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# Christmas Feasting and Social Class

## CHRISTMAS FEASTING AND EVERYDAY CONSUMPTION

### **Martin Pitts**

Department of Classics and Ancient History, University of Exeter

### **Danny Dorling**

Department of Geography, University of Sheffield

### **Charles Pattie**

Department of Geography, University of Sheffield

## **Abstract**

This paper examines the role of Christmas meals in Britain, with particular focus on the construction of social class identities through feasting and the consumption of food and drink. Analysis is based on quantitative data from the National Food Survey in the period 1975–2000, sampled at five-year intervals, comparing food shopping data from the month of December with that for the rest of the year. Whilst expenditure on food in December is shown to be consistently higher than for the rest of the year in all social groups, significant social class differences remain, not least in the consumption of healthy food and alcohol. At the same time, as expenditure on the constituents of the traditional Victorian-style Christmas has declined rapidly in the festive season over recent decades, there has been increased emphasis among all social classes on modern convenience food and ready meals.

The aim of this paper is to explore issues of modern social class through the medium of food and eating. Food has long been an indicator of social differentiation. From prehistory to the present, groups at the top of the social ladder have distinguished themselves from those at the bottom through the food they eat (Goody 1982; Bourdieu 1984). In earliest times this was a matter of quantity, but as civilizations developed, styles of consumption, table manners and now the selection of healthy foods have become reliable gauges of class difference. The book *Bad Food Britain: How A Nation Ruined Its Appetite* brings the issue of class and healthy food in Britain to public attention, with the message that in recent years the country has been more divided over the food people eat than ever before (Blythman 2006). The notion of class distinctions in expenditure on different food items is also well established in literature of a more academic nature (e.g. Bourdieu 1984). However, whereas other studies have looked at food selection and social class *per se* in Britain (e.g. Warde 1997), the present study seeks to further understand the relationship by comparing day-to-day eating habits with more ritual feasting events, particularly Christmas meals. Indeed, it is arguable that the construction of social identities during instances of public or communal feasting is more explicit and self-conscious than would be the case through routine everyday consumption (perhaps more unconscious if no less significant), thus offering a potentially vital insight into commensal practice. However, before comparing patterns of ritual and everyday food consumption, we will briefly consider the phenomenon of feasting and its relationship with social class in further detail.

### **The Significance of Feasting**

In recent years there has been increased interest in anthropological and archaeological circles in the concept of feasting as a highly ritualized form of eating or dining (e.g. Dietler and Hayden 2001a). At the most basic level, feasts can be identified on the basis of two criteria—the consumption of food and drink, and in a communal context (Dietler and Hayden 2001b: 3). Dietler (2001) suggested that feasting is distinctive because it is a form of ritual, involving the intentional creation of identities in a public context. This provides a tangible distinction from everyday meals, and also places more emphasis on the role of feasting in the creation and maintenance of networks of social power. Other potential characteristics distinguishing feasting from more routine consumption practices and meals include (i) the consumption of special or unusual foods, which may require specific practices of preparation or cooking, (ii) the consumption of unusually large quantities of food and drink, and (iii) an unusual context or spatial setting for consumption to take place (Pitts 2005). Many of these

characteristics apply to the modern Christmas meal, which takes place once a year in December (usually on the 25th), often involves several family participants who perhaps would not normally live or eat together on an everyday basis, and is often characterized by the consumption of special traditional food and drink, often to excess.

Emphasis has been placed on the significance of feasting as a practice vital for the articulation of social relations and the negotiation of identity in both ethnographic and ancient societies (Dietler and Hayden 2001a). Such attention builds on a wider body of anthropological literature concerned with gift giving and the transformation of food and drink into social capital (e.g. Mauss 1924), whereby the characteristics of feasting come under the heading of the “potlatch,” particularly in terms of inviting guests and competing in hospitable honors (Douglas and Isherwood 1996: 46). However, more recently it has been suggested that the benefits of feasting run deeper than the somewhat empty concepts of prestige and self-gratification, and moreover, that feasting is an essential practice for the reproduction of social relations and distinctions, with tangible practical outcomes which improve the chances of survival and reproduction (Hayden 2001: 24). In the material sense, food and drink is destroyed during a feast, yet in the social sense it can be “invested” and returned as “profit.”

