

The simple pleasures unwrapped

Looking for festive gifts fit for a foodie? Ignore the growing commercialisation, says Philippa Davenport, just think quality

We have become obsessed with image not content. More time and attention is paid to appearance than practicality. Even Christmas hampers, boxes and stockings come wrapped and the wrappings often cost more than the present, which seems daft.

The gift trade takes our obsession with wrapping to extremes. Goods are wrapped and overwrapped, bedecked and ribboned. It beggars belief that often someone has been paid a design fee to create such gaudiness. But glossily shallow ploys seem to lure easily impressed shoppers, particularly at Christmas, when panic buying descends on high streets and cash tills ding-dong merrily non-stop.

Package makers must be making serious money at this time of year. No matter how much you and I may wish for a tinsel-free, gift-tagless season of peace and goodwill, the growth rate in tree felling and in disposing of spent Christmas wrappings is on the increase.

I accept, of course, that some sort of protective measures are needed for conveying many goods from shop to home, and if the covering is pleasing on the eye as well as functional, so much the better.

Some modern packaging is apposite, particularly for foods. I lament the passing of Britain's doorstep milk deliveries but plastic bottles, though aesthetically much less pleasing than glass, mean less crying over spilt milk.

The modern egg box is another sensible advance on the practice of my childhood, when the local grocer picked eggs out of a straw nest on the counter and placed them gently in a brown paper bag for sale – sometimes resulting in scrambled eggs long before they reached the kitchen.

The jury is out on biscuits. Secretly I preferred the old-fashioned system of selling biscuits loose, whole or broken. At least you could see what you were getting and the broken ones ate just as well for half the price. Modern straitjacket packets can be tricky to open and the outcome is uncertain. In fairness, the contents are rarely reduced to shards, but neither are they often truly whole, mostly the biscuits are irritatingly frayed.

As for cans, fancy ring-pulls are as unsatisfactory as those with key-operated roll-back lids. A classic wall-mounted tin opener seems better at breaking and entering without raising stress

levels or incurring laundry bills.

Christmas hampers are a pet hate of mine. The names of them (The Knightsbridge, The Château, The Penthouse, etc) are risible and wicker picnic baskets are an anachronistic symbol of gracious living. They are cumbersome, inflexible, weighty and scratchy to carry across fields and stiles, ill suited to 21st century ideas about food on the move.

This is the age of the cool bag, of informality and portable barbecues. Chances are that, once unpacked, ostentatious wickerwork will gather dust in the loft. I am prepared to bet that at least some of the contents will be gifted on.

Food parcels can make wonderful presents, but not the anonymous, stereotype sort. The bespoke approach that takes full account of the recipient's individual tastes satisfies giver and taker far better, and may work out cheaper.

The most personal solution is to do some of the cooking yourself and shop around for other goodies to include in the package. Alternatively, enlist the help of a company that offers plain boxes in various sizes, into which as few or as many goodies as you choose from their stock can be packed and dispatched to order.

This way you can shop from your armchair or com-



Say cheese: seasonal supplies including more than five tons of Stilton have started arriving at Neal's Yard, the cheesemongers, which has outlets near Borough Market in south east London and in Covent Garden. For mail order call 0207 645 3555.

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puter at whatever hour suits you, instead of battling through crowded streets. Your choice makes your gift truly personal, and the company's expertise should ensure safe and efficient delivery. In Britain I recommend the following trio:

■ **Teesdale Trencherman** (tel: 01833-638370, fax: 01833 631218, website: www.trencherman.co.uk – last Christmas order date: December 10). TT's long menu of desirables includes beluga, oscietra and sevruga caviar, various feathered and furred game, fine foie gras roulades and, best of all, raw vacuum packed foie gras of duck.

■ **Simply Salmon** (tel: 01799 550143, fax: 01799 550039, website: www.simplysalmon.co.uk – last Christmas order date: December 6). In spite of the name, this company offers a great deal more than salmon. Traditional favourites include

he bone, Colston Basset Stilton cheeses, Godard *mi-cuit* oie gras and Woodall dry cure bacon. Happy surprises include hot watercrust wild boar pie and a spicy apricot compote created to partner

am.
For cooks consider a mother-of-pearl spoon and a jar of caviar

■ **Heal Farm** (tel: 0176 957 341, fax: 0176 957 2839, website: www.healfarm.co.uk – last Christmas order date: December 19). Anne Petch is a traditional farmer of native and rare breeds, also the pioneer of the meat mail order business in the UK. Her products, which now include many recipe dishes as well as fresh and cured

meats, and a growing selection of other foods, and her service remain leaders in the field.

The more commercialised Christmas becomes, the greater the appeal of simple pleasures. Most readers of this page probably don't believe in Father Christmas, but I have yet to meet anyone of any age who is not happy to be on the receiving end of a Christmas stocking.

I suppose there are stocking givers who indulge their loved ones in such extravagant treats as Fabergé eggs and silver nutmeg graters, but most families deliberately set themselves a modest ceiling per item in order to keep to the traditional lighthearted theme of a Christmas stocking.

The best stockings contain a mix of old favourites and some surprise items. Part of the challenge lies in finding things that are small enough to fit into a stocking – in

practice usually the sort of long, thick, knitted sock worn by the shooting and fishing fraternity (the use of pillowcases in lieu of stockings is regarded as cheating). There is of course no need to wrap Christmas stocking presents since the stocking itself suffices to hide the presents within.

Hurrah for lack of waste paper, ribbons and bows. An added element of fun that comes with Christmas stockings, is the game of trying to guess the contents before dipping a hand inside the stocking to pull out the "plums".

A newly minted coin, a lump of coal for the fire, a chestnut for roasting and a mandarin orange are time-honoured choices for the foot of a Christmas stocking. The rest is up to you.

Suggestions for cooks might include chopsticks and toothpicks, mini bottles of balsamic vinegar and truff-

le oil, a pastry brush and blackbird pie funnel, individually wrapped Elvas plums and marrons glacés, mace-coated nutmegs and vanilla pods, a mother-of-pearl spoon and a jar of caviar (or Avruga for the eco-friendly and economically minded).

You might also consider a paperback cookbook and a pretty teatowel, a porcelain jar of *patum peperium*, a little honeycomb, a larding needle and thread, sheets of rice paper and gold leaf, biscuit cutters and handful of gilded chocolate coins, packets of saffron threads and dried *porcini*, a mini blow torch for brulées and a champagne stopper that claims to keep the fizz in leftover champagne. However, I confess that I have been unable to put the champagne stopper to the test since every last effervescent drop is always downed at one sitting in our house.