowerbeds – will substitute clove; instead of vanilla, dried fig leaves will fit the bill perfectly.

Earlier this year in these pages I set myself [the challenge of eating only British produce](#). As a food writer I thought it would be interesting to see how hard it would be and I wondered if only consuming what's sustainably produced on my doorstep might be kinder on our countryside, communities and climate. Could it be fresher, tastier and more nutritious too?

It's been an [interesting journey](#). I won't pretend foregoing the caffeine kick of a morning cuppa has been easy, but there have been pleasant surprises too: like discovering many British-grown grains (which I mostly buy from Suffolk-based wholefood retailer Hodmedods) are far tastier than imported methane-belching rice, and that there's a dazzling array of [British cheeses](#) to grate on my risottos and bakes in the absence of parmesan. I've met incredible producers too, which has helped me feel more connected to my food. They include Bill from Essex who, after reading one of my previous articles, kindly offered me some of the harvest from his orange tree – just in time for my Christmas mulling.

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As the festive season approaches, I'm pondering what to put on my Christmas Day table. A high-welfare, low-food-mile bird from a local family farm is an obvious choice, but I might be too late: panic buying following reports about a shortage of abattoir workers in the wake of Brexit means they are pretty much sold out. "November is usually when British turkey farmers see Christmas orders coming in, but this year orders began as early as August and many members were nearly sold out by the end of October," says Kate Martin, chairwoman of the Traditional FarmFresh Turkey Association, which represents small family turkey farms. "We've never seen anything like this before." With feed, fuel and labour prices spiralling, the pricetag is heftier than last year's, too.

The meat I'm plumping for is miles more sustainable and, in my view, far tastier too: wild venison. In fact, you could argue that [eating wild venison is something we should all be doing to save our countryside](#). With no natural predators, the deer population has rocketed over recent decades and now stands at an estimated two million.

Wildlife film-maker Tim Martin, whose not-for-profit organisation Farm Wilder sells wildlife-friendly meat online, including venison culled by Forestry England, believes controlling the deer population – by eating it – is vital. “We now have more deer in the UK than we’ve had for 1,000 years,” he says. “Deer are causing untold damage to our woodlands which, as we know, are so vital for sequestering carbon. They’re also threatening the precious wildlife that lives within these woodlands, from dormice to silver-washed fritillary butterflies and nightingales.”

Clare recruited Liz Knight's help in keeping her diet entirely British | CREDIT: Andrew Crowley

It’s not only woodlands, wildlife and biodiversity that deer endanger. Farmers are also seeing precious crops destroyed, while deer are now a significant cause of rural traffic accidents.

As wild deer do not rely on a diet of cultivated cereals, which need fertilisers and other carbon-guzzling inputs, their carbon footprint is tiny. According to a report from the Danish think tank Concito, wild venison has the lightest carbon footprint of any type of meat – six times smaller than that of farmed poultry. Just 0.5kg of CO₂ is released in the production of 1kg of boneless wild venison. By comparison, poultry and seafood release about 3kg of CO₂ for every kg of bone- and shell-free meat, and the figure is the same for plant-based meat substitutes.

Another plus of wild venison is that it doesn’t require those hard-to-staff abattoirs. Deer on Forestry England plantations are humanely dispatched by expert stalkers, then butchered on the premises of game dealers such as MC Kelly and Highland Game, who supply butchers and supermarkets. So there is no overcrowding of farmed animals in pens, no antibiotics, no transportation of live animals, and no stress at the time of killing. And because venison is in such over-supply (particularly post-lockdowns, when restaurants, its main market, were shut) its price is surprisingly pocket-friendly. A boneless haunch, weighing 1.5kg, will feed six and costs just £20 via Farm Wilder (it’s also the same price in my local Bristol butcher). That’s considerably less than the equivalent weight of the organic free-range turkey I’ve seen on sale.

So what cut should I cook for my Christmas dinner? Andy Gray, who runs MC Kelly, recommends a roasting joint from a haunch or loin. And cooking it hot and fast: no more 6am alarm calls on Christmas morning to get the turkey in. “Treat it like a beef topside,” he says. “It has zero fat, so rub it with duck or goose fat, or cover it with streaky bacon before cooking.” A rolled haunch is also lovely wrapped in pastry to make a venison Wellington (or Venny Welly, as it’s called in my household.)

