



# The slice is right

She's a former Chez Panisse pastry chef and favourite of Jamie Oliver, so who better than Violet Cakes' Claire Ptak to put a modern spin on Christmas classics? Candied peel and a glass of egg nog anyone?

**PHOTOGRAPHS**

*David Loftus*

I remember filling box after box of freshly baked Christmas cookies with my grandmother Bette in her huge 1970s California kitchen when I was a little girl. Everyone cherished the day her cookies arrived in the post.

Now during the holidays I love to bake with spirits. A little brandy can bring out the deep dried flavours in a fruitcake while armagnac has an affinity for prunes. I also love to bake for breakfast. Almost nothing gives me more pleasure than having a house full of guests

and tiptoeing around the kitchen so that everyone will wake to the smells of baking.

At the moment I am particularly fond of muffins filled with fruit. This year's pears have been exquisite, but apples or cranberries (tossed in a little sugar) would work just as well. The same goes for the galette. Experiment with fruits and taste, taste, taste!

This year's fruitcake is all hazelnuts and marron glacé and candied orange and lemon with a few sour cherries thrown in to brighten it up. I've no time for glucose glacé cherries

so seek out good sour glacé cherries such as Italian amarena cherries which I have spotted in Waitrose. And the smell of a pot of peel on the hob reminds me why I love what I do.

This year we are making loads of mini Christmas cake whoopie pies at the shop from my new cookbook. They make a wonderful gift wrapped up individually in little paper cases in small cellophane bags tied up with ribbons. The candied peel is lovely as a gift as well. My American grandmother would be very proud. >>



Hazelnut, fig, chestnut and orange fruit cake (see page 34) and, opposite, Christmas cake whoopie pies (see page 36).



### Apple galette

I can't really lay claim to this recipe because it is a staple at Chez Panisse, Alice Waters's bistro in Berkeley, California, where everything is seasonal and sustainable, and I made thousands of them during my three years there. Every winter over the past four years, I have made this recipe for special dinners in various locations around the world with Alice Waters and other Chez Panisse cooks. Alice always looks knowingly at me with a smile and says: "Shall we do apple galette?" We tweak it a little each time by pairing it with a different ice cream or sauce, and it varies fundamentally according to the local apples. The truth is, it is the perfect winter dessert when other fruits are scarce. The thin buttery pastry topped with warm apples is incredibly comforting but light enough after a substantial meal. Choose your apples wisely. Good varieties are the orange pippin, Blenheim orange or of course the cox. You want a variety that will hold its shape but still have a soft texture and lots of flavour after cooking.

SERVES 6-8

For the pastry:

- plain flour** 125g
- salt** a pinch
- sugar** a pinch
- cold butter** 85g, cut into 1.5cm pieces
- iced water** 4 tbsp

For the galette:

- apples** 4-5
- unsalted butter** 25g, melted
- caster sugar** 100g



Apple galette and, top left, sauce.

For the sauce:

- apples** peels and cores from 4-5
- unfiltered apple juice** 500ml
- caster sugar** 100g
- apple brandy or calvados** 1-2 tbsp

#### DIRECTIONS

Combine the flour, salt and sugar in a bowl and cut in the butter with a pastry cutter or use a mixer. Avoid overmixing, leaving larger chunks of butter than you would think. This will make the pastry more flaky. Drizzle in the water and bring it all together without working the dough. Wrap

An apple galette is the perfect winter dessert when other fruits are scarce

in a ball in clingfilm, then flatten into a disc and let rest in the fridge for about 45 minutes.

Remove from the fridge and let it soften while you prepare the apples.

Peel, core and quarter your apples. Save all of the peels and cores and put them into a small saucepan to the side. Slice each quarter into 3mm slices. Take all of the small end pieces of apple and coarsely chop them up with a few of the nice slices to make a handful of chopped apple. Set these aside. Don't worry about the apples browning because this will disappear once they are baked.

