



THE PUDDING CLUB NIGHT

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Are four peas too many? Is a potato a mistake? Will this sip of water fill me up? The table is noisy with tactics. How much dinner should we eat to make sure we've room for all seven puddings? What's the best order to tackle them in?

The room hushes. The stars of the show are ready. Seventy people cheer as enormous steaming puddings are paraded in: "Wait until your table number is called and you can't come for more unless your plate is clean."

"Oh-my-God, this is so good," becomes "Oh-my-God I'm so full," becomes "Oh-my-God I'm never going to eat again." But it's a point of honour to try all seven so you can vote for your

favourite at evening's end. And by the rising hubbub, it matters:

"Pah, the toffee apple was nothing compared to that syrup sponge. Haven't had pudding like that in 20 years."

"You're wrong. This bread and butter is absolutely incredible."

"Nah, it has to be this tutti frutti – I'm going to cheat and vote for it four times."

The champion? Bread and butter pudding.

And if you haven't had your fill of the sweet stuff, book into one of the pudding-themed rooms and sleep in a bed like a box of chocolates or decorated in syrup coloured satins with a tin of Tate & Lyle on the bedside table.

THE INFO

Pudding Nights run every Friday and some Saturday nights and cost £30 for a light main and all that pudding! The menu varies each week and in summer includes a couple of lighter options like gooseberry fool or summer pud.

Or book in for a Cotswold Walking Weekend – a Pudding Club meet on the Friday, a guided 11-mile hike on Saturday followed by a three-course dinner, then an eight-miler on Sunday. From £225 per person including breakfasts and packed lunches.

visit www.puddingclub.com, or call 01386 438429

THE PUDDINGS

We scoffed the lot. In the name of research, you understand...



Toffee Apple

Apple-packed toffee-topped sponge with extra toffee sauce.

Verdict Had to try it twice as forgot the extra sauce first time. Much nicer second time!



Syrup Sponge

Pride of the pudding club – a steamed sponge with lashings of golden syrup.

Verdict Oh-so-very-good. Close runner-up to Tutti Frutti.



Bread & Butter

Traditional bread, dried fruit and egg custard pudding.

Verdict A yummy blend of toasty top and wobbly middle, but not as good as my mum's.



Lord Randall's

A dark demerara sponge topped with marmalade and apricots.

Verdict A most welcome orangey bitterness after the sweetness of the syrup sponge.



Tutti Frutti

Sponge packed with candied peel, apricots, cherries and angelica.

Verdict Sounded odd but it's a winner – feather-light cake and tangy fruit.



Spotted dick

Currant-studded suet pudding and the butt of oh-so-many jokes.

Verdict Reassuringly stodgy but not quite sweet enough for us.



Squidgy Chocolate

A great dome of dark chocolate gooiness.

Verdict Delicious but stomach-stretchingly rich. A tactical error to leave it 'til last.

PUDDING CLUB MORSELS 🍷 Each pudding night uses eight gallons of custard – that's 64 pints or nearly a pint per punter. 🍷 There are three to four tins of Tate & Lyle's golden syrup in each treacle sponge. 🍷 The record number of portions eaten by one person in a single pudding night is 23, wolfed down by a 6ft 4in rugby player with a very sweet tooth. 🍷 A chef once accidentally used garlic butter in the bread and butter pudding. Let's just say it didn't win the vote that night. 🍷 The sticky toffee pudding has won the most pudding night votes, closely followed by the ginger syrup sponge. 🍷 The English pudding has worldwide appeal and visitors come from as far as Australia, Japan and New York. 🍷 Co-owner Jill Coombe took pudding when trekking in Nepal last year and shared it with French, Dutch, Belgian, American and Nepalese folk at Annapurna Basecamp.



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Walking near Kiftsgate Court, a perfect serving of rural England.



Chef finishes the puddings before they're paraded out to the waiting crowd and the feast begins...



"I'm getting out first." "No, I am." Jenny and Andy get stuck in a race to reach the Pudding Club first.

As we crest the route's highest point and turn down the lane, we drop off the northern tip of the Cotswold escarpment, a rift that pulls 100 miles south to Bath.

The western edge crumbles steeply to the Severn plain; the east tilts gently across Oxfordshire to the Thames basin. The scarp is oolitic limestone, which means little until I realise it's responsible for the area's famous honey-stone cottages.

The panorama spreads north across Shakespeare country towards Stratford-upon-Avon and the low-lying fields look like slices across a bread and butter pudding, toasted crusts curling gently into boundaries. Andy studies the perfectly trimmed

hedges and neat fields; "Were these done with nail clippers? I feel like I'm on the set of a BBC costume drama."

The hazy wide-angle view becomes a solid green close-up of grassy slopes as we turn into the neat valleys of Lark Stoke, curved like folds of softly whipped gooseberry fool. Flecks of honey-stone herald the edge of Ilmington, a scrumptious village of pretty cottages and fishponds, with chestnut trees on the green.

It lies on the north-west cusp of the Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty – Britain's largest at 790 square miles – which means it's gorgeously quiet compared to the tourist-choked Broadway and

Snowhill further south. In fact, the AONB boundary runs clean through the village, as if on a mission to prove how arbitrary these designations can be. The scenery doesn't suddenly morph from idyllic rural England to high-rise concrete or a landfill site – the whole place is gorgeous. We soak it all up, sitting outside the village shop eavesdropping on local gossip and eating lunch, warming up digestive muscles for the evening's pudding marathon.

It's a satisfying calorie-burning climb out of the village to the aptly named Pig Lane, a wide ridge-top track which delivers a mile of eye candy views. Our figure of eight route means we've returned to the highest point, and