



## TRANSCRIPT

Christmas can be a very special time, but it can also be a very stressful time. And given everything that has been going on this year, who knows what will unfold this holiday season? What if, for once, we just relaxed and gave ourselves permission to focus on what really matters. Welcome to the Calm Christmas podcast with me, Beth Kempton. Just like my book of the same name. I hope the Calm Christmas podcast inspires connection, belonging, self care, nourishment, and joy. And a little bit of festive magic.

"'Twas the week before Christmas / when all through the house / 'Chaos is reigning' / noted my spouse. / The stockings were empty, / no shopping yet done. / The mall was a battle / that could not be won. / The children were nestled / so snug in their beds, / no thought of my angst / in their sweet sleepyheads. / Their dad with his coffee / and me a nightcap, / both of us needing / a long winter's nap. / As I pulled out the saucepans / with a bang and a clutter, / he sank into a chair / asking 'What is the matter?' / I stopped and I sighed / the mince pies could wait. / I have so much to do / and I've left it too late'. / 'What counts,' he said wisely, / i's hoping for snow, / believing in magic / wherever you go. / The tree you dressed / with such great care, / the music and laughter / the moments we share. / We'll make a plan / for what matters most, / then on Boxing Day / we'll eat cheese on toast. / A couple of gifts / chosen with love / the promise of a sleigh / on the roof above. / No-one will notice / what doesn't get done / when Christmas rolls round / and we all have such fun.' / More rapid than eagles / my worries they came / I whistled and shouted / and called them by name. / The food! The money! / The family fight! / The headaches! The worry! / Will it be all right? / To the top of the porch / to the top of the wall, / dash away worries / dash away all. / My fears Christmas dinner / won't be up to scratch / or I'll make sweet biscuits / and burn the whole batch. / Too many humans / in one tiny space. / I hope they don't notice / The look on my face. / My husband he laughed / and said 'Oh my dear. / Let's relax and have fun / while we prep this year. / We'll share the load / and

have a quick sherry. / We'll cook together / and all will be merry.' / Laying a finger / aside of his nose, / and giving a smile / from the armchair he rose. / He sprang to his feet / with a seasonal whistle / and raced to my side/ like the down of a thistle. / His arms closed around me / his face out of sight,/ 'A calm Christmas to all / and to all a good night..'

That is a poem that I wrote inspired by the famous 'A visit from St. Nicholas' by Clement Clarke Moore, which appears in the UK version of my book Calm Christmas. The poem (that I wrote, not the original poem), of course, which a lot of us know as 'The Night Before Christmas). I wrote my version to capture the sense of panic that so often dawns ahead of Christmas when we think about all the stuff we have to do. When really, if we can just remember that it's all about love, and it doesn't have to be perfect, then we can relax a little.

Hello, and welcome to Episode Eight: For the Love of Christmas Food. I should warn you that this episode might make you hungry. In fact, it probably will. There is so much to talk about that Christmas food could be its whole own podcast and maybe that's an idea for next year. After all, food is the axis around which Christmas spins for so many of us. Today though, I want to focus on a few key things. I'm going to share some food writers who bring Christmas goodies to life for me as inspiration and a way to get close to the season. I'm going to be talking about some Christmas food and drink around the world plus one or two of my own favourite recipes.

We'll be talking about taking the stress out of christmas food. And of course we have our usual festive origin section and my getting ahead tips for this week. So pour yourself a lovely cup of something, and let's get started.

One of my all time favourite books about Christmas food is actually quite a recent book. It's food writer Nigel Slater's, The Christmas Chronicles and it's packed full of atmospheric reflections on the season and a host of delicious recipes. So let's begin with Nigel's thoughts on 'Eating Winter'.

