

TURKEY, goose, rib of beef, duckling, by this time of year, most people know what they will be cooking for Christmas dinner, and, very likely, it will be the same as last year and the year before that. A family tradition, in other words, and who would want to change that? But perhaps one might want to ring the changes at the end of the meal and forget about the Christmas pudding.

If I were seriously rich, I sometimes think I would like to employ a pâtissier. Their skill, and art, which I know I could never emulate, always fills me with admiration. Over the years, I have had the good fortune to work with many gifted pastry chefs – both here and abroad – and, each time I work with them on my recipes, my desserts invariably emerge much improved and with more elegance and refinement.

My Chocolate Jonathan was never as good as when I made it with Ah Kit and Yves Matthey at the Mandarin Oriental in Hong Kong.

At London's Intercontinental, Ernst Bachmann was the pâtissier and his commis chef the now world-renowned Claire Clark. Sceptical though he was about my lavender sorbets and custards, he showed me many techniques for improving my desserts – one was to thickly butter a cake tin and line it with flaked almonds before spooning in the sponge mixture.

He rather frowned on my version since it was a non-fat, low-sugar, wholemeal flour sponge – about as far removed as possible from the sumptuous, elegant desserts which emerged from his kitchen.

Towering architectural structures, frivolous, frothy confections, baroque and decadent combinations of flavours, some of the desserts I have been served in New York are among the most spectacular and original.

Why do one thing with an apple, when you can do three things – such as award-winning François Payard's pomme, pomme pomme when he was at Restaurant Daniel.

At Vong, Jean-Georges Vongerichten's restaurant, we ate white pepper ice cream with bananas and passion-fruit, and liquorice ice cream with poached pears. The warm, molten-centred chocolate cake, very likely "invented" by Jean-Georges, was a great delight, as were the chocolate millefeuilles with chicory, crisp fig napoleon with grape sorbet, and mango sundae with chilli-macadamia nut brittle.

While I am not keen on le grand dessert, where a little bit of everything appears on the plate, I do like desserts created around a theme.

Thus one might have a trio of chocolate mousses, one milk, one plain and one white, or a pear and almond dessert, such as a miniature pear and almond crumble, a small pear poached in

Key note desserts

To ensure your Christmas meal ends on a high, why not create puddings based on a theme – different kinds of mousses or a combination based on pear and almond or apple – all accompanied with a dessert wine



Pear and almond dessert ... crumble, ice cream and Amaretto.

Picture by Tom Bissell

Amaretto and a scoop of almond ice cream, or try a baked apple, an apple sorbet and an apple crisp.

With citrus fruit now in season, consider a mandarin sorbet, some glazed mandarin segments and a mandarin curd tart, or do the same with lemon.

And with these, what better excuse to open a bottle or two of dessert wine. For rich puddings and pies, as well as mincemeat or chocolate-based desserts, our wine of choice would be a bottle of the rich, dark, mouth-filling Pedro Ximenez, familiarly known as PX, either from Jerez, or the Gran Barquero from Montilla, available in Waitrose. A tawny port also works well, such as the fairly widely available Taylor's 10-year-old. This is also fabulous with English cheeses. As a change from Stilton, I like to serve a selection of soft and hard English ewe's milk and goats' cheeses. The Neal's Yard stall in Hampstead's Community Market has a great selection.

The pear and almond dessert is perfectly matched by a Sauternes or Barsac, such as Chateau Roumieu 2007 (available from the Co-op) or a St Croix du Mont.

Nicolas has the 2002 Chateau Terfort, which we have enjoyed both with dessert and at the beginning of the meal with foie gras. If you are not a member of the Wine Society, whose catalogue is second to none, the

shelf of sweet wines in Waitrose is the place to go if you are short of inspiration.

