

SOME SEASONABLE CHRISTMAS DISHES.

BY A. G. PAYNE, AUTHOR OF "COMMON-SENSE COOKERY."



is with innocent and happy hearts that we should approach the present holy festival, and it is only when our hearts are swollen with such thoughts that we can hope to answer honestly the question, What is hospitality? Christmas-time is now approaching rapidly, and many of us know that we—thanks to its hallowing influence—make some slight change in our wonted customs. In the first place, we shall give one or more dinner-parties, in which some, perhaps, will be invited who would not be asked at any other time of the year.

On these real festive occasions, what should be chiefly borne in mind is that true hospitality in giving dinners consists in giving as far as possible what will be eaten, not what looks best, or is most convenient. I have already in my previous papers, now published under the title of "Common-Sense Cookery," referred to turtle soup, roast beef, turkey and goose, as well as to plum-pudding and mince-pies, and I would now rather confine myself to a few really nice entrées, remarking that to many persons with good appetites, the entrées are often that part of the dinner most appreciated; but, then, how entrées vary! For instance, contrast a dish of oyster patties with one of mutton cutlets. You generally see the former when handed round taken in its early stages, till the dish becomes so bare that it is refused out of politeness; on the other hand, the cutlets are refused time after time till, perhaps, some very poor relation takes one out of compassion. The practical moral of this is, let us have some oyster patties, and enough of them. Next, how shall we make them? for you will *never* get them fit to eat from the pastrycooks', who seem to imagine an oyster patty to be a good-sized piece of pastry, probably light enough, with a small dab of something in the middle about the size of a wafer, in which nothing can be detected in flavour except anchovy sauce.

Oyster patties must, of course, be divided into two distinct portions—the cases and the inside—and we will not here enter into the construction of the former, as you will save time, trouble, and money by buying the cases ready-made, asking for small *vol-au-vent* cases, which will come to about three-halfpence or twopence each. These little *vol-au-vent* cases have small flat lids, and not a little round ball of puff-paste on the top, and contain a far larger quantity of "inside" than the ordinary patty-cases generally obtained from a pastrycook's. We will therefore suppose twelve cases to be ready, and will now describe how to make rich oyster forcemeat, if the expression may be used, wherewith to fill them.

First order in two dozen good-sized oysters, and open them carefully so that not a drop of the liquor

inside is lost. If no one in your establishment is capable of opening oysters—a not uncommon occurrence—you should send some one with a basin to the fishmonger's, who will see the oysters opened, as the importance of not wasting any of the liquor cannot be overrated.

Next take out the oysters carefully, and remove the beards, which are hard and indigestible, and place these beards in a small stewpan with the oyster-liquor; next rinse the oysters in a little milk—about half a pint—and pour this milk into the stewpan with the beards and liquor, and let it gently simmer over the fire for some time, to extract all the flavour possible from the beard, as with the present high price of oysters the flavour must be economised as much as possible. Now strain this carefully in case of tiny little pieces of oyster-shell remaining in, which is a very dangerous thing to get into the mouth, and throw away the beards. Next thicken the strained milk and oyster-liquor with some white roux, which we have already described to be equal quantities of butter and flour, that have been well mixed together and thoroughly baked without any brown colour being imparted. The thickness should be about equal to double cream. Next add a little cayenne pepper and a tea-spoonful of anchovy sauce, as well as a little ordinary black pepper—bearing in mind the good maxim, which should never be forgotten when pepper is used, that it is easy to add but impossible to take away, and that many persons object to high seasoning.

I would recommend the cook to taste this mixture, first before the anchovy sauce is added, and secondly after. It is a good lesson, showing how the anchovy sauce possesses the wonderful power of bringing out the oyster-flavour.

We will next turn to the oysters themselves; these must be scalded—*i.e.*, place them in a small strainer, and dip them into boiling water, but only for a very short time, as otherwise they would get hard. Then cut them up into two, three, or four pieces each, according to their size, add them to the thickened and flavoured liquor and milk, and stir it up in a basin, and make it all hot, but do not let it reach boiling heat; when hot add the yolks of two eggs, and after well mixing fill the cold empty patty-cases with this hot mixture. As these patty-cases are already baked nearly enough, were you to put the inside in *cold*, they would take so long to make hot in the oven, that by the time the inside part was hot through the pastry would be quite spoilt.

Have you ever tasted at any dinner some patties in which the pastry was hot, but the inside cold? I have several times. Do you know what this means? It means that they have been sent from the pastrycook's, and the cook forgot how long it would take to warm a little compact dab of "forcemeat" in the centre of a lot of pastry. In fact, when ready-made patties of

any description are sent from the pastrycook's, the safest plan of warming up is to empty the patties, warm the insides separately, and when hot refill the cold cases, when a very short time will be found to be sufficient to make them hot.