Nevertheless, one might hesitate to ascribe such important social functions to modern Christmas gatherings in the Western world, especially in an increasingly globalized era when the importance of direct social ties for personal advancement and survival has arguably become diluted. That said, it would be equally short-sighted to suggest that Christmas is merely a commercial phenomenon in modern times, representing an empty enactment of tradition, and no longer fulfilling a social function. Caplow’s (1982, 1984) analysis of Christmas gift giving in late 1970s USA shows that festive practices do fulfill an important social role in recent times, albeit not as a means of soliciting more absolute forms of social status as is the case in potlatch-style competitive gift giving in pre-modern societies (Caplow 1982: 390). The principal social function of the Christmas gift in Caplow’s study was to reinforce relationships within families that were highly valued but insecure, namely the relationship between spouses, and the relationship between parents and children. The primary occasion for gift giving to take place was a “traditional Christmas dinner” with a list of familiar foods, although this could become optional in instances where multiple gatherings were required to be scheduled at times when dinner would be inappropriate (Caplow 1984: 1312–13). Although in this example the social role of the dinner itself is portrayed as secondary to that of gift giving, it is likely that the meal may fulfill a different purpose entirely, that of social differentiation.

The most common form of feasting in developed and urbanized societies is “diacritical” feasting, which involves the “use of differentiated cuisine and styles of consumption as a diacritical symbolic device to naturalize and reify concepts of ranked differences in the status of social orders or classes” (Dietler 2001: 85). In this sense, feasts are empowering for reasons of style as opposed to quantity, according to the same principles Bourdieu (1984) set out in his discussion of “taste.” Moreover, obligations of reciprocal hospitality are no longer the basis of status claims and power (Dietler 2001: 85). Particular styles of consumption, learnt through exclusive forms of education and often characterized through exotic and expensive commodities, can become markers of a social elite. This consumption is then subject to emulation by those aspiring to higher status, resulting in the gradual spread of new practices through society, which may in turn provoke continual shifts in elite tastes as they react to this process. It is eminently likely that these theories of status differentiation apply to modern Christmas meals, not least because Christmas represents one of the few regular occasions in which feasting still takes place in contemporary Western society.

### **Christmas and Class: Past and Present**

The feast of Christmas on December 25th was first observed towards the end of the fourth century AD, over three centuries after the birth of Jesus Christ (Conybeare 1899). The celebration did not fill a void, as the end of December was long marked by winter solstice festivities, including the Roman pagan festival of the *Saturnalia* (Conybeare 1899: 3). Despite the long history of such celebrations, the origins of the trappings and traditions of the modern Christmas are much more recent, owing more to Victorian England and Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* (1843) than any earlier period (Connelly 1999). Nevertheless, a recurrent theme of yuletide festivities old and new was the manifestation of social class differences. Whilst the Roman *Saturnalia* was celebrated by games of role-playing in which slaves and masters would temporarily reverse social position (Beard, North and Price 1998: 124; Donahue 2003: 429), social commentators in the Victorian era lamented that Christmas in their age was moving too far away from the traditional festivities that brought rich and poor together, as society had become too stratified (Connelly 1999: 26–7).

At first glance, it appears that the function of the Christmas feast was to reconcile or at least temporarily conceal social differences, considering the annual propagation of messages such as giving, generosity and goodwill to all mankind by the church and media. However, the extent to which such ideals were (and continue to be) upheld is obviously another matter

entirely. Indeed, one Victorian commentator noted that at Christmas “the middle classes make it a sorry business of a pudding or so extra, and a game of cards. The rich invite their friends to their country houses, but do little there but gossip and gamble; the poor are left out entirely” (Hone 1830 cited Connelly 1999: 27), whereas others would lament the passing of past Christmas festivities when “rich and poor discarded for a time all class distinctions and joined equally in the merry-making” (*West Briton and Cornwall Advertiser*, 27 December 1900, cited in Connelly 1999: 24). Although modern data on everyday household food expenditure in the UK supports the notion of the continued existence of class differentiation, with the middle classes most likely to consume healthy food as opposed to the working classes (Warde 1997: 124), this does not follow for the Christmas period, when it has become popular to overindulge for no other apparent reason than because “it’s Christmas” (Reid and Hackett 1999). As Colquhoun and Lyon (2001: 99) point out, rich foods were traditionally eaten at Christmas to demonstrate surplus and plenty and contradict the hardships and scarcities of everyday life, although the significance of this is evidently lost on many people today.

