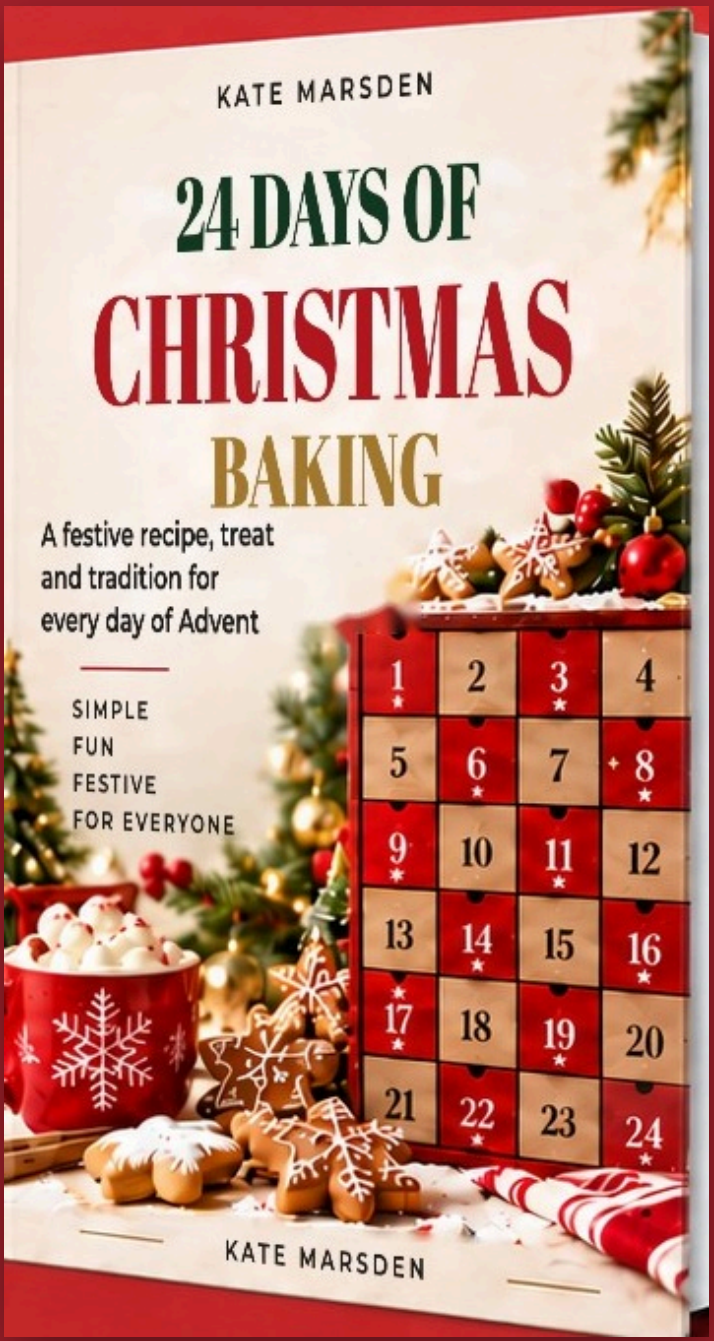
KATE MARSDEN
24 DAYS OF
CHRISTMAS
BAKING
A festive recipe, treat and tradition for every day of Advent
SIMPLE
FUN
FESTIVE
FOR EVERYONE
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KATE MARSDEN

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24 Days of Christmas Baking

A festive recipe, treat and tradition for every day of Advent

Simple · Fun · Festive · For everyone

Kate Marsden

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24 Days of Christmas Baking – A festive recipe, treat and tradition for every day of Advent
Kate Marsden

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Please note: these recipes use ingredients that can cause allergies (gluten, egg, milk, nuts and others): always check the ingredients if you are baking for someone with an allergy or intolerance. Do not serve dishes containing raw egg to pregnant women, young children, older people or anyone with a weakened immune system; use the alternatives given. When children help in the kitchen, an adult always handles the oven, hot oil and knives. Drinks and syrups containing alcohol are not for children. Times and temperatures depend on your oven: always keep an eye on the first batch.

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A word from the author

There is a time of year when the kitchen becomes the heart of the home. It is cold outside, it gets dark early, and indoors the oven is warm, cinnamon drifts through the air and someone always asks: "Is it ready yet?"

I wrote this book for those days. Not for Christmas Day alone, but for the twenty-four that come before it, when the waiting is part of the celebration.

The idea is simple: one recipe a day, from 1 to 24 December. On weekdays, quick recipes that you can make after work or school. At the weekend, recipes that take a little longer, to be made slowly and with the family. And at the end, on Christmas Eve, one recipe to share around the table.

You don't need experience or any special equipment. Every recipe tells you exactly what to buy, how long it takes, how to tell when it is done and how long it keeps. Many are lovely to make with children, and I always say which ones they are and which steps little hands can do safely.

You don't have to follow the calendar to the letter, either. If a day doesn't work out, make the recipe the next day, or swap the order. What matters isn't perfection: it is the smell of Christmas, hands in the dough and good company.

Beside each recipe I have also left a small tradition or activity for the day. They are ideas to make the countdown to Christmas even more special, with or without little helpers.

I hope this book earns a place in your kitchen, splashed with flour and chocolate, and that you come back to it for many Decembers to come.

With love, and a very merry Christmas,

Kate Marsden

How to use this calendar

This book is an Advent calendar made in the kitchen: 24 recipes, one for each day from 1 to 24 December. Every day has a complete recipe and a small tradition or activity to enjoy at home.

How the days are organised

- **Weekdays:** quick recipes, most of them needing less than 30 to 45 minutes of hands-on work. Some need hours in the fridge, but then you don't have to do anything.
- **Weekends:** recipes that take longer, to be made at a gentle pace. In 2026 the December weekends fall on the 5th and 6th, 12th and 13th, and 19th and 20th, and that is where the most time-consuming recipes are (the sweet bread, the candied orange peel, the cupcakes, the puff pastry star and the pumpkin jam).
- **The last days:** from the 22nd to the 24th, the recipes help you prepare for Christmas Eve: the panna cotta is made two days ahead, the almonds are kept in a jar and the fondue is for the evening of the 24th.
- **Total freedom:** if a day doesn't work out, make the recipe the next day or swap two days around. Some recipes use

something you made earlier (for example, the orange peel from day 12), but they always give an alternative.

How to read each recipe

At the top of each recipe you will find a line with the essentials:

- **Makes:** how many pieces or servings.
- **Time:** the total time. When there is waiting time (fridge, rising, drying), it is shown separately.
- **Oven:** the temperature for a conventional oven (heat from above and below), followed by the fan oven temperature and the gas mark in brackets. If your oven is a fan oven, use the fan temperature, which is 20 °C lower.
- **Difficulty:** Easy or Medium. There are no difficult recipes in this book.
- **With children:** "yes" means there are several steps children can do safely; "no" means the recipe involves very hot sugar or splashes, and it is better for children to help only at the end.
- **Allergens:** the main ones (gluten, egg, milk, tree nuts). Always check the labels on the ingredients you buy too, such as chocolate or puff pastry.

At the end of each recipe there is a note on storage (how long it keeps and where to store it), a common mistake to avoid or a

variation.

Measurements

- 1 tbsp (tablespoon) = 15 ml, level.
- 1 tsp (teaspoon) = 5 ml, level.
- 1 pinch = what you can pick up between two fingers.
- Eggs are medium (about 50 g without the shell). Butter is unsalted.

> **Tip:** a simple set of kitchen scales is the best investment for baking. With them, the recipes turn out the same every time.

