



# Stealing turkey's crown

Does turkey still rule the roost or is there another contender for its title? Restaurant looks at the other Christmas cuts waiting in the wings

Words/Laura Price



It seems that turkey has dominated the Christmas dinner plate for ever, but it has, in fact, only been a festive favourite for about 60 years. Before intensive farming in the late 1940s led to a drop in prices, turkey was too expensive for common folk to afford, so it was goose that was the bird du jour. In recent years, turkey has become the mainstay of festive feasts, but with diners increasingly wanting something different from what they'll be cooking at home come the big day, the traditional roast turkey is no longer a given on restaurant menus.

"Turkey hasn't been king for four or five years," says Adam Heanen, director of HG Walter butchers in west London. "Game is very big at top-end restaurants and gastropubs, particularly venison. The birds that will be on Christmas menus are pheasant or partridge."

As customers become more adventurous and accepting of different meats, many restaurants are also using less common cuts of beef and alternative cooking styles for turkey (some are even deep-frying it). Restaurant spoke to a range of operators to discover what's cooking this festive season.



## Poultry

While it may no longer be the only star of the Christmas menu, turkey is by no means completely out of favour. But instead of replicating the traditional version, restaurants are spicing it up with different cooking techniques.

"Turkey is a massive seller at Maze Grill but we do it with a twist," says Matt Pickop, executive chef at the Gordon Ramsay restaurant in London's Mayfair. "We do Jospers-roast turkey - the Jospers gives it a really nice smoky flavour. We start talking about turkeys around August and work really closely with our supplier at Goosnargh in Lancashire to get what we want."

Barbecue restaurant chain Porky's is smoking its turkey to fit with its US theme, says founder Simon Brigg. "We're doing a main course of smoked turkey and smoked Jack Daniels and Coca-Cola ham. We load up the turkey breast with butter, salt and pepper and brine it for 24 hours, then smoke it for four or five hours."

Hix Restaurants is also putting a creative spin on the traditional bird, with a turkey burger at its Champagne & Caviar bar at London's

Selfridges. "It's in a very accessible environment where people don't go for a 10-person feast menu for £65 but they'll have a turkey burger for £13," says group head chef Kevin Gratton.

HG Walter recommends free-range bronze turkey for top-end restaurants, for its slightly richer taste and denser texture than the white variety. Cheaper establishments will go for stuffed and rolled turkey breast. Heanen recommends sticking to 4-8kg birds for their nicer, sweeter flesh. "Once you get over the 10kg mark, the turkey is older, the meat is a bit wetter and they're not quite as tender," he says.

Restaurants are also looking for turkey with good provenance, says Simon Smith, sales manager at Coventry-based Aubrey Allen. The butcher is seeing strong sales of its individual turkey parcels.

Goose is still a firm favourite on Christmas menus and is selling well this year, alongside duck and mallard, says Heanen, whose geese come from Goodman's Geese in Great Witley, Worcestershire. Goodman's clients include Hix Restaurants, which serves a 'goose feast' sharing dish and an à la carte 'goose threesome', according to Gratton. "It's an individual portion

of crispy, confit leg and thinly sliced roast breast, and a little goose salad - we might have some crispy skin and a bit of the offal. We call that a goose threesome - the leg, the breast, the salad."



## Beef

A popular alternative for those saving the turkey for Christmas Day is beef, which is another best-seller at HG Walter. But while beef fillets are very popular, Danish Crown is seeing more take up of well-aged on-the-bone cuts and sharing joints. "Sharing platters are becoming more popular as restaurants look to ape service styles on the continent," says James Roberts, foodservice sales manager at Danish Crown. "Our one kilo rib-eyes have been particularly popular. These tend to be sold at a set price as many customers are still nervous about buying meat by weight."

EBLEX, the organisation for beef and lamb levy payers, says popular cuts include rolled sirloin, bone-in-fore rib, topside and brisket joints.

"We're trying to offer people a bit more variety and pull them away from the turkey,"

says Ronnie Kimbugwe, head chef of Bel & The Dragon's Cookham branch in Berkshire. Although he is offering a traditional local roast turkey with all the trimmings, he is also serving a Jospers-grilled rib eye of beef or flat-iron steak [a grilling cut from the blade] on the Christmas menu, and options of spit-roasted suckling pig or Beef Wellington on New Year's Eve. The beef is sourced from Scottish and Irish farms by butcher Jack O'Shea.

"There used to be a 90% take-up of turkey but it's dropped to about 60%," says Kimbugwe. "People are more educated in what they're eating now. They would have just gone for the safe option of the turkey but now they'll try a flat-iron steak instead."

At Maze Grill, preparation starts early. Pickop relies on impeccable timing to deliver a perfect, Jospers-grilled, 34-day-aged sirloin on Christmas Day. The animals go to slaughter in mid-November and are aged for 28 days before being brought to the restaurant to age for a further 12 to 14 days. Pickop and his team test each piece of meat to see how it cooks on the 300°C grill.

"The Jospers starts cooking the flesh straight away," he says. "If the animal hasn't been aged

for sufficient time then the fats don't break down the flavour and you don't get the best of the product. So we let it age a little bit. That gives it a nice robust, caramel flavour on the outside and, on the inside, the fats break down a lot easier."