PEAR AND ALMOND CRUMBLE serves 20 as part of dessert trio

200g plain flour
200g butter, plus extra for greasing dish
300g light muscovado sugar plus 1 tablespoon
100g flaked or chopped blanched almonds
100g ground almonds
15 ripe pears

Sift the flour and rub in the butter, then stir in the weighed sugar and the almonds. Peel, core and thinly slice the pears. Butter an ovenproof baking dish and put in the pears. Spoon the crumble over the fruit. Bake in a pre-heated oven at 180°C, gas mark 4 for 25 to 30 minutes.

If the pears are of the harder Conference variety, then poach the slices first in a little syrup.

To serve, allow to cool and set slightly, then cut into lozenge-shape serving portions, as these look better than squares. Remove with palate knife and place on plate with the other two desserts.

ALMOND ICE CREAM serves 20 to 30 as part of a dessert trio

Note: This recipe uses raw eggs
500g ground almonds
1.5 litres milk

1 litre cream
10 egg yolks
3 tablespoons almond liqueur OR 1 teaspoon pure almond essence
Icing sugar to sweeten to taste

Scald half the milk and, in it, infuse the ground almonds overnight, refrigerating the mixture as soon as it is cool. Make custard with the rest of the milk, the cream and egg yolks. For extra stability, you can stir in before you start cooking the custard, a little arrowroot or cornflour, slaked in a little water. When the custard cools, stir in almond flavouring. Combine the custard and infused almonds and then sweeten to taste, remembering that freezing mixture dulls the sweetness. Freeze in an ice cream maker, according to the manufacturer's directions, or in a freezer container, stirring from time to time.

PEARS IN AMARETTO serves 20 as part of dessert trio

10 firm ripe pears
Pear or apple juice – see recipe
Zest of 2 oranges
6 cardamom pods
1 small cinnamon stick
Amaretto

Carefully peel the pears, halve and core them. Put the pears in a large saucepan and just cover with apple or pear juice. Add the orange zest and spices, together with a little orange juice if you

wish. Poach for 20 to 30 minutes until the pears are just tender. Riper pears may be done in 15 minutes. Transfer the pears to a glass bowl or other serving dish. Strain the cooking juices into a clean saucepan and reduce until you have about 300ml liquid. Add Amaretto and any sugar to taste and pour the syrup over the pears. Let then steep until ready to serve with the other two desserts.

Garnish for the pear and almond dessert

Toasted flaked almonds
Very thin slices of dried pear
Almond brittle or praline, crushed and scattered on the plate.
At this time of year, you might also like to scatter ruby red pomegranate seeds over the plate.

MARZIPAN MINCE TART serves 10 to 12

This is an easy make-ahead dessert, with rich orange and marzipan flavours. A little goes a long way. Less fiddly than individual mince pies, it makes a very attractive tray bake. The layer of marzipan under the mincemeat makes this an even richer than usual mince tart. Cut into squares or fingers for serving, dusted with icing sugar. If you use bought mincemeat, you can dress it up by pouring a miniature of Grand Marnier or Cointreau into the jar before you start making the pastry, and preferably the day before you plan to use it. For a chilled fruit dessert to serve with or instead of the tart, make a mixed orange salad, of mandarins, clementines, Navel and Valencia oranges with roasted flaked almonds, rose water and orange flower water. Or serve it with a scoop of the almond ice cream.

400g plain flour
200g butter, chilled and diced
2 tablespoons caster sugar
Grated zest of 2 oranges and their juice, chilled
250g marzipan
400g mincemeat

Crumble the flour and butter together, by hand or in a food processor. Stir in the sugar, zest and enough juice to bind, adding iced water if necessary. Line a baking sheet with greased baking parchment, long enough for you to use it to ease the baked tart from the baking sheet. Divide the pastry in half. Roll out one piece to a rectangle and place on the prepared baking sheet. Roll out the marzipan as thinly as possible to fit on top of the pastry, cutting and patching if necessary. But leave a plain border

of about 0.5cm/ ¼ inch to allow the mixture to spread. Brush the border with milk.