"The food of fairy tales, gingerbread biscuits with icing like melting snow, steaming glasses of 'glow wine', savoury puddings of bread and cheese, and a goose with golden skin and a puddle of applesauce. There is stews of game birds with twigs of thyme and rosemary, fish soups the colour of rust and baked apples. frothing at the rim. Winter is the time for marzipan-filled stollen, thick with powdered sugar. Pork chops as thick as a plank, and rings of Cumberland sausage sweet with dates and bacon. The flavours of winter come at us like paper-wrapped presents in a Christmas stocking. Ginger aniseed, cardamom, juniper and cloves. The caramel notes of maple syrup, treacle, butterscotch and the damp muscovado sugars, fruits dried on the vine and preserved in sugar. Ingredients too that hold the essence of the cold months. Red

cabbage, Russet apples, walnuts, smoked garlic, chestnuts, parsnips and cranberries. Winter cooking is clouds of mashed potato flecked with dark green cabbage, roasted onions glistening like brass bedknobs and parsnips that crisp and stick molasses-like to the roasting tin.

The food of the cold months is fatty cuts of meat, the flanks, shins and cheeks that we can leave to breathe unhindered in a slow oven with onions and thyme, wine and woody herbs plodding silently toward tenderness. Meat you could cut with a spoon. Winter cooking is ham with a quince paste crust, gamebirds with redcurrant jelly, treacle sponge and lebkuchen, mince pies and marmalade tarts. Winter food is about both celebration and survival. It's about feasting. Roast turkey, plum pudding and fruitcake. Frugality. Bean soups and mugs of miso broth. It's the food of hope. Lentil soup for good luck on New Year's Day. And the food of love. The mug of hot cardamom-spiced hot chocolate you make for a loved one on a freezing day."

I love what Nigel says in that last part, that Christmas food is not just about the luxurious sweet things that come to mind or the rich mains or the steaming alcoholic beverages. It's also about the nourishing things that often don't cost much but see us through, keep our immune system healthy, our bodies cared for and our spirits up. For me that's about stews and soups, a slow cooker chilli and a batch-cooked curry I pop in the freezer so I know we have a good meal at the end of a long cold day.

And there's something about winter that makes the little treats extra special. I once surprised my parents with tickets to a Christmas carol concert at the Royal Albert Hall in London. They thought it was just the two of them. But when they got there I was already in the next seat along having smuggled a bottle of red wine and a tin of mince pies in at the bottom of my handbag. As the lights went down and the singing began, we all tucked into our crumbly buttery mince pies, agreeing afterwards that eating them under the cover of darkness made them taste even better.

For my children, it's probably homemade hot chocolate with whipped cream and extra marshmallows to warm cold hands after running around outside. I love a glass of hot mulled wine or warming ginger tea whilst writing out my Christmas card list. When it comes to the big day, you can read all about how a chicken pie saved our Christmas in my book *Calm Christmas and a Happy New Year*. In researching that book, I asked people of 37 different nationalities about their favourite food and had all sorts of replies as you might imagine. Bacon stolen off the top of the turkey. The annual batch of homemade limoncello. clove studded ham with spiced roast red cabbage, deviled eggs, cookies, smoked salmon, crispy roast potatoes and parsnips with lashings of gravy, eggnog, mulled cider, grandma's cranberry sauce, the mother-in-law's mac and cheese, pumpkin pie and many more. Holiday food is a source of pride and an

expression of love, while Christmas dinner is probably the most anticipated meal of the year for many people. Answer me this. What's the one food or drink item that represents Christmas for you?

Why not this year, make an event of trying a few versions of it to evolve your own food tradition. Okay, so if you said turkey, you're probably not going to cook turkey five times in the run up to Christmas. But you might experiment experiment with what goes in the gravy or the way you cook your favourite side to accompany. For example, in my house, we are having the Great Mince Pie Off this year, where we're going to identify five or six of the most delicious sounding recipes from our favourite chefs and bakers and put them all to the test to find a favourite one. And then we're going to pitch the winner against my grandma's recipe, the one of my childhood mince pies and see where we get to. I adore the idea of holding onto the old recipes and bringing them out every year. But I also love the creativity of today's chefs and bakers with all sorts of different ingredients available to them that weern't around and my grandma's day. So I'm open to evolving tradition. And if we can make it fun in the process, all the better.

