

Tracing the spicy history of mincemeat, a favorite Yuletide dessert, from the Middle Ages through today



LITTLE JACK HORNER, surrounded by a group of canine and feline friends, about to dig into his Christmas pie — another name for the mince pie which has been a traditional accompaniment to the Christmas dinner since Medieval times. The drawing was executed by Thomas Nast, the renowned 19th century illustrator, for the journal, *Harper's Weekly*. Nast's Christmas illustrations were recently issued in a paperback volume by Dover Publications.

Merry-making often takes place around a table. Hence, for each holiday, there is an assortment of traditional dishes without which the occasion would not be complete.

Christmas dinner is simply not Christmas dinner without a roast goose or turkey as a main dish, and without mince pie for dessert.

In fact, so central is mince pie to the celebration of Christmas that it is considered bad luck to turn down a portion of mincemeat during Christmas dinner — a year's worth of misfortune, to be precise.

On the other hand, mincemeat lovers will be glad to learn that, for every day during the Twelve Days of Christmas in which they partake of mincemeat at a different home, they will enjoy a month of happiness in the coming year.

The tradition of serving mincemeat at Christmas is centuries old. Since the Middle Ages, when the Crusaders brought back to England the first fragrant spices out of the east, British cooks have been preparing mincemeat pies — originally called "shrid pies" and, somewhat later, "shredded pies" — to commemorate the Christmas holiday.

The use of spices had a two-fold importance. Primarily, the spices acted as a preservative, increasing the staying power of the meat which was the most important ingredient in mincemeat. The spices also had a symbolic importance, as they represented the gifts which the three Magi brought to the infant Christ.

This symbolism was enhanced by the shape in which the pie was baked. A rectangular form, called a "coffin," was used — a visual metaphor for Christ's cradle, according to some experts; for his sepulchre, according to others. Oftentimes, this metaphor was extended by decorating the top of the mince pie with an image of the Holy Infant.

The form and symbolism of the mince pie contributed to its popularity during the centuries before the Puritan regime in England; however, once the Puritans took control of the British government, they outlawed mince pie. For, strict in their rules and expectations, they saw mince pie as it was baked and served, as "an abomination, idolatry, superstition and popish observance."

In order to get around the ban on this Christmas favorite, British bakers resorted to subterfuge; they rechristened them Christmas pies, and changed their shape to round — which it has remained.

As "Christmas pie," the mince pie played an important role in a small episode of British history, which was commemorated in a familiar nursery rhyme, "Little Jack Horner."

During the reign of Henry VIII, the monarch who confiscated church lands on any pretext he could devise, one prelate decided to buy him off with the gift of 12 deeds to various valuable estates in his control which he baked inside a mince pie for secrecy's sake.

This pie was given to the churchman's servant, Thomas Horner, to deliver to the king. Horner, apprised of what the pie contained, opened it up and extracted one valuable deed for himself before delivering the pie with the remaining deeds to the monarch, thus giving an anonymous rhymist a lively subject for doggerel which ran as follows:

"Little Jack Horner
sat in a corner
eating his Christmas pie;
he put in his thumb
and pulled out a plum,
and said, 'What a good boy am I!'"

Today, in England, Jack Horner Pie is a popular Christmas gift. It is not a food-stuff, however, but a package in the shape of a pie which contains an assortment of small presents.

Mince pie is, of course, still popular in England, though its ingredients have changed markedly over the centuries. In the 17th century, one recipe for mincemeat called for lamb, suet, currants, raisins, prunes and a handful of spices — caraway seeds, mace, nutmeg, cloves, black pepper and salt.

By the 19th century the recipe had been considerably elaborated. For instance, one Victorian "receipt" book called for mincemeat to be made with the following ingredients: beef suet, apples, currants, raisins, sugar, citron, candied lemon and orange peel, roast beef, nutmeg, salt, ginger, coriander seed, allspice, cloves, lemon juice, brandy and sweet wine. (The liquors, one assumes, took over some of the preservative function of the spices.)

Eliza Acton, one of the grand dames of

19th century cooking, included a recipe in her cookbook for Mince Pies Royal which, instead of being covered by a top crust, were crowned instead by a great puff of meringue, baked till golden.

In Victorian times, the mincemeat filling itself was usually made weeks or even months in advance and, lacking refrigeration, was preserved by being packaged in small jars which were tightly covered by a paper soaked in brandy or other spirit.

Today, unfortunately, there has been a further change in the preparation of mincemeat, and the ingredient often lacking is the one for which it was named — the meat, itself.

If you'd like to try mincemeat the way it was made in Queen Victoria's day, the following recipe, adapted from Eliza Acton's original by Lorna Sass for her unique volume, *Christmas Feasts from History* (Irena Chalmers Cookbooks, Inc.) is a good place to start.

Included from Sass' volume is the recipe for Superlative Mincemeat and the one for Mince Pies Royal.

SUPERLATIVE MINCEMEAT

Makes 1½ quarts or 2¾ pounds

- 2 large lemons
- 2 small tart apples, pared, cored and grated
- 2 cups raisins
- 2 cups dried currants
- Generous ¼ cup coarsely chopped citron
- Generous ¼ cup coarsely chopped candied orange peel
- 2 cups (½ pound) loosely packed grated beef kidney suet
- 1 tablespoon freshly grated nutmeg
- ½ teaspoon mace
- ¾ teaspoon ground ginger
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ½ cup of brandy
- ¼ pound lean round beef, ground (optional; see note)

Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

In a small saucepan, cover the lemons with water. Bring to a boil and simmer for 20 minutes. Remove the lemons, cut them in half and remove the pits. Chop the lemons finely.

