



BING CROSBY might have waxed lyrical about chestnuts roasting on an open fire, but Helen Cunningham of the award-winning Phoenix Café prefers them in soup; just like her mother did before her.

"My mother, Maggie Cunningham, studied home economics in Galway after school and was always great at trying out new things. She got the idea for this soup because there was a chestnut avenue leading up to our farmhouse in Drimmien, though she used sweet chestnuts that came from Spain. It's savoury and silky smooth and I always associate it with Christmas at home in Leitrim.

"We lived on a beef farm, but we also bred turkeys, so the weeks before Christmas were always spent plucking. We even sent turkeys in the post, wrapped up in brown paper and twine, to our relations in Westmeath. You couldn't do that now!

"Our local shop was called Quinn's and they had everything from food to hardware. We used to always get a box of apricots at Christmas that came from the Hunza Valley in Pakistan. We made our own crab apple and rowan berry jelly, and we'd collect sloes to put in vodka for visitors.

"These days, I celebrate Christmas with my husband Peter and our sons Ross (25) and Scott (23) in Lucan, where we live in an old farmhouse very like my home in Leitrim. Starter could be chestnut soup or something fishy, like mussel chowder, followed by turkey and ham with bread sauce and homemade cranberry sauce, and pudding with crème anglaise and coffee.

"We keep things fairly traditional; though I always put chestnuts in my stuffing." ❄️

Helen's Christmas Chestnut Soup

Phoenix Café

Phoenix Park Visitor Centre, Dublin. Tel: 01-677-0090

Drimmien farm chestnut soup

- 400g (14oz) chestnuts (available vacuum-packed in supermarkets)
- 30g (1oz) butter
- 850ml (1½ pints) chicken or vegetable stock
- 2 medium onions, peeled and finely chopped
- 4 sticks of celery, de-stringed and finely chopped
- 2 potatoes, peeled and diced
- Pinch of nutmeg, salt and pepper
- Sprig of thyme
- 1 bay leaf
- Crusty bread to serve

Melt the butter in a large saucepan. Add in the onions, potatoes, celery, bay leaf and thyme and cook for a few minutes, stirring regularly. Then add the chestnuts and stock, bring to a quick boil, then lower and simmer for 20 minutes. Remove the bay leaf and thyme and purée until smooth. Season with salt, pepper and nutmeg as desired, with a dash of cream if you like. Serve with crusty bread.