While I was researching Calm Christmas, I came across a lovely collection of Elizabeth David's scribblings about Christmas. simply called Elizabeth David's Christmas, and in it she said this,

"If I had my way, which I shan't, my Christmas day eating and drinking would consist of an omelette and cold ham and a nice bottle of wine at lunchtime, and a smoked salmon sandwich with a glass of champagne on a tray in bed in the evening. This lovely selfish anti-gorging un-Christmas dream of hospitality either given or taken must be shared by thousands of women who know it's all Lombard Street to China orange that they'll spend both Christmas Eve and Christmas morning peeling, chopping, mixing, boiling, roasting, steaming. They will eat and drink too much. That someone will say the turkey isn't quite as good as last year, or discover that the rum for the pudding has been forgotten. That by the time lunch has been washed up and put away it will be tea time, not to mention drink or dinner time. And tomorrow, it's the weekend and it's going to start all over again."

To be fair, it's not just women these days, of course, but I think that description of christmas food preparation probably still holds true for many people decades after Elizabeth David wrote it. Today I'd like to share a few tips for stress-free festive food preparation in the hope that it means you get more time to actually eat it and enjoy it and less time worrying about it.

I was inspired last year by my friend and chef Steven Lamb who's an expert on curing and smoking and taking simple ingredients and making them last longer. Last Christmas he posted a

picture of an incredible cured fish the colour of a blood orange on his Instagram @lambposts with the comment, "This is one of my favourite combinations to make. Cold smoked beetroot-cured wild salmon with creamy homemade labneh. Went down a storm with a glass of fizz on Christmas morning. Making things ahead is one great way of reducing the stress on Christmas Day. Here are some others.

- If you're going to be having people over or you're going to be making several different meals around Christmas time that are a little bit special, then why not map out each event for which you plan to cook, whether that's alone or with other people, and decide on a little menu for each one. Remember to include breakfast, lunch and snacks if guests are going to be staying for several days.

- Be sure to ask them in advance about any special dietary requirements and preferences as well.

- If thinking about hosting makes you feel anxious, then try to find ways to simplify your plans or rope in some support.

- If you find cooking everything a bit too stressful, then why not ask yourself which specific item you most associate with Christmas, and you could ask your guests that as well. Then focus on that particular thing or just a small group of things. Ask whether you can make it yourself with love or buy the very best version of it that you can afford. And then outside of that you can let go of peripheral fare that no one really isn't that bothered about. That will save you time, energy and money. Of course, you can encourage your guests to contribute some things such as wine or dessert. Make sure you're specific about what you need, you don't end up with three of one thing and nothing of something else, and they don't have to guess.

- If you have a large family, you might want to consider organising a Christmas dinner fund, so everyone puts the money in and then whoever's hosting gets to use that.

- Of course, if money is tight, plant-based dishes do tend to be cheaper than meat or fish. So even if you do a small roast, you could be extra generous with sides to fill plates and it will still feel like a really special feast if you take extra care with the table settings, and lighting of course, if you radiate festive spirit.

- It can be a good idea to write a complete list of all the ingredients you need for those menus. Then check your cupboards before you go to the supermarket or the shops or wherever you're going to buy your food. It's really obvious, but how many times have you and I have gone to the

shop to do the Christmas shopping and can't remember whether you've got cranberry sauce, if that was something you're going to buy instead of make this year. And then you realise you've got five jars of it in the fridge because you only ever eat cranberry sauce on Christmas Day. So check your cupboards and then do your shopping. Of course when you're compiling your list, remember to include some ingredients for things like healthy breakfasts, you know frozen fruit for smoothies, that kind of thing, and to give everyone a good start to the day.

Where possible shop locally. I think that's more important than ever this year. And also buying direct from growers, bakers or independent shopkeepers gives you an opportunity to chat and learn about what you're buying. That makes it so much more special when it comes time for the meal.

Of course food banks are needing our help ever more than usual. So if you can afford it, why not add a few extras to your list and donate them to

Then when it comes to cooking, but on your favourite apron and some festive music, perhaps roping some help if you can, and try to enjoy it, you know.

A tip I learned at Leith's Cookery School in London, which has served me very well ever since, is to make a simple timeline counting backwards from when you want to serve,. It makes all the difference. And then if you want to, you could set an alarm on your phone for when each component needs to come out of the oven, that kind of thing.

If you plan it correctly, the cooking itself ends up being a lovely mindful experience as you melt into the smells, sights, textures, sound and of course, taste of your bubbling dishes.

