

Wrapping up a profit

Licensees should plan well in advance and capitalise on the big spenders to boost profits this Christmas, says **Lesley Footitt**

This almost the season to be jolly and, as it is among the busiest and most profitable of the year, licensees must plan well in advance. Times are still tough for the trade and consumers alike, but people tend to splash out around Christmas. According to Mintel, in

2009 20% of those polled claimed that money was tighter, but they still spent big in the festive season.

The Mystery Dining Company (TMDC) found six out of 10 consumers said they eat out between three and five times at Christmas.

More than 50% of respondents said they were prepared to spend

more on drinks and three out of five people said they would be more likely to order an aperitif.

Despite money being tight, the British Turkey Information Service expects around 10 million turkeys to be eaten in the UK this year, so Christmas 2010 still presents a great opportunity for pubs and caterers.

Christmas accommodation packages

The Cary Arms in Babbacombe, Devon, is holding a "Christmas and new year respite" to encourage people to stay at the pub after Christmas. Guests can book two-night getaways on 27 and 28 December or 29 and 30 December for £450. The price includes luxury double accommodation for two with a full English breakfast and a three-course dinner on one night. The pub has eight rooms and three cottages.

"It is a good deal," says marketing manager Jo DiCarlo. "We don't normally add a

three-course meal to bookings."

The Kingham Plough in Kingham, Oxfordshire, will give guests staying on Christmas Eve a hamper on Christmas morning with a Champagne breakfast.



Customer preferences

When creating new menus, taking bookings and organising events, it's important to keep the customer in mind. TMDC

conducted a poll that revealed slow service, poor food quality and overcrowding to be diners' biggest annoyances during Christmas. Brakes suggests assigning one or two good members of staff to look after Christmas bookings, so it doesn't get out of control and the pub doesn't end up squeezing too many diners in. Encouraging early and late bookings will mean achieving the same profitability

throughout the night, without having to add extra tables and causing overcrowding.

The Richard Onslow Peach pub, in Cranleigh, Surrey, is offering an incentive to get customers in early by giving away a free glass of Prosecco for pre-booked dinner guests seated between 6pm and 7pm from 1 to 24 December when eating from the set Christmas menu.

TMDC director Sally Whelan warned pub chefs that great care must be taken when putting together a set menu. "If you are renowned for a particular dish or style of cooking then you should make sure a limited menu reflects this, otherwise you're likely to disappoint loyal customers and fail to make the right impression on new ones," she says.

The survey also found opinions were split when it comes to preferred menus – 35% favoured traditional Christmas dishes, but 27% wanted to see a menu with lighter or more modern options.

Dessert options

Christmas menus are a great time to blend traditional dessert options with contemporary ideas. 3663 is offering Ice Fresh orange cream chocolate profiterole bites – which are also available in mint – and raspberry trifle cheesecake as innovative options.

Customers who indulge in a Christmas dinner with all the trimmings may not want a heavy dessert. Mini-desserts give them the option of having something sweet, without overloading. Atlantic Foods' Go On! puds range features seven mini-desserts, including Belgian waffles and Tia Maria profiteroles. The company recommends offering platters to share, giving people the chance to sample as much, or as little, as they would like.

Whoopie cakes hit Britain this year, and have proved a hit. The cakes – two small sponge disks sandwiched with buttercream – are set to be a hit this Christmas.

Brakes has devised a Whoopie recipe with a festive twist, using typical winter spices such as nutmeg and cinnamon, as well as dried fruit and brandy butter icing. The cakes could accompany a coffee, or become an alternative to mince pies.

Delice de France has launched a selection of sweet and savoury

snacks for Christmas. The dessert options include a chocolate, cherry and cranberry bundt cake; and a Belgian chocolate sponge topped with meringue and holly.

The Richard Onslow pub in Cranleigh, Surrey, has put a Christmas twist on its desserts, offering traditional mulled cherries, cinnamon ice cream and shortbread biscuits for more adventurous diners who still want a taste of Christmas. "Everyone loves a dessert at Christmas," says Mike Godwin, managing director of premium ice cream brand Mövenpick. "And a super premium ice cream can be a lighter, yet decadent option."

The company has introduced new flavours including double cream and meringue; and almond and vanilla. Drizzle brandy over the top for a Christmas twist.

Brandy sauce can add quality to an indulgent dessert. Macphie sauce contains French brandy and can be added to cakes for added appeal.

Cakes and biscuits can also be given a Christmas feel using edible glittering pigment powder. Perlazoon from Cream Supplies is available in gold and red and can be sprinkled on to the food. It can also be used in jellies, which would be popular with children.



The importance of gravy

A delicious roast can be ruined by a below-par gravy, so it is important to get it just right. According to Nestlé Professional, 75% of customers think if a venue serves a quality gravy, they would be more likely to visit again. It recommends Maggi instant gravy to be used on its own or as a base.

You may have a variety of meats on your festive menu and you can always add that little bit extra to

make your gravy special.