### **Methods and Data: Manipulating the National Food Survey**

The present study is based on analysis of the National Food Survey (NFS), for the period 1975–2000. The NFS has already been analyzed by Fine, Heasman and Wright (1996) with specific attention to food and class (Fine *et al.* 1996: 218–36). The main findings of this study echo those of Warde (1997), who based his analysis on the UK Family Expenditure Survey (FES)—namely that the middle classes are more likely to distinguish themselves through the purchase of foods with perceived health benefits (e.g. fresh fruit and vegetables, wholemeal bread, skimmed milk and yoghurt), whereas the working classes were more likely to consume more sweet, fatty or satisfying foods (e.g. white bread, sugar, cooked meats and burgers). At the same time, a number of foods were identified with no obvious class correlations over time (e.g. chicken). Although Fine *et al.* (1996) highlighted some interesting trends by subdividing their social classes by household composition (for example, middle class couples with children were more likely to buy biscuits than equivalent childless couples), the issue of seasonal consumption was overlooked. Therefore, instead of replicating the results of Fine *et al.* (1996) and Warde (1997) using slightly more up-to-date data, such general patterns are only revisited here for comparative purposes.

The National Food Survey represents one of the most detailed and comprehensive surveys of expenditure on food in the UK, with around eight thousand households being

sampled every year. For the purposes of the present study, the main advantage of the NFS over the FES is the greater detail it affords in describing food categories, helping to differentiate food items predominantly purchased during the Christmas period (e.g. Brussels sprouts) from their broader food groups (e.g. fresh vegetables). However, the NFS is not without problems. Fine *et al.* (1996: 184–5) noted that the poor response rate of approximately 50 percent coupled with the tendency to identify households by electoral register means that the survey is almost certainly biased by education, class and availability of free time; although they concede that it would be difficult to rectify these problems on a regular basis.

For the purpose of analysis in the present study, data from the NFS were sampled at five-year intervals for the period 1975–2000, following the approach of Warde (1997: 101, Fig. 6.1) using the FES. Expenditure on individual (e.g. Brussels sprouts) or grouped food items (e.g. fresh fruit and vegetables) in pence is used to examine the food shopping habits of different social classes, using the Registrar General's class scheme (the principal scheme used in the NFS). In order to examine the phenomenon of Christmas feasting, household food purchase data from the month of December was compared with equivalent data for the rest of the year. Although this method does not permit the direct analysis of specific meals eaten (for example, on Christmas day), it should nevertheless account for trends in Christmas provisioning which take place in the days and weeks leading up to Christmas day itself, and the occurrence of extra non-family Christmas meals among colleagues and friends in the days preceding December 25th, in addition to the consumption of cheap leftover food following Christmas.

The structure of the following discussion of Christmas versus everyday consumption patterns is based on the four binary oppositions concerning the socioeconomic role of food set out by Warde (1997): (i) economy and extravagance, (ii) novelty and tradition, (iii) health and indulgence, and (iv) convenience and care. The first section, economy and extravagance, examines whether or not consumption in the Christmas period can be described as feasting, by comparing expenditure on all foods with the rest of the year, across the different social classes. The second section, novelty and tradition, investigates the consumption of so-called traditional Christmas foods such as turkey and Brussels sprouts. Lastly, the third section considers the subjects of health and indulgence and convenience and care, focusing on the health properties of Christmas food and the related issue of excessive alcohol consumption.

