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Traditional Christmas Eve Dishes in Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine



Christmas Eve, celebrated on 24 December in Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine, is a family celebration centred on a ritual meatless supper distinguished by its archaic customs and rich symbolism. The dishes made from grains, mushrooms, fish, poppy seeds, dried fruits, and honey are specific to the occasion, expressing hopes for abundance, health, and prosperity in the coming year. The celebration retains a strong ritual character, reflected in prayer, the gathering for supper after the first star appears in the sky, the sharing of ritual bread and other foods, and the remembrance of deceased family members by leaving a portion of each dish on the table for their souls.

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Reconstruction of the Christmas Eve supper table, Open Air Museum of Lithuania



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Preface

Gastronomic culture is not a set of bubbles of national cuisines, but a network of connections linking different countries, regions, continents and cultures. It is a multi-layered structure, the origins of which can be traced back to migrations in prehistoric times. It was subsequently shaped by intercultural exchanges in historical times, colonisation, worldwide spread of universal religions, international trade, the exchange of technologies, and the movement of people, animals, and plants, right up to the present-day world characterised by global digital networks. This networked structure ensures that gastronomic culture is an effective means of discussing and understanding one's own and other cultures.

The idea for this book arose while preparing the nomination to inscribe the Christmas Eve celebration in Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The first thing we aim to highlight is the relationships between the three countries and their shared intangible cultural heritage. The Christmas Eve table in Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine is characterised by a tradition of twelve dishes. That is the reason why you will find the numbers six and twelve recurring throughout this book. To highlight the connections between these countries, we have selected six dishes common to all three, and six for each country. The dishes typical of each country represent the distinctive features of the Christmas Eve table in Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine. However, it is important to note that attributing a dish to Lithuania, Poland, or Ukraine does not imply that it is exclusive to, or the property of, any of those countries, nor that it cannot be found elsewhere. Christmas Eve dishes identified as characteristic of Lithuania also appear in certain regions of Poland, while those characteristic of Poland are also known in some regions of Ukraine. The boundary between what is perceived as "our" intangible cultural heritage and that of "others" is shaped by history and identity. "Ours" is what has been passed down from generation to generation over many years and has become part of our cultural identity. At the same time, the fact that an element of intangible cultural heritage is regarded as "ours" does not preclude it from also belonging to "others" – especially those with whom we share a common history and closely related cultural identities.

We therefore invite readers to view this tradition not in terms of clearly defined cultural boundaries, but as an interconnected cultural landscape, where recognising a dish as being particularly characteristic of one tradition does not diminish or deny its place within another.

For several hundred years, Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine formed a single cultural space, known in the 16th–18th centuries as the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth. This was not only a political space but also one of intense cultural exchange. Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine feature a rich diversity of dishes in numerous regional and local variations. Some cultural regions have retained recipes that are characteristic of their local culinary traditions; therefore, this publication also includes a few dishes that are more distinctly regional. While preserving the essential character of traditional Christmas Eve dishes, those who prepare them often enrich the recipes with knowledge inherited within their families, particularly about preparation methods or ingredient choices. As a result, individual recipes may vary and be interpreted differently depending on the country, cultural region, community, or family tradition. This diversity reflects the living nature of intangible cultural heritage and embodies the spirit of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. The Christmas Eve tradition constitutes a living form of intangible cultural heritage (ICH), yet its origins can be traced back to the distant past.

Through the recipes selected by the authors, we have sought to illustrate the chronological depth and continuity of this tradition, ranging from the earliest recipes documented in sources dating from the 16th to the 18th centuries to contemporary versions shared on blogs by prominent chefs and food influencers from Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine. To make these historical recipes more accessible to contemporary audiences and easier to prepare, they have been adapted into a modern recipe format. The publication clearly specifies



Making *kūčiukai* in the Gelčiai Family, Lithuania

individual ingredients and quantities, and presents the preparation process step by step.

The Lithuanian National Commission for UNESCO, in cooperation with the Lithuanian National Culture Centre, coordinated the publication; the latter has also been responsible for developing the National Inventory of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Lithuania since 2017.

The publication was prepared with the contribution of historians of gastronomic heritage from Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine: Lithuanian researcher Rimvydas Laužikas (Vilnius University) writes about Christmas Eve in Lithuania, Polish researcher Jarosław Dumanowski (Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń) – in Poland, Ukrainian researcher Ihor Lylo (Piotrków Academy in Piotrków Trybunalski) – in Ukraine, and Milda Valančiauskienė (the Secretariat of the Lithuanian National Commission for UNESCO) – the significance of Christmas Eve tradition within the broader context of UNESCO's intangible cultural heritage. Intangible cultural heritage experts also participated in compiling the book: Vida Šatkauskienė (Lithuania), Loreta Sungailienė (Lithuania), Robert Andrzej Dul (Poland), Valentyna Demian (Ukraine), and Oleksandr Butsenko (Ukraine).

The present publication was financially supported by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Lithuania and the Ministry of Agriculture of the Republic of Lithuania, which is also responsible for certifying National Heritage Products in Lithuania, thereby contributing to the safeguarding and promotion of intangible cultural heritage. The certified national heritage elements include traditional products, plants of traditional varieties and animals of traditional breeds, wild-harvested products, traditional services and fairs, as well as several foods and items traditionally associated with the Christmas Eve supper in Lithuania.

We sincerely thank Vice-Minister of Culture Lina Baublienė for her support of and commitment to this publication. We would also like to express our gratitude to the chefs and advocates of contemporary gastronomy who contributed to this book: Beata Nicholson, Alfas Ivanauskas, and Justinas Kapkovičius from Lithuania; Jarek Walczyk and Norbert Sokołowski from Warsaw, the chefs of the Toruń Gingerbread Culinary Trail, Iga Sarzyńska, and Agnieszka Michałowska from Poland; and Yevhen Klopotenko and Marianna Dushar from Ukraine. We are grateful to them for sharing their recipes for the Christmas Eve table, as well as for their



Making traditional dumplings at the Ivan Honchar Museum, Ukraine

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In your hands is a book featuring 24 recipes, intended not only as a feast for the eyes or an invitation to imagine the abundant festive tables around which Lithuanians, Poles, and Ukrainians gather with their families and communities to celebrate Christmas Eve and strengthen family bonds, but also as a practical opportunity to discover new flavours, try preparing these dishes by following clearly explained recipes, experience the peaceful atmosphere of winter, and, in this way, embark on a culinary journey. If you can't find certain ingredients, don't be discouraged – try replacing them with suitable alternatives. Remember that communities and groups continuously recreate traditions in response to their environment, their interaction with nature, and their history – this lies at the heart of both gastronomic culture and living heritage.

Rimvydas Laužikas
Milda Valančiauskienė



Christmas Eve – a family tradition transmitted from generation to generation in Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine

Christmas Eve, celebrated on 24 December, is a family celebration characteristic of Central and Eastern Europe, centred on a ritual meatless supper distinguished by its archaic customs and rich symbolism. Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine, connected by the shared historical and cultural heritage of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth from the 16-18th centuries, have preserved closely related features of this celebration, including feast preparations, the ritual family supper, and associated symbolism. The dishes are specific to the occasion, and the celebration retains a strongly ritual character, expressed through prayer, the sharing of bread and other foods, and the remembrance of deceased family members. Various elements of the Christmas Eve tradition are readily recognisable in the cultural practices of Lithuanians, Poles, and Ukrainians alike.

Most people in Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine cherish Christmas Eve traditions, regardless of age, cultural background, or religious affiliation. They have endured despite historical upheavals and periods of occupation, during which unsuccessful attempts were made to suppress the tradition and replace it with alternative celebrations.

The tradition of Christmas Eve encompasses various cultural layers, ranging from pre-Christian customs associated with the winter solstice to those of different Christian traditions (Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant), as well as modern, secular traditions. The cultural meanings of Christmas Eve are closely connected to ideas of transition and transformation – the birth of Christ, the end of Advent, and the winter solstice. In the past, Christmas Eve involved numerous agricultural customs aimed at ensuring abundance, a good harvest, and a prosperous and happy year ahead. It remains an important family celebration centred on hospitality, remembrance, renewal, and togetherness, with the shared evening meal at its heart.

Traditionally, family members seek to return home to celebrate Christmas Eve together. People also remember deceased relatives and ancestors at the Christmas Eve table. This remembrance is reflected in the custom of leaving seats vacant and setting places for them at the table. The empty seat may also represent hospitality towards an unexpected guest. After supper, something of every dish is left on the table for the souls of deceased relatives.

Animals, too, are traditionally treated with particular care and given better food on Christmas Eve. In the villages of Poland and Ukraine, people give colourful wafers to farm animals in the evening to ensure their health in the coming year. Such practices form part of a broader ethical framework associated with the celebration, which also emphasises care for vulnerable and lonely people in all three countries.

Before the celebration, the house is cleaned, and the Christmas tree is decorated. During the Christmas Eve supper, the table – often covered with a white or festive tablecloth placed over a symbolic layer of hay or accompanied by a small bundle of hay on a plate or in a small basket in remembrance of Christ's birth in the manger – is set with twelve or more meatless dishes, including *kūčia/kutia/кутя* (a dish made from soaked or boiled grains, poppy seeds, and honey), *kisielius/kisiel/кисіль* (a gel-like drink) or *uzwar/узвар* (a dried fruit drink),



Reading the Bible during Christmas Eve in the village of Kolbuszowa Górna, Poland

barščiai/barszcz/борщ (beetroot soup), and various fish and herring dishes, as well as filled dough dishes with poppy seeds, mushrooms, or wild berries.

A common feature throughout the region is the festive evening meal, traditionally eaten after the first star appears in the sky. In Christian tradition, the star is associated with the Star of Bethlehem, though the custom itself may also retain earlier, pre-Christian meanings related to the appearance of the stars in the night sky. The meal is meatless, reflecting the traditional Christian fast, and begins with a prayer and the exchange of good wishes. In all three countries, dishes prepared from grains, mushrooms, fish, poppy seeds, dried fruits, and honey express hopes and wishes for abundance, health, and prosperity in the coming year.

Ceremonial foods hold a central place on the Christmas Eve table; these include the thin unleavened wafer (*kalėdaitis/opłatek*) in Lithuania and Poland, *prosphora* in Ukraine, and the traditional dish *kūčia/kutia/кутя*, a mixture of wheat, honey, poppy seeds, and nuts. The Christmas Eve supper traditionally begins with a prayer or words spoken by the eldest member of the family. Family members break *kalėdaitis/opłatek*, give a small piece to each person, share *prosphora* and/or *kūčia/kutia/кутя*, and exchange blessings and ask one another's forgiveness. This sharing ritual is also cultivated in secular families. During the meal, everyone is expected to taste every dish.

In Lithuania, folk customs also include fortune-telling games, observing animal behaviour, and interpreting signs in nature to predict the coming year's harvest or family events.