Equipment

You don't need anything special. With this list you can make every recipe in the book:

- Kitchen scales, a measuring jug and a set of measuring spoons
- 2 large mixing bowls and a few small ones
- Balloon whisk, silicone spatula and wooden spoon
- Electric hand mixer (for the cupcakes; for the other recipes a whisk is enough)
- Medium saucepan, small saucepan and a non-stick frying pan, 20 to 24 cm

- 2 baking trays and baking parchment
- 12-hole muffin tin (for the muffins, the cupcakes and the little custard tarts)
- Square tin, 20 × 20 cm (fudge and brownies)
- 6 small bowls or glasses of about 150 ml (panna cotta)
- Wire cooling rack (the oven rack will do)
- Sieve, fine grater for citrus zest and rolling pin
- Stick blender or small food processor (for the gummy sweets and the date truffles)
- Oven gloves and glass jars with lids, for storing and gifting

Storecupboard basics for the month

These ingredients turn up on many days. It is worth buying them at the end of November:

- Caster sugar: 2.5 kg · Light brown soft sugar: 500 g · Icing sugar: 500 g
- Plain flour: 1 kg · Strong white bread flour: 500 g · Cornflour: 1 small box
- Baking powder: 1 tub · Dried fast-action yeast: 1 sachet
- Ground cinnamon and 2 cinnamon sticks · Ground ginger · Salt · Flaky sea salt (optional)
- Vanilla extract · Honey: 1 jar of 250 g
- Cocoa powder: 1 tub

- Sunflower oil: 1 small bottle
- Baking parchment, cling film, aluminium foil, paper cases (12 large and 30 small)

The fresh ingredients and the specific items for each week are in the shopping lists in the last chapter. In short:

- **Week 1:** milk, apples, oranges, lemon, eggs, butter, plain and white chocolate, oats, nuts, dried cranberries, popping corn.
- **Week 2:** plain chocolate (500 g), double cream, condensed milk, desiccated coconut, apples, puff pastry, 4 thick-skinned oranges.
- **Week 3:** plenty of butter and eggs, cream cheese, oranges, chocolate, frozen mixed berries, leaf gelatine, walnuts.
- **Week 4:** pumpkin, round puff pastry, chocolate hazelnut spread, dates, almonds, double cream, milk, gelatine, a pomegranate and fruit for the fondue.

Cooking safely with children

Children learn a lot in the kitchen: measuring, waiting, sharing. For things to go well, agree these rules before you start:

- **Hands washed and hair tied back**, apron on and sleeves rolled up.

- **An adult always deals with the hob, the oven and the knives.** Children measure, mix, knead, roll, sprinkle and decorate.
- **A sturdy step stool** to reach the worktop, never a chair on wheels.
- **Saucepan handles turned inwards**, so nobody catches them when passing.
- **Melted sugar and caramel burn far worse than boiling water.** On the caramel and syrup days (12, 20, 22 and 23), children stay away from the hob.
- **Raw mixtures are not for tasting**: they contain raw egg and raw flour.
- **Under 5s:** popcorn, whole nuts and whole grapes can cause choking. Chop the nuts and cut grapes into quarters.
- **Babies under 1 year** should not eat honey.
- **Allergies:** if anyone at home or a guest has allergies, check the allergen line of each recipe and read the labels.

> **Warning:** pregnant women, small children, older people and people with a weakened immune system should not eat raw egg. In this book, every recipe containing egg is cooked or baked. Do not taste the mixtures before they are cooked.

Giving what you make

Many recipes in this calendar make lovely gifts: the granola (day 5), the truffles (day 7), the chocolates (days 8 and 21), the fudge (day 11), the orange peel (day 12), the chocolate bar (day 14), the pumpkin jam (day 20) and the almonds (day 23). On each package, stick a label with the name of the sweet, the date you made it, whether it should go in the fridge and the date by which it should be eaten.

Week 1 · Days 1 to 6

The first week starts gently, with quick, comforting recipes for working days and school days. At the weekend (days 5 and 6) there is more time: a granola to give as a gift and a plaited sweet bread to fill the house with its scent.

Day 1 · Creamy hot chocolate

Makes: 4 mugs · Time: 15 min · Difficulty: Easy · With children: yes · Allergens: milk

Thick, velvety and with a hint of cinnamon: the best way to open the calendar on a cold December evening.

INGREDIENTS

- 800 ml semi-skimmed or whole milk
- 100 g plain chocolate (about 50% cocoa), chopped
- 2 tbsp caster sugar (30 g)
- 1 tbsp cornflour (10 g)
- 1 cinnamon stick
- 1 strip of orange peel, only the orange part (optional)
- 1 pinch of salt

METHOD

1. In a mug, mix the cornflour with 100 ml of the cold milk until there are no lumps. Set aside.
2. Pour the rest of the milk into a saucepan with the cinnamon stick, the orange peel, the sugar and the salt. Heat over a medium heat until it starts to steam and tiny bubbles form around the edge, without letting it boil (about 5 minutes).
3. Add the chopped chocolate and stir with a balloon whisk until completely melted.

4. Stir the cornflour mixture again (it settles at the bottom) and pour it into the saucepan, stirring all the time.
5. Lower the heat and cook for 2 to 3 minutes, stirring constantly, until thickened. It is ready when it coats the back of a spoon and, when you run a finger through it, leaves a clean line.
6. Remove the cinnamon stick and the orange peel and serve straight away, in mugs.

Storage: best freshly made. Leftovers keep for 2 days in the fridge, in a closed jar; reheat over a low heat, stirring, with a little milk. Common mistake: letting it boil over a high heat, which makes it catch on the bottom. Variation: swap the plain chocolate for white chocolate and leave out the sugar.

Activity of the day: make a homemade Advent calendar with 24 numbered envelopes or little bags and, in each one, write the name of that day's recipe.

Day 2 · Baked apples with cinnamon and walnuts

Makes: 4 apples · Time: 50 min (10 min preparation) · Oven: 180 °C (160 °C fan, gas mark 4) · Difficulty: Easy · With children: yes · Allergens: milk, tree nuts

A simple, fragrant Portuguese winter pudding. The filling of walnuts and brown sugar melts in the oven and makes a delicious syrup.

INGREDIENTS

- 4 medium Cox or Braeburn apples
- 40 g walnuts, chopped
- 2 tbsp raisins (optional)
- 3 tbsp light brown soft sugar (45 g)
- 1 tsp ground cinnamon
- 30 g unsalted butter, in 4 pieces
- 100 ml orange juice or water

METHOD

1. Heat the oven to 180 °C (160 °C fan, gas mark 4).
2. Wash the apples. An adult removes the core with an apple corer or a small knife, without piercing the base, so the filling doesn't run out.
3. With the tip of a knife, make a shallow cut around each apple, halfway up. This stops the skin from bursting in the oven.

4. In a bowl, mix the walnuts, raisins, brown sugar and cinnamon. Children can fill the apples with this mixture, pressing it down well with a teaspoon.
5. Put the apples in an ovenproof dish or a small baking dish, place a piece of butter on top of each one and pour the orange juice into the bottom of the dish.
6. Bake for 35 to 45 minutes, spooning the syrup from the dish over them halfway through. They are ready when the skin is wrinkled and the tip of a knife goes in without resistance.
7. Leave to cool for 5 minutes (the filling is very hot) and serve with the syrup spooned over.

Storage: 2 days in the fridge, covered; warm for 10 minutes in the oven or 1 minute in the microwave. Common mistake: using very soft apples, which collapse; firmer varieties hold their shape well. Variation: swap the walnuts for chopped almonds and add 1 tsp of honey per apple.

Activity of the day: choose together the spot in the house where you will put the nativity scene or the tree, and make a list of what is still missing.

Day 3 · Chocolate mug cake

Makes: 1 large mug · Time: 5 min · Microwave: 60 to 90 seconds · Difficulty: Easy · With children: yes · Allergens: gluten, milk

A single-serving cake, light and warm, made in the microwave in a few minutes. Ideal for a weeknight when time is short.

INGREDIENTS

- 4 tbsp plain flour (30 g)
- 3 tbsp caster sugar (40 g)
- 2 tbsp cocoa powder (15 g)
- ¼ tsp baking powder
- 1 pinch of salt
- 1 pinch of cinnamon (optional)
- 3 tbsp milk (45 ml)
- 2 tbsp sunflower oil (30 ml)
- 1 square of plain chocolate (10 g), for the centre

METHOD

1. Choose a mug of at least 300 ml that is microwave-safe (no metal trim).
2. Put the flour, sugar, cocoa, baking powder, salt and cinnamon in the mug. Mix well with a fork.
3. Add the milk and oil and stir until you have a smooth batter, with no dry flour at the bottom.

4. Push the square of chocolate into the middle of the batter.
5. Microwave on full power (about 800 W) for 60 seconds. If the centre is still liquid, add another 15 to 30 seconds. It is ready when the surface is firm and the middle is still slightly moist.
6. Leave to stand for 1 minute. An adult takes the mug out using a cloth or oven glove, because it gets very hot.

Storage: eat it straight away, while it is warm; once cold it becomes drier. Common mistake: cooking it for too long, which makes the cake hard and rubbery; it is better to take it out early. Variation: swap the square of chocolate for 1 tsp of orange marmalade.

Activity of the day: write the first Christmas cards to grandparents, aunts and uncles or friends who live far away.



Baked apples with cinnamon and walnuts (day 2)

Photo: Liia / Unsplash

Day 4 · Christmas popcorn with white chocolate

Makes: 1 large bowl (6 people) · Time: 20 min + 30 min to set · Difficulty: Easy · With children: yes · Allergens: milk, tree nuts

Homemade popcorn drizzled with white chocolate, dried cranberries and nuts. Perfect for a Christmas film night on the sofa.

