

Delivery delight

We tried out online food specialists to see whether their produce deserves to make it on to your table at Christmas



Christmas is a time for indulgence. Most of us splash out, whether it's on a luxury joint of meat or special chocolates.

But it can be difficult to get your hands on top-quality produce; gone are the days when specialist butchers and fish-mongers were found in most towns. Instead, people are turning to specialist food websites.

To help you find the best products, we asked Which? members to tell us which sites they use, then ordered a range of their foods and asked a leading chef to prepare them and give her views.

Frances Atkins (above), Head Chef at the Yorke Arms – the

Good Food Guide readers' restaurant of the year – says: 'Generally, the quality was high and some of the parcels – such as the Donald Russell meat – were very exciting to receive.'

Ordering top-quality meat like this can be expensive, but Frances reckons it's worth it: '£54 for 2kg of sirloin roast might sound a lot, but it's what you'd expect to pay for such good quality.'

However, there are pitfalls. Of the 13 products we received, two involved substitutions. If you need food for a special occasion, call to check your order. But if you know your rights as a consumer and bear web security in mind (see 'Checklist', p22), you can minimise problems.

MEAT MATTERS

High-quality meat should be a deep colour and look dry rather than wet and bloody, but it shouldn't have a film on it or smell.

Frances says: 'The cooking times I've given are those that I would choose; for the beef and lamb they will give pink meat. However, I have a powerful oven so you may need to cook yours for a little longer.'

She also says that if you're pregnant, older or have stomach problems, you should cook it through.

■ Donald Russell

www.donaldrussell.com

01467 629666

Donald Russell was the most popular site with readers. Its produce includes beef, lamb, pork, fish, venison, game birds and poultry.

Sirloin roast, 2kg minimum, £54



Frances says: 'I was thrilled with the quality of this beef. It was delicious, full of flavour and very moreish. It looked excellent from the start and it carves beautifully. There's no need to do anything fancy with meat like that.'

She was also impressed with the presentation: 'It's packaged like a box of chocolates.'



Frances placed the beef on root vegetables and roasted it at 200°C for 50 minutes, then left it to rest for ten minutes.

Joints ordered online often arrive vacuum packed; Frances says that you should wash such meat, dry it with paper towels and let it breathe for a few minutes.



Two stuffed whole pheasants, 750g minimum pack weight, £21

Frances thought that the quality of these 'beautifully presented birds' was high. She was 'pleased that Donald Russell included cooking instructions' but concerned that the suggested cooking time of an hour could dry out the birds. She recommends wrapping the birds in foil so that they steam while roasting and remain moist.



Frances roasted the pheasants at 180°C for 40 minutes, but cook for longer if you're unsure.



Delivery Choose any day, Tuesday to Saturday.

Charge £7.95, £3.95 or free depending on the cost of order, and £7 extra outside the UK mainland. On Saturday, there's a £5 charge on top. **Last Christmas order 14 December.**

■ Well Hung Meat Company

www.wellhungmeat.com

0845 230 3131

This organic producer's offerings include beef, lamb, poultry, pork and veal.

Organic gammon joint, 1.01kg, £11.30



This company's gammon was excellent. However, we had ordered a large joint but only a small one arrived. If you want an order for a particular occasion, it's always worth ringing in advance to check.

We were charged only for the small joint and the company told us that it was 'a small company that has grown very fast'

but issues like this were its 'top priority...we take customer service very seriously.'

After cooking the gammon, Frances says that the quality was really good: 'It was firm to the touch and a nice colour – the only disappointment was the order change.'



Frances boiled the ham in water with onion, leek and carrot for an hour. She trimmed the fat, inserted cloves and spread mustard on top. It was then drizzled with honey and placed in the oven at 200°C for five minutes.

Organic leg of lamb, 2.24kg (large), £33.57

Frances was impressed with the way this lamb cooked. When it came out of the oven, she says, it had 'a good colour, with a lovely smell' and that it 'carved beautifully and was delicious and moist'.



Place on top of root vegetables, make slits in the meat and insert garlic and rosemary. Cook at 200°C for an hour to an hour and a quarter.



