

# A Dickens of a Christmas feast

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*A Christmas Carol*, the beloved Charles Dickens novel about the miserly Scrooge's evolution into a kindlier man, features a brilliant account of a Christmas dinner that the Cratchit family have thanks to Scrooge's new-found generosity. In some ways it has become the quintessential Christmas feast, full of bountiful food and good cheer.



This year, celebrate your own special 21st-century Christmas à la Dickens with a modern dinner inspired by Victorian times. Along with the recipes below, I recommend serving mashed potatoes, crisp green beans and roasted carrots.

## Oyster Fritters

In Victorian times, oysters, which were plentiful and cheap, were served either raw, as a stew or as fritters similar to this recipe. The fritters can be reheated in a 350 F oven for 5 minutes, but they are at their crispiest straight out of the skillet.

### Ingredients

12 large oysters, shucked

2 tablespoons butter

½ cup finely chopped shallots

½ cup finely chopped celery

1 teaspoon chopped garlic

½ cup all-purpose flour

2 tablespoons cornstarch

½ teaspoon baking powder

½ teaspoon kosher salt

Freshly ground pepper to taste

1 egg, beaten

1/3 cup cold water

2 tablespoons finely chopped parsley

½ cup vegetable oil for frying

### Method

Drain oysters in a strainer for a few minutes. Coarsely chop and return to strainer until ready to use.

Heat butter in a skillet over medium heat. Add shallots and celery and sauté for 2 minutes or until softened. Add garlic and cook for 1 minute. Let cool.

Sift together flour, cornstarch, baking powder and salt in a large bowl. Stir in pepper. Make a well in the centre and drop the egg and water into the well. Slowly stir into flour mixture. Stir in shallot mixture and parsley. Stir in oysters.

Heat ½-inch oil in a heavy-bottomed skillet over medium-high heat until a cube of bread turns brown in 15 seconds.

Drop batter into oil, 2 tablespoons at a time, and cook fritters until golden brown, turning once, about 1 minute per side. Drain and serve immediately. Makes 10 to 12.

## Roast Goose with Prune Stuffing and Pan Gravy

Goose was the traditional main course for a Victorian Christmas, and these days geese are available at many butchers. The quality of the goose absolutely affects the final product; the best I have found are from Quebec, but there are also lovely Brethren geese from Mennonite farmers.

Determine the amount of brine you will need by placing the goose in a pot and adding water until it's completely immersed. Measure the water and then make up the brine according to the following recipe.

## **Ingredients**

1 7- to-8-pound (3.15- to 3.5-kilogram) goose

### Brine

16 cups water

1 cup kosher salt

½ cup sugar

2-inch strip orange rind

1 tablespoon peppercorns, cracked

One recipe Prune Stuffing (see below)

### **Method**

The day before you roast the goose, bring 4 cups water, 1 cup kosher salt, ½ cup sugar, orange rind and peppercorns to boil. Remove from heat and add remaining cold water. Chill. Place goose in a large pot and cover with the brine. Cover and refrigerate for 24 hours.

On roasting day, preheat oven to 425 F.

Loosely stuff goose with prune stuffing. Close cavity with skewers. Use a fork to prick the goose all over.

Place goose, breast-side-up, on a rack in a roasting pan and roast for 30 minutes or until lightly browned.

Reduce oven to 350 F and continue roasting for 1 hour and 15 minutes or until drumsticks move easily in their sockets and thigh juices are a pale yellow. Do not overcook or meat will dry out. An instant-read thermometer should read 160 F at the thickest part.

Drain fat from roasting pan, leaving brown roasting juices and 3 tablespoons fat. Place pan on stove over medium heat. Add flour, stir well and cook until flour is browned. Whisk in wine and stock, scraping up any brown bits from the bottom of the pan. Bring to a boil, stirring constantly. Add soy and red currant jelly and let simmer for 5 to 8 minutes or until it coats a spoon. Season with salt and pepper. Serve goose with gravy on the side. Serves 8.

## **Prune Stuffing**

The Armagnac perfumes the prunes and imparts its lovely taste to the goose. Prunes and goose are a classic combination. This is also excellent with turkey and capon.

