

Shop while you flop

Going online now for Christmas goodies can ensure you get quality



Roz Crowley

GET ahead this year and get organised, now, for the festive season. A little forward planning, at this stage, goes a long way, and, with a full month to go, using the internet makes sense. Now is the perfect time to get online and order — there's a stack of practical ideas to save you from lugging around heavy bags.

With the torrentially bad weather we are experiencing, surfing the web is far better than surfing the streets.

However, don't forget local businesses, which need us more than ever. There are plenty of good Irish websites — I've used a few and have found them efficient, with prompt delivery.

1. At Country Choice, in Nenagh, Peter Ward imports just about the best quality foods possible. He takes great pride in making his own, but also imports the best of food from organic parmiggiano reggiano, pictured here — delicious served as a cheese course with some local honey — to plump raisins for cakes.



His candied fruit makes particularly good decoration for Christmas cakes, ideal for those who don't like white icing. Spread a little sieved marmalade over the cake and place a fan of green citrus peel, a pear or apple shape and some cherries, for a magnificent stylish finish. The fruit is also delicious on a cheeseboard, to decorate but also to taste. Order lots of treats from www.countrychoice.ie.

2. Now is a the time to order a locally produced Christmas ham. Mine, this year, will be Rosscarbery's lightly smoked, which has a little maple in the curing mixture. €14.30 per kg uncooked and €26.21 per kg cooked, it's good value as the flesh is dense and low in fat, and the taste is hard to beat. They also do excellent sausages, an award-winning pork pâté, and white pudding, which will be useful for last-minute celebrations. To order and enquire about the range: email willie@rosscarberyrecipes.ie. The website is currently being updated.

3. With a long shelf life, smoked foods are delicious as starters and to give as gifts. At Ummera Smokehouse, a few sizes of smoked salmon is useful, but there is also a delicious gravadlax, €11.35 for 250g. This makes an



SCREEN SAVER: Although we need to support our Irish shops during Christmas, we can also source their products online, saving us from crowded streets and ensuring we get what we want on time.

Picture: iStock

easy, light starter on Christmas day. For those alone, or in pairs, in search of a light Christmas dinner, the smoked chicken works well, and with no wastage is reasonably priced at €9.95 for a crown (without limbs). There is also smoked eel, fleur de sel and organic raw sugar cane, which make good gifts for food lovers. From Connemara Smokehouse come good, smoked tuna, both farmed and organic smoked salmon, and three fillets of plain and peppered smoked mackerel, €6.50, which is easy to make into pâté, with cream cheese and lemon juice for starters and nibbles. www.smokehouse.ie.

4. For those who find shopping a pain, and dread foraging for everything from brussels sprouts to Christmas puddings, a terrific service from Christmas Made Easy is the solution. Full menus of different sizes from two people, to just about any size, come prepared and ready to roll. The menus are not so much ready-cooked as cooking-ready, with vegetables peeled and vacuum-packed ready for boiling, with goose fat included for roasting the potatoes. Turkey and ham are ready for roasting and baking, with matching sauces and gravies.

There is a roast parsnip soup to be heated, smoked salmon for starter, top quality Irish cheeses and biscuits, and, of course, Christ-

mas pudding with brandy butter. The menu for four to six people works out at €45 per person and there will be plenty of leftovers. You may not even want to eat the chocolate dessert on the day, after the Christmas pudding. Delivery nationwide. Deadline for orders is December 6, www.christmas-madeeasy.ie

5. Ireland's Blue Book 2010 lists the current members of this Irish Country Houses and Historic Hotel and Restaurant group — many of which are open for Christmas Day. A night in one of these beautiful locations would make a great gift. So far, I can vouch for the Park Hotel, Kenmare; Rathallagh House, in Co Wicklow; Mustard Seed, in Co Limerick; Longueville Mallow and Ballymaloe House for luxury, warm service and great food. There are 40 listed. www.irelands-bluebook.com.

6. Family treats are a good idea this Christmas, it means the fiver we might have spent on small, silly gifts could be amassed into one decent one for everyone to enjoy, particularly if they are foodies. The Palais de Thé has come to Ireland with its first shop, on Wicklow Street, Dublin, where there are daily tastings. They can also be ordered online. There are 250 teas in the range, but an excellent

nine of them come together in an elegant box of 54 individually-wrapped bags. Coffrets de Mousselines are muslin bags of tea leaves, such as Japanese Green tea, Earl Grey and breakfast teas.

The stunners for those who like more exotic flavours are Hammam, a green tea blended with rose, green date, and red fruits — delicious. There is a Tibetan one, and a Rooibos with lime blossom and mint. I know €29.95 sounds a lot, but for a family gift of this quality in an elegant box, worth it. They also have 87 varieties of teapots. www.palaisdesthes.com.



Another fascinating tea company is Winchester-based Jing, which sells a range of unusual teas, such as a slightly sweet, flowering green tea. Dry, it looks like a bulb, and, once dampened with hot water, springs open to a beautiful osmanthus flower.

Each flowering tea bulb weighs about 6g, so in a 50g packet you will get around eight bulbs for €7.86.

A single-cup teapot to show it off costs €13.37, www.jingtea.com.

Only the best

MAKE sure you get to your local famers' and country market this weekend to order free-range turkeys. Producers, such as Aherns, in Middleton, supply a few Cork-based markets. I always order my turkey from Anthony and Noreen Buckley, in Aherla, Co Cork. They do a great job, managing to rear turkeys to deliver old-fashioned, rich flavour and good, dark, leg meat. 021-733-1119.



Picture: PA

Some seasonally Nash nosh

HAMPERS make a perfect Christmas gift for families. This is the ideal time to order to ensure they don't get caught in the festive rush. Particularly impressive, for the quality of all the products, is Nash 19, where the best of Irish produce is assembled in combinations, which start at €12. Top-class produce has been created this year, including a delicious fig confit, which is excellent with rich cheeses. A piece of cheese and this would make a special gift for a foodie. www.nash19.com to see what's available.