Many persons, instead of having a number of small *vol-au-vents*, one of which makes "a portion," prefer to have one large *vol-au-vent*; when this is the case it will be found advisable to add a tin of preserved button mushrooms to the inside. These mushrooms should be put in the milk and liquor after the beards have been strained—the mushrooms, of course, being cut up when large. This not only helps to fill the inside—oysters, as we have said, being now very dear—but also improves the flavour.

We next come to consider the best method of garnishing this dish of patties, or *vol-au-vents*, as the case may be. By far the best garnish will be found to be fried parsley and, if possible, a few small crayfish. A large *vol-au-vent*, surrounded by freshly-fried dark green parsley, with four small crayfish with open claws leaning against the sides of the *vol-au-vent*, has a very handsome appearance, especially if the dish be a good-sized massive silver one.

There are two valuable, but at the same time somewhat dangerous seasonings, that I have omitted in the preparation of oyster patties and *vol-au-vents*, and these are lemon-juice and nutmeg. I have purposely put these two seasonings in a separate paragraph, in order the better to warn you against their indiscriminate use. There is, perhaps, nothing that tests the cook's art more than the use of spices, the too general fault being that they over-spice their dishes. For instance, those who have ever tasted the mock-turtle soup sold in large basins in ham and beef shops, will probably, if possessed of any palate, recollect how, as a rule, the flavour of mace preponderated, and to a great extent spoiled the flavour of the soup. Just so in these oyster patties; a suspicion of nutmeg and about a salt-spoonful of lemon-juice, supposing the lemon to be fresh and thick-skinned, added to the whole mass, will improve the flavour; but err, if possible, on the side of too little rather than too much.

While upon the subject of cooking oysters, I will refer to a most delicious little *bonne-bouche*, which I think has been dignified with the name of "flying angel;" and should you be fortunate enough this Christmas to receive that good old-fashioned, but now, alas! rare present, a barrel of oysters, you would do well to remember the following receipt:—Cut out first a dozen pieces of stale bread, the size and thickness of ordinary good-sized draughtsmen, or say a little bigger round than half-a-crown, and fry these pieces of bread a nice golden-brown colour. Have these drained and then slightly buttered over with anchovy butter—*i.e.*, one anchovy filleted and pounded with a little butter—a piece of anchovy butter the size of a pea being sufficient for each piece of fried bread. Next cut some round pieces of fat bacon, as thin as a wafer; fry them just enough to cook them, and lay them on the bread, place a roasted oyster on the top

of each piece of bacon, and pour the liquor of the oyster out of the deep shell over each. To roast an oyster, you have simply to place it, the round shell downwards, on a gridiron. When the oyster opens of its own accord, then it is done; or if in a few minutes it won't open, you will find it give easily to a knife. Detach the oyster with a thin sharp knife from each shell. I think these little *bonnes-bouches* about the most delicious things I know.

I will now try and explain another entrée, very good, called *tête-de-veau, en tortue*—or in other words, calf's head dressed turtle fashion. First, do not be alarmed, I am not going to order whole truffles, cocks'-combs, silver arrows, *ad lib.*—all very good in their way, but then those who can afford to use them generally keep a cook who is in no want of the elementary instruction that we here endeavour to give. So let us try what we may term a middle-class method, and suppose half a calf's head has been bought for the purpose of making mock-turtle soup. First parboil the head, and when sufficiently cooked to separate the meat from the bones, take it out of the large saucepan and place it on a dish, and with a sharp knife cut a good oblong or slightly oval piece of the horn away from the bone, leaving the ear exactly in the centre; this ear will stick upright in the centre of the dish eventually. Next the gravy: take some of the stock in which the bones of the head are being boiled, and which we presume to be already flavoured with marjoram, basil, lemon-thyme, &c., as well as having had the usual herbs, parsley, onion, &c., added to it, and place the stock on the fire with a little extra marjoram, basil, and lemon-thyme, and if possible add a good pinch of a herb called pennyroyal. Reduce this stock to make it very strong, strain it off, thicken it with brown thickening, and if only a little gravy beef was used in making the stock originally, add a little extract of meat. Add also a small tin of button mushrooms, two table-spoonfuls of tomato sauce, if not acid, and a good-sized port wine glass of golden sherry, or still better, madeira. The calf's ear and surrounding flesh must be gently stewed in this gravy till perfectly tender, and if care be taken in this process, the ear itself, which will be above the gravy, will become glazed, and present that dark, rich, golden-brown appearance, that renders it so appetising. The gravy should be quite as thick as double cream. Care should be taken before stewing the par-boiled ear to remove all grease from the gravy, and pepper should be added, as usual, sparingly. Next have ready some hearts of bread, fried a nice brown colour, and having placed the ear in the centre of a dish, and poured the rich gravy over it, ornament the dish by placing fried eggs—four will be enough—alternately round the edge of the dish with the fried bread. These eggs must be fried rather hard, and trimmed, so that only a thin rim of white surrounds the yolk. Also, pick out some of the largest mushrooms, and put them upright on the meat, and place on and about the meat a few stoned French olives—a dozen will be plenty. Some also use a few filleted anchovies, but they are not absolutely necessary.