Britain is full of fantastic ingredients | CREDIT: Andrew Crowley

For accompaniments, I’ll see what’s on offer at my local farmers’ market or in my weekly Riverford UK vegetable box. That way I can ensure that my veg is organically grown and British, as shockingly, only around half the veg sold in the UK is actually grown here.

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I could stick to the usual sprouts, roasted potatoes and parsnips, gravy and bread sauce, maybe with a bit of herby stuffing. Or I might venture off-piste with some roasted salsify or celeriac; include some red cabbage braised with shredded apples, elderberry vinegar and bay leaves; replace the bread sauce with creamy celeriac purée. London’s Michelin-starred Harwood Arms, famous for its venison, serves it with yorkshire puddings and cauliflower cheese topped with breadcrumbs and truffle mayonnaise.

If I opt for sprouts they won’t get the sulphurous boil-to-death treatment that puts so many Brits off them; instead I’ll shred and stir-fry them with foraged chestnuts and free-range streaky bacon bits – a feast in itself. And if a veggie main is also needed, I’ll knock up a Riverford squash, kale and stilton pie: always a hit.

When it comes to eating British at Christmas, the biggest challenge is pud. Yes I can manage British brandy (in the form of Somerset cider brandy), oranges (thanks to my kind Telegraph reader Bill), pasture-fed beef suet from Pipers Farm in Devon, and my foraged spices. But a traditional pudding, as we know, is a fruity affair, and if you’re buying dried fruit, none will be British-grown (that’s if there are HGV drivers to get them on the supermarket shelves in the first place). Grapes grow brilliantly here and we’re growing more and more for wine, but due to the lower return, we’re not yet

cultivating them for drying. Overall we produce just 16 per cent of our fruit, and next year’s figure is likely to slump still lower, thanks to the dearth of pickers, post-Brexit.

I'm going to have to be clever.

If you have the time and knowledge, you can find numerous ingredients all around | CREDIT: Andrew Crowley

Luckily, I find help in the shape of forager Liz Knight, whose book *Forage: Wild Plants to Gather and Eat* was published earlier this year, and who runs courses in making Christmas puddings from British ingredients. Signed up, I drive through sheep-dotted hills to her Herefordshire kitchen.

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“People imagine it’s difficult to forage for your own fruits and spices, but [actually these are growing all around us](#) – it’s just a matter of opening our eyes,” says Knight. “Most of us will know of a grapevine growing in a garden nearby and drying grapes is easy: just dehydrate them overnight in a very low oven. You can also include fresh elderberries, which are bursting with antioxidants. To make your spices, simply grind your ripe seeds in a coffee grinder or processor.”

Obviously, not everyone will have the time or inclination for these procedures – and you’ll need to do them in autumn when you’re harvesting fresh fruits and seeds – but Knight demonstrates that making a totally British Christmas pudding is perfectly feasible.

While it’s not quite Christmas yet, I have to give the pud a try. It turns out to be a far cry from the usual stodgy affair that lies like lead in your stomach after lunch and ensures there’s not an open eye during the Queen’s address. This one is miraculously light and moist, with the flavours of the hogweed spice and Bill’s oranges shining through.

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No-one can “cancel” my Britmas: in this bleak winter of Covid, post-Brexit shortages, cross-border bureaucracy, post-Cop26 climate awareness and rocketing fuel prices, eating British feels like a no-brainer.

Liz Knight’s British Christmas Pudding

Makes 1 x 450g (1lb) pudding, to feed six

Ingredients

- ◆ 100g dried vine fruits and fresh, frozen or dried elderberries

Optional: 1 small quince, peeled and chopped very finely to the size of the vine fruits

- ◆ Zest and juice of one small unsprayed orange (if you can, find a British one – or cheat and use an organic imported one)
- ◆ 50ml Somerset cider brandy
- ◆ 1 dessertspoon wild spices (we used ground dried hogweed and dock seeds, plus wood avens roots. If you want to cheat, use a mix of mixed spice, clove and nutmeg)

Optional: 1 dried fig leaf

- ◆ 60g self-raising flour, sifted. Or flour made from dried and ground foraged chestnuts
- ◆ 75g organic unsalted butter, softened. Or shredded pasture-fed beef suet (we used Pipers Farm)
- ◆ 40g sourdough breadcrumbs
- ◆ 50g sugar
- ◆ 1 dessertspoon honey
- ◆ 1 dessertspoon apple syrup (we used Liberty Fields)
- ◆ 2 crab apples, or one small cooking apple, grated (including skin)
- ◆ 1/4 tsp sea salt flakes
- ◆ 1 large free-range egg, beaten
- ◆ Optional: 25g purée of raw, well-softened medlar fruit