Roll the pastry out into a large circle about 30cm in diameter. Slide the pastry on to a paper-lined heavy baking sheet. Make a border of apple slices >>



around the perimeter of the pastry, leaving a border of about 4cm. Sprinkle the chopped apples in a thin layer inside the ring of apple slices. Over this, arrange the apples in a pretty pattern so that they are overlapping and you don't see any of the pastry or chopped apples poking through underneath. Roll the pastry up over the border of apples tightly and place in the fridge for at least 15 minutes.

Heat the oven to 200C/gas mark 6. Remove the galette from the fridge and brush the pastry edge with the melted butter. Sprinkle the apples with about half the caster sugar. The other half is to generously sprinkle over the pastry edge, which will give it a nice crunch once baked. Place the galette in the oven and bake for 45-60 minutes.

While the galette bakes you can prepare the sauce. Add the apple juice and sugar to the pot of peels and cores, and place over a medium heat for 20 minutes, stirring occasionally. Strain the sauce and put it back in the pot to reduce the liquid for another 10 minutes. Add the calvados.

When the galette is golden and bubbly, remove it from the oven and place on a rack to cool.

Serve with Walnut Praline Ice Cream (see below) and the appley sauce poured over the top.

### Egg nog

One Christmas in my teens, my parents decided to go to sunny Puerto Rico with friends and leave my brother and me at home alone. As you can see, I have never quite forgiven them. The good part was that Louis and I made the most of a non-traditional Christmas and took to the hills surrounding our home to forage for porcini (or boletus, as we always called them). The bounty was above average, so we thought we would cook up a huge pasta of the mushrooms sizzled in butter with cream and pancetta and call all of our friends who could break away from their family meals to join us. We also knew that it wouldn't be a party unless there was a decent amount of booze, so I made up this egg nog recipe to get us in a festive mood while we cooked. It has become one of my favourite recipes. It is so decadent



that you only dare make it once a year. Something to really look forward to.

- SERVES 12+
- eggs** (the freshest you can find) 12, separated
- icing sugar** 500g
- cognac, other brandy or dark rum** 750ml
- double cream** 1litre
- single cream** 200ml
- nutmeg**

### DIRECTIONS

Beat the egg yolks and icing sugar to thick ribbons in a very large bowl. Slowly add half of the liquor, and then cover and let stand for one hour.

Add the remaining liquor and the cream, and refrigerate for about 3 hours.

Finally whip up the egg whites to very soft peaks and fold them into the cream mixture. Serve into pretty glasses and grate fresh nutmeg over the top.

### Walnut praline ice cream

I usually opt to make an old style of ice cream which consists of whipping sugar syrup into egg whites and then folding through a whipped cream. The texture is like a whipped marshmallow cloud. It's incredibly soft and delicate, but still just good old frozen cream. At his birthday celebration in Ireland at the Ballymaloe Cookery School, the talented Rory O'Connell served one made with yolks rather than whites. It had an added richness that feels more wintery, so I have adapted my walnut ice cream recipe to this new method to accompany the apple tart. The only catch to making it is that you need to start 24 hours in advance to get the flavour from the walnuts, but it's worth it.

- SERVES 6-8
- For the ice cream:
- walnuts** 100g
- double cream** 500ml
- vanilla extract** ½ tsp
- caster sugar** 100g
- water** 50ml
- egg yolks** 2

- For the walnut praline:
- walnuts** 100g



Walnut praline ice cream and, above, egg nog.



**caster sugar** 100g  
**water** 50ml  
**salt** pinch

DIRECTIONS

Start the night before you wish to serve this ice cream.

Heat your oven to 170C/gas mark 3. Spread the nuts for the ice cream and the praline out on to a baking tray lined with baking paper. Place in the oven for 4-5 minutes, just until you start to smell them. You are not trying to toast them, but merely warm them to bring out the oils. Measure the cream into a large jug, separate out half of the walnuts and roughly chop them, leaving the other walnuts on the tray. Drop the chopped walnuts into the cream, add the vanilla and chill the mixture overnight.