"The secret's in the resting - we rest it for a good 8 to 10 minutes before we get it out to the tables."



## Game

One of the candidates for the turkey's crown is game, with venison, partridge, mallard and pheasant all increasingly popular choices.

"We've sold more game this year than ever before," says Heanen of HG Walter. "It's very fashionable. You've got the grey partridge, which is the native English species and is much scarcer than the red-legged partridge, so they're something you'd see at a top restaurant. Red leg is a bit more common but still a lovely bird. Mallards are also very popular."

Petersham Nurseries in Richmond, Surrey, is offering three different game dishes - grouse,

partridge and wild duck - at three different prices. The restaurant is serving a lot of grouse, according to head chef Damian Clisby. At the River Café, head chef Joanne Holland says grouse and pheasant are also extremely popular, and butcher Aubrey Allen says hare is a top-seller, with restaurants such as Sat Bains in Nottingham including it on the menu.

Finally, venison is an increasingly common choice for the festive season, and many restaurants will butcher it themselves, trimming the loins off the saddle and either butchering the haunch or braising it on the bone. "Quite a few restaurants are doing the haunch at the moment as a tartare for the starter, so it's not always roasted or slow-braised," says Heanen. "It can be chopped finely and eaten raw."

At La Trompette in Chiswick, head chef Rob Weston cooks the haunch with Jerusalem artichoke and uses the trimmings for Scotch eggs.

## Pork



"Pork is a great flavour carrier and complements festive ingredients," says Keith Fisher, butchery and

development manager at BPEX, with pork able to deliver impressive margins as well as menu variation. "As well as being a key supporting ingredient in the trimmings of a Christmas roast, pork can be used as the main event, too,"

adds Roberts of Danish Crown. "Bone-in loins are a great option for celebratory meals."

As with turkey, more restaurants are starting to put pork and gammon centre stage. "As well as being a key supporting ingredient in the trimmings of a Christmas roast, pork can be used as the main event, too," says Roberts. "Bone-in loins are a great option for celebratory meals."

Suckling pig is another good option, especially for feeding large groups during the office party season. "We do a suckling pig feast for larger parties at Hix Soho with 6kg pigs from Pugh's Piglets in Lancashire," says Hix's Grattan. "They're roasted and served with quince sauce and presented with the head on."

Poultry and pork are good bets for keeping prices competitive and increasing margins, says Danish Crown. But James Moyle-Rosser, executive chef at Whiting & Hammond, says the demand for cheaper cuts of meat, such as pork belly and oxtail has caused a significant price increase. "We've all jumped on this wagon of using these cheaper cuts and it's driven the price up," he says. "I used to get pork belly for free, but those days have gone."

Still, Fisher says pork belly and shoulder are ideal because they're large enough to feed big groups but can also be broken down into joints. "For more traditional roasting joints, pork loin and leg both still offer good margins, particularly when compared with other proteins." ■



## THE INSIDER

**James Roberts**  
foodservice sales manager, Danish Crown

0161 1766 1144

[www.danishcrownfoodservice.co.uk](http://www.danishcrownfoodservice.co.uk)



### What are the key meat trends this Christmas?

Christmas is about tradition for most restaurants and diners. At this time of year, sales are dominated by beef fillet, gammon and turkey. This year we've noticed a rise in people ordering 'green' gammon (cured and raw) so they can add their own twist. Popular flavourings include Coca-Cola, Guinness, juniper and honey. While beef fillets have been popular we have seen more take up of well-aged beef on the bone. Consumers are becoming more knowledgeable about steak and the improvement in the economy means they're more likely to splash out on something special. As such, it's important for restaurants to carry premium options such as côte de boeuf and tomahawk steaks (bone-in rib eye).

### What about set-priced Christmas menus?

Premium and larger cuts can be offered as a supplement to drive up spend. If a restaurant wants to keep prices competitive and or increase margins, poultry and pork are the best bets. Belly pork remains affordable and is extremely popular with consumers, although in some venues there may be some cultural barriers to overcome. Braising steak is increasingly fashionable and can be prepared a few days in advance, which takes the pressure off the kitchen during peak times. We've also noticed that more and more mid and upmarket restaurants are

asking customers to order Christmas menus in advance to increase speed of delivery.

### What's the best way to serve turkey?

Turkey is tricky because the white meat is quite prone to drying out. The dark meat is far more forgiving and can be held for much longer. I'd suggest serving a mixture of both because it's a more cost-effective option and a lot of people that think they just like breast will end up enjoying the dark meat. Another tactic is to stuff the breast with dark meat. We sell mainly crown and breast.

### Why consider buying from Danish Crown?

We've been established 125 years, giving us knowledge, passion and expertise. We are renowned for our pork but we have a complete range of products tailored to chefs. Local is currently fashionable but it's quite restrictive. We can offer the benefits of provenance because we own our supply chain right back to the farm, so we can guarantee traceability, quality and choice, but we have the scale that allows absolute consistency too. Taking the example of beef, we select our cattle based on a wide range of technical and ethical criteria that results in the highest quality finished product. When compared with a specific breed in a taste test, our products are often deemed superior by chefs.



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