

MY CHRISTMAS PUDDING

Mandarin. Dark chocolate. Pedro Ximénez.



Creaming butter and sugar in a ceramic bowl awakens a sense of nostalgia in me. The chime of the wood against the porcelain, the gritty sound of the sugar as I encourage it to mingle with the butter and the smell of faux vanilla mixed in amongst it all. I’m entranced as I chase a lump of butter that is always much too small for the bowl and much less softened than I’m trying to convince myself it is. You might not be familiar with this joy but

I promise, if you use a wooden spoon, you will be transported to a simpler place in time.

CERAMIC PUDDING BOWL SIZE	900g
SERVES	10-12
dried fruit (<i>SEE NOTES</i>)	375g
candied clementines, finely sliced	75g
Pedro Ximénez sherry or brandy	80ml
dark chocolate (minimum 55% cocoa solids), finely chopped	100g
mandarin jam or marmalade, roughly chopped	75g
green or red apple, coarsely grated	1
orange, zested	1
lemon, zested	1
natural almonds, toasted and finely chopped (optional)	55g
unsalted butter, softened, plus extra 1 tbsp for greasing	65g
brown sugar	25g
caster sugar, plus extra 1 tbsp for dusting	25g
eggs	2
ground allspice	¼ tsp
ground cloves	¼ tsp
ground nutmeg	½ tsp
ground cinnamon	1 tsp
gluten-free flour	55g
TO SERVE	
crème Anglaise (<i>SEE RECIPE</i> , page 147)	

(The day before)

- 1 The day before you intend to make and steam the pudding, you will need to rehydrate all the dried fruit except for the candied clementines. Dried fruit is improved immeasurably by first covering the fruit with boiling water from the kettle and letting it rehydrate for 30 minutes. Drain the water off the fruit and pour over the sherry. This will help the fruit to soak up the alcohol and will create more moisture in the final pudding. Set the fruit aside on the bench overnight.

(On the day)

- 1 Butter the pudding basin using a pastry brush, then coat the butter with sugar and tap out any excess. I like to use sugar because it gives the pudding a lovely, glossy shine, whereas flour can dull the finish of the pudding when it is turned out. Set the basin to one side for now.
- 2 Half-fill a large saucepan (that you have a lid for) with water and place over medium heat while you get on with making the pudding.
- 3 Place the chocolate in a food processor and chop as fine as possible; this is so it distributes well through the pudding crumb. Having the chocolate chilled in the freezer overnight will help make the crumb finer. Combine the chocolate, fruit soak, clementines, mandarin jam, apple, orange zest, lemon zest and almond (if using) in a large bowl, then mix together and set to one side.
- 4 Combine the butter and sugars in a medium mixing bowl and use a wooden spoon to whip them together until smooth and creamy. If you ensure the butter is super-soft, this step will be a breeze as it’s not necessary to aerate the butter too much, you just want to create a smooth cohesion with the sugars.
- 5 Add the creamed butter to the large bowl of fruit and use a wooden spoon or your hands to fold the butter through the pudding until it is fully combined.

- 6 Crack the eggs into a separate small bowl and whisk them a little with a fork, then gradually trickle them into the fruit mixture until they are fully incorporated. Now, sift all the spices and the flour into the pudding mixture and fold them through. Make a wish into the batter and ask a loved one nearby to stir the pudding and make a wish, too, then pour the batter into the buttered pudding bowl and smooth the top with a palette knife or a spoon.
- 7 To prepare the pudding for steaming, place a buttered square of baking paper on top to cover the whole surface of the pudding, then cover the pudding with a large sheet of foil that reaches all the way down the sides of the basin. Use some cooking twine to wrap around the rim of the pudding twice and secure the foil in place with a double knot to prevent any water from entering during the steaming process.
- 8 Place the pudding in the saucepan of boiling water, making sure the water reaches at least halfway up the sides of the pudding basin. Set the heat to simmer now (just ticking over) and put the lid on to steam for 3 hours 30 minutes. It will be necessary to continue topping up the water level (preferably with boiling water from the kettle) during the coarse of the cooking time to ensure the pudding steams evenly. Afterwards, turn the heat off and remove the pudding from the water, taking care as the basin will be very hot.
- 9 Allow the pudding to set outside of the saucepan for a minimum of 20 minutes, then snip off the string, remove the foil and paper and invert it onto a serving plate. Flame with more sherry, if you wish (*SEE NOTES*). Accompany the pudding with crème Anglaise (*SEE RECIPE*, page 147) or brandy butter.
- 10 If you are steaming the pudding in advance and reheating on Christmas day, this can be done by tying a fresh piece of foil over the basin and returning the pudding to a covered saucepan of simmering water for 45 minutes. The pudding can also be reheated in the microwave on medium heat for 12–15 minutes, but be sure to replace the foil with plastic film or an upturned plate. (*end*.)

NOTES.

Choose any dried fruit that takes your fancy for this recipe. I like currants, sultanas, raisins, prunes, figs and sour cherries. Just bear in mind that some fruit will need to be roughly chopped. Dried figs, for instance, are actually quite lovely just cut into quarters.

You can steam the pudding up to two months in advance of reheating it. Store it in a cool, dry place until Christmas day.

To flame the pudding, arrange the pudding in situ at the table where you are entertaining your loved ones and place a lighter nearby. Then return to the kitchen and heat the sherry in a small saucepan until it is piping-hot, but not boiling, as this will evaporate the alcohol, which is what makes it flame. Once the sherry is hot, take it to the table and tilt the saucepan at a 45-degree angle, then hold a flame from the lighter near the surface of the sherry. You will hopefully see the alcohol set alight straight away with a red-blue glow that hovers over the pan, then immediately pour the sherry over the top of the pudding. The glow from the lit sherry in the saucepan can be subtle, but once you pour the alcohol over the pudding it will become brighter.