## Economy and Extravagance

An oft-cited characteristic of feasting is the consumption of greater amounts of surplus than would be expected for everyday meals. Figure 1 shows that British household expenditure on food in the month of December consistently outweighs the average monthly expenditure for the rest of the year (the figures used here are not adjusted for the effects of inflation, hence the increase in expenditure over time). Although it is not certain from the data whether or not this expenditure was on greater quantities of food than usual, more expensive foods than usual, or even if the extra food purchased was actually being consumed, it is nonetheless clear that additional economic capital is being expended on food in December. Such patterning is entirely commensurate with the idea that the Christmas season is one in which feasting is taking place. Figure 1 also shows that although all social classes generally conform to the pattern, the trend is most consistent for the middle classes (households headed by professional or managerial workers, classes I and II), who collectively had higher than average weekly food bills in December for every year of the NFS sampled in this study. In contrast, the skilled manual and nonmanual classes (classes IIIM and IIIN) followed the pattern for five of the six years sampled, whereas the semi and unskilled workers (classes IV and V) followed the pattern for only four of the six years sampled. This suggests that although it may be socially desirable to spend more than usual on food at Christmas, in times of economic downturn the working classes are less able to do this (1990 seems to have been a particularly bad year for classes III–V).

**Figure 1: Average December and annual expenditure on food by social class, 1975–2000**

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Source: NFS – NOTE –SEE JOURNAL PAPER AS PRINTED FOR THE FIGURE

Figure 2 shows spending on food as a proportion of the middle class budget (classes I and II) for all months and December. It is clear that the middle classes have not always spent more on food per household than the working classes, even though they have been more likely to do so over the Christmas period. In 1975, 1980 and 1985, working class spending on food was at a generally comparable level with the middle classes, with the former actually more likely to spend more than the latter in December. However, the years 1990, 1995 and 2000 show a stark contrast, with the working classes spending significantly less money on food in general in addition to during the festive season. Whereas general class differences in

food budgets appear to have widened since 1985, the reverse appears to hold true for December, with the working classes showing signs of regaining their lost ground. That such trends should occur in the mid-1980s is perhaps no coincidence, as this period was characterized by the highest growth in income inequality in the UK (Brewer, Goodman and Leicester 2006). The patterns presented here suggest that although class differences measured by expenditure on food have been widening from 1985, there appears to have been increased effort during this period by the working classes to deny such distinctions during the Christmas period. Perhaps the relative increase in working class spending on Christmas food since 1990 can be explained by an extra willingness to go into debt in order to provide a full feast with all the trimmings.

**Figure 2:** Expenditure on food per household per week as a proportion of the middle class (I and II) budget, for all months and December

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Source: NFS – NOTE –SEE JOURNAL PAPER AS PRINTED FOR THE FIGURE

Not only is the Christmas period characterized by greater than average household expenditure on food and drink, but also Christmas feasting is so important that in spite of a widening gap in food budgets generally between the middle and working classes since the mid-1980s, the latter are increasingly likely to spend more than the former on food at Christmas. It is likely that this can be explained by the semi and unskilled working classes having the greatest need for the social benefits obtained through Christmas feasting—the potential to reinforce family relationships in a context contradicting the hardships of everyday life by stressing plenty and excess. In the next section we explore expenditure on foods regarded as traditional Christmas staples, with a view to examining cultural changes in festive eating practices.

