

A RIGHT ROYAL STUFFING

Story Jake Smith

Traditionally, those of regal bearing spared no expense, or excess, at Christmas. Celebrations typically took the form of a 12-course feast crowned by a stuffed wild boar's head or a giant blue carp.

Fresh from his royal birth and christening, little Prince George of Cambridge will shortly be chauffeured to Sandringham, the Queen's country residence, to wallow in all the grandeur and magic of his first royal Christmas. Alas, at just four months old, it is doubtful Prince George will appreciate that he – in common perhaps with all his future Australian subjects – should thank the influence of his dear great-great-great-great-great grandmother, Queen Victoria, for making the Christmas tree popular in Britain after its arrival from Germany during, appropriately enough, the Georgian era.

It is also doubtful the little prince will appreciate that the leg of ham, which makes its annual yuletide appearance, is nothing more than a cheap and rather common tribute to the whole stuffed wild boar's head that for centuries has graced the royal Christmas table. But in time, Prince George will listen wide-eyed to the stories of past family Christmases; and he will learn that when Queen Victoria once decreed it to be a "most dear happy time", she also expected a most dear happy banquet to do justice to the royal sentiment.

By the late 1880s, Queen Victoria's chef, Monsieur Juste Ménagier, commanded a legion of 45 kitchen staff who were tasked with making more than 100 plum puddings and 20 times as many mince pies – each stamped in edible gold-leaf with the personal royal cipher of Queen Victoria – to be dispatched as personal Christmas gifts to Her

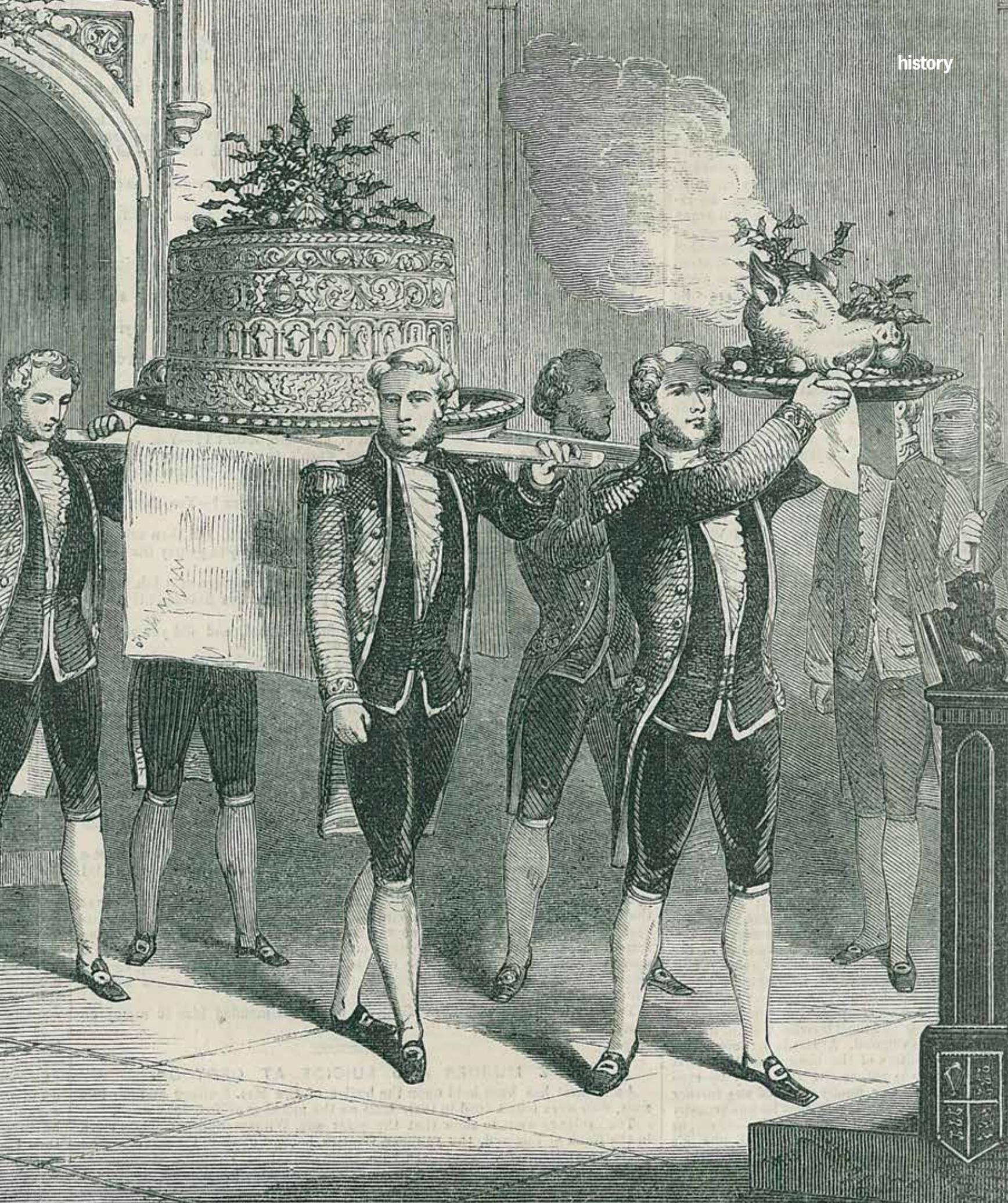
Majesty's closest relatives. For these, recounted one of the palace cooks, "we used 24 bottles of brandy in the preparation of mincemeat made each Christmas for the royal family, and 150 eggs in the plum puddings for the household. These plum puddings, made every Christmas from a very old Buckingham Palace menu, were a great success and contained four gallons of strong ale, a bottle of rum and a bottle of brandy. The ale gave them a particular richness which you do not find in plum puddings these days." Indeed not. But the same royal chef did complain that "it became very tiring stirring a 300lb [140kg] Christmas pudding mixture".