INGREDIENTS

- 70 g popping corn
- 2 tbsp sunflower oil
- 1 pinch of salt
- 150 g white chocolate, chopped
- 50 g dried cranberries
- 40 g almonds or pistachios, roughly chopped
- 1 tbsp coloured sugar sprinkles (optional)

METHOD

1. Line a large baking tray with baking parchment.
2. An adult heats the oil in a large saucepan with a lid, over a medium heat. Add 3 corn kernels and cover. When they pop, add the rest of the corn, cover and shake the pan from time to time.
3. When the popping slows down (2 to 3 seconds between pops), turn off the heat. Wait 1 minute before lifting the lid.

4. Spread the popcorn on the tray, sprinkle with the salt and pick out any kernels that haven't popped. Leave to cool for 5 minutes.
5. Melt the white chocolate in the microwave in 30-second bursts, stirring between each one, until smooth (about 1 minute 30 seconds). White chocolate burns quickly: don't overdo the time.
6. Children drizzle the chocolate over the popcorn with a spoon, in thin streams, and scatter the cranberries, nuts and sprinkles on top.
7. Leave to set for 30 minutes at room temperature (or 15 minutes in the fridge) and break into pieces.

Storage: up to 3 days in a tin or well-closed box, in a cool place; humidity makes the popcorn go soft. Warning: popcorn, unpopped kernels and whole nuts are not safe for children under 5, because of the risk of choking. Variation: swap the white chocolate for milk chocolate and the cranberries for candied orange peel (day 12).

Activity of the day: family film night: choose a Christmas film and serve the popcorn in a big bowl in the middle.

Day 5 · Christmas granola to give as a gift

Makes: about 650 g (3 jars of 350 ml) · Time: 50 min · Oven: 160 °C (140 °C fan, gas mark 3) · Difficulty: Easy · With children: yes · Allergens: gluten (oats), tree nuts

Crunchy, with honey, cinnamon and orange. A special breakfast for December and a homemade gift that keeps for weeks.

INGREDIENTS

- 300 g rolled oats
- 100 g flaked or chopped almonds
- 50 g walnuts, chopped
- 40 g pumpkin seeds (optional)
- 1 tsp ground cinnamon
- ½ tsp ground ginger
- ¼ tsp salt
- zest of 1 orange
- 100 g honey (about 4 tbsp)
- 50 g light brown soft sugar
- 80 ml sunflower oil or mild olive oil
- 80 g dried cranberries or raisins (for the end)

METHOD

1. Heat the oven to 160 °C (140 °C fan, gas mark 3) and line a large baking tray with baking parchment.

2. In a large bowl, mix the oats, almonds, walnuts, seeds, cinnamon, ginger, salt and orange zest.
3. In a small saucepan, heat the honey, brown sugar and oil over a low heat, only until the sugar dissolves (1 to 2 minutes). Do not let it boil.
4. Pour the honey mixture over the oats and stir well with a spoon until everything is glossy and moist. Children can help with the stirring once the syrup is lukewarm.
5. Spread on the tray in a thin, even layer.
6. Bake for 30 to 35 minutes, stirring every 10 minutes so it toasts evenly. It is ready when golden and smelling toasty. It is still soft when hot: it hardens as it cools.
7. Leave to cool completely on the tray (30 minutes), without stirring, so that it forms clusters. Only then add the cranberries and fill the jars.

Storage: up to 4 weeks in a well-closed jar, in a dry place. Common mistake: adding the dried fruit before baking, because it burns and goes hard. Variation: swap the walnuts for hazelnuts and add 50 g of chopped chocolate once cool (never warm, or it melts). To give as a gift, stick on a label with the name, the date and "best eaten within 4 weeks".

Activity of the day: make paper labels for the granola jars and choose who will receive the first homemade gift of the month.

Day 6 · Plaited sweet bread

Makes: 1 large plait (10 to 12 slices) · Time: 3 h (40 min of work) · Oven: 180 °C (160 °C fan, gas mark 4) · Difficulty: Medium · With children: yes · Allergens: gluten, egg, milk, tree nuts (almonds, optional)

A soft, lightly sweet bread scented with lemon. It is a Sunday recipe: the dough rises on its own and children love kneading and plaiting.

INGREDIENTS

- 500 g strong white bread flour (or plain flour)
- 1 sachet of dried fast-action yeast (7 g) or 20 g fresh yeast
- 70 g caster sugar
- ½ tsp salt
- zest of 1 lemon
- 250 ml lukewarm milk
- 1 egg and 1 egg yolk, at room temperature
- 60 g unsalted butter, very soft
- To brush and decorate: 1 beaten egg, 2 tbsp caster sugar, 2 tbsp flaked almonds (optional)

METHOD

1. Warm the milk only until lukewarm (about 37 °C: when you put a finger in, it should not burn). Milk that is too hot ruins the yeast.

2. In a large bowl, mix the flour, dried yeast, sugar, salt and lemon zest. If using fresh yeast, dissolve it in the lukewarm milk first.
3. Add the milk, the egg and the yolk and mix with a spoon until a dough forms.
4. Turn out onto a lightly floured worktop and knead for 5 minutes. Add the butter a little at a time and knead for another 8 to 10 minutes. It is sticky at first; it is ready when smooth, elastic and coming away from your hands. Avoid adding too much flour.
5. Shape into a ball, put in a greased bowl, cover with cling film or a tea towel and leave to rise in a draught-free place for 1 h to 1 h 30 min, until doubled in size.
6. Turn the dough out onto the worktop and divide it into 3 equal parts (about 300 g each). Roll each part into a rope 40 cm long.
7. Join the 3 ropes at one end, press together, and plait without pulling too tightly. Pinch the other end together and tuck both ends underneath.
8. Put the plait on a tray lined with baking parchment, cover and leave to rise for another 40 to 45 minutes, until well puffed up. Meanwhile, heat the oven to 180 °C (160 °C fan, gas mark 4).

9. Brush with the beaten egg and sprinkle with the sugar and almonds.
10. Bake for 25 to 30 minutes. If it browns too quickly, cover with aluminium foil after 15 minutes. It is ready when deep golden and, when you tap the base, it sounds hollow.
11. Leave to cool on a wire rack for at least 20 minutes before cutting.

Storage: 2 days in a well-closed bag, at room temperature; freezes well for up to 1 month, already sliced. Common mistake: the dough doesn't rise because the kitchen is cold; put the bowl inside the switched-off oven, with the light on. Variation: join the ends of the plait to make a Christmas wreath and decorate with candied fruit after brushing.

Activity of the day: while the dough rises, decorate the Christmas tree or start setting up the nativity scene, with the figures chosen by the youngest.



Plaited sweet bread (day 6)

Photo: melanie boers / Unsplash

Week 2 · Days 7 to 12

The second week brings in little sweets to give as gifts: truffles, chocolates and fudge, which keep well and fit into any little box. On Saturday (day 12), an old-fashioned, patient recipe: candied orange peel, which is then used to decorate and in other recipes in the calendar.

Day 7 · Chocolate truffles

Makes: about 25 truffles · Time: 20 min + 2 h in the fridge · Difficulty: Easy · With children: yes · Allergens: milk (tree nuts, if you use them for rolling)

Just three main ingredients and a result worthy of a fine patisserie. Children love the rolling and the dipping into the coatings.

INGREDIENTS

- 200 g plain chocolate (50 to 60% cocoa), finely chopped
- 100 ml double cream
- 20 g unsalted butter, softened
- 1 pinch of salt
- For rolling: 3 tbsp cocoa powder, 3 tbsp desiccated coconut, 3 tbsp finely chopped hazelnuts or pistachios

METHOD

1. Put the chopped chocolate in a heatproof bowl.
2. An adult heats the cream in a small saucepan until small bubbles appear around the edge (without boiling).
3. Pour the cream over the chocolate and wait 2 minutes, without stirring.
4. Stir slowly with a spatula, from the centre outwards, until you have a smooth, glossy cream. Add the butter

and salt and stir until they disappear.

5. Cover and chill in the fridge for 2 hours, until firm like soft modelling clay.
6. With a teaspoon, scoop out portions the size of a walnut (about 12 g) and roll them quickly between your cold palms. If the mixture softens, put it back in the fridge for 10 minutes.
7. Roll each truffle in one of the coatings and place in paper cases.