In all three countries, the Christmas Eve tradition includes the customary counting of the dishes before supper, with twelve traditionally regarded as the minimum. While the number represents the twelve apostles in Christian tradition, it is also widely understood as a symbol of abundance, the annual cycle, and hope for prosperity in the coming year.

In Poland and Lithuania, the Catholic celebration culminates in participation in Midnight Mass (*Bernelių mišios/Pasterka*). In all three countries, collective pre-celebration of Christmas Eve traditions extends beyond the family home through large public suppers organised for people who are lonely, homeless, or in need, reflecting the values of hospitality, solidarity, and community. Communal celebrations often take place in schools, care homes, orphanages, and military units.



Sharing the Christmas wafer in the Gelčiai Family, Lithuania

In Ukraine, the ritual of bringing a *didukh* (*Дідух*), a ceremonial sheaf, into the home and placing it in the most honoured position – a distinctive custom preserved across Ukraine, in both cities and villages – symbolises the connection between the family, its ancestors, and the harvest.

In Poland and Ukraine, Christmas carolling is a long-standing tradition, in which children (and sometimes adults) go from house to house singing Christmas carols and receiving treats or small gifts in return. In all three countries, families and members of cultural or religious communities gather on Christmas Eve to sing traditional religious and folk songs associated with the symbolic meanings of Christmas and the festive season.

Although the tradition naturally evolves over time, the core values, symbolism, and defining features that shape cultural identity and are most meaningful to communities endure and continue to be passed down across generations within families and society.

Following the initiative launched by the Lithuanian National Commission for UNESCO in 2024, numerous partners from Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine – experts in intangible cultural heritage, tradition bearers, families, communities, and organisations – joined in preparing the nomination file. These included museums, religious and educational organisations, schools and universities, cultural and craft centres, traditional music performers, experts in the history and culture of gastronomy, and numerous families. They contributed written and filmed testimonies, submitted supporting materials, and participated in producing a video prepared for the multinational nomination, sharing their views on the element's importance to their communities. Questionnaires were also distributed in Lithuanian, Polish, and Ukrainian, reaching thousands of individuals, communities, and organisations, who expressed their free, prior, and informed consent and their support for the multinational inscription. The Ministers of Culture of Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine endorsed the multinational nomination of the Christmas Eve tradition for inscription on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

This broad community participation in preparing the nomination demonstrates the significance of the Christmas Eve tradition for the religiously and culturally diverse societies of the three countries and their shared sense of identity.



1. Christmas Eve wheat dish with poppy seeds and honey

LT Kūčia PL Kutia UA Кутя

Traditional recipe dating back to the 16th century

The Christmas Eve wheat dish with poppy seeds and honey is one of the oldest dishes associated with this celebration. The Lithuanian, Polish, and Ukrainian names for the dish are of Greek origin. Since classical antiquity, people have prepared a similar dish to commemorate deceased family members. Remembering the deceased remains an important part of Christmas Eve to this day. Although local recipes vary, the combination of grains, poppy seeds, and honey is common to all three countries.

Ingredients

200 g wheat grains or pearl barley
100 g unshelled peas
2 tablespoons poppy seeds
2 tablespoons honey

Instructions

Soak the wheat grains or pearl barley and peas in water overnight. Drain them, then boil. Combine the grains, peas, honey, and poppy seeds in a bowl.

Specific features

Lithuania: *Kūčia* versions vary. Some people include dried fruit, while others boil pearl barley and mix it with honey just before serving. Some families serve only boiled peas or beans instead of *kūčia*.

Poland: *Kutia* is primarily popular in the eastern regions. People traditionally made it on Christmas Eve in Małopolska. Due to border changes after World War II and population resettlements, it is now also found in western Poland, where families of former Lithuanian and Ukrainian residents continue these traditions.

Ukraine: The consistency of *Кутя* can vary from relatively dry to moist or liquid, depending on the region and family tradition. Traditionally, *кутя* is made with wheat, although some regions also add rice. This doesn't affect the tradition itself, but it draws more attention to the dish's preparation.







2. Cranberry kissel

LT Spanguolių kisielius PL Kisiel żurawinowy UA Журавлиновий кисіль

Beata Nicholson, 2013

Kissel is another particularly archaic Christmas Eve dish. The name is of Slavonic origin and refers to the method of preparation – fermentation. The earliest record of *kisielius* in the region dates back to 1394 in the accounts of King Jagiello (Lith. Jogaila) of Poland and Lithuania, who enjoyed it with his guests at lunch. Originally, it was a sour, oat-based dish. By the 20th century, the recipe evolved into a thick cranberry beverage. Despite these changes, kissel remains a key Christmas Eve tradition for many Lithuanian, Polish and Ukrainian families.

Ingredients

- 250 g cranberries
- 1.5 litres water
- 6 tablespoons starch
- Sugar to taste
- A few cloves

Instructions

Begin by selecting only the highest-quality cranberries and setting aside any that aren't suitable. Mash the berries thoroughly using a wooden pestle or a food processor. Transfer the cranberry purée to a saucepan, then add water and a few cloves, and bring to a boil. Adjust the sweetness according to your preference, and reboil. In a small bowl, combine about 100 ml of cold water with the starch, stirring until smooth. Gradually add this mixture to the boiling cranberries and return to a boil. To prevent a skin from forming on the jelly as it cools, sprinkle sugar on top.



Specific features

Lithuania: Kissel was not only a Lenten dish. Traditionally, people dried oats in the oven, ground them finely, and mixed them with warm water. They added leaven and let the mixture ferment. Afterwards, they strained the liquid and boiled it with salt. Once thickened, they ate it with butter or milk, like a pudding. The Lenten version was served with honey or cranberries.

Poland: Kissel is a traditional Christmas Eve dish, especially popular in the eastern regions. Historically, it was prepared with fermented oat flour, but now the fruit-based variety, typically made with cranberries, is more common. Today, it is a sweet dessert consisting of puréed fruit thickened with potato starch to create a firm, jelly-like texture.

Ukraine: Cranberry kissel as a Christmas Eve dish belongs to the cuisine of the northern lands of Ukraine – Polissia, Volyn, and the Chernihiv region – characterised by forests, rivers, mushrooms, and berries. In those regions, they also prepared pear kissel for Christmas Eve. In the Donetsk, Dnipropetrovsk, Cherkasy, and Kyiv regions, as well as in Halychyna (Galicia), cherry kissel is more widespread.



3. Borscht with mushroom dumplings known as "Little ears"

LT Barščiai su ausytėmis PL Barszcz z uszkami UA Борщ з вушками

Jan Szyttler, 1835; Małgorzata Bogacka, 1896

Borscht is among the oldest dishes in our regional cuisine. In all three languages, its name comes from wild hogweed (*Heracleum sphondylium*), whose leaves have been used in dishes since prehistoric times. Written sources mention a few different types of borscht. The main varieties include a green, often fermented leaf soup, and a beetroot-based dish. Traditionally, all social and ethnic groups in Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine consumed borscht. The version with mushroom dumplings highlights a wealthy, festive style of historical cuisine.

Ingredients

For the broth:

- Approximately 700–800 g (or 4 medium) beetroots
- 1 medium onion
- 1 tablespoon vinegar, with additional to taste
- Salt as needed

For the dumplings:

- 250 g all-purpose flour
- 120–140 ml warm water
- ½ teaspoon salt
- Additional flour for dusting
- 100 g dried porcini mushrooms
- 2 medium onions (around 200 g), finely chopped
- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
- ½ teaspoon salt (or to taste)
- ¼ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper (or to taste)

Instructions

The broth: Peel the beetroot and slice it thinly. Peel and roughly chop the onion, then add it to the beetroot in a large saucepan. Add 3 litres of water and 1 tablespoon of vinegar, bring to a boil, then reduce the heat and simmer gently for 45 to 60 minutes until the beetroot is tender and has infused the broth with flavour and colour. Strain the mushroom broth (refer to the dumpling instructions) through a fine sieve to remove sediments, then mix it with the beetroot broth. Season the mixture with salt and more vinegar to taste. If the borscht isn't sufficiently red, peel and finely grate a small raw beetroot, sprinkle it with 1 teaspoon of vinegar, add it to the soup, and quickly bring it back to a boil. Remove from heat and strain through a fine sieve or colander to remove solids like cooked beetroot and onion. Serve hot, ideally with mushroom-filled dumplings.






The dumplings: Place the dried porcini mushrooms in a bowl, cover with warm water, and soak for 1–2 hours. Transfer the soaked mushrooms and their liquid to a small saucepan, bring to a boil, and simmer gently for 20–30 minutes until tender. Drain well and set aside the mushroom broth for borscht. Let the mushrooms cool slightly, then chop them finely. Next, heat vegetable oil in a frying pan over medium-low heat. Fry the chopped onions for 10–15 minutes, stirring occasionally, until soft and lightly golden. Remove from heat. Mix the chopped mushrooms with the fried onions in a roughly 1:2 ratio, season with salt and freshly ground black pepper, and stir well. Let the mixture cool completely before using.

Prepare the dough by placing flour and salt in a large bowl. Slowly add warm water while mixing with a spoon or your hands. Once the mixture forms a dough, transfer it to a lightly floured surface and knead for 5–8 minutes, until smooth and elastic. Cover the dough with a clean kitchen towel or an inverted bowl and let it rest for 20–30 minutes.

Divide the dough into two portions to make it easier to handle. On a lightly floured surface, roll each portion very thin, about 1 mm thick. Use a small glass or a round pastry cutter (about 5–6 cm in diameter) to cut out circles. Place approximately ½ teaspoon of mushroom filling in the centre of each circle. Fold the circle over the filling to form a crescent, then press the edges together firmly to seal, ensuring no filling gets trapped. Bring the pointed ends together and pinch them tightly to create the signature “ear” shape, which inspired the dumplings’ name. Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil. Add the dumplings in small batches to prevent sticking and stir gently after adding. When they float to the surface, cook for another 2–3 minutes until the dough is tender. Remove with a slotted spoon and drain well.



Specific features

Lithuania: Borscht was commonly eaten not only as a daily meal but also on Christmas Eve. Historically, the type of borscht varied with household wealth: poorer families might have made it with just beetroot, water, and a bit of herring, while wealthier households served it with dumplings. Today, borscht is rarely part of the Christmas Eve meal but remains a feature of festive feasts that reflect traditional urban culinary customs.

Poland: Certain regional features stand out. Today, borscht with dumplings is arguably the most popular Polish Christmas Eve dish, known and made across the country. The mushroom-filled version, typically a Lenten dish, is mainly prepared for Christmas Eve, while throughout the year, dumplings are often filled with meat. For Christmas Eve, the filling is usually made from dried mushrooms, ideally porcini, which contribute a rich, distinctive flavour. In most areas, a simple "pure borscht" – a robust beetroot broth with added dumplings – dominates. However, in some eastern regions, people serve this borscht alongside beetroot and other vegetables.

