

Proof of the Pudding

It was a cold grey November day. Great banks of pewter coloured clouds filled the sky as sleet showers drifted across the window. There had been a thin layer of ice on the bird bath that morning.

However the kitchen was warm and bright. Bach's Christmas Oratorio sang out from the radio, the trumpets and drums heralding the coming season. I decided to make a start on some of the food I was planning for the celebration. Perhaps I could start by making the Christmas pudding, so I started to check and see if I had all the ingredients I needed.

Just as I was assembling the various packets and containers of fruit, spices, flour, black treacle etc. the phone rang - sadly not in the same key that Bach had chosen! This was my friend and neighbour, who had embarked on the same mission and was ringing to see if I had any eggs to spare. Luckily I had plenty so we agreed that she would come round to collect them. Naturally this led to coffee and further exchanges of news.

When my friend had gone I started the chopping and mixing that needed to be done. I always made the puddings on one day and steamed them the next, as they needed a good 5 or 6 hours on the hob for their initial cooking. They would be steamed for a further 2 hours on Christmas Day, to achieve the dark, rich, soft, fruity sweetness that I was looking for.

A few weeks later and the Christmas table was almost ready. It was set with the best linen, cutlery and glasses. It all looked very pleasing and soon it was time for our usual glass of bubbles before the main event. I went out into the kitchen to check that the Christmas pudding had enough water in the base of the steamer to keep it going for the last part of its cooking. The cream jug had been polished. It was and still is one of my most precious possessions. Made in London, in 1805, by English silversmith William Bateman, with a simple elegant shape and a strap handle, it is used only for special meals, including Christmas lunch. It was full of pouring cream, ready to complete our traditional dessert.

After our main course, when everyone felt they had room, the pudding was carried into the dining room, flamed with brandy. I proudly served it handing round generous portions. When I tasted my own, I knew that something was wrong. The fruit and spice came through but no real

sweetness. I had forgotten to add the dark brown sugar. I was about to weigh it out when the phone rang with my friend's egg SOS.

Everyone was very kind and luckily somewhat merry, so it wasn't a complete disaster, but I was disappointed. The lesson was to tick off the ingredients as they were added, then check that everything had been included, something I have done ever since.