Storage: up to 1 week in the fridge, in a closed box; take out 10 minutes before serving. Common mistake: if the cream turns oily and separates (splits), add 1 tbsp of warm cream and stir vigorously until smooth again. Variation: add orange zest to the cream, or make them with white chocolate (in which case use only 70 ml of cream).

Activity of the day: cover a cardboard box with wrapping paper to hold this week's sweets and, at the end, give it to a neighbour.

Day 8 · Coconut sweets

Makes: about 30 sweets · Time: 25 min + 1 h to cool · Difficulty: Easy · With children: yes (an adult looks after the saucepan) · Allergens: milk

Soft little balls of condensed milk and coconut, rolled in desiccated coconut. They look pretty like tiny snowballs on the Christmas table.

INGREDIENTS

- 1 tin of condensed milk (397 g)
- 1 tbsp unsalted butter (15 g), plus a little more for your hands
- 100 g desiccated coconut, plus 50 g for rolling
- 30 small paper cases

METHOD

1. In a non-stick saucepan, combine the condensed milk, the butter and the 100 g of coconut.
2. An adult sets it over a medium-low heat and stirs constantly with a wooden spoon for 8 to 10 minutes. The mixture bubbles and can spit: mind your hands.
3. It is ready when, as you tilt the pan, the mixture slides away all in one piece and comes off the bottom.
4. Turn out onto a plate greased with butter and leave to cool for 1 hour (or 30 minutes in the fridge). It must be cold to be rolled.

5. With hands greased with a little butter, shape into balls the size of a large hazelnut (about 15 g).
6. Roll each ball in the desiccated coconut and place in the paper cases.

Storage: up to 5 days in the fridge, in a closed box. Common mistake: taking the mixture off the heat too soon; it stays soft and can't be rolled. If that happens, return it to the heat for another 2 to 3 minutes. Variation: roll half of the sweets in cocoa powder instead of coconut, to have two colours on the plate.

Activity of the day: cut out snowflakes from white paper (folding it and snipping small triangles) and stick them on the windows.

Day 9 · Apple and cinnamon muffins

Makes: 12 muffins · Time: 40 min · Oven: 190 °C (170 °C fan, gas mark 5) · Tin: 12-hole muffin tin · Difficulty: Easy · With children: yes · Allergens: gluten, egg, milk (tree nuts, if you use walnuts)

Fluffy, moist and full of little pieces of apple. They are great for school lunchboxes or for a December breakfast.

INGREDIENTS

- 250 g plain flour
- 2 tsp baking powder (8 g)
- 1 ½ tsp ground cinnamon
- ¼ tsp salt
- 120 g light brown soft sugar
- 2 eggs
- 200 ml milk
- 100 ml sunflower oil
- zest of 1 lemon
- 2 medium apples (about 300 g), peeled and cut into small cubes
- 40 g walnuts, chopped (optional)
- For the topping: 1 tbsp caster sugar mixed with ½ tsp cinnamon

METHOD

1. Heat the oven to 190 °C (170 °C fan, gas mark 5) and put 12 paper cases in the muffin tin.
2. In a large bowl, mix the flour, baking powder, cinnamon and salt.
3. In another bowl, whisk the brown sugar, eggs, milk, oil and lemon zest until combined.
4. Pour the liquids over the flour and mix with a spatula, only until no dry flour can be seen. The batter should have a few lumps: don't beat it any more.
5. Add the apple and walnuts and fold in with 3 or 4 movements.
6. Fill the cases to ¾ of their height and sprinkle with the sugar and cinnamon.
7. Bake for 20 to 22 minutes, until risen and golden. A cocktail stick pushed into the centre should come out clean.
8. Leave to cool for 5 minutes in the tin and then on a wire rack.

Storage: 2 days in a closed box, at room temperature; they freeze for up to 1 month (defrost for 1 hour on the worktop). Common mistake: overmixing the batter, which makes the muffins tough and full of holes inside. Variation: swap the apple for pear and the lemon zest for orange zest.

Activity of the day: wrap two muffins in a napkin and take them to someone who is working at this time of year, such as the postie or the next-door neighbour.



Chocolate truffles with three coatings (day 7)

Photo: blackieshoot / Unsplash

Day 10 · Cinnamon palmiers

Makes: about 30 palmiers · Time: 45 min (with 20 min chilling) · Oven: 200 °C (180 °C fan, gas mark 6) · Difficulty: Easy · With children: yes (an adult cuts) · Allergens: gluten, milk (depending on the pastry)

Crisp, heart-shaped pastries made with ready-made puff pastry, sugar and cinnamon. They look like they came from a patisserie and are among the easiest in the book.

INGREDIENTS

- 1 sheet of fresh ready-rolled rectangular puff pastry (about 230 g, 35 × 23 cm)
- 60 g caster sugar
- 1 tsp ground cinnamon

METHOD

1. Take the pastry out of the fridge 10 minutes beforehand, so it doesn't crack when unrolled.
2. Mix the sugar with the cinnamon. Sprinkle half on the worktop, unroll the pastry on top (remove the paper) and sprinkle the rest of the sugar over it.
3. Roll once with a rolling pin, without pressing hard, so the sugar sticks on both sides.
4. Take one of the long sides and fold it in to a quarter of the width; fold again to the centre. Do the same on the other side. Finally, fold one half over the other, like a closed book. You will have a log with 6 layers.

5. Wrap in cling film and chill for 20 minutes (or 10 minutes in the freezer). Meanwhile, heat the oven to 200 °C (180 °C fan, gas mark 6) and line 2 baking trays with baking parchment.
6. An adult cuts the log into 1 cm slices with a very sharp knife.
7. Lay the slices flat on the trays, 5 cm apart, because they spread a lot.
8. Bake for 8 to 10 minutes, until the underside is caramelised. Turn them over with a spatula and bake for another 3 to 5 minutes. Always keep an eye on them: sugar goes from golden to burnt in under a minute.
9. Leave to cool on a wire rack: they only turn crisp once cold.

Storage: up to 5 days in a well-closed tin. Common mistake: cutting the pastry while still soft, which squashes the layers; the cold is the secret. Variation: swap the cinnamon for orange zest, or dip half of each palmier in melted chocolate once cold.

Activity of the day: sit down to write the present list or the letter to Father Christmas, with a palmier and a cup of tea beside you.

Day 11 · Chocolate fudge

Makes: 36 squares · Time: 15 min + 3 h in the fridge · Tin: square, 20 × 20 cm · Difficulty: Easy · With children: yes (an adult does the melting) · Allergens: milk (tree nuts, if you use walnuts)

Dense, creamy little squares of chocolate, with no oven and no thermometer. One of the quickest homemade gifts to make.

INGREDIENTS

- 300 g plain chocolate, chopped
- 1 tin of condensed milk (397 g)
- 30 g unsalted butter
- 1 pinch of salt
- 75 g walnuts, chopped (optional)

METHOD

1. Line the tin with baking parchment, letting the paper hang over the sides so you can lift the fudge out later.
2. In a saucepan, combine the chocolate, condensed milk, butter and salt. Heat over a low heat, stirring constantly with a spatula, until smooth and glossy (about 5 minutes). You can also melt it in the microwave in 30-second bursts, stirring between each one.
3. Take off the heat and stir in the walnuts.
4. Pour into the tin and smooth the surface with the spatula. Children can decorate with more walnuts or

coloured sprinkles.

5. Leave to cool for 15 minutes and put in the fridge for at least 3 hours (or overnight), until firm.
6. Lift the fudge out by the paper and cut into 6 × 6 squares with a large knife, dipped in hot water and wiped clean between each cut.

Storage: up to 2 weeks in the fridge, in a closed box, with baking parchment between the layers. Common mistake: high heat, which makes the chocolate grainy and release its fat; always melt it slowly. Variation: swap the walnuts for 60 g of dried cranberries and 40 g of pistachios, to get the colours of Christmas.

Activity of the day: choose a local charity and prepare a bag of food or toys together to donate.

Day 12 · Candied orange peel

Makes: about 200 g · Time: 2 h + 12 to 24 h to dry · Difficulty: Medium · With children: no (very hot syrup) · Allergens: none of the main ones

Sweet, translucent, fragrant strips of orange peel, like the candied fruit in a bolo-rei (Portuguese King Cake). You can eat them on their own, with chocolate, or use them in other recipes.

INGREDIENTS

- 4 thick-skinned oranges, preferably unwaxed
- 400 g caster sugar for the syrup, plus 100 g for coating
- 250 ml water

METHOD

1. Wash the oranges well with warm water and a brush.
2. Cut the peel of each orange into 4 segments, from top to bottom, and remove it with the white pith. Keep the fruit to eat or for juice.
3. Cut the peel into strips 5 to 7 mm wide.
4. Put the strips in a saucepan, cover with cold water and bring to the boil. Boil for 5 minutes and drain. Repeat twice more, each time with fresh water. This removes the bitterness of the white pith.
5. In the same saucepan, combine the 400 g of sugar and the 250 ml of water. Heat until the sugar dissolves and

add the peel.

