

## Acquired tastes

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Food is always a welcome present at Christmas. The ultimate symbol of sharing, the perfect food present can bring manifold dividends. It can be the centrepiece of a spontaneous and memorable holiday midnight feast. A hamper or gift box that contains the makings of a main course or, better yet, a whole meal can give the busy host/hostess an hour or two off. An unfamiliar ingredient or a cooking course can jolt the recipient on to a whole new path of culinary discovery. A box of chocolates can pleasantly prolong a meal and the conversation long after the food has been cleared away.

### Meat and seafood

The Complete H Forman & Son smoked salmon gift set includes a whole side of wild smoked salmon, a sustainably sourced hardwood board and a Granton smoked salmon knife (£132.95 plus shipping; [www.formanandfield.com](http://www.formanandfield.com)). Barney Greengrass's pastrami salmon (\$36/lb) is a great complement to its traditional Western Nova smoked salmon (\$45/lb), which can be shipped along with side orders of bagels, cream cheese or even caviar ([www.barneygreengrass.com](http://www.barneygreengrass.com)). Highland Game, which sources its venison from some of the great Scottish estates, offers Game Boxes such as the Cairngorm, which includes venison sausages and medallions (£62.70), and the Eton Box (£75), which also includes duck breasts and Maxine Clark's *Venison* cookbook ([www.highlandgame.com](http://www.highlandgame.com)). For caviar lovers, Daylesford Organic has sourced a sustainably farmed oscietra caviar (£165/125g; £65/50g; [www.daylesfordorganic.com](http://www.daylesfordorganic.com)). A three-bird roast - a goose stuffed with a chicken that is in turn stuffed with a pheasant - makes a great house present and conversation piece (for prices, [www.seldomseenfarm.co.uk](http://www.seldomseenfarm.co.uk)).

### Ingredients

For home cooks looking to expand their repertoires, New York's Dean and DeLuca offers the elegant Metropolitan spice rack in several sizes - the large has 34 tins including arrowroot powder and black Tellicherry peppercorns (\$195; [www.deandeluca.com](http://www.deandeluca.com)). For a rare treat, go downtown to New York spice bazaar Kalustyan. Among the more than 4,000 spices, coffees and teas, it offers 15g bottles of Persian saffron (\$99; [www.kalustyans.com](http://www.kalustyans.com)). In London, The Spice Shop sells bright yellow tins of blended spices, such as Berbere Ethiopian "Wat" seasoning and Mexican mole sauce mix, which make excellent stocking fillers (from £2.35; [www.thespiceshop.co.uk](http://www.thespiceshop.co.uk)). Budding molecular gastronomists can find all their curing and crisping agents and emulsifiers at San Francisco's Le Sanctuaire, which in December will also launch, as co-publisher, the first English language edition of *Apicius* magazine, the organ of molecular gastronomy - only 2,000 copies will be printed, so hurry (\$125 for one year's subscription; [www.le-sanctuaire.com](http://www.le-sanctuaire.com)). If you contact them by Friday December 19, The Italian Truffle Shop will hunt a truffle to order in Italy and ensure it is with the recipient on December 23 (from £135 for a 25g truffle; [www.theitaliantruffles.com](http://www.theitaliantruffles.com)).

### Chocolates and sweets

In New York, Dylan's Candy Bar is the ideal one-stop-shop for children, offering a Candy Bar Peppermint Palace (\$90), which can be personalised, and jolly Christmas Oreos (\$24) ([www.dylanscandybar.com](http://www.dylanscandybar.com)). Children will love the chocolate gingerbread men, reindeer and snowmen from Charbonnel and Walker (£4.99; [www.charbonnel.co.uk](http://www.charbonnel.co.uk)) and the Irresistible Candy Cane (£9.99; [www.artisanduchocolat.com](http://www.artisanduchocolat.com)), while their parents will appreciate the port and cranberry truffles ([www.charbonnel.co.uk](http://www.charbonnel.co.uk)). For making traditional hot chocolate, a porcelain reproduction of a Louis XVIII hot chocolate pot made by Pillivuyt is the perfect present (\$184.95 plus shipping from [www.broadwaypanhandler.com](http://www.broadwaypanhandler.com); £98.69 plus shipping from [www.kingsandqueens.org.uk](http://www.kingsandqueens.org.uk); [www.pillivuyt.fr](http://www.pillivuyt.fr)).

