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CHRISTMAS 2026

Make-ahead Countdown



Illustration



Hello, I’m Chef Col. Most of Christmas dinner can be made, or at least started, ahead. Spread the work out and the day itself is mostly roasting and reheating.
Tick each job off as you go. Every recipe and guide is free on www.cookeryonline.com/Xmas/.

Good eating!

Key dates and make-ahead countdown

Date	What
Sunday 22 November	Stir-up Sunday: the traditional day to make the Christmas pudding
Sunday 29 November	Advent Sunday
Friday 25 December	Christmas Day
Saturday 26 December	Boxing Day



Illustration



Illustration



Illustration

What to make when

November

- [ ] Bake the Christmas cake. Wrap it in baking paper and foil and feed it with a spoonful of brandy every week or two.
- [ ] Make the Christmas pudding on Stir-up Sunday (22 November) and store it somewhere cool and dark.

Early December

- [ ] Order the turkey or ham from your butcher.
- [ ] Make mince pies and freeze them, baked or unbaked.
- [ ] Bake Christmas biscuits for gifts and the tree.

From 18 December

- [ ] Make the cranberry sauce: it keeps a week in the fridge (or 3 months frozen).
- [ ] Cover the cake with marzipan and let it dry for a day or two before icing.
- [ ] Plan the oven: write down what goes in when (see the Christmas Day timeline).

21–22 December

- [ ] If you're having a frozen turkey, move it into the fridge: allow 10–12 hours per kg, so a 5 kg bird by the morning of the 22nd. See the thawing notes in our Roast Turkey recipe.

23 December

- [ ] Make giblet stock for the gravy.
- [ ] Make the bread sauce (it keeps 2 days) and the onion gravy if you have vegetarians at the table.
- [ ] Bake the sticky toffee pudding: it is better a day or two later.

Christmas Eve

- [ ] Make the stuffing.
- [ ] If you're cooking a crown, bone the legs and stuff them.
- [ ] Make the red cabbage (leave out the bacon to keep it vegetarian).
- [ ] Make the pigs in blankets: chipolatas rolled in bacon.
- [ ] For a vegetarian main, bake the nut roast (it reheats in about 30 minutes on the day), or make the mushroom filling and the pastry for a Mushroom and Chestnut Wellington and keep them covered in the fridge.
- [ ] Blanch the sprouts and assemble the cauliflower cheese.
- [ ] Peel the potatoes and keep them covered in cold water.
- [ ] Simmer the ham if you are having one (how to cook ham); glaze it on the day or serve it cold.
- [ ] Lay the table and get out the pudding steamer.

Christmas Day

- [ ] Follow the timeline: take the turkey out of the fridge at least an hour before it goes in; for dinner at 2pm it goes in at 11:15, then rests while you finish the potatoes, stuffing, gravy and greens.

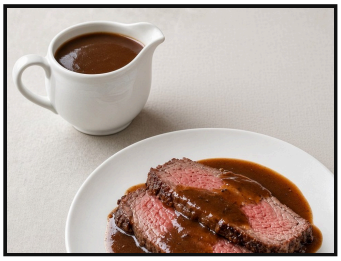
From our planner: www.cookeryonline.com/Xmas/Xmas1.html

Christmas Day timeline: dinner at 2pm

- [ ] **10:15** **Check the bird**
  Take the turkey out of the fridge at least an hour before it goes in. If it was frozen, make sure it is fully thawed: no ice crystals in the cavity and no hard, frozen meat in the thighs. Take out the giblets (keep the neck for the roasting tin). Soften the butter. Do not wash the bird.
- [ ] **10:45** **Heat the oven**
  Heat the oven to 230°C (220°C fan, gas 8). Brown the neck and wings in the roasting tin for 8–10 minutes, then add the onion and carrot. Beat the butter with salt and pepper, spread some under the breast skin and rub the rest over the bird.
- [ ] **11:15** **Turkey in**
  A 5 kg bird goes in at 230°C (220°C fan, gas 8) for 30 minutes, until the skin starts to colour. Total time in the oven is 1 hour 30 minutes–1 hour 45 minutes. Cook the stuffing separately, later.
- [ ] **11:45** **Turn the oven down**
  Baste quickly, lower the oven to 160°C (150°C fan, gas 3) and pour 200 ml water into the tin. Baste about every 20 minutes, and top up the tin with a splash of water if it is drying out.
- [ ] **12:30** **Start probing**
  A 5 kg bird is first checked at 1 hour 15 minutes. Take it out when every thigh is over 70°C and every breast is above 65°C (probe both sides and go by the lowest reading). It should come out between about 12:45 and 13:00. Lift it onto a board, cover loosely with foil and rest for 45 minutes to 1½ hours. Check with a probe after five minutes; if the temperature hasn't risen, return it to the oven for 15 minutes.
- [ ] **12:45** **When the turkey is out**
  Turn the oven up to 200°C (180°C fan, gas 6) and put a tin of fat in to heat for 10 minutes. Start the gravy in the roasting tin: skim the fat (keep it for the potatoes if you like), add the wine, then the stock, and thicken with cornflour. Our gravy guide takes you through it. Parboil the potatoes for 8–10 minutes (they can go on the hob a little earlier if the turkey is still in), drain, leave to steam dry and shake them to rough up the edges. Put the Christmas pudding on to steam: it needs about 2 hours.
- [ ] **13:00** **Potatoes and sides in**
  Tip the potatoes into the hot fat and roast for 50–60 minutes, sharing the oven with the stuffing, the cauliflower cheese and the nut roast reheat (about 30 minutes, until 75°C in the centre; rest it in the tin for 10 minutes and glaze it). See roast potatoes. It depends a bit on your oven and what else is in it, because a full oven runs cooler. If the turkey comes out closer to 13:00, put the fat in then and the potatoes ten minutes later – they will still have about 50 minutes.
- [ ] **13:35** **Sauces and plates**
  Reheat the bread sauce gently with a splash of milk, set out the cranberry sauce and warm the plates.
- [ ] **13:40** **Sprouts**
  Finish the sprouts with bacon in a hot pan; they take about 10 minutes once blanched.
- [ ] **13:50** **Carve**
  Pour the juices from the turkey board into the gravy and strain it into a warm jug. Carve: our carving guide shows how.
- [ ] **14:00** **Dinner**
  Everything on the table. Turn the oven down low to keep second helpings warm.
- [ ] **15:00** **Pudding**
  Turn out the Christmas pudding. Warm the brandy sauce gently while it steams.