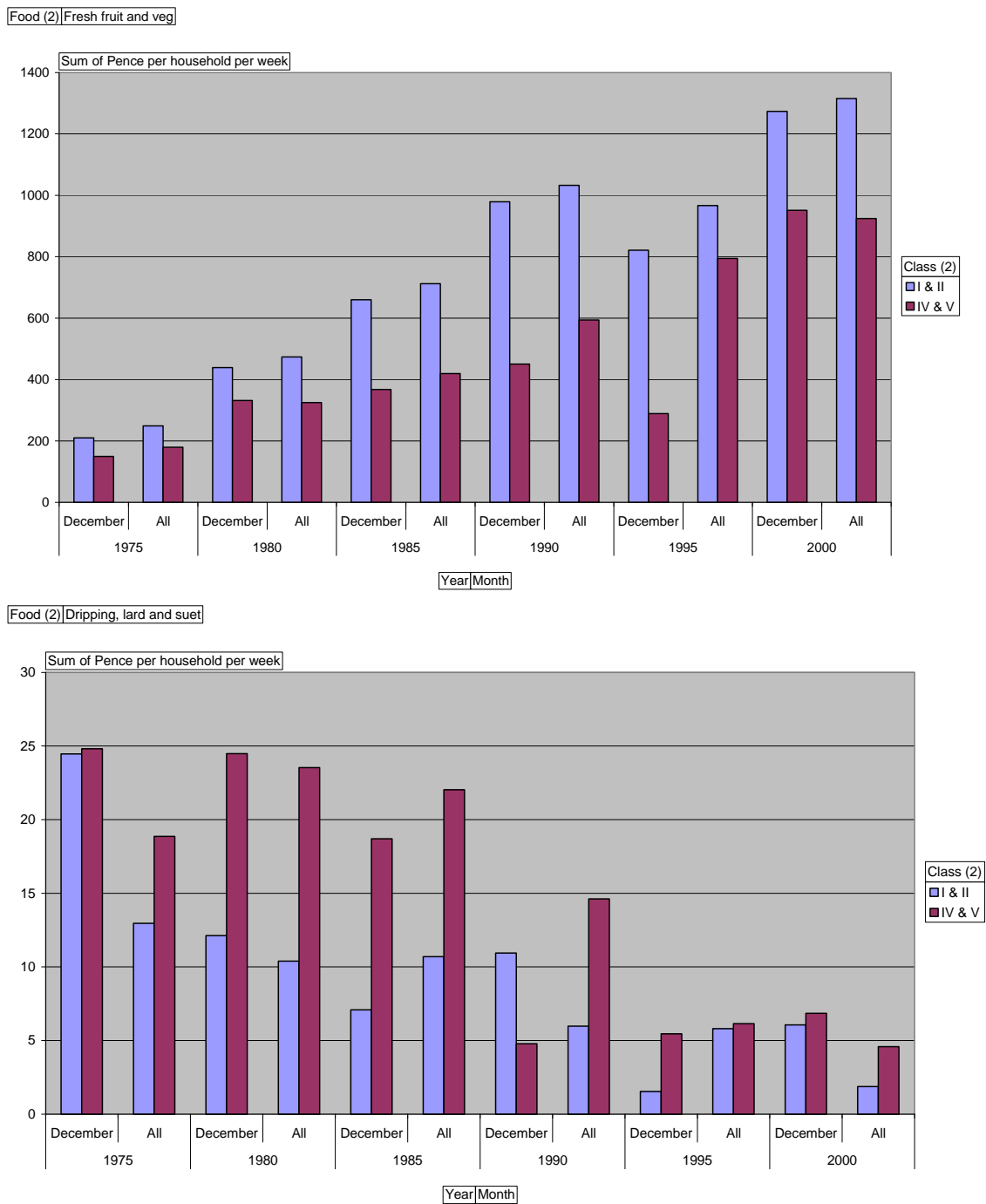
### **Novelty and Tradition**

What foods constitute a traditional Christmas dinner? In Victorian England, traditional Christmas fare was regarded as roast beef and plum pudding, with goose and turkey also popular (Connelly 1999: 26, 113), no doubt aided by the publication of Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* (1843), which helped establish turkey as a festive staple (Kaufman 2004). Britain's experience as a world superpower in this period had no small impact on Christmas

food, with early processed products such as dried fruit being sent to the UK from more tropical parts of the British Empire especially for Christmas (Connelly 1999: 128). The focus here on the Victorians is no coincidence. As Connelly (1999: 187–88) has stated: “Cinema projected, quite literally, the image of the English Christmas to millions ... Cinema also helped to speed up the process whereby it was felt that the Victorians were the key to understanding Christmas ... Film gave Dickens back to the people...” Victorian ideas were clearly reinforced and spread to a wider audience by twentieth-century cinema. The impact of the image of a Dickensian Christmas dinner on more modern times was such that the respondents in Caplow’s study of late 1970s Christmas in the USA identified turkey (and ham) as the primary element in what they thought constituted a “traditional Christmas dinner” (Caplow 1984: 1313).

