

IN MY OPINION *Fi Glover*



The Radio 4 journalist airs her views

It's time to turn up the Christmas music, unpack the baubles and head off down the road of yuletide tradition now that December is here. Like all of you I have no real idea whether this year can be as merry as others, but in keeping with the real story of Christmas, I reserve the right to hope.

We know there are many things we can't do, but surely it's better if we can dwell on the things we can do and one of those is to send Christmas cards. I've always been hopeless at it. The rush of the working parent – endless deadlines for Christmas specials, joyful kids carol services, lists upon lists – has meant that only a handful of people have ever received a card from Glover Towers. Apologies to all relatives and friends at the end of the alphabet. This year these excuses don't work. Stuck at home, beyond another boxset and keen to show we are thinking of others – we're going to send as many as we can.

The jury is still out on whether to break with a massive tradition and pop a little Christmas letter inside too. I love to receive them, but I've never sent one. They are divisive

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things and their frequent pomposity has achieved legendary status. This week the wonderful Alexander McCall Smith described them as 'a marvellous moral test' and he's never wrong about words and what they tell us about people. He was referring to the boasting in them – you know the kind of thing... 'We'd just had the glass extension completed when we got the news that Brian's bonus meant we could start work on the swimming pool right away?' or 'Elspeth will be keeping in touch with all the children she met at the school she built single-handedly in Peru during her gap year'.

Then there's the danger that some might actually feel the need to tell you what they have done during lockdown. I'm not sure I can cope with people who've mastered Mandarin or built a shed from wattle and daub. It's no humble brag to say that our family would just have to write 'we got through it'. Actually I'm fibbing a bit – we bought a deep fat fryer back in June and our family motto now is 'if you can eat it we can fry it'. I think that's worth a mention.

Of course the very obvious thing is that if you have anything joyful to report you really should share that – and if you need to share sadness that's important too. Maybe make this the year to get through your whole address book.

I'm popping the stamp on your card right now – whether I make it as far as the postbox is another matter.

Fortunately... with Fi and Jane, and The Listening Project are on BBC Sounds @fijiglover



Letting in the light

As seasonal celebrations are reimagined up and down the country, members of the UK's Jewish community tell Anna-Marie Julyan how they'll be observing Chanukah in old and new ways this year

Karma Bread Bakery sits around the corner from London's Royal Free Hospital. Every day during the first lockdown, owner Tami Isaacs Pearce baked for hospital staff to the backdrop of emergencies. "All you could hear were sirens," she says.

In the run-up to the Jewish winter festival of light, Chanukah (pronounced kha-nu-kah) from 10-18 December, she wondered how to celebrate with her tight-knit local community in a safe way. "We're holding the people we have as close as possible, even if they're far away. There's been so much loss. Any festival like this, whether it's Chanukah, Christmas or Diwali will be filled with gratitude," she says.

Normally, Tami shapes the Jewish celebratory bread challah (pronounced hallah) into nine-branched menorahs, the candelabras traditionally lit and displayed in windows at Chanukah. Her glossy, plaited breads are placed both in and outside of the bakery so local people can come to light candles and sing at sundown each night of the eight-day festival.

"It's the most special thing. I'll make one and put it in the window this year. We can't have people inside. I want to do it but am not quite sure how," she says.

The bakery brims with freshly baked doughnuts – classic ones filled with jam or custard or sprinkled



TRADITION *Challah is a special bread in Jewish cuisine*

with sugar and cinnamon; there's also a stollen-spiced variation, and Tami's favourite, halva honey. Fried foods are synonymous with the festival, because of the miracle it commemorates.

In 165 BC a small band of Jews, the Maccabees, defeated a large Syrian-Greek army in defence of their faith. The Hebrew word 'Chanukah' – Hanukkah is the more popular spelling whereas Chanukah is more traditional – means 'dedication' and celebrates the Maccabees' rededication of the ransacked Holy



FESTIVAL OF LIGHTS
Children at a traditional menorah (main image); Jewish food experts Claudia Roden (left) and Victoria Prever (below)

uprooted migrating people and their vanished worlds". Potato latkes come from the Ashkenazi tradition rooted in Western and Eastern Europe and Russia. Claudia grew up in Egypt, part of the Sephardi Jewish world, which stretched from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean. She writes of jam-filled doughnuts from Israel called sufganiyot, battered and deep-fried chicken from Italy, pollo fritto and fritters drenched in syrup and served all over the Middle East known variously as zalabia, bimuelos or zengoula.