In addition to her relatives, Queen Victoria had a string of royal friends who required their fair share of Christmas cheer. To these were sent extravagant large raised pies made from game birds shot on the royal estates. "These pies were a great delicacy and took a lot of preparation," recounted one of the royal cooks, Gabriel Tschumi. "The birds used in them – turkey, chicken, pheasant and woodcock – have each to be boned and a stuffing of forcemeat, truffles and tongue prepared.

"The woodcock was put inside the pheasant," he continued, "the pheasant inside the chicken, and the chicken inside the turkey, packed around with stuffing. A very rich pastry was used, and when the pie was sliced, each piece had the different flavours of the bird from which it was made."

The palace servants were not forgotten, with each receiving a brace of pheasants and a haunch of venison. But all these were just trifling culinary ►







“**VICTORIA BUSIED HERSELF WITH THE CHILDREN AS THEY EXCITEDLY CIRCLED THE FAMILY TREE.**”

With bells on ... Christmas 1848 at Osborne House, private residence of Queen Victoria; (opening pages) Windsor Castle, 1857 – a newspaper illustration depicts the entry of the stuffed wild boar’s head and giant game pie.

creations alongside the banquet required for Queen Victoria’s personal partaking. Once Chef Ménagier had donned his toque and white overalls, he stepped inside the royal kitchens which were a whirlwind of frantic activity. Chefs, sous-chefs and kitchen hands were darting from bench to bench and pot to pot as they prepared Queen Victoria’s personal Christmas menu that consisted of no fewer than 12 courses in addition to an impressive sideboard.

Down one length of the kitchen was a roaring open fire where two royal roasters dripped with sweat as they slowly turned and basted a baron of beef. A baron, for those modern cooks unfamiliar with the term, is no pint-sized joint of beef – weighing more than 130kg, it took exactly 12 hours to roast, from 8am till 8pm. The royal baron refers to the entire two hind legs of a Shorthorn ox that had been especially bred on the queen’s Frogmore estate, near Windsor. The towering baron would sit centre stage on Queen Victoria’s Christmas sideboard, served cold and decorated with the royal arms and the date made from shredded horseradish. Surrounding this mountain of beef were yet more cold delicacies: woodcock pie, an entire brawn (jellied offal), and a game pie made from pheasants, partridges, rabbit and venison.

Christmas charity, if you can call it that, was kind to Queen Victoria’s royal pantry: her granddaughter, Crown Princess Sophie of Greece, would help stock the kitchens by sending fresh currants and spices; the Tsar of Russia would send wooden boxes of imperial

sturgeons; the Grand Duke of Mecklenburg-Schwerin would send the finest pâté de foie-gras, made from the delectable silky livers of force-fed geese, encased in pastry to look like a giant pork pie; and the Emperor of Austria would send a dozen bottles of sweet Tokay wine from his personal vineyards.

