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WHY ARE SOME FOODS ONLY EATEN AT CHRISTMAS?

Whether it's Brussels sprouts at Christmas, pumpkins at Halloween, or hot cross buns at Easter, there are certain foods that are inextricably tied to festive occasions. Why do people crave specific flavours at set times of the year? And how are brands tapping into their long-lasting appeal?

Location [North America / Northern Europe](#)

Featured Experts

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Highlights & Data

- 'Seasonality' in food can refer to the availability of certain ingredients throughout the year as well as the specific dishes and drinks tied to special occasions
- While restaurants tend to push the former concept, food brands and supermarkets promote the latter by repackaging and selling ingredients for traditional meals
- Seasonally-themed flavours can trigger an emotional response, marking the beginning of the holidays
- Novel products (e.g. turkey gin, cheese Easter eggs) may see short-term success, but entrenched traditions make it difficult to change festive eating habits
- There are nearly **half a million** Instagram posts tagged with #rhubarb ([Instagram, 2018](#))
- **Over half** of Britons think Brussels sprouts could completely disappear from Christmas dinners by 2020 ([Unilever, 2018](#))
- Ultra-processed goods account for **roughly half** of all family food purchases in the UK ([Public Health Nutrition, 2018](#))
- **57.5%** of daily calories consumed by the average American come from ultra-processed foods ([Population Health Metrics, 2017](#))

Scope

In 2003, Starbucks sought a new seasonal drink for fall following the successful introduction of Christmas-targeted beverages such as the peppermint mocha and eggnog latte. Yet while chocolate and caramel flavours proved the most popular in taste tests, the company eventually settled on what would become the Pumpkin Spice Latte. “We realised there was something special around the pumpkin flavour [we developed], especially since there wasn’t anything around pumpkin at the time,” says Peter Dukes, Starbucks’ director of espresso in the Americas. [1] The drink has since become a global sensation; Starbucks reported that Pumpkin Spice Latte is its most-sold seasonal product, with over 200 million sales over 15 years. [2]

As well as helping Starbucks sell more cups of coffee, the ‘PSL’ set a trend for seasonal flavours that has spread to wider realms of eating and drinking. In the US, there are now pumpkin-based versions of M&Ms, Kool-Aid, Twinkies, and Pop Tarts, while in the UK (where no Thanksgiving means pumpkin holds less relevance) Christmas sandwiches, candy cane crisps, and Easter hot cross bun gin get people’s taste-buds in a festive mood.

“Consumers love that ‘first bite’ phenomenon that comes with seasonal produce – that first mince pie, that first Easter egg,” explains food trend consultant Lisa Harris. “There is a pay-off and reward mentality of waiting for something and finally getting to eat it.” [3] But beyond this sense of anticipation, why do people go crazy for novel food and drink that imitates traditional seasonal flavours?

The different types of seasonality

Easter eggs, Pumpkin Spice Lattes, and candy canes are all linked to specific times of the year, but isn’t food intrinsically seasonal? With high-end restaurants and celebrity chefs pushing the concept of seasonal ingredients, are Christmas sandwiches just an extension of an already existing phenomenon? “Seasonality has different meanings according to the context,” says Harris. “There’s ‘everyday seasonality’, which is focused on ingredients (strawberries, new potatoes, asparagus, cranberries, etc.) and ‘occasion seasonality’ celebrating specific dishes (the PSL, your mum’s Christmas turkey, hot cross buns, etc.)” [3]

Everyday seasonality produces its own buzz as specific ingredients become available and find a platform on social media. Rhubarb, for example, has proven a hit on Instagram, with Quartzly writer Annaliese Griffin stating: “With its rosy hue and architectural lines, [it] is a dream to photograph... As one of the first spring crops in the northern hemisphere, rhubarb serves as its own photogenic red carpet at the farmers market. Like asparagus, it boasts long clean lines that nod to the minimalist design. Its high contrast green and crimson hues look great with or without filter.” [4] Highlighting its up-and-coming appeal, there are nearly half a million Instagram posts tagged with [#rhubarb](#), though that figure is dwarfed by the nearly 1.7 million [#pumpkinspice](#) posts.

