



LOUISE WALKER

Traditional Aga
Christmas

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Louise Walker

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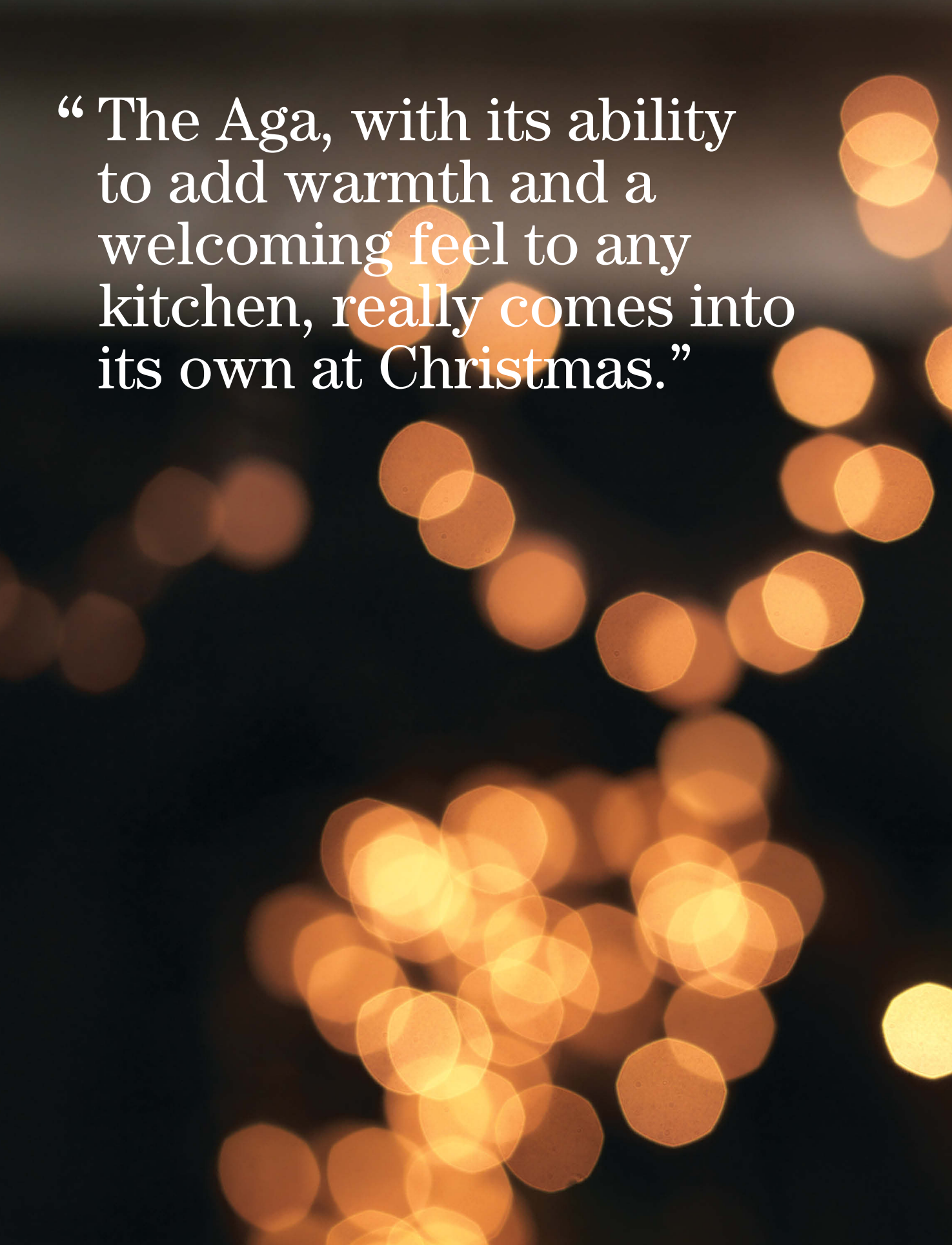
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Contents

8	Introduction
10	Cooking in Advance
30	Christmas Eve
44	Christmas Day
70	Boxing Day
86	Lunches, Dinners and Suppers for the Festive Season
116	Cakes and Puddings
134	Entertaining
160	Christmas Leftovers
176	Kitchenalia
178	Appendices
184	Index
190	Acknowledgements

“The Aga, with its ability to add warmth and a welcoming feel to any kitchen, really comes into its own at Christmas.”





Introduction

The Aga, with its ability to add warmth and a welcoming feel to any kitchen, really comes into its own at Christmas. It somehow epitomises the romantic image of the season of family gatherings and the giving and receiving of presents. Perhaps it is this that makes Christmas loom large in the minds of many Aga owners, especially new Aga owners facing their first Christmas, keen to entertain family and friends.