Ukraine: Ukraine's geographic and climatic diversity has contributed to regional variations in how people prepare Christmas borscht. Depending on the region, people may prepare Lenten borscht with fresh, dried, or cured fish. This variation is particularly characteristic of the Odesa, Kherson, and Mykolaiv regions, as well as areas along the Dnieper river, where fish has traditionally been readily available due to the abundance of rivers and other bodies of water. Borscht with mushrooms is characteristic of Volhynia, while borscht with beans is typical for Slobozhanshchyna and central Ukraine (the Dnieper, Vinnytsia, and Poltava regions, Sivershchyna). In western Ukraine, borscht is often served with vushka ("little ears"), small dumplings filled with mushrooms, while in the Poltava region, a traditional variation is borscht with halushky – dumplings without filling.

4. Cabbage and mushroom dumplings

LT Virtinukai su kopūstais ir grybais PL Pierogi z kapustą i grzybami UA Вареники з капустою та грибами

Alfas Ivanauskas, 2026

The pairing of cabbage and forest mushrooms has been recorded since the 17th century and was particularly popular during Advent and Lent, periods when meat and dairy were avoided. Over the years, this straightforward filling became a common ingredient in dumplings, pies, and other pastries. Dumplings stuffed with sauerkraut and dried mushrooms are also a traditional Christmas Eve dish.

Ingredients

For the dough:

700 g plain (all-purpose) flour
50 g sour cream
2 large eggs
50 ml vegetable oil
130 ml water
A pinch of salt

For the filling:

750 g sauerkraut
200 g dried porcini
2 onions
Vegetable oil for frying
Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
A pinch of sugar

Instructions

Prepare the dough by mixing all ingredients and kneading until smooth and elastic. Wrap in cling film and let it rest for 30 minutes.

Prepare the filling by soaking dried mushrooms in water overnight. The next day, cook them in the same water for 10 minutes. Drain the mushrooms, reserving the cooking liquid, and squeeze out any excess moisture. Pour the mushroom cooking liquid over the sauerkraut and cook until tender. Drain if needed and let it cool. Finely chop the onions and fry in vegetable oil until soft and lightly golden. Mix in the cooked sauerkraut and season with salt, freshly ground black pepper, and a pinch of sugar. Grind the cooked mushrooms using a meat grinder or chop very finely. Mix thoroughly with the sauerkraut. Let the filling cool completely.

Shape the dumplings by rolling the rested dough out thinly on a lightly floured surface. Use a glass or round pastry cutter to cut out circles. Place a small spoonful of sauerkraut and mushroom filling in the centre of each circle. Fold the dough over the filling and press the edges firmly to seal, creating half-moon-shaped dumplings. Boil them in salted water, adding in small batches to prevent sticking. Stir gently once after adding. When the dumplings rise to the surface, cook for 4–5 more minutes, until the dough is tender. Remove with a slotted spoon and drain thoroughly.

Specific features

Lithuania: Lithuania's traditional cuisine was renowned for its dumplings. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the region featured Lithuanian *virtiniai* and *šaltanosiai*, Tatar *koldūnai* and regional *koldūnai* variations, Jewish *kreplach* and *varnishkes*, and Polish *pierogi*. Unsurprisingly, these dumplings are also present on the Christmas Eve table, served in borscht as "ears" or as a standalone dish.

Poland: *Pierogi* are one of the country's most popular dishes. The dough and cooking methods vary: *pierogi* can be boiled or fried after boiling. The main variation is the filling, especially on Christmas Eve, when they are typically filled with sauerkraut and dried mushrooms, and less often with fresh white cabbage or a mix of both. Originally a traditional home-cooked dish, *pierogi* are now also commonly found in restaurants. The dried mushrooms give them a unique aroma, turning this simple, labour-intensive dish into a festive and special treat.

Ukraine: *Varenyky* are one of the most emblematic dishes of Ukrainian cuisine, deeply rooted in everyday, festive, and ritual food traditions. Their fillings reflect considerable regional diversity and may include potatoes, cheese, cabbage, mushrooms, beans, buckwheat, poppy seeds, or fruit. On Christmas Eve, people traditionally prepare special meatless *varenyky*, often filled with cabbage, mushrooms, potatoes, beans, or fish. In some parts of Ukraine, they are known by regional names such as *kreplyky* or *kraplyky*, particularly in the Ivano-Frankivsk region.











5. Baked carp

LT Keptas karpis PL Smażony karp UA Смажений короп

Beata Nicholson, 2017

Fish has historically played a key role in Christian fasting meals, replacing meat during periods like Advent, Lent, and weekly fast days. Large freshwater species such as pike, carp, tench, and perch were especially valued and became staple festive dishes. By the 19th century, whole fried or jellied carp, often served with sauces, raisins, or other accompaniments, became a Christmas Eve tradition. Today, carp (along with other freshwater fish) remains one of the most iconic Christmas Eve dishes in Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine.

Ingredients

1 large cleaned carp (about 1.5 kg)
1 lime
Fresh parsley
1 courgette
2 medium carrots
2 red onions
1 whole garlic head
2 cherry tomato sprigs
1 tablespoon olive oil
A pinch of salt
Freshly ground black pepper

Instructions

Rub the cleaned carp with salt and black pepper. Make small slits on one side of the fish skin and stuff them with thin lime slices and sprigs of parsley. Add lime to taste. Arrange thinly sliced vegetables – carrot, onion, and courgette – in a high-sided baking dish, layering twice to ensure enough for everyone, as they pair well with the carp. Season the vegetables with salt, pepper, and olive oil. Place a halved garlic bulb and some tomatoes on the stem alongside the vegetables. Position the carp next to the vegetables and bake everything in a preheated oven at 190°C. Cover with foil and bake for 45 minutes, then uncover and bake for 10 more minutes to achieve a golden crust.

Specific features

Lithuania: Fish has been a traditional Christmas Eve dish. Historically, people commonly served it in towns, monasteries, and manors. In rural areas, the popularity of eating fish increased only after World War I. Today, fish remains one of Lithuania's most distinctive Christmas Eve foods.

Poland: Carp is the most popular fish served on Christmas Eve. It has a long history on the festive menu. Typically, it is fried, but it can also be served cold in aspic or with a sweet-and-sour grey sauce, sometimes flavoured with gingerbread. Nearly all carp farmed in Poland is reserved for this annual meal.

Ukraine: Carp is a universal dish throughout the country, but preparation techniques differ. Usually, people baked or dried the fish in slices for Christmas Eve. In eastern and central Ukraine, it is fried, while in the West and South (in Odesa, some towns in Western Ukraine, and in large cities, like Kyiv and Kharkiv) the carp is stuffed.





6. Herring with onions and oil

LT Silkė su svogūnais ir aliejumi PL Śledź z cebulą i olejem UA Оселедець з цибулею та олією

Jan Krzystof Kluk, 1780

Salted herring became a key fasting food because it preserved well and travelled easily inland. Historical menus list it boiled, fried, or paired with other fasting dishes, especially when meat and dairy were avoided. By the late 19th and notably the 20th century, herring became a Christmas Eve tradition, served with onions, oil, vegetables, or marinades in various variations.

Ingredients

1 cleaned salted herring or 400 g salted herring fillets
2 medium onions (about 250 g)
3 tablespoons olive oil
1–2 tablespoons vinegar
½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

Instructions

Taste a small piece of the herring fillet to assess its saltiness. If it's too salty, soak the fillets in cold water for 30 to 60 minutes, or longer if needed. Drain and pat dry thoroughly. Cut the fillets crosswise into bite-sized portions, about 2–3 cm wide. Peel the onions and slice them into thin rings or half-rings. Place the onions in a bowl, add oil and vinegar, and gently toss to soften slightly. Arrange the herring pieces on a serving plate, then generously sprinkle the onions over them. Season with freshly ground black pepper, and drizzle with olive oil and vinegar to taste. Serve immediately, or let it sit for 30–60 minutes to let the flavours meld.

Specific features

Lithuania: Herring dishes gained popularity on Christmas Eve after World War I and are now a staple of the holiday meal.

Poland: Certain features stand out, especially cold dishes featuring marinated herring, which are integral to the Polish Christmas Eve menu. The most common preparation involves herring with oil and onions, occasionally mixed with other ingredients. Locally produced oils such as rapeseed, hemp, or linseed – typically cold-pressed – often add a unique flavour and serve as subtle, aromatic seasonings.

Ukraine: Salted fish, from rivers and the sea, was central to Ukrainian food tradition. In the 16th and 17th centuries, there was a thriving trade in Baltic herring, and herring appeared at the table. Depending on the region, herring, mackerel, or Danube herring (known locally as "*dunaika*") were served at the table. It's hard to say exactly when herring became a staple of the Ukrainian Christmas table, but by the 19th century, it was already widespread.





Christmas Eve in Lithuania

Christmas Eve in Lithuania is known as Kūčios. *Kūčia* – the Christmas Eve wheat dish with poppy seeds and honey – is one of the most important dishes of this celebration. *Kūčia* is one of the oldest Lithuanian dishes, known from the 1573 *Wolfenbüttel Postil* manuscript in Lithuanian. One sermon in the *Postil* discusses various folk superstitions and states that Lithuanians perform rituals on Christmas Eve "...with *kūčia*, of peas, with wheat, with honey mixed...". The word – both the dish and the celebration – appears in various later Lithuanian historical sources.

The word *"kūčia"* entered Lithuanian from Byzantine Greek via present-day Ukraine during the era of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. It is derived from the Greek words κουκκί (bean) or κόκκος (grain). A similar dish in Greek Orthodox culture is called *koliva* (κόλλυβα). In Byzantine culture, this meal commemorates one's ancestors. Lithuanian culture has preserved this meaning on Christmas Eve. On Christmas Eve, family members would get together to eat *kūčia*, which is why the dish's name became directly associated with the celebration. *Kūčia* was eaten on Christmas Eve in the homes of people from all social strata, from poor peasants to the Lithuanian nobility and rulers, from the 16th century to the present.

Christmas Eve in Lithuania is a celebration featuring many specific dishes. Although Christianity has not established a tradition of ritual dishes, many plants and animals carry definite Christian symbolism. Consequently, the festive table combines Christian tradition with local gastronomy, which has been incorporated into the Christian customs. Lithuanian Christmas Eve dishes are often simple in composition and retain elements of relatively austere culinary traditions, some of which can be traced back to the Middle Ages and the Early Modern period. Christmas Eve and Christmas Day mark the transition between periods of strict fasting and times of abundant, festive meal consumption. During Lent, recipes replaced animal milk with almond, poppy seed, or hemp milk; butter with olive oil; and animal fat with hemp, poppy seed, or linseed oil. Therefore, traditionally, in many families in Lithuania (even non-religious ones), the Christmas Eve meal consists of grains, boiled, smoked, or baked fish, mushrooms, wild berries, nuts, apples, poppy or hemp seeds, and dried fruit; however, none of the dishes contains meat, animal fats, or dairy products.