Brandy butter

- ◆ 100g organic butter, softened

- ◆ 225g icing sugar, sieved
- ◆ 3 tbsp Somerset cider brandy

Method

- 1 Mix the dried fruits and elderberries, chopped quince, orange zest and juice, cider brandy and spices. Add a dried fig leaf, if you have one, to infuse the mixture with vanilla flavour. Cover basin with a clean cloth and leave to soak overnight to let the fruit plump up.
- 2 Carefully remove the fig leaf from the fruit mixture and set to one side. Blend the flour, softened butter or suet, and breadcrumbs in a separate bowl, then add this to the fruit mixture. Add sugar, honey, apple syrup, grated apple, salt, beaten egg, and medlars if including.
- 3 Generously butter a 1-litre pudding basin, and put a disc of baking parchment in the bottom. Cover it with your saved fig leaf, vein-side up. Spoon in the mixture, packing it down with the back of a wooden spoon. Stretch a double-layered piece of baking parchment over the top, making a pleat in the middle to allow room for expansion during cooking. Finally, cover with a piece of pudding cloth or aluminium foil, also pleated, and tie securely with string. Make a handle of string across the top of the basin so you can lift the pudding out of the pan.
- 4 Place pudding in a bain-marie in the oven and cook at 120C/100C fan/gas mark 1/2) for 7-8 hours, topping up the water as necessary. (Alternatively cook the pudding in a steamer or a large pan of boiling water, for 7-8 hours.) When cooked, remove the pudding from the pan and leave until cold. Remove the wrappings, then re-wrap in fresh baking parchment, foil and string. Store in a cool, dry place.
- 5 To make brandy butter, cream the butter with sieved icing sugar. Gradually beat in the brandy. Place in the fridge to set (it will keep for up to a week).
- 6 On Christmas Day, steam the pudding again for 1-2 hours to reheat. Unwrap and turn out onto a serving plate. Decorate with holly. Pour some previously warmed brandy over the hot pudding and set it alight. Serve with generous dollops of brandy butter.





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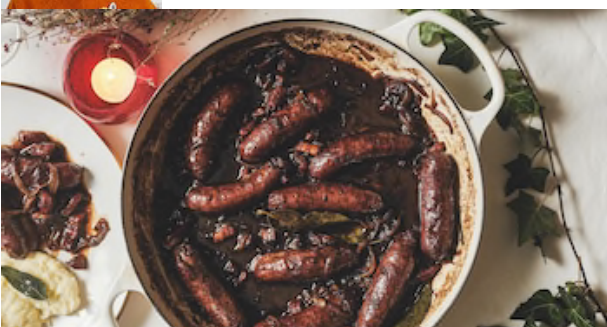


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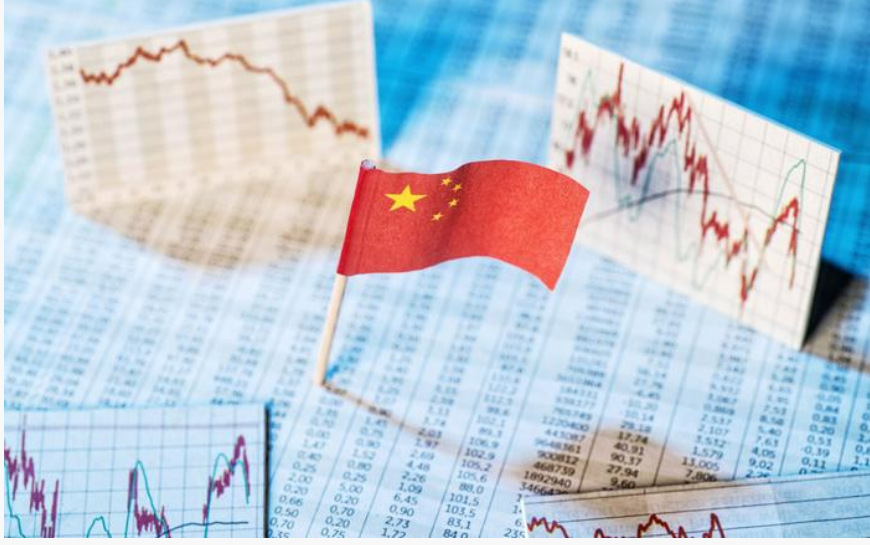


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