Spoon the mincemeat on top, spread it to the border. Roll out the second piece of pastry to fit and press it down to seal the edges, trimming if necessary. Decorate the edges with a fork or spoon handle if you wish. Prick the pastry all over with a fork and bake at 180°C, gas mark 4 for about 25 minutes, until the pastry is crisp and pale golden. Remove from the oven and carefully transfer from the baking sheet to a wire rack after about 5 minutes.

Serve warm as a pudding with custard, ice cream, yoghurt or cream, or cold, cut in smaller pieces, for teatime.

But if pudding you must have, you could do worse than the famous sticky toffee pudding, invented by the late Francis Coulson, chef patron at Sharrow Bay, the famous country house hotel in the Lake District. Often imitated but never bettered, this is the original recipe, which Francis gave me. I prefer it to Christmas pudding – it would certainly grace any Christmas table.

STICKY TOFFEE PUDDING serves four to six

50g unsalted butter
175g caster sugar
175g chopped stoned dates
275ml water
1 teaspoon bicarbonate of soda
2 eggs
175g self-raising flour
1/2 teaspoon pure vanilla essence
600ml fresh cream
75g Demerara sugar
2 tablespoons black treacle

Cream the butter and sugar. Boil the dates in the water until soft and add the bicarbonate of soda. Beat the eggs into the creamed mixture, then fold in the flour, dates and liquid and the vanilla essence. Pour into a greased deep cake tin or soufflé dish, or individual pudding basins, cover loosely with foil and bake for 40 to 45 minutes at 180°C, gas mark 4, less time for smaller, individual puddings. While the pudding is baking, boil together the cream, sugar and treacle until you have a nice golden caramel sauce. When cooked, turn the pudding out and pour the sauce over the top.

More of Frances' dessert and baking recipes can be found in her *Modern Classics and Entertaining*, both published by Macmillan and available, like many of her other books, on-line.

WIN VIP TICKETS TO A LONDON PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA CONCERT AND A CASE OF VILLA MARIA WINE

A VERY special Christmas present is being offered to a lucky Ham&High reader who enjoys wine and good music.

Villa Maria, New Zealand's leading award-winning winery for more than 30 years, is offering a pair of VIP tickets to a London Philharmonic Orchestra (LPO) concert of the winner's choice in the current season (running to the end of

May 2011) plus a six-bottle case of Villa Maria wine. Villa Maria is proud to be the official wine sponsor of the LPO. VIP guests enjoy Villa Maria wines at the LPO's concerts at the Royal Festival Hall. Forthcoming concerts include performances of Mahler's epic Symphony No.5 on January 19 and Fauré's Requiem on January 22. The VIP tickets provide some of the best seats in the hall along with

a complimentary invitation to the orchestra's private bar where guests can enjoy Villa Maria wines and canapés.

One hundred per cent New Zealand and family-owned, Villa Maria Estate was founded in 1961 by George Fistonich. His

dedication to quality has led Villa Maria to claim more trophies and awards than any other New Zealand winery every year since 1979.

The winner will receive of Villa also a six-bottle case



Maria Private Bin Pinot Noir 2009 (RRP from £9.99, Tesco, Sainsbury's and the Co-op). This deliciously vibrant wine is full of ripe cherries and raspberry fruits with savoury and spice elements. It is wonderfully elegant and rich for perfect Christmas entertaining.

For more information about Villa Maria, visit www.villamariaestate.co.uk. For more information on the LPO, visit

www.lpo.org.uk.

To enter the competition, answer this simple question: In which year was Villa Maria Estate founded?

Email your answer to Chance2Win@hamhigh.co.uk by December 20.

All entrants must be aged 18 years or over and must provide a full UK mainland address and telephone number (for delivery purposes).