Beginning of the Christmas Eve supper in the Gelčiai family, Lithuania

Some dishes – *kūčia*, *kūčiukai*, and poppy seed milk – are only made once a year, for Christmas Eve supper. Some Christmas Eve dishes have their roots in a particularly archaic culinary tradition. Kissel is one such dish. Other dishes might also be served during other calendar or family celebrations. On a traditional Lithuanian Christmas Eve table, we usually find several freshwater fish dishes prepared in different ways. These may range from fried or smoked fish to stuffed pike. Herring dishes are also popular. They are served with various dressings: fried carrots and onions, fried onions with mushrooms, boiled beetroot and mayonnaise, raw apples, fresh onions and oil. The third category includes dishes made with pickled or dried mushrooms. These might include dumplings, buns fried in oil or baked in the oven, or a mushroom salad with onions and sour cream. Usually, you'll also find other salads on the table, made from boiled root vegetables (carrots, beetroot, potatoes), pickled cucumbers, and tinned green peas, dressed with sour cream or mayonnaise. Boiled peas or beans are often served on the table. In some families, borscht with small dumplings known as "little ears" is eaten on Christmas Eve. Such a wide variety of foods from nature is a characteristic feature of Lithuanian culinary traditions. In the Middle Ages, the Lithuanian state was established around Vilnius. This region has particularly poor soil, but is rich in forests, rivers, and lakes. The poor soil meant food shortages and a need to rely on nature for abundance. As the Lithuanian state began, such a culinary tradition became an integral part of Lithuanian haute cuisine. We can also see this blending of cultural and natural ingredients in contemporary Lithuanian cuisine.

The Christmas Eve table also shows noticeable regional and cultural differences in Lithuania. In the western region of Samogitia, we find hemp salt and a cold soup made from onions and herring – known as *cibulynė*; in the south-eastern region of Dzūkija, we find flatbreads known as *lamancai*. Protestant families use a different menu because they follow different fasting traditions. In Lithuanian Lutheran families, alongside the kissel, the Christmas Eve meal might also include



Sharing the Christmas wafer in the Vainučiai family, Lithuania

peas with meat sauce, roast duck or goose, beer and milk soup, a cake (called *pyragas*), gingerbread, and a gift for everyone – a plate of biscuits, sweets, nuts, and apples. Some dishes may also have symbolised cultural differences between Catholics and Lutherans in western Lithuania (the region called *Mažoji Lietuva* – Lithuania Minor). These included oblong poppy seed cakes (called *Mohnkeilchen*), the presence of which on the Christmas Eve table indicated that the household was Catholic.

One key element of contemporary Christmas Eve celebrations in Lithuania is preparing the meals together with all family members. This can take several days. Usually, family members agree among themselves who will prepare which dishes. They serve the prepared dishes at the table.

Usually, before the meal, the number of dishes on the table is counted – there should be at least twelve different ones. The most respected or eldest member of the family starts supper. In religious families, dinner begins with a joint prayer and the sharing of the Christmas wafer (Lith. *plotkelė*, *kalėdaitis*). After that, everyone must taste a little of every dish on the table to ensure that the coming year will be happy and prosperous. After supper, usually, a small portion of each dish is left on the table for the souls of deceased family members.



1. Christmas Eve poppy seed biscuits – kūčiukai

Pranė Grinkevičienė, 1936

***Kūčiukai* are among the oldest and most distinctive foods on the Lithuanian Christmas Eve table, made exclusively for Christmas Eve. Historically, they could be boiled or baked. Today they are usually made from yeast dough with poppy seeds. Traditionally prepared from simple fasting ingredients, *kūčiukai* are closely associated with grain, abundance and remembrance of deceased ancestors. They are most commonly eaten soaked in poppy seed milk (*aguonpienis*). Their many regional names and variations reflect this ceremonial food's deep roots in Lithuanian Christmas Eve culture.**

Ingredients

250 ml lukewarm water
15 g fresh yeast (or approximately 5 g dried yeast)
50 g granulated sugar
120 g poppy seeds
500–600 g all-purpose flour, as needed

Instructions

Place the poppy seeds in a bowl and pour boiling water over them. Let sit for 10–15 minutes, then drain carefully through a fine sieve. Cool the seeds. Prepare the yeast mixture by pouring lukewarm water into a large bowl and crumbling in the fresh yeast. Add about 150 g of flour and mix until you get a thick, smooth batter. Cover and let sit in a warm spot for 15–20 minutes. Add the sugar and drained poppy seeds to the yeast mixture. Gradually mix in the remaining flour. When the dough becomes firm enough to handle, transfer it to a lightly floured surface and knead for 8–10 minutes. Continue adding flour until the dough is firm yet elastic and no longer sticks heavily to your hands. Place the dough in a bowl, cover with a clean kitchen towel, and let rise in a warm area for about 45–60 minutes, until it visibly expands. The dough should rise slightly; it doesn't need to double in size. Preheat the oven to 180°C (160°C fan). Divide the dough into several portions. Roll each into a thin rope about 1–1.5 cm in diameter. Cut the ropes into small pieces approximately 1.5–2 cm long. Arrange on baking trays lined with paper, leaving space between each piece. Bake for 10–15 minutes, until lightly golden and firm. For a crunchier, drier texture typical of traditional Christmas Eve *kūčiukai*, bake slightly longer at a lower temperature. Transfer to a wire rack and cool completely.





2. Poppy seed milk – aguonpienis

Traditional recipe dating back to the 17th century

During Lent, people removed dairy products from tables and kitchens, replacing them with plant-based "milks". Wealthy households often used almond milk, while others used alternatives like poppy seeds or hemp. Today poppy-seed milk (*aguonpienis*) is a distinctive Lithuanian Christmas Eve dish. When sweetened with honey or sugar, it becomes a festive "soup" traditionally served with *kūčiukai*. This mix of grains, poppy seeds, and honey retains some of the oldest traditions of the Kūčios meal.

Ingredients

200 g poppy seeds
1 litre water, plus extra water for soaking
30–50 g sugar or honey, or to taste

Instructions

Soak the poppy seeds in a large bowl, covering them generously with warm water. Soak for at least 3–4 hours, or ideally overnight, to soften the seeds and make them easier to grind. Afterwards, drain the soaked seeds through a fine-mesh sieve. Pass them through a meat grinder with a fine plate two or three times until they form a moist, pale paste that begins to release a whitish "milk". Alternatively, you can use a *makutra*, mortar and pestle, or food processor. Transfer the ground poppy seeds to a large bowl and mix in sugar or honey thoroughly. Taste and add more sweetener if you want a sweeter drink. Gradually pour about 1 litre of cool, boiled, or drinking water into the mixture, stirring continuously. Adjust the water amount to achieve your preferred consistency. Traditional *aguonpienis* should be drinkable or spoonable over *kūčiukai* (similar to milk), while still having a noticeable poppy seed concentration. Let the mixture stand for 20–30 minutes, stirring occasionally, to let the flavours and the poppy seed milk fully disperse. Serve chilled or at room temperature.



3. Herring with carrots and onions – silkė su morkomis ir svogūnais

Traditional recipe dating back to the early 20th century

Salted herring has been part of Lithuanian tradition since the Middle Ages. It served as a Lenten dish mainly for the upper classes, often prepared in urban, manor, and monastery kitchens. In contrast, less affluent townspeople and villagers typically consumed pulses like peas and beans, as well as grain- and flour-based foods, seasoned with vegetable oil during Lent. The Christmas Eve feast traditionally focused on freshwater fish prepared in various styles, excluding herring. It only gained popularity for Christmas after World War I. A common Lithuanian way to serve herring is to place it at the bottom of the plate and top it with a fruit- or vegetable-based dressing, such as one made from onions and carrots.

Ingredients

- 1 cleaned salted herring or 400 g salted herring fillets
- 2 medium onions (approximately 250 g)
- 1 medium carrot (about 250 g)
- 3 tablespoons oil
- Salt to taste

Instructions

Slice the herring crosswise into pieces about 2–3 cm wide. Peel the onions and cut them into thin rings or half-rings. Peel the carrots and grate them coarsely. Heat around 50 ml of oil in a frying pan over medium-low heat. Add the onions and cook gently for 7–10 minutes, stirring occasionally, until they are soft and translucent. They may turn lightly golden but should not brown too much. Mix in the grated carrots and cook for another 8–10 minutes, stirring regularly, until the carrots are tender but still a bit firm. Season with salt to taste (adjust based on the herring's saltiness; if the herring is salty, use less salt in the dressing). Remove from heat and let the onion and carrot mixture cool completely, as warm vegetables should not be combined with the herring. Arrange the herring pieces on a serving dish and generously top with the cooled onion and carrot mixture. Serve the herring immediately, or let it rest for 30–60 minutes to let the flavours meld.





4. Hemp salt – kanapių druska

Traditional recipe dating back to the 19th century

Hemp salt (*kanapių druska*) is a traditional Lithuanian fasting food made from lightly toasted hemp seeds ground with salt. In peasant cuisine, especially during Advent and Lent when meat, dairy, and eggs were avoided, hemp was crucial. Rich in fat and protein, hemp seeds were used to make milk, oil, and simple dishes. People often enjoyed hemp salt with boiled potatoes or grain dishes, and it could also be served on Christmas Eve as part of a meatless meal. While commonly sprinkled on boiled potatoes, it is also used to season dishes like herring, bean, and mushroom salads, or simply sprinkled on black bread.

Ingredients

200 g whole hemp seeds
1 spoon salt, or to taste

Instructions

Place the hemp seeds in a dry frying pan. Heat over medium heat, toasting for 3–5 minutes while stirring or shaking frequently for even heating. When fragrant and nutty, the seeds are ready. Be attentive, as they can burn quickly. Remove from heat and transfer to a plate or bowl to cool for a few minutes. Next, grind the toasted seeds in a mortar using a pestle until they become a fine, slightly oily meal. Traditionally, seeds are pounded by hand, but you can also use a spice grinder or food processor – pulse briefly to avoid turning them into a paste. After grinding, add salt and mix or grind briefly again for even distribution. Taste and add more salt if needed.





5. Beetroot vinaigrette salad – burokėlių mišrainė

Beata Nicholson, 2011

Beetroot has been known in Lithuania since the Middle Ages. However, beetroot salad is a relatively new dish, gaining popularity about 100 years ago. During the interwar period, Lithuania focused significantly on modernising daily life, including gastronomic culture. Housewife training courses were held in larger villages and towns, and information spread through the press and cookbooks. This influenced the Christmas Eve table, with some traditional dishes disappearing and new ones emerging. Beetroot salad exemplifies this modernisation, showing that tradition persists as long as it evolves with social and cultural changes. Like most dishes, it comes in various versions– some add pickled cucumbers or use beans instead of lentils, while others omit dried fruit.