### A favourite way to eat grapefruit is in a sherbet spiked with sparkling wine

The praline can be made the night before as well. Place the sugar in a small, heavy-bottomed saucepan over a medium heat with the water and salt, and stir to dissolve. Once the sugar has dissolved, stop stirring and turn the heat up to high. Cook the sugar until it turns a deep amber colour and starts to smell like caramel. When the caramel is ready, pour it over the warmed walnuts on the baking tray and leave it to harden. Break up the praline with a sharp knife into bite-sized chunks and keep overnight in an airtight container in the freezer.

Start to make the ice cream the next morning if possible, so it has ample time to freeze. Select a pretty enamel pie tin or shallow bowl that can hold the ice cream and place it in the freezer to chill. Remove the cream from the fridge and strain through a fine sieve to remove the walnuts. Discard the nuts. Whip the cold cream up into soft, billowy peaks and set aside.

In a small saucepan, heat the sugar and water and stir to



**Grapefruit snow with sparkling wine and clementines.**

dissolve. Stop stirring and cook the syrup for 3 minutes until thickened but not coloured. Meanwhile, place your egg yolks in a bowl and whisk until they begin to get light and frothy. When the sugar syrup is ready, Pour it into the yolks in a steady stream, whisking by hand or with an electric whisk until pale and very fluffy. Fold in the whipped walnut cream until just incorporated. Sprinkle over the praline and fold it through. Pour the ice cream into the cold container and place back in the freezer for at least 5 hours.

### Grapefruit snow with sparkling wine and clementines

I have been eating grapefruit for breakfast my entire life. When I was little, my mum sprinkled it with sugar. As a teenager, I raised money for charity by selling boxes of the ruby red variety. As an adult, one of my favourite ways to eat them is in a fluffy sherbet spiked with sparkling wine. You can use prosecco, cava, English sparkling wine or champagne. It doesn't have to be the finest – in fact it shouldn't be – but never

cook with a wine you wouldn't drink. Choose grapefruit that are heavy, with fragrant peels. Adding the sparkling wine to the "snow" tastes great and improves texture.

SERVES 6  
**freshly squeezed grapefruit juice** (pink looks beautiful) 500ml  
**caster sugar** 150g  
**prosecco** 4 tbsps, plus more to serve (about a bottle)  
**clementines** 6, to serve

DIRECTIONS

Place half of the grapefruit juice >>



with the sugar in a heavy saucepan over a low heat. Stir until the sugar dissolves and then add this to the rest of the juice.

Cool completely before adding the prosecco. This can be frozen in an ice-cream machine for a sorbet or “snow”, as I prefer to call it, or use the mixture to make granita if you don’t have a machine. For the granita, pour it into a container and place it in the fridge. Every hour, whisk it up with a balloon whisk or fork to make sheets of ice. Serve with clementine segments and more prosecco.

### Rum baba

I like a boozy pudding at the end of a big dinner because it wakes up your senses and, when done well, brings the meal together. The rum baba is an old-fashioned pudding that has acquired a bad name in the past by being overly sweet or simply stale. All of my chef friends love it and I think you will too. This warm, currant-dotted sponge soaked in a spicy rum syrup sitting in a pool of stone-cold cream is just so good!

- MAKES 8-12 BABAS
- milk** 80ml
- dry yeast** 2 tsp
- caster sugar** 2 tsp
- sea salt** pinch
- eggs** 3
- plain flour** 300g
- unsalted butter** 125g, softened
- white rum** 3 tbsps
- currants** 50g

- For the syrup:
- caster sugar** 200g
- water** 200g
- golden syrup** 1 tbsps
- Ceylon cinnamon stick** ½
- star anise** 1
- your favourite rum** 100ml
- double cream** to serve

### DIRECTIONS

Butter 12 dariole moulds or 8 cups of a cupcake tin.

In a small saucepan, warm the milk briefly so it is warm to the touch. If it becomes too hot, let it cool before sprinkling over the yeast, sugar and salt. Stir to dissolve and then allow to rest for 10 minutes as the yeast starts to activate.

Crack the eggs into a large



Rum baba and, below, homemade candied orange peel.



mixing bowl and break them up with a fork or whisk. Add the yeast mixture to the eggs and whisk together well. Sprinkle half of the flour over this and use a wooden spoon to bring the dough together (it will be very wet). Cover with a tea towel or clingfilm and place in a warm spot in your home to rise for an hour.