Premier Foods' Mark Rigby recommends adding these ingredients. For gravy with roast beef ideas include red wine, chestnuts, mushrooms, garlic, rosemary and redcurrants. With roast pork add cider, honey, clove, sage, mustard and apricots, and for game dishes add port, bay leaf, juniper, smoked bacon, walnuts and cranberries.

Bisto and Premier Foods recommend adding rosemary or sage to improve the flavour of gravy, and cream or redcurrant jelly to give a glossy finish.

Unilever Foodsolution's marketing director Claire Sullivan recommends adding Port, Madeira or cranberries to Knorr bouillons. Premier's Rigby adds: "Keep a lid on your gravy and don't let it boil away. Measure and make only as much as you need."



Boxing Day ideas

Peach pub the Richard Onslow in Cranleigh is hosting a Boxing Day breakfast to keep the momentum going throughout the festive period. Post-Christmas revellers can turn up early for a hearty breakfast of kippers, porridge, smoked salmon and scrambled eggs, or a full English.

From 10.30am the brave can indulge in "hangover cures" such as mulled cider (£3.75) and Bloody Marys (£6).

For entertainment there will be Connect 4 and Jenga competitions and a "pressie

amnesty" where people can bring in unwanted gifts and pick something else. "There'll also be a toy exchange for children," says Peach partner John Taylor.

"We thought we'd be open for lunch anyway so may as well open for breakfast and have fun with it. We're trying to provide an honest, warm environment for everyone to enjoy."

The pub will be making the most of New Year's Eve with a Bond-themed party featuring the hero's films and "Vespa Martinis" – shaken not stirred.

Christmas tips

- Use seasonal ingredients for best flavour and value
- Think beyond the traditional turkey
- Put on a daily specials board to take advantage of what your supplier may have to offer
- Use cheaper cuts of meat for stewing and casseroles
- Get your suppliers' help when planning your menu
- Include dishes that can be prepared ahead

Source: Knorr

Highlight alcohol-free options

TMDC director Sally Whelan suggests highlighting alcohol-free options such as freshly squeezed juices and sparkling drinks to give customers more choice. Non-alcoholic cocktails and a good hot beverage offer are likely to be popular, especially with designated drivers.

A quality hot drinks offer will also serve to attract Christmas shoppers to help maximise profit throughout the day.

Twinnings has launched a mulled spice tea blended with Christmas spices and Assam. The "seasonal indulgence" can be offered alone or with a sweet treat.

The London Tea Company has a range of unusual speciality teas to tempt customers.

Drake & Morgan (D&M) pubs the Refinery, in Southwark, south London, and the Parlour, in Canary Wharf, east London, will offer warm Christmas cocktails from November such as warm, spiced apple toddy (£6.95). It contains Cognac and Calvados, which are shaken with fresh apple juice, liquorice bitters and mint and served in a Thermos flask.

D&M's pub, the Anthologist, in the City of London, will serve mulled wine in tankards. The

company's fourth pub – the Folly – opens next month complete with a Pommery Champagne pop-up shop.

D&M provides hot water bottles where its venues have outside areas. There are also outdoor fire pits to help customers stay warm.



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Mathieu Eke, 2010 desserts champion and chef/owner, the Helyar Arms, East Coker, Somerset:

"I cannot explain how much of a lifeline winning the awards was amid some challenging times for the pub industry."



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Traditional or adventurous?

For those diners looking for a traditional Christmas feast, Rectory Foods has introduced a turkey butterfly as part of its new No Nonsense food range. Each 4kg butterfly serves up to 50.

Bernard Matthews Foodservice believes that turkey will be the big winner this year, as an affordable meat with good profit margins and health benefits.

The meat is high in protein, low in fat and salt and comes in several different cuts to offer caterers options when devising dishes. For more experimental customers, there are ways to tweak traditional dishes.

Unilever Foodsolutions suggests using cheaper cuts of meat in casseroles, stews and pies for different, but satisfying winter warmers. Festive colours can give dishes a Christmas twist, such as serving slow-cooked lamb shanks with redcurrants.

IMAGE: BERNARD MATTHEWS



Pork specialist BPEX has come up with some inspirational recipes covering pork, gammon and ham that include a boneless rolled pork roast with baked red apples and apple sauce.

Brakes suggests offering game such as wood pigeon, as a quintessentially British choice. Wood pigeon filets are a perfect size for one diner and make a great starter or main. In comparison to other game birds, it is cost-effective and popular with consumers. Prime Meats, supplied

by Brakes, suggests grilling or roasting the birds for serving whole, or as part of a warm salad for lighter eaters. Following the game theme, foodservice supplier 3663 has introduced pluma pheasant pâté for the festive season.

Brakes customers M&J Seafood recommends having a good fish dish on the menu this Christmas. With salmon prices higher this year, it suggests using mackerel, marinated in a sweet chilli, lime and ginger coating.

