

Dr. Annie Gray



Dr Annie Gray is a food historian who specialises in food and dining c. 1700-1950. Her PhD thesis focused on the role of women in driving dining change. She regularly appears as a food history expert on various TV and radio shows and is a regular contributor to Radio 4's The Kitchen Cabinet.

Dr Annie was commissioned by Making Sense of Sugar to perform research specific into our Christmas dining habits and lifestyle during WWI, WWII, the present day and the future. See Annie's website here: <http://www.anniegray.co.uk/>

Christmas dinner - past, present and future

Food and mealtime traditions change greatly over time, and how we consume calories today is undoubtedly different from previous generations.

At this festive time of year, we tend to consume more as we spend quality time at home, eating our favourite foods and enjoying time with our loved ones. Against this backdrop, we asked food historian Dr. Annie Gray, who specialises in looking at how Britain's food habits change over time, to tell us how Christmas day meals have changed over the past 100 years. As well as looking at how people ate during World War I, World War II and today, we asked her to forecast what Christmas dinner might look like in twenty years' time. Below you'll find a summary of her findings. We hope that you'll agree that it makes for fascinating reading!

World War I

Before the Great War, class played a huge role in society - even at Christmas time. Before the war, the rich, waited on by servants, could enjoy a nine or ten course meal while the poor often could only scrape together bread and margarine. The war meant, however, that poorer families saw standards rise in terms of their everyday diet (as workers were fed officially by the factories), while the rich were forced to eat a much more restricted diet than they'd previously been used to.

In 1914, everyday lives were much more physically demanding. Without most of the modern appliances that we take for granted today, even the act of making Christmas dinner took a huge amount of energy, while the lack of central heating meant staying warm used up more calories. People needed more food to do more physical activity than we do today. Despite this, generally they still consumed less, and ate healthier food. Alcohol was restricted, furthered by the 9pm pub close time.

At Christmas, while the number of courses varied depending on how wealthy you were, most households would have served a soup course, a stuffed bird (goose was much more popular than turkey) and beef (cheaper cuts were stewed rather than roasted), served with Yorkshire puddings. Vegetables could be scarce unless you grew your own,

but potatoes and turnips were popular. Dessert was a plum pudding, mince pies and a savoury cheese dish, while the rich would have enjoyed fruit and nuts.



World War II

Unlike WWI, during WWII strict rationing was in place. Surprisingly this didn't necessarily have an adverse effect on people's health. In fact, by the end of the war, British people had never been healthier. Increased knowledge of vitamins and the nutritional value of foods, a very fair system of rationing and government education programmes, ensured that people ate well with what they had.

Food shortages led to people growing their own fruit and vegetables to supplement their meals (the Government began a 'Dig for Victory' campaign to encourage home-vegetable plots), while people became more inventive 'mock' food and with substituting available foods for those that had virtually disappeared such as bananas and pineapple.

Like WWI, the preparation of Christmas dinner was a long process, with people saving up dried fruit and key ingredients for weeks or even months before. Petrol rationing meant that everyone either walked or cycled, making the collection of ingredients particularly difficult – very different from today's supermarket dash!

With rationing in full force, the difference between Christmas dinner between the very poor and the very rich was slight. Those who could, still tried to get goose or turkey, however if that wasn't available, they would eat mutton or beef. However, meat rations were dictated by price, so many families had to decide whether they wanted quality or quantity.

Wartime recipes were published to help housewives make the most out of their fat and sugar rations, including for treats such as wartime Christmas pudding, wartime mincemeat, eggless sponges, mock turkey and carrot jam. With dried fruit in short supply, you would have to choose between your pudding, cake and mincemeat tarts.

People consumed slightly more than usual on Christmas day – mainly because due to some saved-up beer being consumed - however calorie consumption remained around the same as during everyday life.



Today

While some parts of Christmas have changed drastically since the end of WWII, many of our mealtime traditions have stayed the same. Christmas dinner remains one of the most old-fashioned meals of the year. Turkey is still seen as the traditional choice (despite only becoming very popular after the two wars), while Christmas pudding and mince-pies remain favourites.

While preparing Christmas dinner required much more effort during WWI and II, with everything being made from scratch, today we are much more reliant on modern kitchen equipment and pre-prepared food. Unlike previous generations, who generally had more courses - and always had a soup course - our Christmas meal consists of three courses on average. However, we are much more likely to snack on a range of different foods throughout the day, something previous generations never did.

On our Christmas dinner table we're likely to find a turkey, served with sausages or chipolatas. Unlike in WWII, when a huge variety of home grown vegetables would have been served, we are most likely to eat roast potatoes with brussels sprouts and parsnips. Traditional fruit and nuts have been almost forgotten in favour of snacks such as crisps and peanuts, while we are seeing a rise in pre-prepared desserts and chocolates.

Unlike during wartime, alcohol now plays a big role in our Christmas day, with wine, sparkling wine and beer being favourites. It is estimated that we now consume almost 6,000 calories at Christmas dinner - almost double that consumed during war times. This high calorie intake, combined with much less physical activity over the Christmas period, means we need to be more aware than ever about what we are eating.



Christmas in the future

In the future, it is likely that some of the more traditional Christmas foods will become less popular, if not completely die out. Desserts such as Christmas pudding and mince pies, although synonymous with Christmas now, are less likely to be seen on our table. Chocolate is becoming increasingly popular and it is likely that dessert will consist of a box of chocolate or chocolate dessert. However, with cocoa supplies more restricted, this chocolate dessert will be seen as a treat.

With meat supplies also due to become an increasingly important issue, it is likely we will see a rise in more sustainable options. With many Brits becoming more ethically-minded about where their food is sourced from, a rise in meat-free food is likely to become increasingly common. Likewise, less common protein-based foods, such as quorn or even insects, will potentially become more popular.

With the decline of the Sunday roast, it is also likely that roast potatoes will only be consumed on special occasions, such as Christmas, while other vegetables, such as sweet potatoes will have become more common. Food for thought, no doubt!



Bibliography

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For a recipe for 'mock' turkey, as eaten during WWII, see here: <http://long-may-she-rain.blogspot.co.uk/2011/12/christmas-in-wartime.html>

2007 Data on calories consumed: <http://www.realwire.com/releases/the-british-christmas-dinner-2007-pass-the-3-63-roast-potatoes-dear>