Sprinkle the remaining 150g of flour over the dough and use your hands, or a dough hook on an electric mixer, to knead the dough in its bowl until it is soft and silky. Shape the dough roughly into a ball. Break the butter into pieces and scatter them over the ball

of dough, cover once again and allow to rise for another hour in the warm spot.

Meanwhile, you can prepare the currants. Warm the 3 tbsps of rum in a small saucepan, watching the entire time. Be sure there is no rum on the outside of the saucepan, as it can go up in flames! If this happens, don't worry – the alcohol will burn out eventually. Take the rum off the heat and add the currants. Cover the saucepan and let them soak until ready to use.

The dough should have risen considerably by this stage. Pour the soaked currants and any >>



## Christmas cakes

rum in the pan over the butter and dough. Use your hands or an electric mixer with a dough hook to mix everything together into a silky mass. This could take up to 10 minutes. As you work the dough it will become less sticky. Don't be afraid that the dough is too soft. It should be of a thick pouring consistency. Divide the dough between the buttered moulds or tins, filling them about halfway. Cover and place in a warm spot, but now that the butter has been added, be careful that the dough does not get so warm (keep away from direct heat) that the butter melts out of it. This will alter the flavour and texture of the babas.

Heat the oven to 200C/gas mark 6 and bake for 15-20 minutes. The tops should be golden. Remove the babas from the oven and place on a rack to cool.

Now make the syrup. Place all the ingredients except for the rum and cream in a medium saucepan over a low heat and stir to dissolve. Turn the heat up and boil for 2-3 minutes. While the syrup is reducing, pop the babas out of their moulds and place on a large platter. Take the syrup off the heat, add the rum and pour into a large serving jug. Take your cream from the fridge and put that into a nice jug as well (chill the jug ahead of time if you can). Place the babas on the table and pour over the syrup, really dousing them with it. They will immediately soak it up. Divide them among your guests and pass the cold cream.

### Pear crumble muffins

Muffins are satisfying because they are quick to make and fill the house with bakey smells. At Violet we change the fruit with the season: in the summer, strawberries, raspberries, cherries and then plums feature in the moist crumb of the muffin topped with buttery crumble. They are best when made by hand, as overmixing ruins the texture.

MAKES 12 MUFFINS

**plain flour** 270g  
**baking powder** 2½ tsp  
**bicarbonate of soda** ½ tsp  
**salt** ¼ tsp  
**eggs** 2  
**caster sugar** 170g



Pear crumble muffins.

**unsalted butter** 75g, melted  
**buttermilk or plain yoghurt** 140ml  
**lemon** zest of one half  
**pears** 3 ripe medium-sized, such as comice (or about 200g of other fruits in season)

For the crumble topping:  
**unsalted butter** 100g, cold  
**plain flour** 150g  
**light brown sugar** 4 tbsp

#### DIRECTIONS

Heat the oven to 170C/gas mark 3 and line deep muffin tins with paper cases.

In a large bowl combine the flour, baking powder, soda and salt and use a balloon whisk to mix it all together. I find this much easier than sifting, and it evenly distributes the baking powder and bicarbonate of soda through the flour. Set aside.

In another bowl, whisk together the eggs and caster sugar. Gradually drizzle in the melted butter, and finally whisk in the buttermilk. Zest the lemon right into the bowl so you catch the aromatic oils that are released. Scrape the liquid into the dry ingredients and stir together *just* until the dry is incorporated into

the liquid. The batter will be thick.

Spoon the batter into the 12 paper cases. Quarter and core the pears and cut each quarter into bite-sized pieces. Push about a quarter of a pear into each muffin.

Quickly mash all of the crumble ingredients together and sprinkle generously over the muffins. The topping can be made in advance and kept in the fridge for up to a week and in the freezer for up to a month.

Bake the muffins for 25-30 minutes until a skewer inserted in the middle comes out clean. Serve warm with a fresh pot of coffee.