It is with this in mind that I have sectioned recipes in such a way that they will see you through the whole festive season. Of course, the secret to a relaxed Christmas is to do as much cooking and preparation as possible ahead of time, and therefore I have included in the Cooking in Advance chapter (page 10) all the classics such as Christmas Pudding, Christmas Cake and Mincemeat. For those of you who, even with the best will in the world, can not find time to prepare cakes in advance, turn to the Cakes and Puddings chapter (page 116) where you will find some delicious last minute recipes.

The Christmas Eve chapter (page 30) also includes all those dishes that, if cooked the day before, can make the day itself a lot less work and a lot more enjoyable. For Christmas Day, the classic turkey roast is of course here (see page 44), but for those who would like an alternative there are some wonderful pheasant, venison and goose dishes (see the Christmas Day chapter and also the Boxing Day chapter on pages 44 and 70).

As everyone knows, entertaining at Christmas can be both great fun and extremely stressful! So if you are planning to have a party over the holiday period then you should turn to the Entertaining chapter on page 134 for a collection of easy and impressive nibbles and bites that should help you enjoy the festivities as much as your guests.

Cooking in Advance

If you can find the time to cook and store some of the dishes in this chapter before Christmas week it will not only save you valuable time and energy in the last few days leading up to Christmas, but will also give you a strong feeling of being in control. Of course, some dishes actually taste better if they are cooked in advance and left to mature.

Storing will allow flavours to develop, particularly Christmas cakes, puddings and mincemeat. October seems a good time to make them; comforting baking smells permeate the house and remind us all that Christmas is approaching. I know some people who go so far as to make two puddings in one year, eating one pudding and storing the other, and then the following year baking two cakes, eating one and then storing the other.

Always wrap your cakes in greaseproof paper and foil, but remember that foil can be eaten away by the acid in the fruits if left in direct contact, so be sure not to use foil basins for your puddings. Don't worry about leftover mincemeat, it can always be used for filling baked apples or mincemeat cake. Have a look at the Leftovers chapter for wonderful Mincemeat Flapjacks (page 171). Also featured in this chapter are a couple of puddings and cakes that freeze especially well. There are of course many other dishes throughout the book that freeze well and I have indicated these when appropriate.

One of the things that I really love to do in the weeks leading up to Christmas is to make several batches of Shortbread (page 27) – a prettily wrapped tin of home-made shortbread is one of the best possible presents to give to friends and family in the run-up to December 25th.

Whilst you are busy doing all this preparation, be sure to fill your house with some seasonal aroma – simply slice some oranges, lay them on a baking tray and gently dry them in the simmering oven. In my oven it takes about 8 hours, but as Ovens vary from household to household be sure to keep an eye on them to make sure that they don't blacken. When dried they can then be tied together with cinnamon sticks or displayed in bowls.

There is, of course, one danger to this well thought through preparation; you can all too easily be lulled into a false sense of security and become complacent about all that still has to be done. I'm afraid the sad truth is that when it comes to Christmas you can never really fully relax...!

Granny's Christmas Pudding

This recipe has been taken from my second book *The Traditional Aga Party Book* and I think it's the best recipe for Christmas pudding that I have ever tried. It has always proved hugely popular at my demonstrations around the country, even with those who, at first, are adamant that they don't like Christmas pudding! Traditionally, puddings are made on the first Sunday of Advent, also known as 'Stir-up Sunday' when everyone is at home to have a stir and a wish. I usually make mine a month or so earlier than this, but we all still enjoy the tradition.

250g/9oz suet (I use 'vegetable suet', suitable for vegetarians)
350g/12oz Demerara sugar
500g /1lb 2oz sultanas
500g/1lb 2oz currants
500g/1lb 2oz raisins
1 cooking apple, peeled and grated
15g/1/2oz ground mixed spice
15g/1/2oz ground ginger
Pinch salt
Grated rind and juice 1 lemon
Grated rind and juice 1 orange
300ml/1/2 pint Guinness
300ml/1/2 pint water
60ml/2 fl oz brandy
30ml/1 fl oz sherry
30ml/1 fl oz rum
5 eggs, beaten
350g/12oz fresh breadcrumbs

Put all the ingredients except the eggs and the breadcrumbs in a large mixing bowl and mix thoroughly. Cover and leave to stand somewhere cool for 3 to 4 days, stirring occasionally. When you are ready to cook the puddings, add the eggs and breadcrumbs to the soaked fruit mixture and stir thoroughly. Spoon the mixture into basins. Level the top and cover with a double layer circle of greaseproof paper. Then cover with a fitted lid, if using boilable plastic basins, or a double layer of foil, if using a traditional basin.