Figure 3 shows relative expenditure by social class in Britain on selected foods chosen because of their connotations with Christmas. Relative expenditure was calculated by dividing the average household expenditure on each food item per week by the total expenditure on food for the period in question for each class grouping. Unfortunately the NFS only records specific food items purchased as opposed to the constituents of meals eaten, so our analysis of “traditional” Christmas food has been limited to single food items with seasonal connotations—fresh turkey, Brussels sprouts, dried fruit, and nuts (as loose proxies for chestnuts). For sprouts and dried fruit, classes IIIM and IIIN are considered instead of IV and V, the latter pairing generally following the same trends but failing to register any expenditure at all for certain Decembers when the sample size was smaller. An immediately striking feature of Figure 3 is expenditure on all four food items significantly increases in December, at least for the first few years sampled in the survey, effectively confirming their status as Christmas staples. Indeed, one of the potential defining characteristics of feasting is the consumption of “special” foods, which appears to be the case here. However, in the more recent years sampled, the distinction between expenditure at Christmas and the rest of the year shows signs of decline in the proportion of food spending allocated to all four food items, with the possible exception of turkey, whose share of food budgets only wanes slightly. As the proportion of food expenditure on these items generally remained constant for the period 1975–2000, it would appear that the position of Brussels sprouts, dried fruit and nuts as traditional Christmas foods is being rapidly eroded.

**Figure 3: Average expenditure on selected food items by social class, as a proportion of the annual/December class budget, 1975–2000**



Source: NFS

Figure 3 also shows some very marked differences in the consumption of Christmas food by social class. A recurrent feature of the graphs for turkey, dried fruit and nuts is that compared with the working classes, the middle classes usually spend a higher proportion of their food budget on such foods in the Christmas period, even though both classes typically spend more than usual on them in December than at other times of the year. The exception is

Brussels sprouts, on which the skilled working classes (IIIM and IIIN) have consistently spent a higher proportion of their food budget than the middle classes (apart from 1980), even though relative Christmas spending on sprouts has been in decline since at least 1975. This suggests that the middle classes are at the forefront of the trend by which traditional Christmas foods are being slowly abandoned (or that the cost of sprouts has fallen dramatically compared to other foodstuffs). Indeed, the fastest negative trends in the consumption of all four food items are by classes I and II, apart from the steep dip in relative expenditure on turkey by classes IV and V in 1990, which appears to be part of larger food spending downturn for the working classes in this year (see previous section).