6. Leave to simmer very gently, with tiny bubbles, for 50 to 60 minutes, stirring carefully from time to time. It is ready when the peel is translucent and the syrup is thick, like runny honey. Do not let the syrup take on colour.
7. With a slotted spoon, lift out the peel and spread it on a wire rack, without the strips touching. Keep the syrup in a jar: it makes a great orange syrup for drizzling over cakes.
8. Leave to dry for 12 to 24 hours, at room temperature, until it no longer sticks to your fingers.
9. Roll the peel in the sugar and store.

Storage: up to 1 month in a well-closed jar, in a cool, dry place, or up to 3 months in the fridge. Common mistake: boiling the syrup over a high heat, which caramelises it and hardens the peel. Variation: instead of rolling in sugar, dip half of each strip in melted plain chocolate and leave to dry on baking parchment.

Activity of the day: use the orange flesh to make fresh juice and, on a whole orange, push cloves in lines or in a spiral: it is an old-fashioned decoration that scents the room for days.



Candied orange peel (day 12)

Photo: Natalia Gusakova / Unsplash

Week 3 · Days 13 to 18

The third week begins on Sunday (day 13) with cupcakes to decorate as a family. Quick, colourful recipes for school days and working days follow, and it ends with brownies, ideal to take to end-of-term parties.

Day 13 · Christmas cupcakes with cream cheese frosting

Makes: 12 cupcakes · Time: 1 h 15 min + 1 h to cool · Oven: 180 °C (160 °C fan, gas mark 4) · Tin: 12-hole muffin tin · Difficulty: Medium · With children: yes · Allergens: gluten, egg, milk

Vanilla and orange cupcakes with a creamy white frosting, decorated like a tiny snowy landscape. A Sunday afternoon well spent.

INGREDIENTS

- **Cake mixture:**
- 120 g unsalted butter, softened
- 150 g caster sugar
- 2 eggs, at room temperature
- 1 tsp vanilla extract
- zest of 1 orange (optional)
- 180 g plain flour
- 2 tsp baking powder (8 g)
- ¼ tsp salt
- 120 ml milk
- **Frosting:**
- 100 g unsalted butter, softened
- 250 g icing sugar
- 200 g full-fat soft cream cheese, plain and very cold

- To decorate: small sprigs of rosemary, dried cranberries, sugar sprinkles, paper stars

METHOD

1. Heat the oven to 180 °C (160 °C fan, gas mark 4) and put 12 paper cases in the tin.
2. With the electric mixer, beat the butter with the sugar for 3 to 4 minutes, until pale and fluffy.
3. Add the eggs one at a time, beating well after each. Add the vanilla and the orange zest.
4. In another bowl, mix the flour, baking powder and salt.
5. With the mixer on low speed, add the flour in three batches, alternating with the milk. Beat only until combined.
6. Fill the cases to ⅔ of their height (about 2 heaped tablespoons each).
7. Bake for 18 to 20 minutes, until golden and a cocktail stick comes out clean. Leave to cool completely on a wire rack (at least 1 hour). The frosting melts on warm cakes.
8. For the frosting, beat the butter with the icing sugar for 2 minutes, until smooth. Add the cold cream cheese and beat for only 30 to 60 seconds, until creamy. If you beat it longer, it turns runny.

9. Chill the frosting in the fridge for 15 minutes. Spread over the cupcakes with a spoon or pipe it with a piping bag.
10. Children decorate: a sprig of rosemary makes a tree, cranberries make red baubles, sprinkles make coloured snow.

Storage: up to 3 days in the fridge, in a closed box, because of the cream cheese; take out 20 minutes before serving. Without the frosting, the cupcakes freeze well for up to 1 month. Common mistake: using cream cheese at room temperature or beating it too much, which leaves the frosting runny. Variation: add 2 tbsp of cocoa powder to the frosting, for brown cupcakes with icing sugar snow.

Activity of the day: hold a little cupcake decorating contest, in which everyone gives their cupcake a name.

Day 14 · Chocolate bark with nuts

Makes: about 20 pieces · Time: 20 min + 1 h to set · Difficulty: Easy · With children: yes · Allergens: milk, tree nuts

A thin slab of chocolate covered in nuts and dried cranberries, broken by hand into irregular pieces. Quick, pretty and perfect for putting in gift bags.

INGREDIENTS

- 200 g plain chocolate, chopped
- 100 g white chocolate, chopped
- 40 g shelled pistachios
- 40 g toasted almonds, roughly chopped
- 40 g dried cranberries
- zest of 1 orange (or 2 tbsp chopped candied orange peel, from day 12)
- 1 pinch of flaky sea salt (optional)

METHOD

1. Line a tray of about 25 × 20 cm with baking parchment.
2. Melt the plain chocolate in the microwave in 30-second bursts, stirring between each one, until smooth. Do the same with the white chocolate, in another bowl. Don't let any water fall into the chocolate: it turns thick and grainy.

3. Spread the dark chocolate on the paper, in a layer about 5 mm thick.
4. Drop the white chocolate on top in spoonfuls and swirl it with the tip of a cocktail stick.
5. Children immediately scatter the pistachios, almonds, cranberries and orange zest on top, pressing gently so they stick. Sprinkle with the sea salt.
6. Leave to set for 1 hour in a cool place (or 30 minutes in the fridge).
7. Break into irregular pieces with your hands.

Storage: up to 2 weeks in a closed box, in a cool, dry place (away from the cooker and the sun). Common mistake: overheating the white chocolate, which turns thick and grainy; always melt it in short bursts. Variation: make it with milk chocolate only and decorate with popcorn and coloured sprinkles, for a version the little ones will love.

Activity of the day: fill clear little bags with the pieces of chocolate, tie them with red ribbon and keep them for teachers or work colleagues.

Day 15 · Pancakes with orange sauce

Makes: about 10 pancakes (4 people) · Time: 45 min (with 20 min resting) · Difficulty: Easy · With children: yes (an adult looks after the frying pan) · Allergens: gluten, egg, milk

Thin pancakes folded in four and warmed in a glossy orange and butter sauce, with no alcohol. A restaurant pudding made at home.

INGREDIENTS

- **Pancakes:**
- 125 g plain flour
- 1 tbsp caster sugar
- 1 pinch of salt
- 2 eggs
- 300 ml milk
- 25 g unsalted butter, melted, plus a little more for the frying pan
- **Sauce:**
- 50 g caster sugar
- 30 g unsalted butter
- 200 ml orange juice (about 3 oranges)
- zest of 1 orange

METHOD

1. In a bowl, mix the flour, sugar and salt. Make a well in the middle and add the eggs.
2. With a whisk, mix from the centre outwards, adding the milk a little at a time so that no lumps form. Children can do this part.
3. Add the melted butter and leave the batter to rest for 20 minutes. It should be runny, like single cream.
4. An adult heats a non-stick frying pan, 20 to 24 cm, over a medium heat and greases it with a little butter, using kitchen paper.
5. Pour in a small ladleful of batter (about 50 ml) and swirl the pan straight away to cover the base in a thin layer.
6. Cook for about 1 minute, until the edges come away and the underside is golden. Flip with a spatula and cook for another 30 seconds. Stack on a plate. The first pancake almost always turns out ugly: that's normal.
7. For the sauce, in a wide frying pan, heat the sugar and butter over a medium heat until the sugar melts and turns lightly golden (2 to 3 minutes). It is very hot: children stay away.
8. Carefully add the orange juice (it will bubble) and the zest. Simmer gently for 4 to 5 minutes, until it thickens

a little.

9. Fold each pancake in four, put them in the sauce and warm for 1 minute, spooning the sauce over them. Serve at once.

Storage: pancakes without the sauce keep for 2 days in the fridge, stacked and covered with cling film, or 1 month in the freezer with baking parchment between them. Common mistake: a batter that is too thick, which gives heavy pancakes; add 2 to 3 tbsp of milk. Variation: fill with pumpkin jam (day 20) or with slices of apple sautéed in butter and cinnamon.

Activity of the day: everyone in the family writes down on a piece of paper a happy memory of past Christmases; read them aloud over pudding.