### Hazelnut, fig, chestnut and orange fruit cake

This deeply flavoured fruit cake is inspired by my love of Italy. The figs and chestnuts give the cake a lovely texture while the hazelnuts impart an earthy taste. I have also added a bit of strong coffee, which works well with hazelnuts. Finally, the candied orange peel brightens up the cake and rounds out the flavour. If you have the time, make your own candied orange peel because it's a nice thing to do – it fills your

home with incredible perfume and tastes so much better.

SERVES 6-8

**flour** 250g  
**whole hazelnuts** with skins on, 200g  
**stout** 200ml  
**dried figs** 100g, chopped into small pieces  
**candied orange peel** 200g (plus more for decorating)  
**candied lemon peel** 100g (plus more for decorating)  
**sultanas** 200g  
**fresh dates** 150g pitted, chopped  
**marrons glacés** (candied chestnuts) 150g  
**sour cherries** (glacé sour cherries if you can find them) 150g  
**oranges** 2, zest and juice  
**lemons** 2, zest and juice  
**brandy** 100ml  
**vanilla extract** 1 tbsp  
**espresso or strong filter coffee** (not instant) 2 tbsp  
**unsalted butter** 250g, softened  
**dark brown sugar** 250g  
**eggs** 3  
**sea salt** 1 tsp  
**marzipan**  
**royal icing**  
**pretty ribbon** to decorate

#### DIRECTIONS

Heat the oven to 160C/gas mark 3 and butter and line with baking paper a 25cm-deep round cake tin.

Lay the hazelnuts out on a baking tray lined with paper and toast in the oven for about 10 minutes – the papery skins should be lifting off the nuts. Break open a nut to see that it is golden brown inside. Empty the toasted nuts out on to a clean tea towel and slough off the skins while still warm. Cool before chopping roughly.

Place the stout in a small saucepan over a medium heat and cook until the quantity of the liquid is reduced by half. Set aside to cool.

In a large bowl, combine the figs, orange and lemon peel, sultanas, dates, glacé chestnuts and cherries, orange and lemon zest and juice, stout, brandy and vanilla. Soak for a few hours or overnight. Add the coffee and mix.

In another bowl, whip the soft butter and sugar until pale and fluffy. Add the eggs one at a time, mixing well after each addition.

Add the salt and the soaked >>



## Christmas cakes

fruits and mix well. Fold in the flour and finally the chopped hazelnuts and mix until just combined. Scoop the batter into the prepared tin and bake for 2 to 2½ hours.

Cool and cover with marzipan and icing and decorate with candied fruits.

### Goopy chocolate, prune and armagnac cake



For me, this is the perfect chocolate cake. It has the right amount of rich dark chocolate, some ground almonds for texture and moisture, and the classic combination of prunes and armagnac. If you think you don't like prunes, please try them like this. Soak a larger batch of the prunes and store them in a jar. They keep for ages. Popping one on top of your porridge in the morning with a little maple syrup and milk is a great way to start the day.

SERVES 6-8

**prunes** 125g  
**armagnac** 40ml  
**dark chocolate** (I used 70%) 240g, chopped into small pieces  
**unsalted butter** 200g  
**eggs** 5, separated  
**caster sugar** 100g  
**sea salt** ¼ tsp  
**ground almonds** 150g  
**whipped cream** to serve

#### DIRECTIONS

Soak the prunes in the armagnac. If you can do this the night before, all the better. Butter and line a 20-23cm cake tin with baking paper and set it aside.

Heat the oven to 180C/gas mark 4.

Put the dark chocolate and butter in a heatproof bowl and place over a pot of barely simmering water. Make sure the water does not touch the bottom of the bowl or it may burn the chocolate. Stir occasionally to emulsify the butter and chocolate. Once melted, take off the heat to cool slightly but keep away from any draughts.

Separate the egg whites and yolks into two separate bowls and, starting with the yolks, add half of the sugar and whisk to thicken. Fold the thickened yolks into the melted chocolate and set aside. Chop the prunes into eighths and add to the yolks mixture with the salt and ground almonds.

Beat the egg whites with the remaining caster sugar until soft peaks form. Fold into the chocolate mixture just until incorporated. Pour the cake mixture into the prepared cake tin and bake for 30 minutes. The cake will be slightly soft in the middle, but do not overbake it or the gooeyness will be lost.