Then when it comes to serve, you might want to consider setting up some festive party stations if you're having guests, so they can help themselves to drinks and snacks before the main event and you can concentrate on getting all the pieces of it together.

You might want to serve the meal itself in large bowls on platters maybe, or dishes straight from the oven, buffet style, so that people can help themselves and your table is filled with lovely steaming goodness. And then when the time comes, you know even if you've forgotten the sprouts or whatever it is that threatens to ruin the perfect Christmas - remember that that word is banned round in my house - when the time comes, remember that what it's really all about is just being together. And spending that precious time and, and being grateful for all the goodness in your life.

So just try to relax. Everyone is there because they want to spend time with you. And they are grateful for your effort whether or not they articulate that.

For a lot more festive food ideas and tips, you can take a look at my book *Calm Christmas and Happy New Year*. I'd also like to share some other festive food recommendations in terms of books because I just adore Christmas cookbooks and I have many. So here are my picks of them that you might enjoy.

*New York Christmas: Recipes and Stories* by Lisa Nieschlag and Lars Wentrup is a gorgeous book. It captures a winter in New York in stunning photos, alongside festive recipes like candy cane cupcakes, cornbread muffins with parmesan and sesame apple pie with walnuts and cranberries. Sounds so good. And there are also some lovely Christmas stories in there from guest writers. And it's a treat that I've given as a gift on several occasions.

And another brilliant one is *Delia Smith's Christmas*. I've actually got two of these on my bookshelf. I'm not sure why. It's a book from the BBC. It's a bit old now, but to me is the classic recipe book for all traditional British Christmas food. It's hard to beat Delia to be honest, and it includes a complete countdown for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.

Lots of other British celebrity chefs have bought out Christmas books in recent years, my favourites among them for their inspiring but accessible recipes would be *Jamie's Christmas* from Jamie Oliver, *Nigella's Christmas* from Nigella Lawson and *Gizzi's Season's Eatings* by Gizzi Erskine. The book looks gorgeous, that *Gizzi's Season's Eatings* - highly recommend.

*Sarah Raven's Complete Christmas Food and Flowers* is a beautiful book, offering a wonderful combination of decorating and eating ideas. And I absolutely love *Winter Cabin Cooking* by Lizzie Kamenetsky makes me want to hop on a plane to Canada or Switzerland and rent a snowy cabin for the holidays. I also love the *Borough Market Cookbook*. In fact, reading about winter at the market makes my heartache for the way that producers and so many in the hospitality industry have been affected by the pandemic this year.

Actually buying a cookbook is a great way to support a chef or a restaurant that's been impacted by closure or cancelled events. Just signing up the veggie box or shopping locally can help support producers who've been hit by the pandemics so hard this year. Here's a snippet from the *Borough Market Cookbook* and you'll see why I love it so much.

"The mere mention of winter brings to mind Norwegian furs, mistletoe, mulled wine and figgy pudding. Borough Market embraces that traditional vignette and then some. Lights, fruits and

foliage frame the old iron architecture, the market's choir provides a cheerful backdrop of carols and hymns, traders sport festive woolly jumpers and Santa hats while fairy lights add merriment and warmth, and there's a whiff of mulled wine and cider around each corner. Small wonder then that many Londoners make a pilgrimage to the market to pick up groceries and gifts for loved ones and themselves. Lines form at the butchers for family size turkeys, geese and ribs of beef as well as smaller but similarly premium joints. With around 20 cheesemongers there's no better place to pick up a platter to last the entire holiday season. December 'tis but one month though and while the frenetic pace of the festive period slows a little once the new year begins, other edible treats continue to arrive through January and February. Citrus fruits truly come to the fore as the year turns, bergamots, clementines, tangerines and mandarins are joined by oranges from Seville which beg to be boiled for marmalade, and blood oranges with their crowd-pleasing sharpness and shocking red centres. Their vivid colour and flavour are matched, exceeded even, by eye-catching sticks of pink rhubarb from Yorkshire. Many autumnal vegetables continue through these cold months with parsnips, Jerusalem artichokes and swedes, arguably at their peak, the freezing nights and frosty mornings encouraging their sweeter notes. Sprouts, sprout tops and flower sprouts prove themselves to be for life, not just as a trimming for turkey, and winter squash, which confusingly arrived in Autumn is still going strong, now alongside red cabbage, purple kale, and a full Pantone strip of pink and purple bitter leaves.

