

The pud that likes to party

Put your hands together for trifle – for more than 400 years it has held its own on our festive dining tables, despite upstart competition

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YOU CAN TELL A LOT ABOUT A PERSON by what's in their trifle. This festive favourite, found on many a dining table over Christmas, is more than a mere pudding; it's a powerful prism, splitting the white light of Britishness into a culinary spectrum of regional cooking, social background and family traditions. There are those, for example, who see jelly as an abomination and others who insist on it (I side with the latter). Then there are those who think fruit is a no-no, while for others it's the very reason to buy tinned clementine segments.

The history of trifle begins, simply enough, with a recipe entitled 'trifle' appearing in Thomas Dawson's 1585 cookery book, *The Good Huswifes Jewell*, but this early version describes something more akin to what we now think of as a fool.

Indeed, the words fool, syllabub and trifle were used interchangeably for a period. But slowly, over the next 100 years, trifle broke away from the other delicate fruit and cream concoctions and came to mean something bolder, boozier and more solid.

By 1751 Hannah Glasse, the fabled 18th-century English cookery writer, had taken up trifle's cause in *The Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy*, adding custard and sack- (sherry) soaked cake. And by the late Victorian era, trifle had become a gaudy riot of fruit, cream, booze, jam, jelly, candied fruit and comfits (sugar-coated caraway seeds, replaced today by hundreds and thousands).

ANYONE FANCY A DOLLOP OF MAYO?

It hasn't always been about unadulterated deliciousness. *Trifle*, published in 2001 and written by Helen Saberi and the late food historian Alan Davidson, charts the rise and fall of this plump

princess of puds. Their research unearthed various manifestations of the dish, which absorbed influences from across the Empire. There's a recipe for 'Indian trifle', featuring rice and cinnamon; a recipe with coconut milk; another with coffee. Helen, inspired by the cuisine of her Afghan husband, gives a recipe using quince and yogurt.

Then there are the oddities: *The Encyclopaedia of Practical Cookery* (1890s) contains a recipe for 'savory trifle' in which the cake is replaced with fried bread, and lobster and mayonnaise are used instead of fruit and custard. Meanwhile, Florence Petty's *The Pudding Lady* (1910) tempts the reader with a 'beef trifle' made with beef, gravy and horseradish with breadcrumbs on top. Whichever ingredients you choose (except perhaps the beef), they need to be shown off. Trifle looks best in a glass bowl, so you can see the layers.

FOREVER IN VOGUE

During the rest of the year, save for the odd party, trifle can look a little lost – nudged out by filling pastry puddings or Johnny-come-lately chocolate cakes. But come Christmas, when everything's a little over the top, it's exactly what's called for. There's something slightly bawdy about a good trifle. It's a dish that has reinvented itself over the centuries (if Madonna were a pudding, she'd be a trifle). It appeals to children and adults alike; it can be homely or mass-produced, boozy and grown-up or sugary and innocent.

Perhaps trifle's strength is that it doesn't rule out any flavours or ingredients, welcoming one and all with open arms like the perfect host greeting guests. It's the ultimate good-time pud. **a**

Fancy making your own trifle for Christmas? Visit bit.ly/delicioustrifle for recipes



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