According to Harris, everyday seasonality and occasion seasonality are only tangentially linked. “I don’t think there’s a trend for seasonal ingredients in medium- and high-end restaurants. I don’t think you can legitimately regard yourself as a high-end restaurant without cooking seasonally,” she says. “Food has always been seasonal – the only difference is how much consumers value that. Unfortunately, with the prevalence of supermarkets and mass-produced food, UK consumers have lost sight of true everyday seasonality. They expect courgettes all year round even though they’re only in season four to five months of the year.” [3]



The ingredients in festive meals aren't always 'in season'

Spring House (2018) ©

Festive anticipation

With seasonal produce now available at almost any time of the year, products that focus on special occasions can benefit from the hype that once surrounded freshly harvested ingredients. What's more, the fact that some of these items may not contain their namesake ingredients – the PSL, for instance, had no actual pumpkin until it was reformulated in 2015 – seemingly does little to dent their success. [5] This is perhaps no surprise given that ultra-processed goods account for roughly half of all family food purchases in the UK, while 57.5% of daily calories consumed by the average American come from ultra-processed foods. [6][7]

As Harris explains, seasonally-themed foods and beverages are popular because of the emotional response they trigger, marking the beginning of the holidays and people's annual traditions. "We're first taught it as children: no dessert until you've finished your dinner. It gives a huge endorphin rush and we then continue to seek that kind of pleasure," she says. "Brands understand this, so they're increasingly clever about finding new ways to stimulate (and sell) that emotional feedback loop." [3] The PSL exemplifies how brands tap into this behaviour. Despite being released in the last week of August, which is still 'summer' in many parts of the world, the drink capitalises on the pent-up anticipation for Halloween, Thanksgiving, and the fall season as a whole.

“*The sandwich is a convenient vehicle for occasion seasonality for brands. It's an on-the-go, low-entry product that enables consumers to indulge in a small slice of celebration*”

Lisa Harris, food trends consultant

However, the success of seasonal food and drink is as much down to the way brands package them up as the flavour itself. "The sandwich is a convenient vehicle for occasion seasonality for brands," says Harris. "It's an on-the-go, low-entry product that enables consumers to indulge in a

[Canvas8 - Why are some foods only eaten at Christmas?]

small slice of celebration without interrupting their everyday eating habits. Any way brands can commercialise occasion seasonality as part of the grab-and-go breakfast, takeaway coffee, snack lunch or sandwich will be fully exploited.” [3]

Seasonal food and drink is neither new nor restricted to specific dates in the calendar. Brands have been celebrating seasons for years, with regular spring and summer releases like Starbucks’ Violet Drink in 2018 and its massively popular Unicorn Frappuccino in 2017. The latter, which reflected spring colours and temperatures, was hailed by Kate Taylor, a retail correspondent at Business Insider, as one of Starbucks’ best decisions. “While autumn at Starbucks is defined by the Pumpkin Spice Latte and winter is synonymous with red cups, the coffee giant has previously lacked a definitive ‘spring’ beverage. With the Unicorn Frappuccino, Starbucks may have found a suitable candidate,” she writes. Though Starbucks only sold the beverage for five days, it amassed over 180,000 mentions on Instagram, according to a UBS study. [8]



That ‘first taste’ of Christmas can come in various forms

Spring House (2018) ©

The drive to try something new

When seasonal foods hit supermarket shelves, both the sensible options and more outlandish picks tend to cause a stir. The underlying motif of Christmas sandwiches seems to be the repackaging of traditions. There are Christmas dinner wraps in Tesco and butternut squash and parsnip fritter sandwiches at Boots, to name but a few examples. Off-the-wall options, meanwhile, include turkey and hot cross bun gin, cheese Easter eggs and, in 2015, a Tesco chocolate and cherry sandwich.