### **Ingredients**

¼ cup butter

1½ cups chopped onion

1 cup chopped celery

1½ cups chopped pitted prunes

2 tablespoons Armagnac or brandy

1 tablespoon soy sauce

1 teaspoon grated orange rind

2 teaspoons grated ginger

1 tablespoon chopped thyme

2 tablespoons chopped parsley

3 cups fresh breadcrumbs

½ cup chicken stock

Salt and freshly ground pepper

### **Method**

Melt butter in a skillet over medium low heat. Add onion and sauté for 5 minutes. Add celery and cook for 5 minutes more or until celery is soft and onions are slightly golden.

Remove from heat and stir in prunes, Armagnac, soy sauce, grated orange rind, ginger, thyme and parsley. Add breadcrumbs and stir in enough stock to moisten. Season well with salt and pepper. Yields 3 to 4 cups.

## **Rustic Applesauce**

Victorians served applesauce with goose or turkey. The combination of the two varieties gives the sauce texture.

### **Ingredients**

2 pounds (1 kilogram) tart cooking apples

1 pound (500 grams) Macintosh apples

½ cup apple cider

¼ cup brown sugar

1 3-inch cinnamon stick

2 tablespoons lemon juice

Peel and core apples and cut into 1-inch chunks. Place apples in a heavy-bottomed saucepan along with cider, brown sugar, cinnamon stick and lemon juice and bring to a boil over medium heat. Reduce heat to medium low, cover and cook, stirring occasionally, for about 10 minutes. Remove lid and cook another 20 minutes or until apple pieces are translucent and falling apart. If sauce is too liquid because apples are juicy, cook another 10 minutes.

Remove cinnamon stick. Mash apple chunks with a potato masher until desired consistency has been reached. Cool. Yields about 3½ cups applesauce.

### **Braised Red Cabbage**

Because there was no real refrigeration, vegetables that last well in a root cellar were a staple of the Victorian table. This dish reheats well at 350 F for 20 minutes and can be made up to 5 days ahead of time.

#### **Ingredients**

2 tablespoons vegetable oil	4 cloves
2 tablespoons butter	1 bay leaf
2 cups chopped onions	Pinch allspice
4 pounds (2 kilograms) red cabbage, thinly sliced (about 16 cups)	1 cup chicken stock
1 bay leaf	½ cup red wine
2 teaspoons chopped fresh thyme	½ cup red wine vinegar
½ teaspoon hot pepper flakes	¼ cup brown sugar
	Salt and freshly ground pepper

#### **Method**

Melt butter in a very large sauté pan over medium heat. Add onions and cook for 3 minutes or until softened. Stir in cabbage and sauté for 8 minutes or until tender-crisp.

Add remaining ingredients, cover and simmer gently over low heat for 45 minutes or until flavours have combined and cabbage is very tender. Turn heat up to medium and simmer uncovered for 5 minutes longer or until liquid has almost entirely evaporated. Remove bay leaf and season with salt and pepper to taste. Serves 8.

### **White Chocolate Trifle**

Trifles were the epitome of Victorian desserts. This is an updated version. Use persimmons if available, otherwise kiwi fruit or mango tastes delightful in this confection.

#### **Ingredients**

16 small ladyfinger biscuits	2 persimmons, peeled and sliced
1/3 cup Madeira	Topping:
½ cup pomegranate juice	1 cup whipping cream
1 cup seedless raspberry jam	¼ cup pomegranate seeds
½ cup whipping cream	2 tablespoons chopped pistachios
6 ounces (175 grams) white chocolate, chopped	2 ounces (60 grams) shaved dark chocolate

#### **Method**

Divide ladyfingers among 6 compote or balloon wine glasses, breaking them up as needed to fit. Combine Madeira and pomegranate juice in a small bowl and drizzle ½ cup over ladyfingers, reserving remainder.

Heat jam in a small pot until liquid, adding remaining pomegranate mixture to thin out if needed.

Heat ½ cup whipping cream in a small heavy pot over low heat until it just comes to the boil. Remove from heat and stir in white chocolate. Let sit a few minutes while chocolate melts. Stir to blend. Transfer chocolate mixture into a bowl and place in refrigerator until cold but not set.

Meanwhile, whip 1 cup whipping cream until stiff peaks form. Whisk a large spoonful of whipped cream into white chocolate mixture to soften. Refrigerate whipped cream.

Evenly divide jam over ladyfingers, add a layer of persimmons, then spoon chocolate cream over top. Chill for 2 hours or until set. Garnish with remaining whipped cream, pomegranate seeds, chopped pistachios and shaved dark chocolate. Serves 6.