Delivery Wednesday to Friday within a week of order. You'll be told when your products will arrive.

Charge Usually £8 or up to £30 outside the UK mainland.

Last Christmas order Mid-December.

FINE FISH

You might not have thought of ordering fish online, but the products we ordered were delivered in insulated boxes and bags, with ice when needed, so fish turned up fresh or still frozen. Fish can also make a lovely gift – for instance, a whole smoked salmon would be great for a family.

Fresh fish shouldn't smell unpleasant. To check the quality of smoked salmon look for dry, clean and evenly smoked fish; it shouldn't look slimy.

Loch Fyne

www.lochfyne.com

01499 600470

Loch Fyne sells fresh and smoked fish, seafood, meat and game.

Langoustines, 1.5kg, £28.50

Frances says: 'These are a good class of langoustine: beautifully fresh and very tasty. It was a really nice package to receive. They were also still frozen solid.'



Defrost and boil langoustines whole for two or three minutes, peel and eat with mayonnaise. Alternatively, remove the head and legs, peel and then grill for about a minute until pink and firm.



Gravadlax, 200g, £9.20

Frances thought this was 'elegant, good quality and nicely served'. She says it's important to remember that gravadlax differs from smoked salmon – it's marinated salmon and should taste and feel different.



Delivery Choose any day Tuesday to Friday.

Charge £5 or free, depending on cost of order, but more in Northern Ireland. Minimum order for delivery is £20.

Last Christmas order 17 December.

Inverawe Smokehouses

www.inverawe.co.uk

01866 822446

This smokehouse produces smoked Scottish fish, game and fresh fish.

Smoked salmon royal fillet, 400g, £19.95

Frances was pleased to see that this salmon wasn't 'slimy or shiny' and liked the fact it had 'a strong smoke with a definite flavour' – although she says some people prefer the taste to be more subtle. Finally, she thought that this was beautifully presented and perfect for a family.



Triple salmon terrine, 500g, £10.95

Frances considered this too rich to use as a starter, as it contained a lot of mayonnaise. But she thought that it would make excellent canapés: 'You'd get really good value for money as it would go such a long way.'



Delivery Tries for next day if order is placed before 1pm. You can pay for guaranteed next-day slot.

Charge Free or £2.95 on UK mainland, £2.95 or £10.50 in Northern Ireland, depending on cost of order.

Next-day delivery is £8.50 up to 15kg.

Last Christmas order 12 December.

CHOCOLATE CHOICES

Chocolate sellers online offer a wide choice, from geranium chocolate to classic truffles. You can also find vegan, low-sugar and organic varieties.

Whatever you order, fresh chocolate should look shiny and appealing. A dusty coating suggests it's been sitting around – unless it's cocoa powder. Store chocolates somewhere cool but avoid putting them in the fridge, as they may develop a coating.

Montezuma's

www.montezumas.co.uk

0845 450 6306

Montezuma's sells all kinds of chocolate, from plain bars to bags of truffles.

Gravity box, £29.85

The Gravity Box contains six varieties such as Lime and Vanilla Dollops, Spirit of Seville Truffles and Banana and Pecan Choco-Block Box. However, in the box that we received, two products had been substituted with different flavoured varieties.

Frances says that this chocolate was fresh and good quality and that the box was 'really creative, with something for everyone'. Her favourites were the kirsch

'The Loch Fyne langoustines were beautifully fresh'

'Betty's fruit cake was exceptionally moist but not heavy'

cherries, as 'the flavour was very distinct'. Her least favourite were the chocolate-dipped mango slices: 'I would have sliced the mango thinner as they're rather chewy.'



Two small boxes of truffles, nine in each, £6.25 a box

Frances was disappointed by these truffles, saying that while the quality of the chocolates was good, both the dusty coating and taste suggested they weren't as fresh as they could have been, although the best-before date was four weeks away.

Montezuma's told us: 'In terms of shelf life, less than two months is not normal for us. That said, anything in date should be in perfect condition. It's hard to say exactly what the issue is without seeing the chocolate but we're disappointed that these left us in this state.' If you're not happy with their quality, you can claim a refund.



