



TRANSIT

BY DAVID LOWE

Every second year I spend the Christmas and New Year holidays in England. A traditional English family Christmas – ten days stuck on the sofa in front of the television.

I'll most probably get the same gift from my mother as last time – chronic constipation, relieved a few days later by its biological opposite.

In England about ten million turkeys are eaten every year on Christmas Day. Ten million is roughly the number of Ukrainians who died of starvation during the great famine caused by the disastrous policies of Stalin in the 1930s – just to put things in perspective. The turkey, the pride of the family, has been sitting in the freezer since August. A real bargain. A nearby supermarket on the verge of bankruptcy held a summer sale after a power cut.

We had the opportunity of admiring the beast during our summer holidays. With its opulent breast and its rather meagre legs, it was a judicious mixture of Kate Moss and Jayne Mansfield. Such an anatomical imbalance would have made it impossible for the creature to walk, so the fact that the turkey was raised in a minuscule cage hardly mattered.

There are a few traces of mould on its extremities, nothing serious. I think that the unfortunate turkey had a bit of gangrene. This is the source of great moral relief in the family since it proves that the poor thing was going to die sooner or later anyway... or at least lose a leg.

At about four in the afternoon, shortly after the Queen's speech [an annual live broadcast], your digestive juices start to realize the impossibility of the task before them, and you normally start to burp, a little souvenir of Christmas that continues until Twelfth Night.

My mother will no doubt try out one of her new recipes found in one of her numerous cookbooks. Cookbooks in England are a sort of gastronomic pornography for housewives, like the *Kama Sutra* in the hands of a eunuch.

"Turkey marinated in 7up" for example, or "Turkey with rhubarb stuffing". They sound nicer in French: *Dinde marinée au 7up* or *Dinde farcie à la rhubarbe*. But all the theoretical preparations are blown apart

when we realize that the turkey is too big to fit into the oven. A similar problem faces crematoriums with the increasing obesity in the general population.

For dessert, we have, of course, Christmas pudding, traditionally made several months beforehand. The pudding is wrapped up in a white muslin cloth – which changes colour as the dried fruit macerates in brandy – and left to mature in the garage next to the lawnmower!

After the dessert, the cheese. The English like to keep the acrid taste of cheese in their mouths after a good meal, especially Stilton, which my mother usually buys during the January sales. The cheese is carefully sliced then wrapped in plastic film and popped in the freezer, from which it is taken out in early December to fully ripen on the radiator in the kitchen, giving it that characteristic smell of the mycotic substance you get between your toes when you suffer from athlete's foot. The more it stinks, the more my mother has the impression of rivalling the great French cheese-makers.

"Do you want a glass of Bulgarian Chardonnay or a cup of tea with your cheese?" asks my mother. A difficult choice. Rather like asking if you want your eye poked out with a knife or a fork. I weigh up the options then reply, "A cup of Chardonnay without milk, please."

