

A good and pleasant time

"I have always thought of Christmas time as a good time. A kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time. The only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely." — Charles Dickens, English novelist (1812–70).

Taste and intelligence

"There is a remarkable breakdown of taste and intelligence at Christmas time. Mature, responsible grown men wear neckties made of holly leaves and drink alcoholic beverages with raw egg yolks and cottage cheese in them." — P.J. O'Rourke, US political satirist, journalist and writer (born 1947).

Party problem

"What I don't like about office Christmas parties is looking for a job the next day." — Phyllis Diller, US comedian, actor, concert pianist, author and humanitarian (born 1917).

New year resolution

"Every man should be born again on the first day of January. Start with a fresh page. Take up one hole more in the buckle if necessary, or let down one, according to circumstances; but on the first of January let every man gird himself once more, with his face to the front, and take no interest in the things that were and are past." — Henry Ward Beecher, American preacher, reformer and writer (1813–87).

Garlands of celebration

We rightly rank the holly and the ivy among the evergreens we make into garlands for our Christmas decorations. Yet when it comes to traditions and folklore the mistletoe outranks these as regards its beneficial and harmful associations.

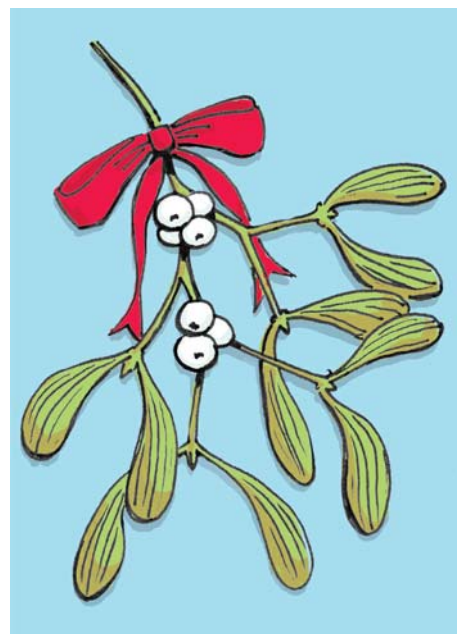
Pliny in AD77 tells the now familiar story of how the Druids, holding mistletoe in high renown, gathered it with golden sickles and with ceremonial rites. He also mentions that the plant was regarded as a safeguard against fire and flood.

John Parkinson in the 17th century referred to the hanging of a sprig of mistletoe round the necks of children to ward off witchcraft evil. John Aubrey in the same century mentions the hanging of mistletoe boughs in halls at Christmas; indeed in some places it was considered unlucky for a house to be without its bough, which had to be left there until replaced the following year. It protected the establishment against lightning strikes, as well as evil influences. —

In 1648 Robert Herrick listed mistletoe among the evergreens used in homes and churches at Christmas since the Middle Ages, together with holly and ivy. However, it came into disrepute because of its pagan connotations.

John Brand in the 19th century expressed the opinion that when displayed in churches mistletoe was objectionable since it belonged to the servants' hall of the manor, where kissing beneath a garland of it was thought to increase fertility. Every time kissing occurred a berry should be removed from the bough, and when no more remained kissing became forbidden.

Curiously enough, although it is said that the Druids particularly venerated mistletoe growing on the oak, it is rarely found on that tree. Nor does it flourish on birch, beech or plane, but is commonest on pear, plum,



poplar, lime, mountain ash and hawthorn. In Britain, most mistletoe is to be found on old orchard trees or high above the ground at the tops of black poplars. Indeed, I recollect one rural neighbour who had a magnificent black poplar in his grounds, crowned with clumps of mistletoe. Since the boughs were inaccessible to him he turned out every Christmas with a shotgun and brought down the top-most clumps by this ingenious means.

Collection is simpler if the trees in an orchard are seeded with the parasite. This can be done by cutting grooves and inserting seed, but the outcome tends to be disappointing. Small wonder, perhaps, that there is currently a great shortage of mistletoe for decorations, most of the market being served from France where the plant occurs in apple orchards and on poplars lining streams.

Reading the label — and trying to make sense of the message

Attaching a label to a substance or its container sounds simple enough. Unfortunately, enabling it to carry a message that is clear and unambiguous to whoever reads it is another matter entirely. We have to overcome the complications of size and shape, the possible confusion introduced by colours, designs or advertisements. And any form of words is subject to misinterpretation and may convey a latent message that is deliberately concealed by the designer. Pharmacists are well aware of the need to include all matter of data on a label that will instruct or warn the user of a product, and guide the expert who may be concerned.

Labels are used not only for medicines but for foods, also, and here we run into fresh difficulties. The chairman of the UK Food

Standards Agency, John Krebs, in an editorial in *Science* for 12 November, has reviewed some of the problems involved in food labelling. He comments that in the UK only 30 per cent of food shoppers always read the labels on products, while 20 per cent rarely or never give them a glance and would not know what to make of them.

The object of a label is to inform you and help you choose wisely. But with perhaps 30 types of chicken soup and 300 varieties of breakfast cereal facing you on the shelves, how much time is there to appraise differences? While consumers demand more choice, consumer pressure groups call for more information on labels. In Europe, in contrast with the US, the method and place of production must often appear on a label.

The greatest current challenge for food policy is the increase in obesity in a situation where diet and lifestyle are regarded as part of personal freedom. There is great pressure for action, since the health care costs involved are massive. Restrictions on foods available from school vending machines, and on related television advertising are placed in some areas.

It is strange that in the US, where obesity is most rife, the labelling of foods is said to be the best in the world. The implications of science-based labelling regulations have great importance for the food industry, but experts on nutrition often disagree over the means employed and the goals sought. When genetic factors are introduced into food science the problems will multiply.