Ingredients

- 4 roasted or boiled beetroots
- 150 g dark green lentils (boiled with thyme, celery, half an onion, a bay leaf, and black peppercorns)
- 50 ml olive oil for frying
- Optional onion (fry or substitute with mushrooms and fruit)
- Handful of dried porcini mushrooms (soaked in water for 10 minutes)
- Dried apples and pears
- Black peppercorns
- A pinch of salt
- Lemon juice

Instructions

Add the lentils to a saucepan with thyme, celery, half an onion, a bay leaf, and a few black peppercorns. Cover generously with water and simmer for about 30 minutes, or until tender but still maintaining their shape. Be careful not to overcook. Drain and let cool. Soak the dried porcini mushrooms in hot water for around 10 minutes until softened, then drain and chop finely. Finely chop the dried apples and pears. If they are very dry or hard, soak them briefly in warm water, then drain thoroughly. In a frying pan, heat the olive oil over low heat. If using extra onion, chop it finely and gently fry until soft and translucent. Add the chopped porcini mushrooms, dried apples, and pears, and cook gently until everything softens and the flavours blend. Season with salt and freshly ground black pepper. Remove from heat and cool. Cut the cooked or roasted beets into small cubes or bite-sized pieces. Mix the beets and cooled lentils in a large bowl, then fold in the cooled onion, mushroom, and fruit mixture. Toss gently to combine evenly. Add lemon juice for acidity, or season with a little balsamic vinegar if desired. Taste and adjust salt and black pepper as needed. Serve at room temperature or slightly chilled.





6. Buns with mushrooms – bandelės su grybais

Justinas Kapkovičius, 2026

Mushrooms played a vital role in fasting cuisine when meat, dairy, and eggs were not available. They enhanced the flavour and texture of soups, porridges, sauces, and fillings, whether fresh, salted, or dried. Mushrooms are also frequently used as fillings for various buns, pastries, and dumplings. These dishes varied in dough type – made from different cereal flours, whether yeast-leavened, sourdough, or plain – the filling mixture (often combined with other ingredients), and preparation methods like boiling, frying, or baking. Mushroom-filled buns, crafted from simple yeast dough and either baked or fried, evolved into a festive Christmas Eve tradition, turning this humble forest ingredient into a special dish.

Ingredients

- 450 g all-purpose flour
- 1 tablespoon salt
- 6 g baking powder (2 tsp)
- 240 ml water
- 3 g dried yeast (1 tsp)
- 80 ml natural yoghurt or sour milk
- 200 g fresh or preserved mushrooms
- Fresh thyme to taste
- Salt to taste
- Freshly ground black pepper to taste
- 20 ml olive oil

Instructions

In a large bowl, whisk together the flour, salt, and baking powder. In a separate bowl, combine the yeast and yoghurt with the room-temperature water. Gradually incorporate the dry ingredients into the wet mixture, kneading until the dough is smooth. Don't worry if the dough feels soft and lively. Cover the bowl with a clean kitchen towel and let it rise for several hours. Meanwhile, blanch the mushrooms in salted boiling water for a few minutes, then drain and rinse under cold water. Slice the mushrooms and season with salt, black pepper, thyme, and a touch of olive oil; mix well. Divide the risen dough into approximately 100 g portions, shaping each into small, flat rounds resembling mini flatbreads. Top each with seasoned mushrooms (another method is to stuff the buns with mushrooms, in a similar way to dumplings). Preheat the oven to 200°C and bake for about 20 minutes, or until the buns are risen and golden brown. Serve warm or at room temperature.





Christmas Eve in Poland

Christmas Eve in Poland has a long history. For centuries, many different vigils were solemnly observed, that is, days preceding the most important feast days of the year. Today, when we speak of *Wigilia*, we mean only this one day: the day before Christmas. The name *Wigilia* derives from the Latin *vigilia*, meaning a vigil or watch. In the traditional Roman rite, a *vigilia* is the liturgical day preceding a feast.

The many vigils of the past, together with long and frequent periods of fasting during which meat was forbidden, required great creativity and ingenuity. On such days, the wealthy ate fresh fish, oysters and various imported foods, especially dried fruits and nuts, citrus fruits, spices from the East, almonds and cane sugar. Most people could afford, at best, preserved fish, particularly salted herring, dried cod (stockfish) and the so-called *wyzina*, or dried beluga sturgeon. The latter was caught in the Dnieper and Dniester rivers, which flow through the Ruthenian lands of the former Polish-Lithuanian-Ruthenian Commonwealth. Instead of luxury foods imported from the Mediterranean, poorer tables featured mainly what was available locally in winter: dried fruit, especially apples, plums and pears, as well as poppy seeds, honey, mushrooms, beetroot, sauerkraut, peas, various groats and other grain products. Over time, the two traditions gradually blended, forming a shared menu. Alongside familiar mushroom soup or beetroot borscht, *kutia* appeared, made from boiled wheat or another grain with dried fruits and nuts; local flour and honey were used to bake gingerbread flavoured with spices from the East, while raisins and almonds were added to carp.

Besides the ingenuity of cooks and housewives, who tried to bring variety to the fasting dishes they prepared so often, another important factor was the much greater diversity of crops, livestock and wildlife than exists today. Christmas Eve tables featured many fish species. Besides the popular carp, the most common were pike, tench, perch, bream, crucian carp and eel, as well as vimba, asp and sturgeon. Sturgeon, once caught in great numbers, eventually disappeared completely from Polish rivers. Today, thanks to the development of sturgeon farming and efforts to reintroduce the species into the wild, this fish is returning to our tables.

The Christmas Eve supper is, above all, a family celebration and an opportunity to gather around the table. For centuries, sharing food brought people together, and gathering around the table formed the basis of social bonds. Today, we often eat together in this way only on special occasions. On such occasions, we also return to old recipes and dishes, and at Christmas, we may spend several days in the kitchen, carefully preparing a family meal from start to finish. Many of these dishes are eaten only once a year. Although they sometimes also appear at Christmas gatherings organised by companies, workplaces, various organisations and



Teaching traditional herring preparation in the Marianna Król Family, Góra Kalwaria, Poland

associations, even several weeks before Christmas, beetroot borscht with uszka, small mushroom-filled dumplings, *kutia*, cabbage with peas, Jewish-style carp, almond soup and hemp soup are associated above all with Christmas Eve.

Dishes that reach far back into our shared Polish, Lithuanian and Ukrainian history bear witness to a common heritage that extends beyond family ties, regional identity, religious affiliation or nationality. Many of them also resemble Jewish dishes. One example is the famous Jewish-style carp, a stuffed fish prepared with raisins and almonds and then served in aspic. This dish resembles one version of the well-known Jewish *gefilte fish*.

Interestingly, this way of preparing carp has a very long history. Over time, it was almost forgotten in Polish cuisine, but survived primarily in Jewish cuisine. In Polish tradition, people returned to it almost exclusively on Christmas Eve. Recipes for carp "sausages" can already be found in the oldest Polish cookery book, dating from around 1540. Although the book itself has not survived, we recently discovered a manuscript copy. We published it as part of a series of the oldest Polish cookery books, published by the Museum of King Jan III's Palace in Warsaw.

The classic stuffed carp, which over time came to be known as Jewish-style carp as a Christmas Eve dish, was described in *Compendium ferculorum albo zebranie potraw*, a cookery book from 1682, which, in our Wilanów edition, also appeared in English.

Today's Christmas Eve menu still preserves traces of the old regional diversity. In everyday life, we often eat similar food today, not only in different regions of Poland but also in different countries across Europe and, increasingly, in many parts of the world. On this special occasion, however, we return to old regional versions of the menu. When spouses come from different regions, or even simply from families that maintain different culinary traditions, choosing the right menu can be a real challenge. This is sometimes described as a battle between mushroom soup and beetroot borscht, but many other culinary disputes and choices exist. In southern



Making traditional dumplings at the Sierpc Open-Air Museum, Poland

Poland, in Upper Silesia, one can still find, for example, a hemp-seed soup rarely encountered elsewhere, as well as *moczka* or *bryja*, a thick dish made with gingerbread and a variety of dried fruits and nuts. In western Poland, in the Wielkopolska region, almond soup, popular for centuries, can still sometimes be found. In eastern Poland, people prepare *kutia* and poppy-seed noodles, and *pierogi* are also more common. Around Toruń and in the Pomerania region, people serve carp in a gingerbread sauce, while in the Kujawy region, vegetable salad is very popular.

Under the strict fasting rules of the past, not only meat but also dairy products were forbidden. Vegetable oils, therefore, played an important role in the Christmas Eve menu: expensive imported olive oil, local hemp or linseed oil, local but luxurious poppy-seed oil, rapeseed oil pressed especially for Christmas Eve, and other oils often produced on the farm itself. Since most rural people did not usually eat expensive fish, which they generally had to buy, the Christmas Eve supper was predominantly vegetarian and often even vegan. Despite its lavishness and abundance, it remained relatively light and easy to digest. Yet it was, and remains, something extraordinary: the one moment in the year for coming together, anticipation, joy, and happiness.

The Christmas Eve tradition remains very much alive in Poland. It is a time when entire families gather for a festive yet meatless meal, as no meat is served until midnight. The table often features traditional dishes that Poles eat only once a year. Christmas Eve supper begins when the first star appears in the sky. Family members share the Christmas wafer, exchange good wishes and then sit down at the table, with a little hay placed beneath the tablecloth. Everyone also looks forward to the presents that Father Christmas (Santa Claus, *Święty Mikołaj*) leaves under the beautifully decorated and illuminated Christmas tree on Christmas Eve.



1. Mushroom soup – zupa grzybowa

Lucyna Ćwierczakiewiczowa, 1908

Mushrooms have long been a key ingredient in traditional rural Christmas Eve meals and remain popular in various dishes today. Previously, they served as a simple, locally accessible substitute for meat, but now they are regarded as a special festive ingredient. Dried porcini mushrooms, the most prized type, are commonly used to impart a rich flavour and distinctive aroma to soups. Although frozen mushrooms are also sometimes utilised, the scent of dried mushrooms remains one of the aromas most strongly linked to Christmas Eve in Poland.

Ingredients

For the soup:

20 dried wild mushrooms
(about 40–50 g, preferably porcini)
2 litres water
2 medium peeled carrots
1 peeled parsley root
A quarter of a small celery root (or 2 celery stalks)
2 medium onions, left whole
4 allspice berries
6 black peppercorns
2 bay leaves
1 to 1.5 teaspoons salt (adjust as needed)
2 to 3 tablespoons white wine vinegar for a tangy flavour, or modify to taste

For the roux:

2 tablespoons butter
2 tablespoons plain flour
Optionally, 1 small, finely chopped onion

Option A – Homemade noodles:

150 g fresh ribbon or egg noodles

Option B – Egg-coated groats (for the sweet version):

150 g of fine barley groats
(or fine semolina-like groats)
1 egg
Serve with freshly ground black pepper



Instructions

Place the dried mushrooms in a bowl and cover with boiling water. Soak for 15–20 minutes. Drain and rinse under cold running water to remove grit, then set aside. Next, transfer the mushrooms to a large saucepan with 2 litres of fresh water. Bring to a gentle boil and simmer for about 30 minutes. Add carrots, parsley root, celery, whole onions, allspice, peppercorns, and bay leaves. Continue simmering gently for another 45–60 minutes, until the mushrooms are tender. Strain the broth through a fine sieve to remove the vegetables and spices, then discard them. Remove the mushrooms from the sieve, slice thinly, and return to the broth. Season with salt.