But the pièce-de-résistance was the whole stuffed wild boar’s head that graced the monarch’s Christmas table after King Henry II started the ritual in the 1100s. With an apple prised in its mouth, the head was placed on a gold platter and heralded into the room with a fanfare of trumpets. Bunches of herbs blossomed from its ears; fierce, bloodshot eyes were made from red jelly and carved vegetables; and intricate designs fashioned from various mousses and aspic-jelly flowed from the swine’s forehead and down over its snout. “I have a set of ivory tusks which serve to give the thing a ferocious and decorative appearance,” recalled the royal chef to King George VI half a century later.

The royal boar’s head always captured the public’s imagination. It was with some relief, therefore, that newspapers in 1896 were able to assure readers “the Queen has received her usual Christmas present of a boar’s head from her grandson, the Emperor of Germany. His Majesty also sent two immense hampers of German cakes and confections.”

Laying the Christmas feast before Her Majesty and the royal family, however, required more than a walk from the palace kitchens to the palace dining

room. Queen Victoria, rather inconveniently, chose to spend Christmas at her private residence, Osborne House, on the Isle of Wight, where the kitchens were too small to prepare such a glutinous spread. Consequently, all the dishes prepared at Windsor Castle were ferried by royal yacht to arrive at Osborne on Christmas Eve. The yacht’s supplies included the royal turkey that would be roasted and served with chestnuts, pearl-onions, pork belly and sliced chipolata sausage bound in a Madeira sauce.

At Osborne, Queen Victoria was busy with her grandchildren as they excitedly circled the family Christmas tree, which climbed a massive seven-and-a-half metres with candles, decorations, gifts and gilded fruits and nuts hanging from each branch. A second tree rotated on a musical swivel-top, playing German Christmas carols.

Here we must pause and give credit to Queen Victoria’s German-born husband, Prince Albert, who in 1840 decorated a Christmas tree at Windsor Castle in the tradition of his homeland. From that day on, as newspapers intrigued readers with stories of the royal family’s magical sparkling tree, the trend quickly spread throughout English-speaking Christendom, including to Australia.

Victoria’s husband was proud of his influence on the English household and appreciatively wrote to his own father, saying of his royal offspring: “They know not why, [but] are full of happy wonder at the German Christmas tree and its radiant candles”.

BY THE LATE 1800s, THE “GERMAN CHRISTMAS tree” and the English plum pudding had also become an integral part of Christmas celebrations in Saint Petersburg, at the court of the emperor of Russia. Although Tsar Nicholas II employed 190 kitchen staff, the task of preparing the imperial Christmas pudding simply could not be chanced – heaven forbid – to non-English hands. Therefore the children’s English governess “made the puddings and forbade the French chefs anywhere near her creations-in-the-making”, recounted one of the tsar’s sisters, Grand Duchess Olga.

Christmas Eve was the traditional time for the Russian imperial children to open their gifts, which had been spectacularly arrayed in the palace banquet room; but before anything could be unwrapped, the emperor and empress insisted on a 15-course family dinner.

Beneath the solid gold platters, crystal glasses and monogrammed porcelain dinner service, “hay was strewn under the tablecloth to remind us of the humility of the manger”, recalled Madame Lili Dehn, who was a close friend of the empress and regular attendee at the imperial family Christmas.

The Christmas Eve meal always featured fish, and the tsar’s kitchens were equipped with marble aquariums to keep them alive and fresh, no matter what the season. So it was, then, that whole stuffed sterlets – a species of small sturgeon – were served ►



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**SURROUNDING
 THE MOUNTAIN
 OF BEEF WAS
 A GAME PIE
 MADE FROM
 PHEASANTS,
 PARTRIDGES,
 RABBIT AND
 VENISON.**

Bill of fare ... Just part of the menu for Queen Victoria's Christmas banquet of 1894 at Osborne House on the Isle of Wight. Dishes had to be ferried in by royal yacht from Windsor Castle.

distributes to whomsoever he chances to meet; it may be to a gardener or a sentry on duty at the gates, or a little school boy or girl ... It was always notable how many gardeners there were out on the paths, sweeping invisible leaves away on Christmas Eve.”

When the Kaiser returned from his imperial sojourn with empty pockets, it was the signal to serve a magnificent banquet, for all the emperor's closest friends and officers, which always included a spectacular dish of *Karpfen blau* – blue carp. “Monster carp are brought round boiled in ale, looking plethoric and porpoise-like,” remembered the governess to the emperor's children. To prepare the dish, the scales on the fish were left intact so a chemical reaction with beer and vinegar during cooking caused the 1.2m-long fish to take on a blue glow.