Christmas cupcakes decorated with rosemary and cranberries (day 13)

Photo: Anita Austvika / Unsplash

Day 16 · Portuguese orange custard cakes (*queijadas de laranja*)

Makes: 12 queijadas · Time: 40 min · Oven: 200 °C (180 °C fan, gas mark 6) · Tin: 12-hole muffin tin, well greased · Difficulty: Easy · With children: yes · Allergens: gluten, egg, milk

A classic of Portuguese pastry shops: little sweets that are creamy inside and caramelised outside, with an intense orange flavour. Made in a single bowl.

INGREDIENTS

- Butter and flour for greasing the tin
- 250 g caster sugar
- 3 eggs
- 50 g plain flour
- 40 g unsalted butter, melted
- 250 ml milk
- zest and juice of 1 large orange (about 100 ml of juice)

METHOD

1. Heat the oven to 200 °C (180 °C fan, gas mark 6). Grease each hole of the tin very well with butter and dust with flour, shaking off the excess. Do not use paper cases: the queijadas stick to the paper.
2. In a bowl, whisk the sugar and eggs, only until combined (it doesn't need to be foamy).

3. Add the flour and mix until there are no lumps. Add the melted butter.
4. Add the milk, the orange zest and juice and stir well. The batter is very runny and may look curdled because of the orange: that's normal.
5. Stir again before filling (the sugar settles) and pour the batter into the holes almost to the top.
6. Bake for 20 to 25 minutes. They are ready when they have risen, the edges are golden brown and the centre is firm. As they cool, they sink a little: that is how it should be.
7. Leave to cool for 10 minutes in the tin. Run a knife around each one and turn out carefully.

Storage: up to 3 days in the fridge, in a closed box; they are best served fresh. Common mistake: turning them out while still hot, which breaks them; always wait the 10 minutes. Variation: swap the orange for the zest and juice of 2 clementines, or add ½ tsp of cinnamon to the batter.

Activity of the day: ask a grandparent to tell you what Christmas was like when they were a child, and write the story down in a family notebook.

Day 17 · Mixed berry gummies

Makes: about 30 gummies · Time: 15 min + 3 h in the fridge · Tin: small, 15 × 15 cm, or silicone moulds · Difficulty: Easy · With children: yes (an adult does the heating) · Allergens: none of the main ones

Homemade fruit gummies, firm and red like the baubles on the tree. They contain real fruit and far less sugar than the shop-bought kind.

INGREDIENTS

- 300 g frozen mixed berries (strawberries, raspberries, blackberries), defrosted
- 40 g honey or caster sugar
- 1 tbsp lemon juice
- 10 leaves of unflavoured gelatine (about 20 g)
- 1 tsp neutral oil, for greasing

METHOD

1. Soak the gelatine leaves in cold water for 5 minutes.
2. Blitz the berries with a stick blender and pass through a sieve, pressing with a spoon, to remove the seeds. You should end up with about 250 ml of purée.
3. Lightly grease the tin with the oil and a piece of kitchen paper (or use silicone moulds).
4. An adult heats the purée with the honey and lemon juice in a small saucepan over a low heat until very hot but not boiling (2 to 3 minutes). Turn off the heat.

5. Squeeze the gelatine leaves out well with your hands and add them to the hot purée. Stir until they disappear completely (1 minute).
6. Pour into the tin or the moulds. Children can help fill the moulds with a spoon once the mixture is lukewarm.
7. Chill in the fridge for 3 hours, until firm to the touch.
8. Turn out and cut into 2.5 cm cubes with a wet knife, or pop them out of the moulds.

Storage: up to 5 days in the fridge, in a closed box; at room temperature they soften. Warning: do not give honey to babies under 1 year; for them, use sugar. Common mistake: boiling the gelatine, which stops it from setting. Gelatine is of animal origin; for a vegetarian version, use 2 g of agar-agar, which has to boil in the purée for 1 to 2 minutes. Variation: swap the purée for 250 ml of freshly squeezed orange juice.

Activity of the day: make a garland of popcorn or coloured paper to decorate the tree or the front door.

Day 18 · Christmas brownies

Makes: 16 squares · Time: 50 min + 1 h to cool · Oven: 180 °C (160 °C fan, gas mark 4) · Tin: square, 20 × 20 cm · Difficulty: Easy · With children: yes · Allergens: gluten, egg, milk, tree nuts

Fudgy inside, crisp on top, with walnuts and a hint of cinnamon. Decorated with icing sugar stars, they are ready for any party.

INGREDIENTS

- 200 g plain chocolate, chopped
- 150 g unsalted butter
- 100 g caster sugar
- 100 g light brown soft sugar
- 3 eggs
- 80 g plain flour
- 2 tbsp cocoa powder (20 g)
- ½ tsp ground cinnamon
- 1 pinch of salt
- 80 g walnuts, chopped
- Icing sugar, to decorate

METHOD

1. Heat the oven to 180 °C (160 °C fan, gas mark 4) and line the tin with baking parchment.

2. Melt the chocolate with the butter in a bain-marie (a bowl set over a saucepan of barely simmering water, without the water touching the bowl) or in the microwave, in short bursts. Leave to cool for 5 minutes.
3. Add the two sugars and stir with a whisk. Add the eggs one at a time, stirring well after each, until the mixture is glossy.
4. Add the flour, cocoa, cinnamon and salt and fold in with a spatula only until the flour disappears. Stir in the walnuts.
5. Pour into the tin and level the top.
6. Bake for 22 to 25 minutes. They are ready when the surface is cracked and shiny and a cocktail stick in the centre comes out with a few moist crumbs, but not liquid batter. If it comes out clean, they are overbaked.
7. Leave to cool in the tin for at least 1 hour before cutting into 16 squares.
8. Cut a star out of a piece of paper, lay it on each square and dust icing sugar over the top; lift the paper off carefully.

Storage: up to 4 days in a closed box, at room temperature; they freeze well for up to 2 months. Common mistake: overbaking while waiting for a dry cocktail stick, which makes the brownies dry.

Variation: swap the walnuts for 80 g of white chocolate chunks and add orange zest to the batter.

Activity of the day: take the brownies to an end-of-term or work party, or invite friends round for a Christmas tea.

Week 4 · Days 19 to 24

The last week is the final countdown. At the weekend (days 19 and 20) there is a puff pastry star to share and a pumpkin jam for the jars. Then come recipes that get the Christmas Eve table ready ahead of time: the panna cotta is made on day 22, the almonds on day 23, and on day 24 the family gathers around a chocolate fondue.

Day 19 · Chocolate hazelnut puff pastry star

Makes: 1 star (8 to 10 people) · Time: 1 h (with 15 min chilling) · Oven: 200 °C (180 °C fan, gas mark 6) · Difficulty: Medium · With children: yes (an adult cuts) · Allergens: gluten, egg, milk, tree nuts (hazelnut)

Two layers of puff pastry with chocolate spread in between, cut and twisted into the shape of a star. It looks very impressive and is easier than it seems.

INGREDIENTS

- 2 discs of fresh ready-rolled round puff pastry (about 230 g and 30 cm each; if you only find rectangular sheets, cut out two 30 cm circles)
- 150 g chocolate hazelnut spread
- 1 egg, beaten, for brushing
- Icing sugar, for dusting

METHOD

1. Take the pastry out of the fridge 10 minutes beforehand. Heat the oven to 200 °C (180 °C fan, gas mark 6).
2. Unroll one disc, with its paper, onto a baking tray. Children spread the chocolate spread over it, leaving 1 cm free around the edge.
3. Lay the second disc on top and press the edge together well with your fingers.

4. Place a small glass (6 to 7 cm across), upside down, in the centre. It is only a guide.
5. An adult cuts with a sharp knife, from the glass to the edge: first into 4 equal parts, then each part in half, and each of those in half again. You get 16 strips, all attached to the centre.
6. Take two neighbouring strips and twist each one two turns, outwards (one to the left, the other to the right). Bring the ends of the two together and pinch well. Repeat with all the pairs: you get 8 star points.
7. Remove the glass. Put the tray in the fridge for 15 minutes, so the pastry firms up.
8. Brush with the beaten egg and bake for 20 to 25 minutes, until deep golden and crisp, underneath as well.
9. Leave to cool for 10 minutes, dust with icing sugar and serve warm, in the middle of the table, so that everyone can pull off a point.

Storage: best on the day; up to 1 day in a box, at room temperature; warm for 5 minutes in the oven to crisp up again. Common mistake: using too much spread, which runs out through the cuts and burns on the tray. Variation: swap the chocolate spread for pumpkin jam (day 20) with cinnamon, or for brown sugar and cinnamon with soft butter.

Activity of the day: make gold paper stars to hang in the window and choose which one goes on top of the tree.