In a bowl, combine the remaining ingredients together and mix them very well.

Press the mincemeat into large sterile jars with tight-fitting lids and store them in a cool place until needed. Should the mincemeat at any time seem dry and

crumbly, perk it up by stirring in more

brandy.

NOTE: This recipe makes enough for 2 8-inch covered pies or about 3 dozen Mince Pies Royal (see following recipe). If you plan to bake the mincemeat in pies or tarts, you will find that adding the meat at the last minute enriches the flavor. If you do this, do not plan on storing the mincemeat for more than a few days in the refrigerator.

MINCE PIES ROYAL

Makes 12 3½-inch tartlets

- 1 pound Superlative Mincemeat (see preceding recipe)
- 10 tablespoons sugar
- ¼ cup lemon juice
- Grated rind of 2 lemons
- ¼ cup clarified butter
- 8 egg yolks
- 3 egg whites

FOR THE SHORT CRUST:

- 2 tablespoons sugar
- Scant 2 cups flour
- 1½ sticks (6 ounces) chilled butter, cut into bits
- 2 tablespoons ice water

In a bowl, combine Superlative Mincemeat with 6 tablespoons of sugar, the lemon juice, lemon rind, clarified butter and egg yolks. Blend well and set aside.

To prepare the crust, combine the flour with the sugar in a bowl or in a food processor. Cut the butter into the flour until the mixture resembles oatmeal. Rapidly blend the ice water into the flour and knead briefly.

Lightly grease 12 tartlet shells. On a

lightly floured board, roll out the dough until it is about ¼ inch thick. (Do not fold the dough a few times, envelope it, as for puff pastry, but this is in the original recipe does not seem to be the effort). Cut out circles and press into the tartlet shells, making sure to push up any holes.

Spoon some mincemeat into each and bake for 20 minutes. When the is set, beat the egg whites with the remaining 4 tablespoons of sugar until stiff. Spread this meringue over each tartlet and bake for 25 minutes longer. Remove tartlets from the oven and cool them on a rack for about 10 minutes. To remove them from the tins, run a knife along the edges and gently pry them out.

Of Carols....

In England and France custom of carol singing Christmas stemmed from song sung between the scenes of the medieval "mystery" plays, which created to teach the Bible to people of the time, a few whom could read.

The early miracle plays traced the coming of Christmas simple drama. Later it became more elaborate, with additional scenes added.



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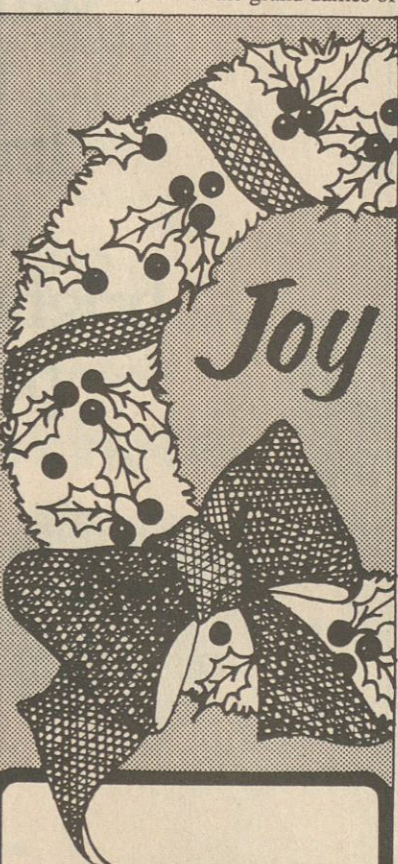
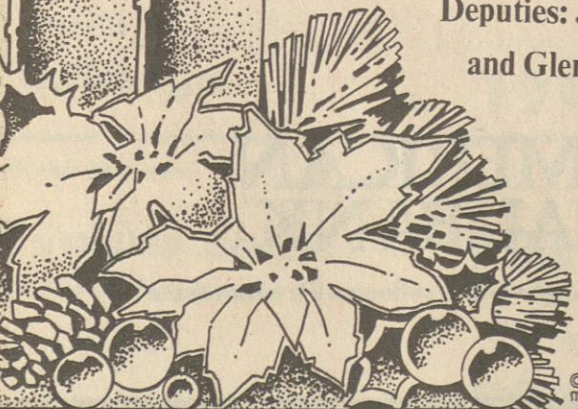


We Join You In Prayer and Celebration

Christmas is a time to reflect on our blessings, and we're honored to count your friendship among ours.


Tishomingo County Circuit Court Clerk Gerald Parsons

Deputies: JoAnn Bolton and Glenda Bolton



May all the blessings of the Holy Season be yours in abundance!

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GREETINGS

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Hoping your efforts are rewarding and that your Christmas be blessed with joy.

It has been our joy getting to know you this past year.

Season's Greetings from Tishomingo County Sheriff - Johnny S. Nunley
It has been my pleasure to serve you during the year.