

# It's a cracker



Will paying more ensure the meal goes with a bang?

**W**hat would Christmas dinner be like without the bad jokes, flimsy hats and gifts of hairslides and tiny playing cards that you get in Christmas crackers?

There are so many types of cracker on sale that we wondered whether it's worth paying extra for a premium set. We asked the Eales family to test the look, content and value of the crackers for us. For the Eales, crackers are an essential part of Christmas.

Granddad Steve said: 'A traditional family Christmas is important to us and that means having all the trimmings.'

We gathered the Eales clan for a festive meal. Mum Tracey brought along her children Robert (18), Kathleen (17) and James (12), as well as her parents Steve and Beryl to test crackers from well-known high-street stores. The family wouldn't normally

splash out on luxury crackers, so they were keen to see what extras they'd get.

## Top cracker

Asda's Luxury Hand-Finished Cracker (£15 for six) came top in two out of three categories and top overall. Woolworths' crackers were cheapest and also considered a good bet. The Eales were disappointed by those sold by Sainsbury's, M&S, Waitrose and Debenhams and wouldn't buy them. Tracey said: 'For £25, the Debenhams crackers aren't worth the money.'

## Good for gifts

Asda impressed with its range of gifts. James said: 'These magic magnets cost £10 in the shops. They're brilliant.' The rest of the family liked the inclusion of a charade to act out and a fact in each cracker as well as the usual joke.

Woolworths' crackers were £12 cheaper but had similar contents to the £25 versions from Debenhams and Waitrose (also available at John Lewis). Each had gifts of silver-effect frames, trinkets and bottle openers.

Robin Reed crackers, also £25 and sold in high-street shops, offered the most for your money – party poppers, streamers and confetti, hat, joke and gift. The youngsters liked these, although the adults felt that gifts such as bottle openers, hip flasks and shot glasses were a bit grown up.



## Best looking

For our grown-ups, appearance was a priority. 'It's more important that the table looks good than we get a good gift,' said Beryl, so the crackers were judged on how good they looked as well as their contents.

The Eales prefer traditional Christmas colours, so they liked the rich red of the Asda crackers. Beryl thought the flock effect 'looked really Christmassy,' and picked out the Waitrose crackers for this, too. Tracey thought the Morrisons' crackers 'felt expensive' and the family liked the place cards, and the gold rollerball pen to write them, that came with this box.

## Best for value

Our family also compared prices to assess the value of each brand, and felt that John Lewis crackers were tops for value, though those we looked at were from its mid-range selection, priced at £20 for 12.

Boots also impressed with its box of six for £20. Beryl said: 'You couldn't make them yourself for less.'

The M&S crackers were judged overpriced. 'In my view, too much money's gone into the packaging and not enough into the content,' said Steve, who thought that the gifts, which included a bag charm, lip gloss and a bracelet, were 'a bit girly'.



A happy (and early) Christmas for the Eales as they test a selection of crackers

# The crackers tested

We asked the Eales family to try a range of premium crackers from some of the leading ranges that are available on the high-street.

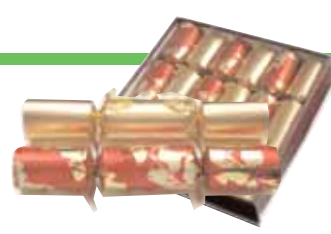
Here are the crackers that they tried out at our Which? party



■ **BOOTS LUXURY CRACKERS** £20 FOR SIX



■ **MARKS & SPENCER CRACKERS** £19.50 FOR SIX



■ **SAINSBURY'S DIFFERENT BY DESIGN CRACKERS** £20 FOR SIX



■ **DEBENHAMS EXCLUSIVELY FROM DESIGNERS AT DEBENHAMS** £25 FOR SIX



■ **MORRISONS THE BEST** £14.99 FOR EIGHT



■ **WAITROSE CRACKERS** £25 FOR SIX



■ **ASDA LUXURY HAND-FINISHED CRACKERS WITH PREMIUM GIFTS** £15 FOR SIX



■ **JOHN LEWIS** 12 CRACKERS £20 FOR 12



■ **ROBIN REED HANDMADE SUPER DELUXE ENGLISH CRACKERS** £24.99 FOR SIX

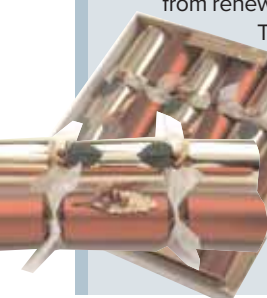


■ **WOOLWORTHS LARGE PREMIUM CRACKERS** £13 FOR EIGHT

## Ethical options

Tesco luxury charity crackers (pictured, £14.74 for eight) have hats and jokes, but instead of a gift there's a medal in each cracker saying where a £5 donation has gone. John Lewis gives 25 per cent of the cost of its Penguin crackers (£10 for six) to WWF (World Wildlife Fund for Nature). Penguin crackers are for children so gifts include a water gun and yo-yo. M&S crackers are made from card certified by the Forest Stewardship Council, so they're from renewable sources.

The Waitrose crackers, along with most of its range, are from at least 80 per cent recycled pulp.



## WHAT DO YOU CALL A WOMAN BETWEEN TWO GOALPOSTS?

Christmas crackers have had puns or jokes in them for more than 80 years – even though most of us groan rather than laugh at them.

Professor Richard Wiseman from the University of Hertford carried out a survey last Christmas that showed that more than six out of ten people didn't find a single cracker joke in the survey funny. Professor Wiseman

said: 'The tradition, I suspect, has survived for so long because you have a shared experience around the table. If you tell a good joke badly, then



**Kathleen (left) and Tracey share a joke**

the spotlight is on the person, and they're embarrassed. But if you have a bad joke – you can't tell it badly. Everyone groans, and we are in it together.'

Crackers were invented by Thomas Smith in 1847. He came up with the idea after seeing the bonbon (a sugared almond wrapped in a twist of paper) while he was in France. He marketed his crackers, added a

love motto when sales started to decline, then adapted them into a tube shape and included a trinket. In 1860 he added the bang. Puns appeared from the 1920s, later evolving into jokes such as these.

■ **What's the oldest fruit?**  
Elderberries

■ **What do you call a woman between two goalposts?**  
Annette

### OUR RESEARCH

We contacted major high-street supermarkets and department stores, as well as manufacturer Robin Reed, which supplies a

large number of high-street chains with their crackers, and asked them to nominate a luxury cracker for our family to assess. The Eales family was

told the cost of each but not where it came from. We made sure cheaper crackers weren't tested immediately before or after the most expensive ones.