Day 20 · Pumpkin jam with walnuts

Makes: about 3 jars of 250 ml · Time: 1 h 30 min · Difficulty: Easy · With children: no (the jam spits and burns) · Allergens: tree nuts

A traditional sweet preserve at Portuguese Christmases (doce de abóbora), orange in colour and scented with cinnamon and lemon. Spread it on bread, serve it with fresh cheese such as ricotta or cottage cheese, or use it to fill pancakes and pastries.

INGREDIENTS

- 1 kg prepared pumpkin or butternut squash, peeled and deseeded
- 100 ml water
- 600 g caster sugar
- 1 cinnamon stick
- peel of 1 lemon, only the yellow part, in wide strips
- 60 g shelled walnuts, broken into pieces

METHOD

1. Cut the pumpkin into cubes of about 3 cm.
2. Put it in a wide saucepan with the water, cover and cook over a medium heat for 20 minutes, until it breaks down with a fork.
3. Mash with a potato masher, or blitz with the stick blender if you like a smooth jam.

4. Add the sugar, cinnamon stick and lemon peel. Stir until the sugar dissolves.
5. Leave to simmer gently, uncovered, for 40 to 50 minutes, stirring often with a long-handled wooden spoon. The jam bubbles and spits: wear oven gloves and don't lean over the pan.
6. It is ready when thick and glossy and, when you drag the spoon across the bottom of the pan, the trail takes a while to close.
7. Remove the cinnamon and lemon peel and stir in the walnuts.
8. Meanwhile, wash the jars and lids in hot soapy water, rinse them with boiling water and leave them to dry upside down on a clean cloth.
9. Fill the jars with the jam while still hot, to 1 cm from the top, close and leave to cool.

Storage: always keep in the fridge, up to 1 month, and use a clean spoon each time; it also freezes well for up to 6 months. Pumpkin is low in acid, so this homemade jam must not be kept out of the fridge. Common mistake: taking it off the heat too soon, which leaves the jam watery once cold. Variation: without walnuts it keeps longer and is excellent in the pancakes on day 15; add the walnuts only at serving time.

Activity of the day: decorate the jar lids with a circle of gingham fabric and a ribbon, and handwrite the label "Homemade pumpkin jam, December".



Pumpkin jam with walnuts in jars for gifts (day 20)

Photo: jarmoluk / Pixabay

Day 21 · Date and cocoa bites

Makes: about 20 bites · Time: 20 min + 30 min in the fridge · Difficulty: Easy · With children: yes (an adult uses the food processor) · Allergens: tree nuts

No-bake sweets with no added sugar, sweet only thanks to the dates. A light pause among so many Christmas treats.

INGREDIENTS

- 200 g pitted dates, soft
- 100 g almonds (or walnuts)
- 2 tbsp cocoa powder (15 g)
- ½ tsp ground cinnamon
- zest of ½ orange
- 1 to 2 tbsp water, if needed
- For rolling: desiccated coconut, cocoa or sesame seeds

METHOD

1. Check that all the dates are pitted, opening them one by one. If they are dry, soak them for 10 minutes in hot water and drain well.
2. An adult chops the almonds in the food processor until they are in fine pieces, like coarse sand.
3. Add the dates, cocoa, cinnamon and orange zest and blitz until a paste forms that sticks together when

pressed between your fingers. If it is dry, add the water a spoonful at a time.

4. With slightly damp hands, shape into balls the size of a walnut (about 15 g). Children can roll them and coat them.
5. Chill in the fridge for 30 minutes, so they firm up.

Storage: up to 1 week in the fridge, in a closed box; they freeze for up to 2 months. Common mistake: dates that are too dry, which give a mixture that crumbles; soaking in hot water fixes it. Variation: swap half of the almonds for desiccated coconut, or add a little chopped candied orange peel (day 12).

Activity of the day: today is the shortest day of the year: light candles at dinner and count how many days are left until Christmas.

Day 22 · Cinnamon panna cotta with pomegranate

Makes: 6 small bowls of 150 ml · Time: 20 min + 6 h in the fridge · Difficulty: Easy · With children: yes (an adult does the heating) · Allergens: milk

A soft white cream scented with cinnamon and lemon, topped with pomegranate seeds as red as jewels. You make it today and it waits for Christmas Eve in the fridge.

INGREDIENTS

- 4 leaves of unflavoured gelatine (about 8 g)
- 500 ml double cream
- 250 ml milk
- 80 g caster sugar
- 1 cinnamon stick
- peel of 1 lemon, only the yellow part
- 1 pomegranate
- 2 tbsp honey
- Ground cinnamon, for dusting

METHOD

1. Soak the gelatine leaves in cold water for 5 minutes.
2. In a saucepan, combine the cream, milk, sugar, cinnamon stick and lemon peel.
3. An adult heats it over a medium heat, stirring, until the sugar dissolves and the mixture begins to steam,

without boiling (about 5 minutes). Turn off the heat, cover and leave to infuse for 10 minutes.

4. Remove the cinnamon stick and lemon peel. Squeeze the gelatine out well with your hands and stir it into the still-warm cream. Stir until it disappears completely.
5. Leave to cool for 10 minutes and divide among 6 small bowls or glasses.
6. Cover with cling film and chill in the fridge for at least 6 hours, until the cream is set but wobbles when you shake the bowl.
7. For the topping, cut the pomegranate in half and, over a bowl, tap the skin with a wooden spoon so the seeds fall out. Remove the white membranes, which are bitter.
8. At serving time, children scatter the pomegranate seeds on top, drizzle with honey and dust with a pinch of cinnamon.

Storage: up to 3 days in the fridge, with the bowls covered; add the pomegranate only on the day of serving. Warning: do not give honey to babies under 1 year. Common mistake: letting the cream boil after adding the gelatine, or adding the gelatine without soaking it first, which leaves the cream soft or lumpy. Variation: swap the pomegranate for clementine segments and orange zest, or for pumpkin jam (day 20).

Activity of the day: together, make the to-do list for Christmas Eve (who sets the table, who does what) and stick it on the fridge.

Day 23 · Cinnamon caramelised almonds

Makes: about 300 g · Time: 25 min + 15 min to cool · Difficulty: Easy · With children: no (very hot sugar) · Allergens: tree nuts

Almonds coated in a crisp shell of sugar and cinnamon, like the ones you buy at Christmas markets. They are ready to put in bowls on the Christmas Eve table.

INGREDIENTS

- 200 g whole almonds with skins
- 100 g caster sugar
- 50 ml water
- 1 tsp ground cinnamon
- 1 pinch of salt

METHOD

1. Line a tray with baking parchment and have two forks to hand.
2. In a wide frying pan, combine the sugar, water, cinnamon and salt and bring to the boil over a medium heat.
3. Add the almonds and stir constantly with a wooden spoon.
4. After 5 to 8 minutes, the water evaporates and the sugar turns dry and sandy, clinging to the almonds. Keep stirring.

5. In another 3 to 5 minutes, some of the sugar melts again and the almonds become glossy with an uneven coating. When they smell toasty, turn off the heat.
6. Spread straight onto the baking parchment and separate them with the two forks while they are still hot. Never taste them or touch them with your fingers: the sugar burns the skin.
7. Leave to cool for 15 minutes: they only turn crisp once cold.

Storage: up to 2 weeks in a well-closed jar, in a dry place. Warning: whole nuts are not safe for children under 5, because of the risk of choking. Common mistake: stopping stirring when the sugar turns sandy; you have to carry on until it shines again. Variation: do the same with hazelnuts or walnuts, or swap the cinnamon for orange zest.

Activity of the day: in the evening, put a stocking (or, following the Portuguese tradition, a little shoe) next to the tree or the fireplace, and leave a small plate of almonds for Father Christmas.



Cinnamon caramelised almonds (day 23)

Photo: David Trinks / Unsplash

Day 24 · Christmas Eve chocolate fondue

Makes: 4 to 6 people · Time: 20 min · Difficulty: Easy · With children: yes · Allergens: milk (gluten, if you use cake)

A bowl of warm chocolate in the middle of the table and fruit for dipping. It is the simplest recipe in the book and the most fun for ending Christmas Eve all together.

INGREDIENTS

- 200 g plain chocolate, chopped
- 200 ml double cream
- 1 tbsp honey (optional)
- 1 pinch of cinnamon
- **For dipping** (about 800 g in total): clementine segments, sliced banana and pear, cubed apple and pineapple, grapes, kiwi, cubes of sponge cake or *bolo-rei* (Portuguese King Cake), candied orange peel (day 12)
- Juice of ½ lemon, so the fruit doesn't turn brown

METHOD

1. Prepare the fruit: peel and cut into pieces of 2 to 3 cm. Sprinkle the banana, pear and apple with the lemon juice. For small children, cut the grapes into quarters lengthways.

