Useful and acceptable presents

We live in tough economic times, as Lord Sugar frequently reminds us, so what effect might this have on our Christmas giving? By **Stephen Hancocks**

The personal present is always the toughest one to choose and the greatest one to give but is it necessarily the most wonderful one to receive? That probably sounds very churlish and ungrateful but the problem with gifts selected on a basis of such close knowledge of the recipient is that occasionally familiarity breeds contempt. Sometimes there is something to be said for the crushingly cruel anonymity of Secret Santa. A can of deodorant may be a genuine gesture of goodwill or an incisive social comment. Carefully check the sniggers as you open yours at this year's practice Christmas lunch.

However, it may not always be so. Home made produce is always a great favourite and at a time of financial stringency as well as such positive emphasis on all things ecological the pot of runner-bean chutney must surely reign supreme. In fairness, the astute can spot the potential pot of kitchen distilled goodies partly

and inevitably by that giveaway shape and the chunky weight of the parcel

but also sometimes by that slight stickiness heralding a less than airtight seal to the jar. Woe betide those who place this package on the pale coloured carpet beneath the Christmas tree or worse yet as the crimson residue of beetroot and crab-apple jelly seeps through the pile of yuletide goodies and stains Aunt Glenda's Fair Isle jumper lovingly needled for young Gregory (age 24).

Jams, jelly, preserves, pickles, chutneys, ketchups, tracklements, relishes and preserves all tussle for top place in the culinary tumult of creativity from the steamy winter kitchen. Wondered what happened to the pumpkin that mysteriously vanished after the practice Halloween party? Welcome to Cynthia's special off-yellow vinaigrette with sun dried peaches, vanilla essence and, hmm, you've guessed it, pumpkin seeds. No E-numbers or artificial colouring to worry about here. The slightly unsavoury truth of all this wonderful devotion to conserving the natural is that invariably it

costs more to DIY than to pop into the nearest super-market and buy. Not, of course, that that is the point. The whole ethos of choosing a glass jar with multiple flat sides and a gingham screw-top lid is that it screams of being hand-crafted and carefully ladled, labelled and fussed over. Perhaps with a small cloth-covering secured by a ribbon in a bow (ends cut at angles) rather than a common or garden elastic band which can so easily fly sideways and strike a relative in the eye as you twist

off the top in mouth-watering anticipation over Boxing Day's cold collations.

Knitted things can give great pleasure but be wary; please be very wary. There are, after all, only so many woolly pink pigs a person can keep in the sitting room however good a colleague you are. Father Christmases do look lovely on the mantelpiece while the Twelve Days are in process but for the other dozen months fare badly in dusty cupboards and draughty, spidery lofts to emerge more like red faced, cobwebbed tramps than the jolly plump men they were just a year previously.

Another trap into which it is easy to fall is the overheard comment during the year that seems to give a hint about the potential recipient's likes and dislikes. A passing remark in the staff room or wafted through an open door into reception can seem like a heaven sent idea for that special personalised gift but can you be sure you have heard the complete sentence? It is so easy to have caught the bit that goes '...and I said, oh, a tissue box covered in sea shells stuck all the way round the outside, I can't think of anything that I'd like more...' You register the thought and spend hours combing the beach for the prettiest and most varied shells. A sturdy cardboard surround, coloured paper, glue, several evenings in arranging and rearranging the patterns and colours. Little are you ever likely to know that on Christmas morning as the wrapping comes off, the sentence is completed to the loved-ones close by '...I can't think of anything that I'd like more than to ban such ghastly old tat from the face of the earth.' Ah well, at least the Kleenex will be useful.

Not all home-spun ideas miss the mark; some are undoubtedly very gratefully received. Alcohol can work. That home brewed elder-flower chardonnay helped pass what might have been an otherwise potentially very dreary evening with Uncle Bob, while a night-cap of Sloe gin can have you drifting off terribly pleasantly before you've even started counting the sheep jumping over the hedge that spawned the crop. So, cheers, *bon appetit*, merry gift-making and may your colleagues in December still be your friends in January!