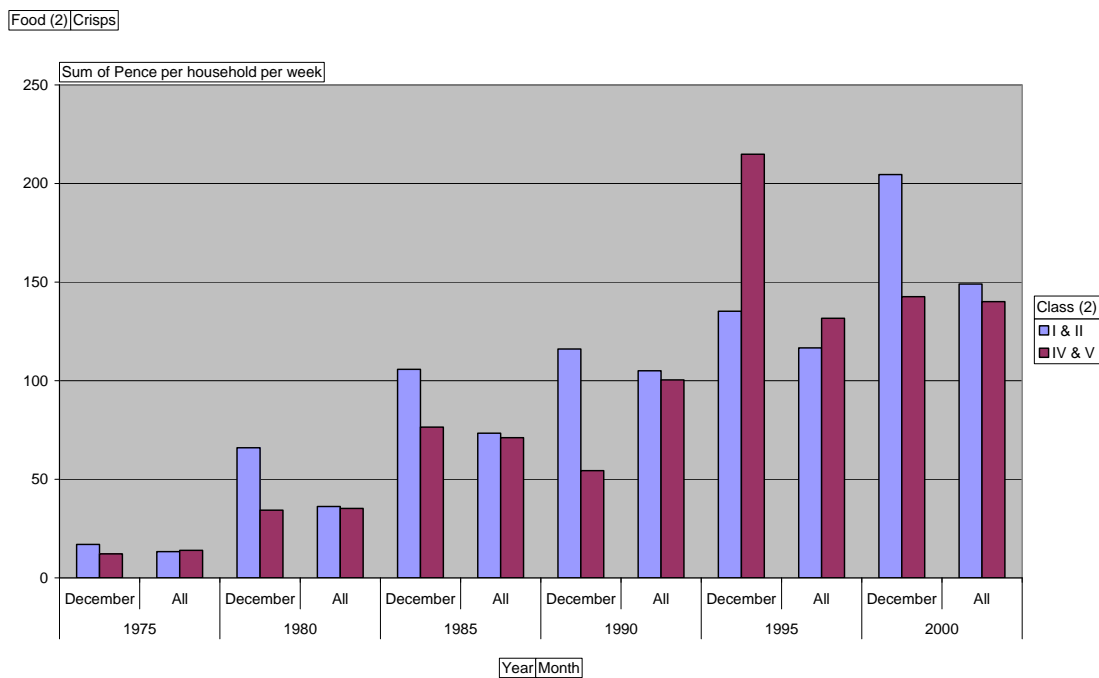
This section has shown that in recent years, relative expenditure on traditional Christmas foods in December is in rapid decline. Once the most voracious consumers of festive food, the middle classes now appear to be at the forefront of this decline, which is less marked among the working classes, who by comparison appear more conservative in their consumption habits. Again, this may be a factor of the working classes having the greatest need for a Christmas, in terms of the social benefits to be solicited through feasting, in addition to the traditional Victorian and religious values surrounding the festivities. Alternatively, these trends could indicate that the middle classes are choosing to spend more money on other feasting foods as opposed to “traditional” Christmas fare. Nevertheless, in terms of the consumption of traditional festive food, class differences actually show signs of lessening in recent years. However, as the next section demonstrates, the consumption of other food and drink in December paints a very different picture.

### **Health and Indulgence, Convenience and Care**

This section explores some of the health implications associated with patterns of Christmas feasting, by examining December expenditure on food items with both positive and negative health implications. As already noted, one of the major factors distinguishing the middle and working classes in modern Britain is the tendency of the former to consistently purchase healthier food (e.g. Warde 1997)—but does this hold true for the Christmas period, now popularly regarded as the one time of the year when excessive calorie intake is acceptable? Figure 4 confirms that whereas the middle classes consistently spend relatively more money on fresh fruit and vegetables all year round, both the middle and working classes spend relatively less on these healthier foods in December. For generations gone by this would be attributed to seasonality and less fresh produce being available in the winter. However, the effectiveness of modern food preservation and distribution techniques render seasonal

availability a thing of the past (Colquhoun and Lyon 2001). These trends seem to confirm the popular notion that the health message is to a greater or lesser extent ignored during the festive season, irrespective of social class.

**Figure 4: Average expenditure on selected food items by social class, as a proportion of the annual/December class budget, 1975–2000**



Source: NFS

In *Bad Food Britain*, Blythman comments on the promotion of supermarket ready meals:

In the run-up to Christmas 2000 ... Tesco ran large adverts in weekend supplements in its “Every Little Helps” campaign, targeting the Christmas meal—the last bastion of home cooking in Britain, and perhaps the only remaining occasion where significant sections of the population still have some residual expectations of home cooking (Blythman 2005: 114).

However, the suggestion that less healthy convenience food and ready meals are replacing traditional forms of cooking at Christmas is only partially confirmed in our analysis. Figure 4 shows that although relative expenditure on the composite food group of snacks and convenience food (comprising confectionary, crisps, chips, cakes, pastries, ice cream, sausage rolls, meat pies and frozen and chilled ready meals) has increased significantly

between 1975 and 2000 as a proportion of the overall food budget, there is little to distinguish spending in December from the rest of the year. Similarly, there appears to be little class distinction in the purchase of snacks and convenience food (the high expenditure for classes IV and V for December 1995 probably relates to the unusually small sample size for this month). However, when certain snacks with stronger negative health connotations are considered separately (e.g. chips, meat pies, pasties and sausage rolls), class differences emerge again, with the working classes predictably spending more, albeit with no consistent December increase or decrease. Nevertheless, the consumption of convenience food shows no sign of decline, and looks to form an increasingly significant part of the British diet, irrespective of social class.