Serve warm or at room temperature with very softly whipped cream.

### Christmas cake whoopie pies



This recipe from my *Whoopie Pie Book* is, I think, the best way to eat Christmas cake. They are a sweet size, which is really nice if you are having lots of guests stopping by over the holidays. The filling can be made ahead and kept in the fridge for a week, as can the whoopie pie mix. Just take the mixture out of the fridge and scoop on to trays to bake

when needed. You can demolish them in two bites, but the flavour is rich and spicy and perfect washed down with egg nog!

MAKES ABOUT 24 MINI WHOOPIE PIES

**brandy** 1tbsp  
**orange** zest and juice of one half  
**currants** 50g  
**candied peel** 50g, chopped  
**plain flour** 300g  
**cornflour** 50g  
**bicarbonate of soda** 1½ tsp  
**mixed spice** ½ tsp  
**cloves** ¼ tsp  
**salt** ½ tsp  
**unsalted butter** 125g, softened  
**dark brown sugar** 200g  
**large egg** 1  
**buttermilk** 150ml  
**ground almonds** 50g

#### DIRECTIONS

Preheat the oven to 180C/gas mark 4. Line 2 trays with baking paper.

In a bowl, combine the brandy, orange zest and juice, currants and candied peel. Soak overnight or for at least 2 hours.

In another bowl, sift together the flour, cornflour, bicarbonate of soda and spices. Stir in the salt and set aside.

In a separate bowl, cream the softened butter and sugar together until light and fluffy, using an electric hand whisk or a freestanding mixer fitted with the flat beater. Add the egg and mix well. Add the buttermilk and gently stir in the prepared fruit and the ground almonds. Slowly add the dry ingredients, mixing until just incorporated. Chill for 30 minutes.

Drop 18 large or 48 small scoops of batter, about 5cm apart, on to the prepared trays. Bake in the middle of the oven for 10-12 minutes for large whoopies or 8-10 minutes for mini whoopies, until the cakes are left with a slight impression when touched with a finger.

Remove from the oven to a wire rack and cool completely.

To assemble, spread a generous scoop of the Brown Sugar Spice Filling (see below) on the flat surface of a cooled whoopie.

Top with another whoopie and drizzle with or dip into Lemon Glaze (see below). Top with an edible gold ball if desired and serve in gold paper cases.

### Brown sugar spice filling

**unsalted butter, softened** 175g  
**large egg whites** 2  
**dark brown sugar** 100g  
**golden syrup** 1tbsp  
**mixed spice** ¼ tsp

#### DIRECTIONS

Beat the butter with an electric whisk until fluffy. In the metal bowl of a freestanding mixer, combine the egg whites with the sugar, golden syrup and mixed spice. Place over a saucepan of barely simmering water and whisk continuously by hand until the sugar has dissolved and the mixture is frothy and slightly opaque (10-15 minutes).

Transfer the bowl of egg whites to the freestanding mixer and whisk until fluffy and cooled (about 10 minutes). Once the mixture is cool enough, start adding the creamed butter. The mixture will curdle but then come back together again. Switch to the flat beater and beat for 3 minutes more.

Spread or pipe on to the flat surface of a cooled Christmas cake whoopie pie. If not using right away, store in an airtight container in the fridge for up to 5 days. Bring to room temperature and beat with a flat beater before using again.

### Lemon glaze

**icing sugar** 200g, sifted  
**freshly squeezed lemon juice** 2tsp

Whisk together and spoon over the whoopie pies. Finish with a gold ball and place in gold cases.

### Clementines and dates

After dinner, and before dessert, place bowls of clementines and dates on the table. The act of peeling the clementines at the table is soothing and fills the air with the fragrant oil. Choose tender dates such as medjool. **OFM**

*The Whoopie Pie Book* by Claire Ptak, published by Square Peg at £15, is out now.

To order a copy at the special price of £12 with free p&p visit [guardianbookshop.co.uk](http://guardianbookshop.co.uk) or call 0330 33 6846