"Our traditional food that symbolised the miracle of the oil was zalabia, light balls of dough deep-fried in oil then soaked in sugar syrup," she says. "I went on making it when my children were small."

Chanukah is a children's festival, explains Marc Cooper, whose Let's Fress Deli in Manchester is famous for its freshly baked bagels. When his children were younger they received gifts every night, the largest on the last one and his family still gather to light the menorah. He thinks this year people will be more inclined to celebrate because travel is limited.

There is certainly a lot of gift-sending as opposed to in-person gift-giving this year, confirms Victoria Prever, food editor of *The Jewish Chronicle*. "Jews send foodie gifts for Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year in early autumn) but it's increased massively this year for Chanukah too with people wanting others to know they're there," she says.

She points to caterers whose events work has dried up who are now making hampers for people to send instead, with foods such as baked doughnuts and chocolate coins.

Jewish mental health charity Jami is doing Chanukah celebration boxes for the first time with the option, in parts of London, to have it delivered with a doorstep chat. "You send someone a lovely box and they can be checked in on at the same time by a trained volunteer. And each box provides for another Chanukah present to be delivered to someone else in need of their services," Victoria adds.

At Karma Bread Bakery the popularity of those doughnuts and other baked goods suggests food has become more important to us than ever, muses Tami. "Every piece of dough is chopped, scaled, shaped, proved, fried, sugared and stuffed by hand. It needs to be pillowy with a cloud of custard cream filling, which is so light and divine.

"We'll just take every opportunity at the moment for small pleasures in life, to feel like something is special and share that with family and loved ones. It's all about letting in the light."

TASTY TREATS
Delicious offerings from the Bubala restaurant



Temple in Jerusalem. When relighting the temple's menorah they found only a single cruse of oil – it should have burned for one day but by a miracle instead lasted for eight.

"The oil in the lamp lasted those eight days so basically everything that you eat for Chanukah involves a bounty of oil, is deep-fried and indulgent," explains Helen Graham, head chef of Middle Eastern restaurant Bubala in Spitalfields, east London.

"The typical foods in the UK are doughnuts and latkes, grated potato cakes that are deep-fried and traditionally served with apple sauce and crème fraiche. They're both sweet and savoury," she adds.

Every year she cooks something special for her restaurant team, but gathering indoors with family in north London won't be possible: "I live alone but have never really kept it on my own before. I'd like to light my own menorah, do a Zoom doughnut eating with my family – something to help us all keep feeling connected."

Traditionally, each night families pray and light another candle of the menorah as well as give gifts. Food is central to Jewish festivals. "With most of them the joke is 'they tried to kill us, we survived, let's eat'," she adds. "It's survival against the odds, miracles happening and things working out in the end."

Doyenne of Middle Eastern food and author of *The Book of Jewish Food*, Claudia Roden writes in her introduction that, "Jewish food tells the story of an

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7 QUESTIONS WITH... POLLY WALKER

The actress on Harrison Ford and Line of Duty's Gill Biggeloe

1 Where are you? At my parents' house in Leigh, sitting on a bean bag, looking out at a very desolate winter's day.

2 Can you describe Portia Featherington, your character in Netflix's new Regency drama *Bridgerton*, in five words? Strong, colourful, controversial, energised, funny.

3 *Bridgerton* airs on Christmas Day. Will you be cracking open something fizzy to celebrate? There'll definitely be lots of Champagne opened when we watch it – after much slaving over a hot oven.

4 What question do you always get asked about *Line Of Duty*? What is my character Gill Biggeloe up to now and will she be coming back? She's currently living under witness protection with a new identity – and of course I get asked if Ted is HI!

5 When did you first realise acting was your calling? From a very early age, when I was about five or six. I used to get taken to the cinema for the Saturday matinée, to watch black and white films from the 30s and 40s, with all the great leading ladies.

6 Who has made you the most starstruck? I was in the 1992 film *Patriot Games* with Harrison Ford. Seeing him in the green room for the first time rendered me speechless.

7 Who do you hope finally gets to number one this Christmas – Wham! or Mariah Carey? I'm going to champion Mariah over Wham!

Bridgerton airs on Netflix on Christmas Day. Interview: Nick Needs