In addition to the excessive consumption of foods with high calorie content, the Christmas period is also notorious for disproportionate alcohol intake, sometimes with fatal consequences (Poikolainen, Leppänen and Vuori 2002; Mäkelä, Martikainen and Nihtilä 2005; Pittler, Verster and Edzard 2005). Alcohol was not included in the National Food Survey until 1994, so it is only possible to discuss consumption for 1995 and 2000 for the years sampled in the present study. Nevertheless, the available data show several important trends (Figure 5). In both 1995 and 2000 the middle classes spent a higher proportion of their overall annual food budget on alcohol than the skilled and unskilled working classes respectively. However, in December this pattern completely reverses, with the semi and unskilled working classes (IV and V) consuming the most alcohol, especially in 2000 when their weekly consumption doubles when compared to the rest of the year. Indeed, the semi and unskilled working classes were the only class grouping in this study to exceed their average weekly expenditure on alcohol in both 1995 and 2000. In 2000, classes IV and V nearly quadrupled their consumption of spirits, in addition to large increases in other alcoholic beverages such as beer, wine and cider (Figure 5). These trends underline the social problems caused by excessive alcohol at Christmas, particularly among the working classes, where the preference for spirits increases the chances of overindulgence resulting in fatality (Poikolainen *et al.* 2002: 1039).

**Figure 5: Average expenditure on alcohol by social class, as a proportion of the annual/December class budget, 1995 and 2000**

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Source: NFS – NOTE –SEE JOURNAL PAPER AS PRINTED FOR THE FIGURE

This section demonstrates the health implications of seasonal changes in food expenditure at Christmas. Whereas all social classes generally eat less healthily in December compared with the rest of the year, the semi and unskilled working classes (IV and V) are particularly at risk in this period, spending the highest proportion of any class food budget on alcohol (especially spirits), and the lowest proportion on fresh fruit and vegetables. The choice by the working classes to drink more and eat less healthily probably relates to what Wilkinson (2005: 64) has termed “psychosocial” problems (such as stress), which are caused as a direct result of status inequalities in society. Indeed, it is likely that such problems are brought to the fore at Christmas when the pressure to provide gifts and lay on a “proper” Christmas feast will inevitably cause further stress for low-income families. This suggests that Christmas is ultimately a double-edged sword for low-income working class families, with the potential for positive social benefits solicited through communal feasting such as reinforcing relationships between parents, children and spouses balanced by the destructive effects of alcohol abuse.

### **Conclusions: A Happy Healthy Christmas?**

The findings of this study highlight the significance of Christmas feasting in modern Britain. In a period when all social classes spend proportionately more money on food and drink per week than they would for the rest of the year, our results suggest that December represents the unhealthiest month of the year in terms of the consumption of fresh fruit and vegetables for most people in Britain, as well as a period of excessive alcohol intake for the working classes. Although most households spend significantly more per week during December on traditional Christmas foods such as turkey, Brussels sprouts and dried fruit, this custom is rapidly declining in recent years (with the exception of turkey). At the same time, overall expenditure on snacks and convenience food has significantly increased, although no large differences were marked in the Christmas period.

In terms of class difference, despite a widening gulf between the middle and working classes from the mid-1980s in terms of general food expenditure, this gap has paradoxically lessened in recent years at Christmas, possibly as a result of greater willingness by people closer to the poverty line to go into debt to provide a full Christmas feast and other gifts. This trend is probably no coincidence, with the working classes having greater need for the social benefits of communal feasting and to contradict the problems of everyday life in a period of increased income inequality throughout society. However, despite this extra spending, and the general trend that food is becoming cheaper for all classes, inequality remains a major

feature of Christmas eating. Whereas many traditional Christmas foods are in decline, the middle classes are leading the way when it comes to expenditure on turkey, perhaps through the purchase of “premier” cuts, organic and free-range birds. Moreover, the gulf between social classes in the consumption of healthy food is also maintained at Christmas, in spite of a widespread reduction in fruit and vegetable intake. Would-be Jamie Olivers and others wishing to spread the healthy eating message should take solace in the knowledge that Christmas only comes once a year.

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