Winter is a time of stark contrasts, of generosity and celebration, but also resourcefulness. A desire to feast but also to eat light spritely food too, and though much of nature's bounty is deeply savoury and muted, the sweet fruits of the season are sharp and feisty. Happily, the stalls and stands of underneath the railway arches of London Bridge have all aspects covered."

That's wonderful. Love it.

I also highly recommend the Irish Country Women's Association Book of Christmas, filled with recipes, advice, blessings and traditions for the perfect Irish Christmas. You know how I feel about the word 'perfect'. But other than that it's a delight and includes memories of Christmases past in rural Ireland.

Growing up, my Mum always had a copy of Beeton's Book of Household Management, edited by Mrs Isabella Beeton, and first released in 1859. It's written in a wonderful old font with lots of uppercase and serifs and you can see a slight shadow around the letters where the typewriter keys hit the paper. She has a recipe for plain plum pudding for the children in there. And one for 'a very good plum pudding for the grown ups' - kind of makes you feel sorry for the children. The attention to detail of the book is astonishing and it listed costs of many

ingredients. It's fascinating. If you're interested in the way people lived in the 19th century, I think you'd love it.

I have a copy of *The Wartime Christmas Cookbook* from World War Two by Megan Rogers, showing how resourceful people can be when they need to, with luxuries rare and the basics rationed. How about the mock crab for your Christmas brunch? You have to melt half an ounce of margarine in a saucepan, beat two eggs and then add them to the margarine and basically just scramble the eggs. And when you're done, add an ounce of cheese, a dessert spoon of salad dressing, a few drops of vinegar, salt and pepper. And that's it. Use it as a salad filling or serve on toast and pretend that it's crab. There's also a recipe for mungoose in there too, which uses potatoes, apples, cheese and sage. It's so inspiring to see how people made something of so little and focused on the meaning of Christmas, instead of obsessing over the perfect roast.

Lastly, I'd like to share two of my favourite recipes that I make most years. The first was originally from a wonderful slim book called *Chocolates, Sweets and Candies* by Sarah Ainley. The book is over 20 years old and I'm not even sure if it's still in print, but I've had it all that time. And I love it because it's full of recipes that make great sweet treats, which you can turn into beautiful gifts. This particular recipe I'm going to share now is for peppermint chocolate sticks which remind me of the After Eight after dinner square mints that used to be a real luxury growing up in the 80s. You can get them in supermarkets for next to nothing now but they used to be a treat, certainly in my house, and maybe it's the fact that they're connected to a memory that makes me love these peppermint sticks so much. Perhaps you'd like to give it a try.

This recipe does include desiccated coconut, which I'm not actually a fan of but you can't taste the coconut once these sticks are made. So if you want have a go you will need 115g or 4oz of granulated sugar, 2.5ml or half a teaspoon of peppermint essence or peppermint extract, 200g or 7oz of plain chocolate. I like to use a really good one like Green and Blacks or something like that. And then 16ml of desiccated coconut. You want to toast that off in a dry pan for a little bit first just to give you that lovely tasty flavour.

It's really easy, you just grease a baking sheet and then put the sugar in a pan with 150ml / 1/4 pt of water and heat it gently stirring it occasionally until the sugar has dissolved. Then you want to bring it to the boil and boil it rapidly without stirring it until the syrup reaches 138 degrees Centigrade or 280 degrees Fahrenheit on a sugar thermometer. Then you take the pan off the heat, add the peppermint essence pour it onto the baking sheet and then leave it until it's set and completely cold. Once it's cold you break it up into a bowl and crush it into tiny pieces with the end of a rolling pin.

Next you want to melt your chocolate in a heatproof bowl and set that over pan of barely simmering water while the break up the bar of chocolate and then heat it gently until it's melted taking off the heat and stirring in the bashed up peppermint and desiccated coconut after that to give it a lovely texture.