### Hampers/gift boxes

Anya Hindmarch has designed a novel range of hampers for Selfridges that include the New Year, New You hamper containing a pedometer and several luxury detox foods, as well as half a bottle of champagne and several Naturally Gorgeous dark chocolate bars (£165; [www.selfridgeshampers.com](http://www.selfridgeshampers.com)). In the US, Wild Edibles can ship the lobster feast supreme, which contains a live Maine lobster, nine littleneck clams, uncooked jumbo shrimp and clam chowder (from \$39.99 plus shipping for a 1.25lb lobster; [www.wildedibles.com](http://www.wildedibles.com)). In the UK, The Fish Society's paella kit and paella kit with snails include all you need except vegetables, lemon and olive oil to make a perfect paella (from £22.30 for a two-person serving; [www.thefishsociety.co.uk](http://www.thefishsociety.co.uk)). Manhattan Fruiter offers a range of holiday fruit and treat hampers in various sizes, including the organic fruit hamper (from \$55), the chocolate fondue hamper (from \$75), and the kosher hamper (from \$35) ([www.manhattanfruiter.com](http://www.manhattanfruiter.com)). Eli Zabar's Chanukah gift box includes a menorah made from brioche and his Alpine Picnic Basket includes bread, salami and mountain cheeses (both from \$100; [www.elizabar.com](http://www.elizabar.com)).

## Cookware

Chefs the world over rave about Japanese knives, such as Korin's Shiro-ko Hongasumi Deba (\$553.50; [www.korin.com](http://www.korin.com)), which can be engraved with a name and message and are available in left-handed versions. You can get stunning marble pestle and mortars, hand-carved in India (from £215; [www.davidmellordesign.com](http://www.davidmellordesign.com)). The baking enthusiast will forever relish a magical star bundt mould (£26.95, [www.cucinadirect.com](http://www.cucinadirect.com)) or Cathedral bundt mould (\$36; [www.nordicware.com](http://www.nordicware.com)), made by Nordic Ware, which can also be used to make jellies.

## Spreading the joy

In order to spread the joy throughout the coming year, consider giving a year's worth of monthly food or wine deliveries. Berry Brothers and Rudd's Wine Club will deliver a range of cases, such as an essential red case (£120 per month) or a reserve connoisseurs case (£180) ([www.bbr.com](http://www.bbr.com)). Paxton and Whitfield (£35 per month; [www.paxtonandwhitfield.co.uk](http://www.paxtonandwhitfield.co.uk)) and Murray's (\$280/four months to \$795/12 months; [www.murrayscheese.com](http://www.murrayscheese.com)) can supply monthly deliveries of seasonal cheeses.

## Perpetual student

For the perpetual student or indeed for yourself - your loved ones will reap the rewards - how about a cooking class, tour or holiday? In London, Thailand-born Brit Kay Plunkett-Hogge offers Thai cooking lessons in either her home or yours (£125 per person; or £150 for a private lesson; [www.kaycooks.com/kays-classes](http://www.kaycooks.com/kays-classes)) and Middle Eastern food expert Anissa Helou offers two-hour evening demonstration classes in her London kitchen, followed by dinner and wine (£100 per person; [www.anissas.com](http://www.anissas.com)). In New York, the Astor Centre specialises in food and wine courses such as Cooking For Wine: Syrah/Shiraz (\$145) and esoteric food courses such as Umami, the New Fifth Taste (\$95) ([www.AstorCenterNYC.com](http://www.AstorCenterNYC.com)). Context Travel's expert historians offer guided walks in New York such as Jewish Cuisine and Culture (\$300 for a private tour) or trips such as A Taste of Two Cities: The Food Culture of Rome and Naples (\$4,500 per person; [www.contexttravel.com](http://www.contexttravel.com)). From the UK, Flavours of Italy runs courses from Bologna to Sicily, including a week at the magical 18th-century Casino Pisanelli in Puglia (£1,599; [www.flavoursholidays.co.uk](http://www.flavoursholidays.co.uk)).

## Wine and spirits

Quarterly magazine The World of Fine Wine, whose editorial board is headed by Hugh Johnson, provides indispensable reading for the serious wine lover (annual subscription £79/\$150; [www.finewinemag.com](http://www.finewinemag.com)). Andrew Jefford, who writes for the FT, is a contributing editor. It is rare to come across a large-format bottle within a reasonable price range, so this Jeroboam of delightful 2006 Château Barréjat Madiran is a real find for either laying down or bringing to a party (£63.50 plus delivery; [www.stonevine.co.uk](http://www.stonevine.co.uk)). Publisher-cuminternet wine merchant David Campbell is offering the excellent-value, topical Hard Times case, which includes an Everyman Library edition of Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* as well as a bottle of champagne and two "de-frocked classics" - declassified Clarets from top estates. If bought before December 31 2008, a lifetime membership of The Wine Society will include £20 to spend on wine (£40; [www.thewinesociety.com](http://www.thewinesociety.com)).

In New York, Chambers Street Wines has a terrific collection of sake, including Manotsuru Niigata Daiginjo (\$53.99/720ml), made by one of Japan's only female sake brewers, as well as a terrific selection of wine

from around the world ([www.chambersstwines.com](http://www.chambersstwines.com)). For the whiskey lover, Lenell's in Brooklyn offers a huge selection of bourbon and rye, including Eagle Rare 17-year and Black Maple Hill 23-year rye (call for prices; [www.lenells.com](http://www.lenells.com)).

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