For a sour version (traditional fasting soup), gradually add the vinegar until the soup develops a pleasantly sharp flavour. To prepare a roux, melt the butter in a small pan. If using onion, fry it until golden. Stir in the flour and cook for 1–2 minutes without browning. Whisk a few spoonfuls of hot soup into the roux, then return everything to the saucepan and stir until smooth. Bring the soup to a gentle boil. Add the noodles directly to the soup and cook until tender, based on their usual cooking time.

Serve with a liberal sprinkle of black pepper.

For a milder ("sweet") version, omit the vinegar. Make the butter-and-flour roux without frying the onion, then mix it into the soup as described. Replace the noodles with the prepared egg-coated groats (see below) and cook until tender, about 8–10 minutes.

Egg-coated groats: First, place the fine groats in a shallow bowl or on a plate. Add the whole egg and stir well with a wooden spoon until all grains are lightly coated. Spread the mixture on a tray or plate and let it dry completely at room temperature, or in a very low oven (around 40–50°C) with the door slightly open. Once dry, crumble the grains by hand before adding them to the soup.

Variation with fresh mushrooms: You can make the soup with about 500–600 g of fresh wild mushrooms instead of dried. Clean and slice the mushrooms, then simmer them with the vegetables as described. Historically, people usually prepared fresh mushroom soup only in the mild ("sweet") version, without adding vinegar.



2. Jewish-style carp – karp po żydowsku

Elżbieta Kiewnarska, 1930

Carp, the most popular fish on Christmas Eve, has appeared in many forms. One well-known version is called "Jewish-style carp", which is typically stuffed, served in aspic with raisins and almonds, and sometimes seasoned with aromatic spices. The recipe here adds horseradish, along with sugar and vinegar, creating a unique flavour combination that, though considered bold and unusual today, is usually reserved for festive occasions. The Jewish community maintained this tradition for a long time, which helped associate this dish with Jewish cuisine. The term "Jewish-style carp" also applies to stuffed fish and fish balls like *gefilte* fish.

Ingredients

1 large carp (approximately 2–2.5 kg), cleaned and gutted
2 tablespoons coarse salt, sifted
500 g onions, finely sliced
20 g blanched almonds (roughly chopped)
40 g Smyrna raisins
½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
2 sugar cubes or about 8 g granulated sugar
700–900 ml water (just enough to cover the fish)
Grated fresh horseradish (optional, for serving)
2–3 tablespoons white vinegar (optional, for serving with horseradish)



Instructions

If necessary, scale and gut the carp, then rinse it thoroughly and pat dry. Rub the fish inside and out with 1 tablespoon of coarse salt, and let it rest for 1 hour to firm the flesh and add light seasoning. After salting, rinse the fish under cold water and dry it well. Cut the carp into thick crosswise steaks (about 3–4 cm). In a large, heavy-bottomed saucepan, layer the sliced onions evenly on the bottom. Sprinkle the onions with chopped almonds and raisins. Arrange the carp steaks in a single layer on top of the onion mixture. Season with the remaining salt and black pepper, then tuck the sugar cubes among the fish. Add enough water (around 700–900 ml) to nearly cover the carp without submerging it completely. Cover tightly, bring to a gentle simmer, then reduce heat to very low. Cook slowly for 1½ hours, avoiding vigorous boiling to keep the fish whole and allow the onions to create a rich sauce. Carefully lift out each carp steak with a wide spatula, arranging them on a deep platter, optionally shaping them like a whole fish. Strain the cooking liquid, onions, raisins, and almonds through a coarse sieve or food mill, pressing to extract maximum flavour. Spread the strained onion mixture over the fish and pour the remaining liquid around it. Let the dish cool completely, then refrigerate for several hours or overnight. As it cools, the carp's gelatin will set the liquid into a delicate aspic.

Serve chilled or at a cool room temperature. Traditionally, grated fresh horseradish combined with a bit of vinegar can be served on the side, offering a sharp contrast to the fish's mild sweetness.

3. Peas with sauerkraut – groch z kapustą

Elżbieta Kiewnarska, 1941

Peas with sauerkraut is a traditional dish made from local ingredients typically available in winter and consumed during fasting periods. Nutritious, protein-packed peas are paired with sauerkraut, which provides plenty of vitamin C. The meat version often included pork, sometimes with added pork back fat. During fasting periods, including Christmas Eve, they used only vegetable oil.
The version here is simply seasoned with salt and pepper, though a bay leaf may sometimes be added for extra aroma.

In this dish, the peas are cooked until very soft and mixed with the sauerkraut, creating a flavourful combination where both ingredients remain distinct. In Polish, *groch z kapustą* not only describes the dish but also signifies a jumble, disorder, or chaos.

Ingredients

200 g dried yellow peas
500 g sauerkraut
2 tablespoons vegetable oil or 30 g salted pork (or diced pork fat)
1 tablespoon plain flour
Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
Water for soaking and cooking

Instructions

Place the dried peas in a large bowl and cover with plenty of cold water. Soak overnight (8–12 hours). Drain and rinse the peas before cooking. Transfer the soaked peas to a saucepan, cover with fresh water, and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat and simmer gently for 60–90 minutes, or until the peas are very tender but still hold their shape. Avoid overcooking until they become mushy. Drain if necessary, then season the peas with salt. If the sauerkraut is particularly sour or salty, rinse it briefly and drain well.

Heat the vegetable oil in a large saucepan, or cook the diced salt pork until it releases its fat. Add the sauerkraut and simmer over low heat for 30–40 minutes, stirring occasionally. If necessary, add a little water to prevent sticking.

Sprinkle the flour over the sauerkraut and stir well to mix evenly. Cook for an additional 2–3 minutes to eliminate the raw flour taste. Lightly season with freshly ground black pepper. Incorporate the cooked peas into the sauerkraut, gently mixing until evenly distributed. Warm the mixture over low heat for 5–10 minutes to let the flavours meld. Taste and adjust the seasoning with extra salt and pepper as needed.

Serve hot as a vegetarian main course prepared with vegetable oil, or as a side dish to roasted or smoked meats when made with salt pork.



4. Sauerkraut with dried mushrooms – kapusta z grzybami

Elżbieta Kiewnarska, 1941

Cabbage with mushrooms is a traditional winter pairing made from locally sourced ingredients. True to tradition, both are used in their preserved states. Dried mushrooms are mixed into sauerkraut, imparting a distinctive flavour and aroma. While modern versions might use fresh produce, this practice remains uncommon. Classic preparation methods continue to define festive dishes.

Ingredients

1.5 kg sauerkraut
6–8 large dried wild mushrooms (preferably porcini)
250 ml water for soaking the mushrooms
4 tablespoons vegetable oil
2 medium onions, finely chopped
2 tablespoons plain flour
3–4 tablespoons cold water for mixing with the flour
1 tablespoon sugar
Salt, if needed
Freshly ground black pepper (optional)

Instructions

Put the dried mushrooms in a bowl and cover with about 250 ml of water. Soak overnight (8–12 hours).

Save the soaking liquid to flavour the dish. If the sauerkraut is too sour, rinse it briefly and drain.

Heat the vegetable oil in a large, heavy-bottomed saucepan or casserole over medium heat.

Add the chopped onions and cook for 5–7 minutes, stirring occasionally, until they are softened but not browned. Incorporate the sauerkraut and stir well to coat it with the oil and onions. Cover the pan and simmer on low heat for approximately 30–40 minutes, stirring occasionally. When the sauerkraut is halfway cooked and starting to soften, add the soaked mushrooms along with all their soaking liquid. Stir gently, cover, and continue simmering on low for another 45–60 minutes, or until the sauerkraut is fully tender and the mushrooms are soft. Stir in the sugar. In a small bowl, whisk together the flour and cold water until smooth. Gradually add the mixture to the sauerkraut, stirring constantly to avoid lumps. Bring the mixture to a gentle boil and cook for 2–3 minutes until the sauce thickens slightly. Taste and season as needed; you may not need additional salt depending on the sauerkraut's saltiness, and you can add freshly ground black pepper if desired.

Carefully remove the whole mushrooms from the sauerkraut, then transfer the sauerkraut to a warmed serving dish. Arrange the whole mushrooms decoratively on top before serving.



5. Poppy seed roll – makowiec

Lucyna Ćwierczakiewiczowa, 1908

Another popular Christmas Eve food, then and now, was poppy seeds. They were added to various types of noodles, cakes and biscuits. Poppy seeds were an important ingredient in *kutia* (a sweet dish made from cooked grains). They pressed a highly prized oil from them, and finally, ground poppy seeds mixed with dried fruit and nuts, honey, and shortbread biscuits were served on the Christmas Eve table. They also prepared poppy seed soup for Christmas Eve.

***Makowiec*, or poppy seed cake, comes in various styles. It can look like a tart, with a thick poppy seed layer on a thin pastry sheet, or be shaped as a yeast-raised strudel or a shortcrust strudel. Typically, it includes dried fruits and nuts, such as candied citrus peel and raisins. This combination highlights its festive character, merging folk traditions of seasonal, local ingredients with a refined taste for the exotic.**

Ingredients

Dough:

250 ml whole milk, plus an additional 100 ml for activating the yeast
40 g fresh yeast or 14 g active dry yeast
750 g strong white bread flour, sifted
6 egg yolks
200 g caster sugar
200 g melted and cooled unsalted butter
1 teaspoon salt
75 g seedless raisins
40 g blanched almonds, cut into thin strips
For glazing:
1 beaten egg

Poppy seed filling:

500 g blue poppy seeds
180–220 g sugar or 180 g honey
15 g finely ground almonds (or ½ teaspoon natural bitter almond extract)
1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
75 g Turkish (golden) raisins

Glaze:

150 g icing sugar
2–3 tablespoons hot water
1 teaspoon lemon juice (optional)

Instructions

Twelve hours before baking, soak the poppy seeds in boiling water in a bowl until fully covered; then leave to soak overnight. Drain well. Grind the seeds two or three times using a poppy-seed grinder or a fine-plate meat grinder. Alternatively, process in a food processor until the mixture is moist and paste-like. Mix in the sugar (or honey), ground bitter almonds, cinnamon, and raisins. Set aside.

Heat 250 ml of milk just below boiling. In a large bowl, combine 150 g of flour. Pour the hot milk over the flour and whisk vigorously until it forms a smooth, thick paste. Let it cool until lukewarm. Warm the remaining 100 ml of milk until lukewarm and dissolve the fresh yeast in it. Add this to the cooled flour mixture. Cover and set aside in a warm place for 30–45 minutes, until bubbly and well risen. Beat the egg yolks with the sugar until thick, pale, and creamy. Mix this into the risen starter. Stir in the melted butter and salt. Gradually add the remaining flour, stirring to form a soft dough. Turn onto a floured surface and knead for 10–15 minutes until smooth, elastic, and non-sticky, or use a stand mixer with a dough hook. Knead in the raisins and sliced almonds evenly. Place the dough in a greased bowl, cover, and let rise for 1½–2 hours until doubled in size.