Stand each pudding on a trivet, or an old plate and place on the base of a saucepan. (It is useful to stand the basin in a strap of foil, so it can be easily lifted from the hot pan.) Pour in enough water to come 5cm/2" up the side of the pudding basin. Cover the pan with a lid and bring to the boil. Move to the simmering plate and simmer for 25-30 minutes. (You may need to pull the pan half off the plate to keep to a simmer.) Move the puddings to the simmering oven and leave to cook for 11 or 12 hours. Remove from the oven and allow to completely cool. When cold, replace the greaseproof paper and foil with fresh pieces and then store the puddings somewhere cool.

On Christmas Day, place the pudding directly in the simmering oven for 1-2 hours. Cool for 10 minutes before turning out onto a warm serving plate.

**Makes either 2 large (2 litre/3 pint) puddings or
3 medium (1 litre/2 pint) puddings**



A Light Christmas Pudding

This is a deliciously light alternative to the more traditional dark and heavily fruited Christmas pudding. It's a recipe that doesn't contain a large quantity of dried fruits, so won't keep as long as the classic pudding. However, it will keep in the fridge for 3 or 4 days and can be frozen, which makes it perfect as a last minute pudding.

175g/6oz butter, softened
175g/6oz caster sugar
Grated rind 2 oranges
3 eggs, beaten
175g/6oz self-raising flour
1 level teaspoon ground cinnamon
75g/3oz ready-to-eat prunes, chopped
75g/3oz ready-to-eat apricots, chopped
75g/3oz ready-to-eat figs, chopped
75g/3oz Lexia or large juicy raisins,
chopped

Put the butter and sugar in a bowl and cream together until light and fluffy. Beat in the grated orange rind. Gradually beat in the eggs, adding a little flour with each addition to help the egg mix in. When all the egg has been added, add the cinnamon to the flour and fold into the creamed mixture. Fold in the chopped fruits.

Spoon the mixture into a buttered 1.4 litre/
2¹/₂ pint pudding basin.

Cover the top either with a fitted lid if using a boilable plastic basin, or cover the pudding with greaseproof paper and foil. Put a trivet or an old saucer into the bottom of a saucepan and put in the pudding. (It is useful to stand the basin in a strap of foil so it can be easily lifted from the hot pan).

Add enough water to the saucepan to come 5cm/2" up the side of the saucepan. Cover the pan with a lid. Bring the water to the boil and then simmer on the simmering plate for 30 minutes. Move the saucepan to the simmering oven and cook for 5-6 hours. At this point the pudding can be served, or cooled and stored in the fridge, or frozen. If freezing, remove from the freezer and thaw in a cool place overnight, and then proceed as for reheating. To reheat, place the pudding directly in the simmering oven for 1-2 hours. Cool for 10 minutes before turning out onto a warmed serving plate.

Serves 8–10

Marzipan

You can buy very good quality marzipan from the supermarket, which is easy to use, though it doesn't have the wonderful flavour and texture of homemade. The added bonus of making marzipan by hand (using a food processor will make it too oily) is that your hands will be beautifully soothed and smoothed by the almond oil!

300g/10½oz ground almonds
225g/8oz icing sugar, sieved
225g/8oz caster sugar
1 whole egg and 2 egg yolks, beaten together
1 teaspoon lemon juice
½ teaspoon vanilla essence

Mix the almonds and the sugars together in a mixing bowl. Add the remaining ingredients and mix to a stiff paste. (The easiest way of doing this is to use your hands.) Turn the paste onto a work surface and knead until well mixed and crack free. If the marzipan feels a little sticky add a little icing sugar to the surface. Unwrap the cake and place it on a cake board or plate. The cake will be level on

the top so there is no need to turn the cake upside down or trim the top. Roll the marzipan into a circle to fit over the top and sides of the cake and brush the top and sides with warm apricot jam. Lift the marzipan onto a rolling pin and carefully lay over the cake. Using your hands, carefully stroke the marzipan onto the top and sides of the cake, starting in the middle of the top and working outwards and down the sides. Press and smooth the marzipan to fit the cake. Trim any excess from the base.

Allow the marzipan to dry for 3-4 days before icing (unless you are doing this at the last minute and will be eating the cake in the next day or two).

Royal Icing

Royal icing can either be used as a smooth surface icing and for piping, or applied 'roughly' with a palette knife to create a snow scene.