Then you want to lay a sheet of non-stick baking paper on a flat surface and spread your chocolate mixture all over it leaving a narrow border all the way around to make a rectangle that's about 10" x 8". Leave that to set and then when it's firm use a sharp knife to cut it into thin sticks about 6cm/ 2.5" long. There you are, you have your gorgeous peppermint sticks which you can pack into small food safe bags and tie with ribbon or make some little boxes and put them in there. And of course don't forget to keep some for yourself.

I also love making mulled cider or spiced apple juice if you want a non alcoholic version. And that's really easy. You just grate a few apples in a large pan. Cover it with a litre or so of apple juice or cider and cook it until the fruit is soft. That should just be a few minutes. Then you add about 50g of brown sugar or a bit more if you'd like it really sweet. And then whatever Christmassy spices you like such as grated nutmeg, cinnamon, ginger, cloves, star anise, which I learned in the reading of the Calm Christmas audiobook for the States, it's pronounced 'star aniss' in America. That was a new fact for me. But anyway, 'star a-knees' or 'star aniss', whichever you have, and even a squeeze of clementine juice if you fancy. You can pop that in there. And of course all of those are to taste and so just put the blend of spices in there that you love. But I would say go easy on the cloves unless you absolutely love cloves.

Just as Nigel Slater said, you don't want too much. Then simmer that gently for half an hour to an hour and add more sugar if needed to your taste, and there you have some very lovely mulled cider or spiced apple juice. I'd love to hear about your food memories and your favourite things to eat at Christmas. So do come and tell me over on Instagram @BethKempton.

Our get ahead tips for this week. Just a few this week, we're getting closer to Christmas. But I know that you've been doing all sorts each week getting ready. And so for this week, here we go.

- Ask those close to you what they most want to eat this year, as we've been saying, and use that as your starting point for planning and you never know they might actually surprise you with the answer. Then plan the meals over the holidays including breakfast lunches, snacks, drinks, etc. as well as dinner if you're having guests and nutritious meals that you could make ahead and freeze.

- Remember to write your shopping list, check it works with your budget, put in your online order if you're ordering online or set aside time to do the shopping, and don't forget that some guests might not want to drink so you might want to plan a lovely non-alcoholic festive punch or a mocktail or try my spiced hot apple.

- Enjoy some time exploring Christmas recipe books and pick a couple of things you definitely want to make this year.

- It's a great time to give your house a good clean if you love that fresh feeling for Christmas.

- If you have some space for reflection this week, remember you can get free access to My Perfectly Imperfect 2021 Planner with every copy of Calm Christmas. You just need to go to [bethkempton.com/Christmas](http://bethkempton.com/Christmas) and pop your receipt details in there and then you'll get instant access to that digital planner for 2021 along with a lovely winter visualisation and my guide to creating a seasonal retreat. That's all at [bethkempton.com/Christmas](http://bethkempton.com/Christmas).

- In terms of last posting dates from the UK, Wednesday the 16th of December is the last date for posting Christmas post to Austria, Denmark, Germany, Iceland, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Slovakia, Spain, Switzerland and Friday the 18th of December is the last posting date for Belgium, France, Ireland and Luxembourg. Also here in the UK, Friday the 18th of December is the last day for second class Christmas post domestically, and Monday the 21st of December is the last day for first class Christmas post for anything you want to arrive before Christmas in the UK.

I hope you've enjoyed this episode all about festive food. I don't know about you, but I am definitely hungry now. I'm going to be back next week with a very special show about loneliness, sadness and grief at this time of year. Until then, I'll leave you with the words of Joan Anderson from her book *A Year by the Sea: Thoughts of an Unfinished Woman*:

"Figuring out we get to experience only 70 or 80 Christmases in a lifetime, I'm determined to enjoy this one my way, no matter who is or isn't around. I read somewhere that the French woman's role is to please others, but to please herself in the process. This concept is new for me, that my own joy is my responsibility. Only I can receive it. And likewise, only I can allow others to take it away. Not this Christmas. I've had my fill of bleak midwinters. And now set my sights on joy."

You've been listening to the Calm Christmas podcast with me, Beth Kempton. For more inspiration and ideas, cosy up with a copy of my book, *Calm Christmas and Happy New Year: A*

Little Book of Festive Joy. It's available now from all good bookshops or listen to the audiobook read by me.

Wishing you a calm Christmas and Happy New Year.