Divide the dough into two equal parts. Roll each part into a rectangle about 35 × 25 cm. Spread half of the poppy seed filling evenly over each rectangle, leaving a 2 cm border around the edges. Roll the dough tightly



from the long side to create a long cylinder. Pinch the seam and ends securely shut. Place each roll seam-side down on a baking tray lined with baking paper. Cover loosely and let rise again for 30–45 minutes.

Preheat the oven to 180°C (160°C fan). Brush the rolls with beaten egg. Bake for 45–50 minutes, until deep golden brown and fully cooked. If the tops brown too fast, loosely cover them with aluminium foil in the last 15 minutes. Once baked, remove and transfer immediately to a wire rack.

Combine the icing sugar with hot water (and lemon juice, if desired) until smooth. Brush this glaze onto the warm rolls, then let it dry completely before slicing.

Let the *makowiec* cool completely before slicing. Typically enjoyed during Christmas and Easter with tea or coffee, it stays fresh for several days in an airtight container and often gains a deeper flavour by the second day.

6. Gingerbread cake – piernik

Danuta Wyrybkowska, 1937

Gingerbread, a cake made with honey and aromatic, oriental spices, is popular in Polish cuisine in wide varieties. The most renowned is the Toruń gingerbread, often crafted in decorative moulds. During Christmas and the holiday season, people typically bake small gingerbread cookies in star, moon, and Christmas tree shapes. People decorate these cookies with colourful icing and often hang them on the Christmas tree. The gingerbread dough, made from flour, honey, and spices, should rest for at least a few weeks, making its preparation the first step toward Christmas.

Ingredients

250 g honey
250 g granulated sugar
250 g coarsely chopped blanched almonds
3 large eggs
Approximately 500–550 g plain flour

Spices:

8 whole cloves, finely ground
1 cinnamon stick, finely ground
(or 2 teaspoons ground cinnamon)
6–8 black peppercorns, finely ground
1 teaspoon finely grated lemon zest
1 teaspoon finely grated orange zest

Leavening options:

15 g potassium carbonate (potash) dissolved in 120 ml hot water
10 g baker's ammonia (ammonium carbonate) or a modern substitute
2 teaspoons baking powder or 1 teaspoon bicarbonate of soda

Instructions

Combine the honey and sugar in a saucepan and heat over low heat, stirring constantly until fully dissolved. Avoid boiling.

Remove from the heat, then stir in the chopped almonds. Add the ground cloves, cinnamon, black pepper, lemon zest, and orange zest, and mix well. Let the mixture cool until it is just warm.

Prepare the leavening by fully dissolving potash in hot water. In a separate bowl, beat the eggs until frothy. Whisk the bicarbonate of soda into the eggs (or skip this if you're using baker's ammonia or baking powder). Add the eggs to the honey mixture, then stir in the dissolved potash.

Prepare the dough by gradually incorporating the flour until it reaches a soft yet workable consistency. Transfer the dough to a lightly floured surface and knead for 5–10 minutes until smooth and uniform. It should be soft and slightly sticky, but able to hold its shape. Wrap it tightly in baking paper or plastic wrap and store in a cool place or refrigerate. Let it rest for 2–3 days to enhance flavour and texture by allowing the spices to fully develop. Preheat the oven to 170°C (150°C fan) and prepare a loaf or 20 × 30 cm baking tin by greasing and lining it. Roll or press the dough evenly into the tin to a thickness of about 2–3 cm. Bake for 45–55 minutes, until firm and a skewer inserted into the centre comes out clean. Cool the gingerbread in the tin for 15 minutes, then transfer to a wire rack. Once completely cooled, slice into pieces. Although it can be served immediately, its flavour deepens after several days stored in an airtight container.





Bringing of the ritual Christmas bread *"pomana"*, Ukraine

Christmas Eve in Ukraine

The Christmas holiday cycle is the most eagerly awaited period of the year for Ukrainians. People remember their ancestors, pray, and ask for peace and prosperity, and discuss plans for the future. Preparing for the holiday expresses solidarity and the effort of every family member. Before the supper begins, the table is covered with a thin layer of hay and then with a tablecloth – a reminder of the manger in which Christ was born, as well as an ancient ritual and a hope for success in the coming year. Ukrainians believe in the special symbolism of this time and therefore pay attention to any events that, in their opinion, might indicate something about the future. Dinner begins once the first star appears in the sky. After that, the oldest person or the head of the family says a short blessing and lights a candle.

The supper is meant to consist of twelve dishes. In addition to *kutia* (wheat dish with poppy seeds and honey) and *uzvar* (a dried fruit drink), depending on the region, the list includes meatless borscht, *holubtsi* (cabbage rolls), *varenyky* (dumplings), various kinds of fish, kissel, mushrooms, boiled peas, and, in some regions, *kapusniak* (cabbage soup), *pampushky* (yeast buns), and *vushka* – small dumplings with mushroom or other meatless filling, which are added to the borscht. Meatless borscht, depending on regions, is traditionally cooked with beet kvass, which gives it its rich, dark red colour, and with the vegetables – carrot, potato, cabbage, beetroot. The proportions of ingredients in the dishes and the techniques used to prepare them may vary depending on the region and family tradition. For example, in the south and Dnipro River region, they prepare fish borscht, borscht "*nastorchak*" ("tail up"). In Volyn, they make borscht with mushrooms; bean-added borsch is also widespread, and sometimes they add dried fruit. More generally, the regionality of dishes depends on climate and natural conditions. For example, in the mountainous and foothill areas of Ukraine, the table tends to be richer in mushrooms, beans, cornmeal porridge, and river fish, while in the northern regions people may add cranberries – a plant gathered in wetland areas.

At the centre of the festive table are two main elements – bread, or several kinds of bread (*kolach*, *knysh* "with a soul", "*Vasyl*", "*Malanka*", and *palianytsia* among others). Like other dishes from the table, these are carried to godparents, grandparents, *koumy* (ritual co-parents), and other relatives. The custom of carrying the supper to relatives remains popular in many regions of the country, especially among children. Bread is associated with prosperity and eternity, and its round shape evokes the solar cult as well as the continuation of the family line. At the same time, bread does not replace *kutia*, which remains a distinct Christmas dish.

Tasting the *kutia* begins immediately after the prayer. It is usually eaten first, shared among those at the table, and in the past people would even toss a spoonful up to the ceiling to find out how bountiful the harvest would be, how well the bees would swarm, or



Christmas Eve supper in Verkhovyna, Ukraine

what the prospects for marriages in the family might be. The tradition survives to this day. Many people believe that the grain symbolises the harvest, honey represents living energy, and poppy seeds stand for the souls of deceased ancestors.

As a specific, festive dish, under the Greek name "*kóllyva*", *kutia* came to Rus' from Byzantium, where it was served at funerals and on days of remembrance for the dead. In folk culinary tradition, this duality survives to this day in two parallel names: *kolyvo* – a thick, crumbly version in which the grains remain whole – and *sochyvo* – a thinner, more watery porridge; both variants are equally traditional, and which one prevails depends on regional and family traditions. Today, we find *kutia* prepared with rice, pearl barley, spelt, and even bulgur. Traditionally, however, it was made with barley, and today the classic recipe is a combination of wheat, poppy seeds, and honey. Grinding poppy seeds in a *makitra* bowl with a *makohon* pestle was once considered not only a food preparation activity but also a ritual act: this task was traditionally performed by the father of the family, who would recite a prayer while doing it.

The bowl of *kutia* is placed on the *pokut'* – the space beneath the icons, the most honoured spot in the house – or set on the table, sometimes with money placed underneath it. *Kutia* serves as both an independent dish and a dessert, and pairs beautifully with *uzvar* – a drink made from dried fruit that symbolises the soul's renewal and purification. In Ukraine, *uzvar* has long since moved beyond being merely a ritual Christmas dish and is enjoyed year-round.

In most Ukrainian regions, people bring a *didukh* into the house on Christmas Eve. This sheaf of rye, wheat, or barley symbolises the ancestors and the harvest. Most often it is the head of the household who brings the *didukh* inside, places it in the *pokut'*, and recites a short prayer wishing prosperity for the family in the coming year. The *didukh* usually stays in the house until the Feast of Jordan (Epiphany) or Presentation of the Lord, after which it is either burned in the yard or fed to livestock, and its grain may be used to begin sowing the fields – thus closing a symbolic circle of fertility in which the deceased ancestors play a key role. This blending of memory from pre-Christian traditions with the present day vividly illustrates how Ukrainian ritu-

al culture has preserved its agrarian foundation while being filled with Christian meaning. In modern Ukraine, the tradition is preserved. In the modern city, this tradition has taken on additional forms, such as festivals and competitions for making *didukhy*. However, on the other hand, as Ukrainian identity grows stronger, the culture of *didukh* is recovering and maintains its primary meaning of honouring the spirit of the family, home, and country, while recent layers of the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, like festivals and competitions, have lost their significance. The product's size or decoration became less valuable than its true essence.

In Ukraine, the traditional fish has historically been carp. In most regions, people bake it, fry it in slices, or braise it with vegetables and mushrooms. In the western part of the country, stuffed fish has also recently become popular.

A popular dish on the Ukrainian Christmas Eve table is *varenyky*. Having entered the local culinary culture from the Far East, they underwent a significant transformation and acquired numerous seasonal flavours. Their meatless, festive version usually consists of wheat-flour dough with fillings of sauerkraut or fresh cabbage, with the addition of mushrooms, beans, potatoes, buckwheat, a mix of buckwheat with potato, poppy seeds, fish and even herring. All these varieties may appear on the table at the same time. The difference in preparation technique lies in the fact that in some regions of Ukraine the dough is cut into squares; sometimes rounds are cut out using a glass, while in other cases a rope of dough is rolled out, cut into pieces, and each piece is then rolled out into a small flat disc. The difference could also be the choice of flour – wheat, buckwheat, a mix of wheat and rye flour, as well as preparation technique – steamed or boiled.

The abundance of cabbage in Ukrainian Christmas dishes is not merely a ritual choice, but above all the result of a thousand-year practice among the people of an agrarian country. The filling of *varenyky* and other dishes with vegetables, fruits, dried fruits, and berries is shaped by tradition, logistics, ease of transport, and nutritional value. For example, cabbage retained its properties in both fresh and fermented forms, and depending on its use, the dish had different tastes. This vegetable lasts well through the winter, fully meets the requirements of the fast, and tastes wonderful in *varenyky* and pastries. In addition, sauerkraut is rich in vitamin C, which in the past effectively protected people from winter vitamin deficiency.