2 egg whites
450g/1lb icing sugar, sieved
½ teaspoon lemon juice
2-3 drops glycerine (optional), to keep the icing softer

Beat the egg whites until foamy, but not white. Gradually beat in the icing sugar, lemon juice and glycerine. Continue beating in the sugar until the icing is snowy white, smooth, and stands in stiff peaks when the spoon is lifted from the bowl. If it is too stiff add more lemon juice, or if too soft, more icing sugar. Add a few drops of colouring at this stage if desired. Cover tightly with clingfilm and allow to stand for an hour

or two or even overnight, this allows the bubbles to disperse, which is especially beneficial if you want a smooth icing.

Brush any excess icing sugar from the marzipan on the cake and apply the icing with a palette knife. If the icing begins to stick to the knife, just dip the blade in warm water. Keep any extra icing in the bowl and keep covered at all times to prevent the icing drying out.

This quantity is sufficient to cover the top and sides of a 23cm/9" round cake.



Christmas Cake

A traditional rich fruit cake with the slightly unusual but succulent addition of apricots and figs. You can of course add any dried fruits that you like. If this is the first time you have baked a rich fruit cake in your Aga, I suggest that you bake it during the day and make a note on the recipe for future reference of how long it takes to cook. Don't be surprised by the length of the cooking time, and remember that the tin does not need wrapping on the outside.

1 kg/2lb 2oz dried fruits, such as raisins,
sultanas, mixed peel and cherries
100g/3½oz dried apricots, chopped
100g/3½oz dried figs, chopped
75g/2¾oz blanched almonds, chopped
150ml/5fl oz sherry
Finely grated rind and juice 1 orange
250g/9oz butter, softened
175g/6oz soft brown sugar
5 eggs, beaten
300g/10½oz plain flour
75g/2¾oz self raising flour
3 level teaspoons mixed spice
1 level teaspoon ground cinnamon
1 tablespoon golden syrup and
1 tablespoon fine-cut orange marmalade

In a large non-metallic bowl, put the dried fruits, apricots, figs, almonds, sherry, orange rind and juice. Mix well, cover and leave to stand for 24 hours.

Line the inside of a 20cm/8" deep round cake tin. Cream the butter and sugar together until light and fluffy. Gradually beat in the eggs, alternating with a little flour, to prevent the mixture curdling. Fold in the remaining flour and spices. Gently fold in the golden syrup and the marmalade and then the soaked fruit mixture. Spoon the mixture into the prepared tin and level the top. Place the oven shelf on the floor of the simmering oven and put in the cake. Bake for 9-12 hours (some 'cool' simmering ovens may take up to 24 hours) until the top of the cake is evenly pale golden, the cake has shrunk from the sides of the tin, and a skewer inserted in the middle comes out clean. Allow to completely cool in the tin. Turn out when cold and wrap the cake in greaseproof paper and foil. Store somewhere cool until ready to marzipan and ice the cake (see page 15).

Christmas Fruit and Nut Cake

This is not as heavily fruited as the traditional Christmas Cake on page 17. However, the extra mix of nuts gives it a delicious crunch. It will keep well but can also be made a day or two before eating.

250g/9oz raisins
350g/12oz sultanas
200g/7oz glace cherries, rinsed and halved
50g/2 oz candied peel, finely chopped
100g/3½oz pecans
100g/3½oz hazelnuts
100g/3½oz shelled pistachios
Grated rind and juice 1 lemon
4 tablespoons brandy or sherry
325g/11oz plain flour
2 teaspoons ground allspice
75g/2½oz ground almonds
250g/9oz soft brown sugar
250g/9oz butter, softened
2 tablespoons treacle
5 eggs, beaten

Put the dried fruits, peel, nuts, lemon rind, juice and the brandy or sherry together in a mixing bowl. Mix well, cover and leave to stand overnight.

Mix the flour, spices and ground almonds together. Cream together the butter and the sugar until light and fluffy. Gradually beat in the eggs, adding a little flour mixture between each addition. Beat in the treacle and then fold in the remaining flour mixture. Finally, add the soaked fruit and nuts, stirring gently until all are evenly mixed.

Spoon the mixture into a lined 23cm/9" deep cake tin. Put the shelf on the floor of the simmering oven and put in the cake. Bake for 8-12 hours, or until the cake has shrunk from the sides of the tin and a skewer inserted in the middle comes out clean. Cool the cake in the tin. When cold, remove from the tin and wrap in greaseproof paper and then foil. The cake can be served either without decoration or covered with marzipan and icing (see page 15).

Makes 1 x 23cm/9" round cake