2. Arrange the fruit and cake on plates, with skewers or fondue forks. Children can do this part.
3. An adult heats the cream in a saucepan until small bubbles appear around the edge, without boiling.
4. Turn off the heat, add the chocolate, wait 2 minutes and stir until smooth and glossy. Add the honey and cinnamon.
5. Transfer to a fondue pot with a candle underneath, or to a heatproof bowl set over a saucepan of hot water.
6. Before the children dip the fruit, check the temperature: it should be warm and creamy, not scalding.
7. If the chocolate thickens, add 1 to 2 tbsp of hot cream and stir.

Storage: leftover chocolate keeps for 3 days in the fridge, in a closed jar; reheat over a low heat or use it cold as a topping for pancakes or cakes. Common mistake: the candle flame too close, which burns the chocolate at the bottom; stir from time to time. Variation: make half with white chocolate (in which case use only 100 ml of cream for 200 g of white chocolate), to have two fondues on the table.

Activity of the day: it is Christmas Eve. After dinner, around the fondue, everyone says what they enjoyed most about making these 24 days. Merry Christmas!

Shopping lists and printable planner

This chapter has the shopping lists for each week and the plan for all 24 days in a single table. Print these pages and pin them to the fridge: tick off what you have already done.

The lists include only the fresh ingredients and the items specific to each week. Sugar, flour, yeast, cinnamon, salt, honey, oil, cocoa and baking parchment are in the **storecupboard basics** in the chapter "How to use this calendar". Quantities are rounded up to the usual pack sizes.

The 24-day plan

Day	Recipe	Time	With children	Done
1 (Tue)	Creamy hot chocolate	15 min	Yes	☐
2 (Wed)	Baked apples with cinnamon and walnuts	50 min	Yes	☐
3 (Thu)	Chocolate mug cake	5 min	Yes	☐
4 (Fri)	Christmas popcorn with white chocolate	20 min + 30 min	Yes	☐
5 (Sat)	Christmas granola to give as a gift	50 min	Yes	☐
6 (Sun)	Plaited sweet bread	3 h	Yes	☐

Day	Recipe	Time	With children	Done
7 (Mon)	Chocolate truffles	20 min + 2 h	Yes	☐
8 (Tue)	Coconut sweets	25 min + 1 h	Yes	☐
9 (Wed)	Apple and cinnamon muffins	40 min	Yes	☐
10 (Thu)	Cinnamon palmiers	45 min	Yes	☐
11 (Fri)	Chocolate fudge	15 min + 3 h	Yes	☐
12 (Sat)	Candied orange peel	2 h + 12 to 24 h	No	☐
13 (Sun)	Christmas cupcakes with cream cheese frosting	1 h 15 min + 1 h	Yes	☐
14 (Mon)	Chocolate bark with nuts	20 min + 1 h	Yes	☐
15 (Tue)	Pancakes with orange sauce	45 min	Yes	☐
16 (Wed)	Portuguese orange custard cakes (*queijadas de laranja*)	40 min	Yes	☐
17 (Thu)	Mixed berry gummies	15 min + 3 h	Yes	☐
18 (Fri)	Christmas brownies	50 min + 1 h	Yes	☐
19 (Sat)	Chocolate hazelnut puff pastry star	1 h	Yes	☐

Day	Recipe	Time	With children	Done
20 (Sun)	Pumpkin jam with walnuts	1 h 30 min	No	☐
21 (Mon)	Date and cocoa bites	20 min + 30 min	Yes	☐
22 (Tue)	Cinnamon panna cotta with pomegranate	20 min + 6 h	Yes	☐
23 (Wed)	Cinnamon caramelised almonds	25 min + 15 min	No	☐
24 (Thu)	Christmas Eve chocolate fondue	20 min	Yes	☐

The days of the week in brackets are those of December 2026. In other years, keep the most time-consuming recipes (days 5, 6, 12, 13, 19 and 20) for the weekends.

Shopping list · Week 1 (days 1 to 6)

- ☐ Semi-skimmed or whole milk: 1.5 litres
- ☐ Eggs: 3
- ☐ Unsalted butter: 100 g
- ☐ Plain chocolate: 1 bar of 200 g
- ☐ White chocolate: 150 g
- ☐ Cox or Braeburn apples: 4
- ☐ Oranges: 3

- □ Lemon: 1
- □ Rolled oats: 300 g
- □ Popping corn: 70 g
- □ Chopped walnuts: 100 g
- □ Flaked almonds: 125 g
- □ Almonds or pistachios: 40 g
- □ Dried cranberries: 150 g
- □ Raisins and pumpkin seeds (optional)
- □ Coloured sugar sprinkles (optional)
- □ 3 glass jars of 350 ml with lids

Shopping list · Week 2 (days 7 to 12)

- □ Plain chocolate: 500 g
- □ Double cream: 200 ml
- □ Condensed milk: 2 tins of 397 g
- □ Unsalted butter: 100 g
- □ Milk: 200 ml
- □ Eggs: 2
- □ Desiccated coconut: 200 g
- □ Hazelnuts or pistachios: 50 g
- □ Walnuts: 120 g
- □ Apples: 2

- □ Lemon: 1
- □ Thick-skinned oranges, unwaxed: 4
- □ Fresh ready-rolled rectangular puff pastry: 1 sheet

Shopping list · Week 3 (days 13 to 18)

- □ Unsalted butter: 500 g
- □ Eggs: 1 dozen
- □ Milk: 750 ml
- □ Full-fat soft cream cheese, plain: 200 g
- □ Plain chocolate: 400 g
- □ White chocolate: 100 g
- □ Oranges: 6
- □ Lemon: 1
- □ Frozen mixed berries: 300 g
- □ Unflavoured leaf gelatine: 1 pack (10 leaves)
- □ Shelled pistachios: 40 g
- □ Toasted almonds: 40 g
- □ Dried cranberries: 60 g
- □ Chopped walnuts: 80 g
- □ Fresh rosemary (for decorating)

Shopping list · Week 4 (days 19 to 24)

- □ Fresh ready-rolled round puff pastry: 2 discs
- □ Chocolate hazelnut spread: 1 small jar
- □ Pumpkin or butternut squash: about 1.5 kg (gives 1 kg prepared)
- □ Lemons: 3
- □ Orange: 1
- □ Shelled walnuts: 60 g
- □ Pitted dates: 200 g
- □ Almonds: 100 g (for the bites) and 200 g with skins (for caramelising)
- □ Desiccated coconut or sesame seeds, for rolling
- □ Double cream: 500 ml (for the panna cotta)
- □ Milk: 250 ml
- □ Unflavoured leaf gelatine: 4 leaves
- □ Pomegranate: 1
- □ Eggs: 1
- □ Plain chocolate: 200 g
- □ Double cream: another 200 ml (for the fondue)
- □ Fruit for the fondue (about 800 g): clementines, banana, pear, apple, pineapple, grapes, kiwi

- □ *Bolo-rei* (Portuguese King Cake) or sponge cake, for the fondue (optional)
- □ 3 glass jars of 250 ml with lids

Before Christmas Eve: what to do and when

When	What to do
Day 20	Pumpkin jam in jars, in the fridge.
Day 22	Panna cotta in the bowls; it stays in the fridge until day 24, covered.
Day 23	Caramelised almonds, stored in a closed jar.
Day 24, morning	Buy and wash the fondue fruit; break up the chocolate.
Day 24, at dinner	Put the pomegranate on the panna cotta, the almonds in bowls, cut the fruit and make the fondue at the last minute.

How long the calendar's sweets keep

Sweet	Where to store	How long
Granola (day 5)	Closed jar, dry place	4 weeks
Truffles (day 7)	Fridge	1 week
Coconut sweets (day 8)	Fridge	5 days
Palmiers (day 10)	Closed tin	5 days
Fudge (day 11)	Fridge	2 weeks
Orange peel (day 12)	Jar, cool place / fridge	1 month / 3 months

Sweet	Where to store	How long
Chocolate bark (day 14)	Box, cool place	2 weeks
Gummies (day 17)	Fridge	5 days
Brownies (day 18)	Closed box	4 days
Pumpkin jam (day 20)	Always in the fridge	1 month
Date bites (day 21)	Fridge	1 week
Panna cotta (day 22)	Fridge, covered	3 days
Caramelised almonds (day 23)	Closed jar, dry place	2 weeks

> **Tip:** keep this planner after Christmas. Next December, just print it again and start the countdown over.