Illustration



Illustration



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> Planned for dinner at 2pm with a 5 kg turkey, using our Roast Turkey recipe: 30 minutes at 230°C (220°C fan, gas 8), then 160°C (150°C fan, gas 3), for 1 hour 30 minutes–1 hour 45 minutes in total, then a rest of 45 minutes to 1½ hours. A 4 kg bird needs about 1 hour 20 minutes–1 hour 30 minutes in the oven, so put it in 15 minutes later; a 6 kg bird about 2 hours–2 hours 30 minutes, so put it in 30–45 minutes earlier. Go by a probe, not the clock: take it out when every thigh is over 70°C and every breast is above 65°C. The long rest frees the oven for the potatoes, stuffing and nut roast.

From our Christmas Cookery page: www.cookeryonline.com/Xmas/#timeline

All the Christmas recipes and guides

Everything below is free to read on cookeryonline, with no subscription, no sign-up and no login. In the PDF, tap a title to open the page.

The turkey & the ham

- Roast Turkey
  cookeryonline.com/recipes/chicken-dishes/roast-turkey-and-gravy.html
- Turkey crown with stuffed legs
  cookeryonline.com/recipes/chicken-dishes/turkey-crown-with-stuffed-legs.html
- Preparing a turkey
  cookeryonline.com/know-how/preparing-a-turkey.html
- How to carve a turkey
  cookeryonline.com/know-how/carve-turkey.html
- Brining
  cookeryonline.com/know-how/brining.html
- Roasting guide: probe temperatures
  cookeryonline.com/know-how/roasting.html
- Baked Ham with Glazes
  cookeryonline.com/recipes/meat-dishes/baked-ham-with-glazes.html
- How to cook ham
  cookeryonline.com/Ham/Cooking Ham.html

Gravy & stuffing

- How to make gravy
  cookeryonline.com/Xmas/Gravy.html
- Gravy from the Roast
  cookeryonline.com/recipes/sauces/gravy.html
- Onion Gravy
  cookeryonline.com/recipes/sauces/onion-gravy.html
- Stuffing guide
  cookeryonline.com/know-how/stuffing.html
- English Stuffing
  cookeryonline.com/recipes/meat-dishes/english-stuffing.html
- Chestnut Stuffing
  cookeryonline.com/recipes/meat-dishes/chestnut-stuffing.html

Sauces & sides

- Roast Potatoes
  cookeryonline.com/recipes/potato-dishes/roast-potatoes.html
- Brussels Sprouts with Bacon
  cookeryonline.com/recipes/vegetable-dishes/brussels-sprouts-with-bacon.html
- Cauliflower Cheese
  cookeryonline.com/recipes/vegetable-dishes/cauliflower-cheese.html
- Bread Sauce
  cookeryonline.com/recipes/sauces/bread-sauce.html
- Cranberry Sauce
  cookeryonline.com/recipes/sauces/cranberry-sauce.html

Puddings & baking

- Christmas Pudding
  cookeryonline.com/recipes/desserts/christmas-pudding.html
- Brandy Sauce
  cookeryonline.com/recipes/sauces/brandy-sauce.html
- Christmas Cake
  cookeryonline.com/recipes/pastry/christmas-cake.html
- Mince Pies
  cookeryonline.com/recipes/pastry/mince-pies.html
- Yule Log
  cookeryonline.com/recipes/pastry/yule-log.html
- Sticky Toffee Pudding
  cookeryonline.com/recipes/desserts/sticky-toffee-pudding.html
- Christmas Biscuits
  cookeryonline.com/recipes/pastry/christmas-biscuits.html

Vegetarian & vegan mains

- Classic Christmas Nut Roast
  cookeryonline.com/recipes/vegetarian-dishes/christmas-nut-roast.html
- Mushroom and Chestnut Wellington
  cookeryonline.com/recipes/vegetarian-dishes/mushroom-chestnut-wellington.html
- Jewelled Squash, Chestnut and Mushroom Wreath (vegan)
  cookeryonline.com/recipes/vegetarian-dishes/jewelled-squash-chestnut-mushroom-wreath.html
- Spiced Paneer and Spinach Wellington
  cookeryonline.com/recipes/vegetarian-dishes/spiced-paneer-spinach-wellington.html

Christmas Cookery
www.cookeryonline.com/Xmas/

Make-ahead planner
www.cookeryonline.com/Xmas/Xmas1.html

Got a question? Ask Chef Col: free, no login. Food safety follows UK Food Standards Agency advice; ovens vary, so trust a thermometer more than the clock. Pictures marked “Illustration” are AI-generated illustrations.