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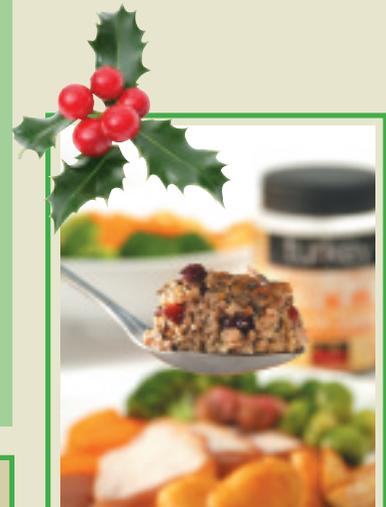


IMAGE: MAJOR INTERNATIONAL - CRANBERRY AND TURKEY STUFFING

Snacks and Christmas hampers

Délicrance UK predicts that menu winners this Christmas will include breads, and has introduced a rustic baguette, Losange Diamond Roll and a rosemary and sea salt focaccia. It recommends its fig and multi-cereal bloomer as an accompaniment to a cheese and chutney board. There is also a five-strong range of “stand-alone” mini-savoury tartlets including goats’ cheese; and tomato and basil.

Licensees could try putting together Christmas hampers for customers, full of locally produced treats, like the Feathers Inn in Stocksfield, Northumberland. The pub takes orders for hampers up until 12 December. Customers can choose what comes in their hamper from a list of produce, and the pub also offers fixed price hampers from £15 to £70. The Pudding and Spice hamper includes black pudding, Christmas pudding, mulled wine and red French wine. Other set hampers come with treats such as Feathers Inn gift vouchers, Prosecco, pickles and cheeses.

Decorations and trends

The Great Pub Company is making its own decorations this year to save money. After taking inspiration from decorations elsewhere, a team from the pubs will be making holly wreaths for the fireplaces and front doors using a holly bush at the Compasses at Pattiswick, Essex.

“We have set staff a challenge to collect as many pine cones as they can from the countryside for one of our decoration ideas,” said Great Pub Company’s marketing manager Heather Tarling.

“The aim of this concept is to cut our costs in what is a difficult economic climate and to be more

resourceful in our approach.”

Table-setting supplier Duni, supplied by Brakes, recommends a move away from the traditional red and green colour scheme of Christmas this year, in order to match décor with silver tableware. It has included combinations of blue and silver; plum and burgundy; and gold and black in its designs for this year.

Bunzl Catering Supplies has launched its largest collection of festive tableware, crackers and partyware. Tableware ideas include different patterns and fabrics in cream, blue, silver and black, as well as the more traditional red, gold and green. It also supplies Christmas staples including trees, baubles, tinsel, wreaths and lights. Director

Paul Willocks says:

“Taking the hassle out of Christmas and the stress involved in creating the perfect atmosphere for customers is a theme for us.”

Bunzl also provides a service to help licensees decide what colour scheme to follow.



The extras

Although not many people’s favourite part of a meal, vegetables are important because it is so easy to get them wrong. Nobody likes their broccoli too hard or too soft/watery. Brakes has come up with some ideas to make vegetables more appealing this season with a range of new recipes including orange and juniper sprouts; parsnip and celeriac dauphinoise; and ginger ale and honey carrots.

Another component of a good Christmas dinner that is easy to get wrong is the stuffing. Major International is urging caterers to make their own stuffing this year.

“Stuffing is very simple to make and, with a little imagination, can easily become the highlight of the Christmas meal, injecting flavour, colour and texture,” says managing director David Bryant.

The fats in pork sausage meat can help keep the turkey moist during cooking and some fruits can work, especially with pork and duck. Major recommends turkey stuffing with sausage meat or cranberries.

Special events

At Christmas, people are prepared to spend a little more on an extra night out and have fun. Anglia Country Inns will hold a joint fund-raising, carol-singing evening across all three of its venues. More than £10,000 has

been raised through carol singing over five years, which will increase this year as all three pubs are involved.

Around 150 people join in each evening. "It's packed and the singing gets totally out of control

— very, very loud," explains a spokeswoman.

The company's suppliers will provide the prizes for a £1 entry tombola-style raffle from the middle of November.

Meanwhile, the Great Pub Company, which is based in Essex, is staging a Winter Fun Day at the Compasses at Pattiswick, following on from the success of similar days in the summer.

"In order to bring together families on what is largely viewed as an adult lead celebration, we wanted to organise a fun family-based daytime event where families with children can come together and celebrate the new year," says sales and marketing manager Heather Tarling.

The pub will organise family-friendly games such as pin the tail on the donkey, lucky dip and Play Your Cards Right. There will also be face-painting at lunch.



IMAGE: THE WHITE HORSE, ANGLIA PUB COMPANY

Tips for Xmas

- Contacting regulars will make them more likely to re-book
- Manage your Christmas bookings rigorously
- Ensure there is a mix of traditional and adventurous food
- Think outside the box — fish doesn't have to mean salmon
- Don't lose sight of your value for money
- Have lighter dessert options for after a big meal
- Don't let food quality slip during busy periods



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Wye Valley Pie by 2010 winner Adam Pavey, The Goat Major, Cardiff.