Delivery Standard service up to five days, special is one day for orders before 1pm Monday to Thurs.

Charge £5 for standard delivery and £7.50 for special service.

Last Christmas order 20 December.

Hotel Chocolat

www.hotelchocolat.co.uk
0870 444 8384

This site was popular with members and sells a wide range, from slabs to hand-piped chocolates.

Chocogram Deluxe (now renamed Sleekster), 480g, £16.75

Frances described this as a 'lovely box of big, contemporary chocolates', adding 'the chocolate is shiny and fresh, they're moreish and I loved the soft, piped fillings – I'd definitely order some for a friend'.



Chocolate Enrobed Fruit Selection, 475g in total (now renamed Dream Fruits at £5 each), £12.75 for three

We received white chocolate-covered rum sultanas, dark chocolate orange tangs and chocolate-covered, Cointreau-soaked apricots.

As Frances says: 'These are fabulous – some of the most exciting chocolates I've tasted for a long time. They had strong flavours and would be a great present.'



Delivery The standard service takes up to five working days. Gold delivery is the next working day for orders that are placed before 2.30pm. Allow an extra day for Northern Ireland.

Charge Standard is £3.95 for one item or £4.95 for more. Gold is £5.95 for one item or £7.95 for more.

Last Christmas order 20 December.

CAKES FOR CHRISTMAS

If you don't have time to make a Christmas cake, you could try ordering one.

OUR RESEARCH

In May 2007, we asked 2,405 online panel members which specialist food online retailers they use. We ordered 13 products from the most popular sites and asked Frances Atkins to assess the products, cooking them if required.

'I loved the soft-piped fillings in the Chocogram Deluxe'

To find out how good a fruit cake is, cut it in half: it should be cooked evenly and have fruit distributed throughout. It should taste moist but not heavy or soggy and should have a dry crumb.

Bettys by post

www.bettysbypost.com
01423 814008

This famous tearoom in Harrogate also sells cakes, chocolates, biscuits, tea and coffee online.

Celebration fruit cake, £15.25, 800g

Frances thought this was 'exactly as a fruit cake should be: exceptionally moist without being heavy and with the richness you'd expect from a celebration fruit cake. It's a beautifully made, first-class cake.'



This cake isn't available in the run-up to Christmas as Bettys is selling Christmas cakes instead, such as the Royal-iced Christmas cake at £15.95 for 800g.



Delivery You can't specify a date online, only a week, but if it's important that a product arrives on a certain day, call the sales team.

Charge £7.

Last Christmas order 14 December.

Checklist

Follow our tips to make sure that any online shopping experience is as trouble free as possible

SHOP SECURELY

■ **Note details** Print contact details. You want a physical address, email address and phone number. Call the number to see who picks up.

■ **Check security** A secure web page may not appear until you're about to pay. The address of a secure page starts with 'https' not 'http'. There should be a padlock on your screen – clicking on it should confirm the site owner.

■ **Record order** Keep a record of your transaction and order number. You should receive a receipt via email; keep it until your goods are delivered and card is charged.

YOUR RIGHTS

■ **Return rights** The Sale of Goods Act applies to all food ordered online. If a product isn't of satisfactory quality, fit for purpose or as described, you can return the product and get your money back.

■ **Cancellation rules** Under the Distance Selling Regulations you can usually cancel an order before goods arrive or send them back within seven working days, even if they're not faulty. But this doesn't apply to perishable goods unless terms and conditions say so. Also check the small print for extra charges such as delivery.

■ **Wrong item** Companies are allowed to substitute items if their terms and conditions state this. However, you can reject them and they must refund you the cost of returning the products.

■ **Price paid** If a company's terms and conditions say it can raise a price after an order and so asks you for more money, you can still return the items.

■ **Use your card** Consider paying with a credit card if an order is between £100 and £30,000. This means that the card company will be jointly liable under the Consumer Credit Act, if, for example, the food company goes bust.