SO SOHO. The very racketsy glamour. A spillage of jolly happy people in Romilly Street, their parboiled and giggly faces lit up by Kettner's white and vertical neon sign – so very ridiculously overscaled. It recalls the glory days, that great sign, when Soho was posh as well as twinklingly brash, tawdry and unashamed – and the good news is that on the right night, if you're in the right mood, this wonderful part of London still can be all of those things. Don't ask me why I'd hit upon Kettner's – it's one of these historic institutions (it's been there since 1867) that I and so many others used to go to all the time, and then it just fell off the map. It has suffered many transformations – mouth-frothing fits, some might say, these occasionally flirting at the edges of a breakdown. In the 1990s I'd come along here towards the end of the evening, most usually with Keith Waterhouse. In those days it was gently faded just to the point of scruffiness (as was dear Keith) and therefore much admired. Although he made much of lunch and dinner, it was the occasion and the company (and the booze) that really were all of it, for him: food was something to taste with reluctance – even when he had ordered off-menu – then shove around the plate before eventually concealing it beneath the lettuce. Kettner's, though, was happy to oblige him with the one thing he would actually consume: egg and chips, accompanied by his usual bottle of house champagne.

Then the place was bought, I recall, by Peter Boizot – he of Pizza Express. Which never quite was right. Soon after that, someone had the idea of making it a gloriously decadent 1930s joint, all pink champagne and cocktail shakers (though I'm not sure they were fooling anyone) – and tourists ran away at the sight of the prices. Now it is changed once again, the large main dining room looking smart indeed, and very Christian Dior – all pale grey velvet, the old filigree panelled mirrors tricked out in crisp white. The grungy old carpet survives though, as so often these things do: I think they just anchor themselves to the floor and protest to the management over their impending ousting: Who do you think you are? (they stickily exclaim). We have rights! We are not fed up with being downtrodden! We are here just to be walked all over! We are your doom!

My guest for the evening was Frieda Hughes, and we'd just come hotfoot from a gallery in

Poetry and commotion

Joseph Connolly heads to Soho institution Kettner's with Frieda Hughes, daughter of Ted and a poet in her own right. There's a bit of clatter from a nervous waiter, but his politeness and the food makes it easy to forgive



In good company ... Joseph with Frieda Hughes in Kettner's.

Cork Street where she'd been showing her latest paintings. Although primarily a poet and writer of children's books (as you might expect from the daughter of that most magnificent duo Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath), Frieda has always been a keen and extremely accomplished painter. Up till now, these pictures have tended towards an eerie realism, but this show was nothing but abstracts – great colour, depth and movement, alive with an almost cosmic energy and painted with immediacy and verve (the gallery was heady with the earthy stink of wet and glistening oils). Her industry and enthusiasm are rather exciting – and not wholly confined to the arts. Although she keeps a bolthole in Kentish Town, her home now is in Wales, where she has created from nothing the most extraordinary garden, and where she likes to build walls. With rocks. And her two bare hands. Her latest tally of

pets includes dogs, chinchillas and owls (three of each) and she laments the loss of an obstreperous magpie which she brought back from the brink of death and nurtured, whereupon it ruined her house and eventually left. "So that's your passion, is it?" I asked her. "Apart from art – you love nature?" She smiled quite roguishly. "No. It's bikes. It's bikes I really love." By bikes, dear Reader, she does not mean a fold-up in the boot of the car, nor one of Boris's turquoise numbers. She means great big hogs – mean machines that roar. "I have eight," she says matter-of-factly. "All black. My favourite is a Hayabusa. 1300cc. The speed is governed at 186mph". She races at Brand's Hatch and Nurburgring and so far, thank God, has broken only a thumb.