And just as German traditions had infiltrated the royal court in England, so too had some English traditions made their way to the Kaiser's Christmas table courtesy of the influence of his grandmother, Queen Victoria. The meal finished with “mince pies served with flaming brandy sauce”, recalled the governess. “The German gentlemen are not at all fond of plum pudding – but they like the mince pies, especially the brandy sauce part.”

The royal chefs had also been making thousands of German gingerbreads, known as *pfefferkuchen*, that would be given to the Kaiser's guests along with their presents. “A large plate of nuts, cakes and chocolates accompanies each table,” recounted the governess, “and those gentlemen who have to return to Berlin early may presently be seen, aided by footmen, pouring nuts and gingerbread into large, brown paper bags, which they carry away under one arm, for all the world like children from a Sunday-school treat. This procession of grey-haired generals and officers in uniform going off like schoolboys with their booty seems to afford the emperor much pleasure.”

Indeed, Christmas at any imperial court would have given all those in attendance much pleasure. The unchecked and unrivalled splendour came courtesy of the seemingly limitless royal coffers. Little did many of these participants know, however, that these were the twilight years of their empires. For the Russian tsar and his family spent their last Christmas in 1917 under house arrest in the capital of Siberia, Tobolsk. The imperial glamour was long gone; there was a single fir tree decorated only with candles. Among belongings retrieved from the assassinated Russian imperial family the following year is a gift from that last Christmas they all enjoyed together in 1917: a small icon bearing the image of the Holy Virgin of Abalak, given by the empress to her daughter, the Grand Duchess Tatiana. On the reverse, in the empress's handwriting, it reads: “*T. Save us and protect us. Mama. Christmas 1917. Tobolsk.*” ●

upon which, like miniature glowing Christmas baubles, the prized golden caviar from the sterlet was arranged to make the most magnificent garnish.

With a jovial touch of “Bah! Humbug!”, the tsar foiled the inventive attempts of his children to sneakily peek at all the gifts in the banquet hall. Cossack guards had been stationed at all the entrances to the room. But the excitement and anticipation were too much. Grand Duchess Olga recounted how after the “unwanted dessert” was finished, Nicholas II would go alone into the banquet room and, only on hearing their father ring a handbell, did the imperial children stampede into a real-life fairytale scene of Christmas trees; tulip-shaped candles; decorations made from gold, silver, porcelain and even chocolate; and gifts of every size and shape.

The entire room sparkled with reflections as the flickering light from hundreds of candles bounced off a sea of fresh fruits, all dipped in silver and gold-leaf, which covered every surface. There wasn't a standalone Christmas tree – instead, each member of the family had his or her own tree, and beside each was a table covered in a white cloth and overflowing with presents. The personal tree of the tsarina was decorated with white silk-satin ribbons and hand-blown glass ornaments all in mauve.

Among the gifts of jewels and furs for the emperor and empress was something, as any parent knows, far more valuable. “The children,” recounted their

governess, “used to make their own Christmas and birthday presents for their parents, generally some needlework. Once the little Grand Duchess Olga [Nicholas II's eldest daughter], in spite of my remonstrances, worked a kettle-holder for the emperor. It had a little kettle singing on a fire, and ‘Polly, put the kettle on’ worked on it, and she grounded it in blue. I made it up for her with a ruche of blue ribbon all round, and she admired it immensely.” Not even the court jeweller, Carl Fabergé himself, could have hoped to create a piece more treasured by the parents.

THE SPLENDOUR OF HAVING ONE CHRISTMAS tree for each imperial child was also a tradition adopted at the court of the German emperor, Kaiser Wilhelm II. Christmas for the Kaiser was spent at the family's Neues Palais on the outskirts of Berlin. For two entire evenings leading up to Christmas Day, the empress and her princely grandchildren spent their time decorating all the trees, which had come from the Kaiser's hunting estates. “Even the emperor joins in, and it is only when it becomes too tedious that he takes to looking through reports and newspaper cuttings,” recalled a former Marshall of the Court.

On Christmas Eve, the Kaiser would dress in mufti and stroll around the expansive gardens of his palace with pockets bulging full of gold coins. “These coins,” recalled one of the palace staff, “he

