The Science of Christmas: Dinner Table

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The origin of plum pudding or Christmas pudding is a porridge-like dish called "furmenty" which contained fruit and spices. It altered to become a plum porridge, or pottage, containing meat or fish and later again was stuffed into sheep's stomach to produce a form of haggis.

When puddling cloths became available, the familiar cannonball shaped plum pudding that we associate with Maria Dickens’ A Christmas Carol became the norm. Pudding cloths could be rubbed with batter and flour before being filled with the pudding mix of suet, brownings, eggs, spices, dried fruit, meat or fish and then boiled or steamed in a cauldron. By the 18th century, improved steaming and cheaper sugar had made meat preserving and spicing less necessary; so wholly savoury meat pies were coming into fashion, and sweeter mincemeat pies with very little meat. By the early 19th century, the meat eventually was left out of the plum pudding but in some remained, which is also true of mincemeat.

To preserve food you need to alter the conditions to make it unfavourable for tiny organisms, called microbes, that can spoil food, to grow. This can be done by altering the temperature (cooling food, refrigeration or freezing); altering the moisture (drying foods, salt or sugar); removing oxygen (cooking, sealing with fat or butter, vacuum packing, canning); and altering the pH of the food using acids such as vinegar. Both sugar and salt have the ability to inhibit microbial growth, most notably for a process known as osmotic or dehydration. Spices also have natural antibacterial properties and have been used for centuries as natural preservatives of food.