

Special Feature

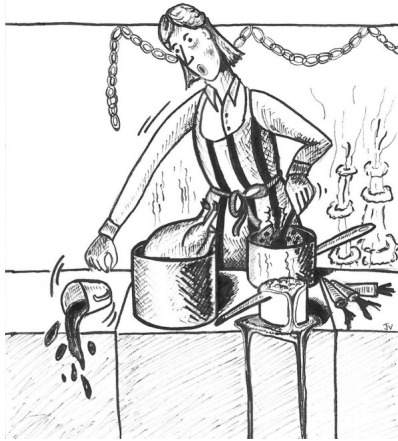
A Memorable Christmas Dinner

“Fifteen!” I

panicked. “But you know what my cooking’s like!” 23rd December, 1961 - mother was in hospital, our cook-general away, I was home from school as temporary housekeeper. It was years before Delia Smith’s step-by-step instructions; and long before beautiful ex-models started explaining how to make chocolate cake while suggestively licking their fingers. Fanny Craddock, all evening dress and bossing Johnny, reigned supreme, taking it for granted everyone knew basic techniques. My mother’s cookery books were no better, including sentences like, ‘*Make bread sauce in the usual way*’, which, when you previously only thought of bread sauce as it arrived on the table in front of you, was not perhaps the most helpful instruction.

Everything’s Ordered

Daddy replied, “Just the usual family. It would worry your mother if invitations were cancelled. Everything’s ordered. Tell the gardener what vegetables you want. Now, I must go.” He left me, stunned. Since coming home I had cooked porridge so thick it could be used as cement; made pastry not even the hens would eat; produced a cake so burned and sunk both cake and tin had been thrown away - and those were my more successful attempts. A vast turkey arrived, butter, milk and cream filled the fridge and early on Christmas Eve the gardener



brought a huge basket of Brussels sprouts, a mountain of potatoes and parsnips, a big bunch of parsley and quantities of leeks, onions, carrots and cooking apples.

How Was I to Know?

Why did no one explain that parsnips and potatoes should be par-boiled before roasting?

How was I to know there was a greaseproof (fortunately not polythene) bag of giblets *inside* the turkey? Cloves are stuck into onions to flavour bread-sauce, not poured loose in to the bread crumbs (or lumps). Gravy is made towards the *end* of the cooking, in the now empty roasting tray, gravy or what I called gravy, is not put in the tray with the bird before cooking starts. Cooking times are calculated *after* weighing the stuffed bird, not before. The ideal Christmas Dinner, indeed any meal, involves *timing the cooking* so that all the different components are ready *together*. In general *most* people don’t have turkey about 3p.m, and other vegetables just before 5p.m, they *remember* to cook the Brussels sprouts *with everything else*, not suddenly spot them at 7p.m. In the best circles the Christmas pudding does not have to be cut into slices to heat, or dinner will continue indefinitely. And at the end of the meal *most people* do not feel like murdering their entire family. My family still laugh about that Christmas dinner. I do now, but I didn’t then.

Catherine Hitchens