Anyway, following the exhilaration of her show, she was starving. We were shown

to a fairly dreadful table, inches away from one on either side – although I had when I booked requested a corner. The very amiable head waiter said that he would arrange that in minutes – and within minutes, he had. The menu is 'good bistro', and Frieda started with beetroot cured salmon with lemon crème fraiche and leaves. She ordered it, she said, for the colour – and was delighted when it arrived. "Crimson," she decided. "This is wonderfully crimson". Too oily for me, but she loved it – except for the leaves, which were so full of grit she had to send the dish back. My Bayonne ham was plentiful and very silky, the celeriac roulade extremely acidic, though mercifully small. Being Soho, they offer a 'Tart of the Day', and at the end of the night they bundle her into a cab, plastered and exhausted, with a couple of tenners thrust under her garter. No – the tart was actually

FACTFILE

- ❑ **KETTNER'S**
29 Romilly Street, W1
Tel: 020-7734 6112
- ❑ Open Monday to Thursday noon-11pm, Friday to Saturday noon-11.30pm, Sunday noon-9.30pm
- ❑ Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆
- ❑ Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆
- ❑ The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆
- ❑ Cost: About 100 for three courses for two with wine

leek and gruyere that day, but the Welsh-Swiss combo didn't appeal.

The very young waiter seemed a bit rattled. "You were quite right about the leaves", he said, placing before Frieda a fresh hors d'oeuvre. Then he brought the bread bowl and butter with a flourish, dropped the lot on to the floor and from beneath the table he was yelping "I'll change these for you" – which was good to know. Then he eyed my notebook, with palpable unease. "Are you ... writing a review?" he stuttered (which I affected not to hear). Frieda's enormous 10 ounce 31-day aged Angus sirloin (had it been hung for just 30 days, clearly it wouldn't be the same) was attacked and devoured with gusto, fat and all. It was rare, as requested, the chips were pretty good and the Bearnaise had the right consistency, but lacked a bit of bite. And I was enjoying my free range Cumbrian chicken – well roasted and milkily tender – braised leeks and girolles (although the rosti potato was a bit of a charred and flattened bird's nest knitted together by an apparently frankly bewildered bird who'd simply never done this sort of thing before). I asked Frieda if she liked to cook. "Oh I do," she said, her eyes alight. "What I like most is to cook far too much food at Christmas for loads of people who dislike Christmas. Lots and lots of wine." They probably dislike it a great deal less, by the end.

The hours were whizzing by, and we thought we could stand a second bottle of Montepulciano. Our jittery waiter opened it and plugged it straight into our half-full glasses. And, given the luck this chap was having tonight, we none of us should have been too surprised to discover it was corked. Which I pointed out to him at the very first whiff. His eyes were soup plates, their brims slopping over with the broth of panic. But he really was so very polite (and unhappy) you just had to love him. A new bottle was brought, a taster properly offered, and the news conveyed that it was on the house: well good. We had puds: crème brulee for Frieda ("Pretty fine", she said. "Rather shallow. I make mine really deep") and I ordered Bakewell Tart. Why did I? What possessed me to do that? I never eat Bakewell Tart. Oh well. Frieda said it was a very ordinary Bakewell Tart, and I, having nothing to go on, believe her. As we were leaving, I asked if she always wore black (she was head-to-toe, as I've seen her before, topped by a not-quite biker's jacket, its butchness cleverly offset by rather pretty peasant embroidery). "Oh no," she said. "Pink is actually my favourite. Though of course I wear all the wonderful black stuff on the bike. I think you must always wear what you want to be seen in, should you ever crash".

Then I was hailed by the fellow tinkling away at the white grand piano – I knew him from another local restaurant. His dad I know from Gerry's Club, down the road. And while we weaved our way towards the Groucho, another great gaggle of folk were eagerly discussing where they were going on to. And the light from Kettner's fabulous sign gleamed in the shimmering pavement. So Soho. The very racketsy glamour.

❑ *Joseph Connolly's latest novel is JACK THE LAD AND BLOODY MARY (Faber and Faber, £8.99). All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.*

Begin and end Christmas with a vino flourish

HAPPY beginnings, happy endings: that should be the Christmas story, so here goes with lots of suggestions to make that happen in your glasses.

Fizz always prompts the festive spirit, but in these straitened times it's interesting to see how much more sparkling wine than champagne is being poured here. The market for each is roughly similar – a bit over £330m a year, but for that outlay UK drinkers knock back 43 million litres of sparkling wine against 14 million of champagne, at average bottle prices, respectively, of £7.85 and £23.20.

