

Reading Level 2/3: Christmas traditions

23rd December 2013

Topics: Christmas, food, cooking, recipe

Learning points:

- vocabulary
- passive

1 I am often asked about traditional English Christmas food. Food, after all, is an important part of Christmas,
2 and I would say particularly so for the English, who tend to stuff themselves to excess on Christmas Day.

3 So, what exactly do we eat?

4

5 The first thing would be mince pies. The critical ingredient in mince pies is mincemeat. This is a rich mixture
6 of chopped dried fruit and spices, similar to wintry mixtures found everywhere. It used to¹ have meat in, but
7 not any more. The mincemeat is always bought rather than made! A spoonful of this mincemeat is placed
8 inside small pastry cakes, making in effect a small pie. These pies are baked in the oven and then dusted with
9 icing sugar to finish.

10

11 Christmas pudding is also very traditional. The basis for this is again dried fruit – it is a bit like a fruit cake.
12 However, the pudding is steamed for several hours so that it becomes a dark, heavy, sticky fruit sponge.
13 It is traditionally made at the beginning of advent and left to mature (brandy is added to the mixture) for
14 several weeks. A silver coin is traditionally hidden in the pudding; and it is often served literally alight, with
15 brandy poured over it and then lit.

16

17 Christmas cake follows the same theme, being a traditional fruit cake. However, this has alcohol
18 (sherry/whisky/rum/brandy) inside it and ideally the cake should be made in advance and then ‘fed’ with
19 extra alcohol every couple of weeks. My sister bakes her Christmas cake about 11 months in advance!
20 Finally, a layer of marzipan and royal icing is added to the cake.

21

22 Brandy butter is not difficult to make, and is the normal accompaniment to mince pies and Christmas
23 pudding. Equal amounts of butter and icing sugar are beaten together and then brandy is added – that’s all!
24 It’s easy, but delicious!

25

26 What about the Christmas dinner itself? It’s actually fairly similar to a traditional Sunday lunch, which can
27 also be called a Sunday roast. With a typical ‘meat and three veg’ including potatoes, everything is cooked in
28 the oven. The meat is usually turkey nowadays, although duck or roast beef is also eaten. Sausage meat
29 wrapped in bacon is also popular as a side dish. Roast potatoes, roast carrots, roast parsnips... plus peas and
30 brussel sprouts. Then, the sauces: gravy, cranberry sauce, bread sauce, and stuffing. Bread sauce really is a
31 bread-and-milk sauce, spiced up of course. Breadcrumbs form the basis for stuffing, too – typically with sage
32 and onion. How is it cooked? Stuffed inside the turkey, of course!

33

34 Now, the drinks mustn’t be forgotten. Sherry, sweet or dry, is the preferred pre-lunch tippie. Wine or a
35 traditional ale would both suit the main course. A port wine could then be drunk with dessert, and then a
36 digestive whisky to round it all off.

37

38 After all that indulgence, just about everyone needs to sleep it all off in front of the conveniently timed
39 Queen’s Speech!

¹ used to = früher getan aber nicht mehr

Level 2/3: the passive – an introduction

This text is a good introduction to the passive voice.

The passive voice is used when the agent of an action is not the subject of the sentence. The passive voice is used for more formal English and can be more professional in business. It is not a personal form, which can be very useful. British people use the passive quite a lot, because they often avoid being personal.

Firstly, let's look at the normal active form. This can be found in line 19: 'My sister bakes her Christmas cake...' Here, it is clear who does the baking – my sister. She is the agent of the action, and she is the subject of the sentence.

In contrast, look at line 13: 'It is traditionally made...' Who does the making? Who is the agent? It is not clear. The subject ('it') is not the agent, but instead the pudding. (in an active sentence this would be the object)

There are lots of examples of this passive form in the text, where there is no agent.

So, how is the passive formed? The rule is, use the verb 'to be' in the right tense and then add the 3rd verb form: Look again at lines 13-15:

- it is made
- a silver coin is hidden
- brandy is added
- it is served

For a different tense, change the form of 'to be'. Modal verbs are easy, because they are followed by 'be':

- line 8: these pies are baked
- line 18: the cake should be made
- line 26-7: can be called
- line 34: mustn't be forgotten
- line 25: could be drunk

If you look back at the text on this 'question' page, you will see more examples of the passive (this sentence is not one of them – it is active, because the subject is the agent: 'you'). The passive is easy to read and understand, but harder to use. However, it is good English!