The run-up to Christmas 2018 saw a mash-up of two highly divisive foods as Iceland and Unilever paired up Marmite and Brussels sprouts for the Save Our Sprouts (SOS) campaign. According to a study carried out by Unilever, over half of Britons believe the vegetable could completely disappear from Christmas dinners by 2020, but Harris disagrees with this notion, saying: “I find it hard to believe that the Brussels sprouts are on their way out. Traditions are hard to shift – if you celebrate Christmas, you will have grown up eating that one meal on that one day and there is a huge emotional charge associated with it.” [9][3]

“ Whether you love or hate Christmas, people find it hard to shift traditions associated with food because eating has such deep emotional resonance

Lisa Harris, food trends consultant

Though Harris is adamant sprouts are here to stay, she admits that “there has been some shift in eating habits. You'll find more gluten-free, vegan, or vegetarian options, goose isn't as popular, and mulled white wine has emerged as an alternative to mulled red wine. But these are relatively small nuances, rather than a complete shift.” This slow pace of change reflects that fact that “food nostalgia and festivity have a very strong association. Whether you love or hate Christmas, people find it hard to shift traditions associated with food because eating has such deep emotional resonance.” She adds that perhaps people like sensible Christmas food products because they're inspired by tradition and also fit better into contemporary life. [3]

While some traditional meals are repackaged to provide a taste of nostalgia on the go, the novelty of odd food combinations can help brands inject themselves into seasonal conversations. For instance, British snack brand Walkers introduced limited-time crisp flavours including Turkey & Stuffing, Glazed Ham, Cheese & Cranberry, and Brussels Sprouts for Christmas 2018, with the latter being the focus of its marketing campaign. “Walkers has a proven track record of launching fun and playful flavours that really get the nation talking, and this year we wanted to bring some of that magic to Christmas,” says Andrew Hawkswell, a marketing manager at parent brand PepsiCo. “We know the sprout debate is one that divides the nation, so we wanted to offer product solutions for both sides of the debate.” [10]



Novel takes on traditional dishes play on people's emotions

Spring House (2018) ©

Insights and opportunities

‘Occasion seasonality’ doesn't just impact the food and drink sector. Fashion brands, for instance, are finding success with Christmas-specific products; in 2017, Britons spent an estimated

£220 million on festive jumpers, with a third of under-35s claiming to buy a new one each year, while Americans retailer UglyChristmasSweater.com reported that its sales increased from \$40,000 in 2012 to almost \$5 million in 2015. [11][12] Perhaps more significantly, home decor can change dramatically depending on the occasion – and it seems people are increasingly using the web to guide (and boast about) their design choices. According to Google Trends data, searches for ‘fall decor’ and ‘Christmas decor’ in the US doubled between 2015 and 2018.

Considering that just 28.6% of food bought by Britons is unprocessed or minimally processed and that such foods make up under a third of the average American’s diet, fresh groceries remain an underdog in the supermarket landscape. [6][7] However, Harris notes that several retailers have recognised the opportunity in ‘everyday seasonality’. “A more significant cultural change is [taking place in] how mainstream supermarkets, restaurants and brands now claim provenance,” she says. “Aldi, one the UK’s fastest growing budget supermarkets, launched a series of adverts about the provenance of its ‘Everyday Amazing’ ingredients and its competitor Iceland is taking a stand against palm oil. Food brands are increasingly expected to have a conscience and seasonality is a big part of that. So, we could see a return to everyday ingredient seasonality if brands think it’s something they can sell to consumers.” [3]

Although some brands are helping to educate people about seasonal ingredients, the general level of awareness is still low. “More work needs be done by TV chefs, restaurants, food writers and supermarkets to promote seasonal ingredients through their true seasons,” says Harris. “Most people only eat sprouts on the 25th of December (and maybe the 26th if there’s some leftover) but sprouts actually come into season from October to March. The same is true of cranberries, turkey and all the other ‘occasion’ seasonal ingredients on the Christmas table.” [3] As a result, it may be some time before we’ll see Brussels sprouts in blankets with a drizzle of turkey gin in October.

Sources

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