So, what to buy? Prosecco and cava sales are soaring and some are excellent value. But one of the very best sparklers I've tried recently comes from Chile: Miguel Torres Brut,

made from old-vine pinot noir with the same care that goes into champagne – which gives it fine bubbles, elegant flavours and lovely lingering character. It's worth the effort to find it: £10.50 plus delivery at www.pauladamswines.co.uk (020-8670 5011), £14 at Partridges of Sloane Square, 020-7730 0651.

Good too from Chile, but in a simpler, softly-fruited way, is Vina Maipo Sparkling Brut, blended from chardonnay, riesling and chenin blanc (£12, Morrisons). And M&S has the intriguing, sulphur-free Villiera Brut Natural chardonnay from South Africa (£10), with quirky and yet enjoyable smoky complexity. Back in Europe, there's enjoyable value to be had in French cremants, closer to champagne than Italian or Spanish fizz. One

of the best is Langlois-Chateau Langlois Brut (£9, two or more bottles). Majestic's line-up also includes the reliable Codorniu Seleccio Raventos cava (£7).

These, too, should launch the celebrations with style: at Oddbins: cava Torre Oria Brut (£7.19 – like all quoted Oddbins prices, this is after the 20 per cent mixed-case discount) and Brut Reserva (£8) and Jansz Premium Brut NV (£10.40). At Waitrose: La Rosca Brut cava (£6.30), SanLeo prosecco brut (£6) and two fine English sparklers, Ridgeview Merret Bloomsbury 2008 (£20) and Nyetimber Classic Cuvee 2005 (£27).

Christmas, though, is a

moment for extravagance. Of the more familiar champagne names, Roederer Brut Premier is consistently delicious (around £27 to £30, widely available). Jacquart Brut Tradition (£15) is a bargain and Laurent-Perrier rosé brut (£52.50) a treat – both offer extra value: recommended are Waitrose Brut NV (£40) or Pol Roger 1999 (£72,



Oddbins). Grand cru quality comes sensibly priced in Berry Bros & Rudd's UKC Mailly (£23.45) – and look there for many fine growers' champagnes. As for endings – these are not so much companions for the pud as wines to pour and sip

afterwards, alone or with a bowl of nuts. Wonderful madeiras are everywhere: Berry's Spy (dry, £15.30 50cl, BBR) and Berry's Meredith (full rich, £12.25, BBR), H.M. Borges five-year-old dry or sweet (£9, Oddbins), Henriques & Henriques Full Rich three-year-old (£11.50, Waitrose), D'Oliveiras Reserve 1977 Terrantez (£55, Waitrose).

Port remains remarkably well-priced – there are lovely styles from Quinta do Noval (Unfiltered LBV 2004 £14.40, Oddbins, 10-year-old tawny £14.40 to £14.60, Oddbins, Waitrose) and Warre (Bottled Aged 2000 LBV £21, Waitrose). Great, too, are the rich, dark PX sherries – or, often bargains, the Montilla-Moriles equivalent: Alvear PX Solera 1927 (£10.40 half-bottle, Oddbins) is a tempting example.

Fortified alternatives, just a touch lighter, include vins doux naturels from the far south of France: try Muscat de Rivesaltes els Pyreneus 2008 (£9.75 50cl, www.bibendum-wine.co.uk) or Arnaud de Villeneuve Ambré 1982 Rivesaltes (£13 50cl, Waitrose). Or proper vin santo, pure and stylish: Rufina, Villa di Monte 1995 (£15 half-bottle, M&S).

But sometimes you covet a wine that turns mid-winter into summer. So here's one which can replace the fizz before the meal or light up any long dark evening. Learn all about Domaine Jones muscat (£10 for 50cl) on maker Katie's website (www.domainejones.com) and order quickly.

LIZ SAGUES