For Ukrainians, Christmas is an unbroken tradition with a pronounced unifying, national character. In the past, everyone who lived in the same house or worked the same farmstead would sit down together at the table. Even today, Ukraine has a tradition: wherever people may be, they always return home for Christmas Eve and Christmas. The tradition has become especially meaningful as many Ukrainians live in different countries; home is where family gathers. Many people wear national costumes for the holiday and sing Christmas songs – *koliadky* and *shchedrivky*. Increasingly common in all regions of Ukraine, the tradition of vertep is being revived – somewhere it is a static nativity scene (*shopka*), somewhere it is a folk theatrical performance. Throughout the Christmas cycle, families customarily exchange and taste each other's *kutia*. People share recipes, thereby maintaining a symbolic connection between households during this period of the year that is so important to Christians. Christmas preparations, family involvement in cooking, and the ritual culture of the Christmas table form a living folk tradition that, even as it changes, grows stronger over time.

Three years have passed since the Orthodox Church of Ukraine and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church decided to move Christmas celebrations to 25 December, in line with the rest of Western Christianity. However, in Ukraine, Christmas was traditionally celebrated for a long time on both 25 December and 7 January, depending on the religious community, family, or local tradition. For example, some communities in the Odesa region practised Christmas only on 25 December. Restoring the date of Christmas celebration is symbolic of restoring something more inherent to Ukrainian culture. The Ukrainian Christmas tradition has simply returned to the norm that had characterised it for many centuries, despite the fact that this tradition was systematically destroyed during the existence of the USSR.

1. Ring-shaped festive bread – Колач

Yevhen Klopotenko, 2025

The traditional Christmas *kolach* (or *kalach*) is the principal symbol of prosperity and well-being on the Ukrainian Christmas table. It is usually baked as a large, round loaf and decorated in a distinctive way.

Ingredients

150 ml milk
150 ml whey (or skimmed milk)
15 g fresh yeast
1 teaspoon sugar
1 tablespoon flour (taken from the total amount of flour), for the starter
1 egg
1 teaspoon salt
1 tablespoon vegetable oil
35 g butter, melted
530 g plain (all-purpose) flour
1 egg yolk, for brushing

Instructions

Bring the milk and whey to a boil separately, then let both cool to 36–37°C.

Place the fresh yeast and the sugar in a large mixing bowl. Pour in the cooled milk and whey, add 1 tablespoon of the total flour, and stir until smooth. Cover and leave the starter to rise for about 30 minutes. Add the egg, salt, vegetable oil, and melted butter to the risen starter and mix well. Gradually add the remaining flour and knead until the dough forms a smooth, elastic dough. Depending on the flour's moisture content, you may need to add an additional 1–2 tablespoons of flour. Knead the dough for about 5 minutes. Cover it with a clean kitchen towel and leave it in a warm place to rise for 1 hour, or until it has increased in volume three to four times. Turn the dough out onto a lightly floured surface and divide it into two equal portions. Roll each portion into a long rope approximately 70 cm in length. Twist the two ropes together to form a braid. Join the ends of the braid to create a ring. Place the ring in a 27 cm round metal baking tin lined with baking paper, or shape it freehand on a baking tray lined with baking paper. Cover and leave to rise for 15–20 more minutes. Meanwhile, preheat the oven to 180°C. Brush the surface of the *kalach* with the egg yolk. Bake for 30–35 minutes, or until golden brown and hollow when tapped on the bottom. Allow the *kalach* to cool slightly before serving.

Traditionally, the centre of the kalach is filled with kutia (a ceremonial dish made from wheat, poppy seeds, honey, and other ingredients) or a candle is placed in the middle as part of the Christmas Eve table setting.





2. Dried fruit compote – Узвар

Marianna Dushar, 2022

***Uzvar* is a traditional compote made from dried fruits. It is an essential ritual drink served at the Ukrainian Christmas Eve dinner, though people enjoy it year-round today. *Uzvar* should not be boiled for long – the key is to let the fruit and spices infuse gently.**

Ingredients

6 litres water
800 g mixed dried apples and pears
100 g dried prunes
100 g dried apricots
100 g dried rose hips
1 cinnamon stick
4–5 whole cloves
2 allspice berries
2 black peppercorns
1 star anise
Honey, to taste (optional)

Instructions

Rinse all the dried fruit thoroughly under cold running water. Place the fruit in a large saucepan and pour in the water. Bring to a boil, then reduce the heat and simmer gently for 7–10 minutes. Add the cinnamon stick, cloves, allspice berries, black peppercorns, and star anise. Cover the saucepan and remove it from the heat. Let the *uzvar* infuse until it cools completely. Taste the drink and, if desired, sweeten it with honey. Strain the compote into a jug, discarding the fruit and spices, and chill before serving.

Serve well chilled or at room temperature. *Uzvar* is traditionally enjoyed during the Ukrainian Christmas Eve meal, but it also makes a refreshing fruit drink throughout the year.





3. Dumplings with filling – Вареники з різними начинками

Vira Yashchynska, 1928

Traditionally, in Ukraine, *varenyky* were made with different fillings depending on the season and region. Since the late 19th century, potato-filled *varenyky* have become the most common type of dumpling among Ukrainians. However, as new ingredients, such as potatoes, became available, new fillings began to appear in *varenyky*. For example, people might add mushrooms or buckwheat to the potatoes, along with herbs; they also made a cabbage filling from both fermented and fresh cabbage, with carrots, mushrooms, or other ingredients. Today, many families still serve several varieties of *varenyky* on the festive table. Sauerkraut-filled *varenyky* belong to an older tradition, while dumplings filled with sauerkraut and mushrooms are also very popular. The dough is prepared in the same way for all these variations.

Ingredients

For the filling:

- 4 cups (about 600 g) sauerkraut
- 2 medium onions, finely chopped
- 60 g butter (¼ cup)
- Salt, to taste
- Freshly ground black pepper, to taste

For the dough:

- 500 g plain (all-purpose) flour (about 3½–4 cups)
- 200–220 ml warm water
- 1 egg (optional; omit for a traditional fasting version)
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil (optional, for a more elastic dough)

To serve (optional):

- Melted butter
- Fried onions



Instructions

Place the sauerkraut in a bowl and pour boiling water over it. Leave it to stand for a few minutes, then drain well in a colander and squeeze out as much excess liquid as possible. Melt the butter in a frying pan over medium heat. Add the chopped onions and cook until soft and lightly golden. Add the prepared sauerkraut and cook for a few more minutes, stirring frequently. Season with salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste. Remove from the heat and allow the filling to cool completely before assembling the dumplings.

Sift the flour into a large mixing bowl and make a well in the centre. Pour in the warm water, then add the salt, egg (if using), and vegetable oil. Mix with a spoon first, then knead by hand for 8–10 minutes, until the dough is smooth, elastic, and no longer sticky. Shape the dough into a ball, cover it with a clean kitchen towel or plastic wrap, and leave it to rest at room temperature for 20–30 minutes. This resting period makes the dough easier to roll out.

Roll the dough out on a lightly floured surface to 2–3 mm thick. Using a glass or round pastry cutter, cut out dough circles. Place about 1 teaspoon of the cooled sauerkraut filling in the centre of each circle. Fold the dough over to form a half-moon shape and press the edges together firmly, sealing them carefully to prevent the filling from escaping during cooking.

Bring a large saucepan of salted water to a boil. Cook the dumplings in small batches, gently lowering them into the boiling water. Once they float to the surface, continue cooking for 3–5 minutes, until the dough is tender. Remove the dumplings with a slotted spoon and transfer them to a serving bowl. To prevent them from sticking together, toss them gently with a little melted butter or fried onions.

Traditionally, these dumplings are served hot and topped with freshly fried onions cooked in butter or vegetable oil, which enhance the sauerkraut filling's flavour. During the Christmas Eve meal, the fasting version is prepared without egg in the dough and is typically served with vegetable oil instead of butter.

4. Poppy seed doughnuts – Пампухи з маком

Olha Franko, 1929

***Pampukhy* remain one of the most recognisable Ukrainian Christmas desserts. In the western part of the country, their filling is made from wild rose (rosehip) petal preserve. In recent decades, *pampukhy* festivals have grown in popularity. In the regions of Podolia, Cherkasy, and Volhynia, these festive pastries are known as *pukhenyky*, a name derived from their exceptionally light and airy texture. Unlike modern yeast-raised doughnuts, they are made from choux pastry – the same type of dough used for éclairs and cream puffs. The original recipe contains no filling, but the poppy seed filling included here reflects an older Ukrainian culinary tradition and combines the two historical techniques.**

Ingredients

For the choux pastry:

- 500 ml water (2 cups)
- 20 g unsalted butter
- 20 g sugar
- 220 g plain (all-purpose) flour
- 4 large eggs
- Finely grated zest of 1 lemon
- Vegetable oil, for deep-frying
- Icing (confectioners') sugar, for dusting

For the poppy seed filling:

- 150 g poppy seeds
- 60–80 g sugar or honey
- 80 ml milk or water
- 1 tablespoon butter, melted

Instructions

Pour boiling water over the poppy seeds and leave them to soak for 15–20 minutes. Drain thoroughly, then grind the poppy seeds using a poppy seed grinder or a meat grinder fitted with a fine plate. Repeat the grinding two or three times, until the seeds release their natural oils and the mixture becomes pale and creamy. Stir in the sugar (or honey) and the melted butter until well combined. Allow the filling to cool completely before using.

In a medium saucepan, combine the water, butter, and sugar. Bring to a boil over medium heat. Add the flour all at once and stir vigorously with a wooden spoon until the mixture forms a smooth dough that pulls away from the sides of the pan. Remove from the heat and allow the dough to cool for 5–10 minutes, until warm but no longer hot. Beat in the eggs one at a time, mixing thoroughly after each addition until the dough is smooth and glossy. Stir in the grated lemon zest.

Heat the vegetable oil in a deep saucepan or deep fryer to 170–175°C.

Using two teaspoons, scoop a small portion of dough. Place about ½ teaspoon of the poppy seed filling in the centre of the dough, then cover it with a little more dough and carefully seal the filling inside, shaping the dough into a small ball. Alternatively, flatten a small portion of dough in your hand, add the filling, and enclose it completely before shaping it into a ball. Repeat with the remaining dough and filling. Carefully lower a few fritters at a time into the hot oil, and don't overcrowd the pan. Fry for 4–6 minutes, turning occasionally, until the fritters puff evenly and turn golden brown. Remove with a slotted spoon and drain on paper towels. Allow to cool slightly.

Dust generously with icing sugar before serving. These fritters are best enjoyed warm, although they may also be served at room temperature.



5. Lean cabbage rolls – Пісні голубці

Zenoviia Klynovetska, 1913

Holubtsi **(cabbage rolls) are not only a Christmas dish. In the Left-Bank region and southern Ukraine,** ***holubtsi*** **with rice, meat, and spices are made large, using a whole cabbage leaf, whereas in Podnistrovia and the Carpathians, the leaf is divided into several parts. The historical version is filled with millet and wild mushrooms, making it suitable for the fasting meal. They are slowly baked or braised in a rich mushroom broth and served with mushroom sauce or browned onions. In 2023, the tradition of preparing** ***holubtsi*** **(Приготування української традиційної страви «Голубці» та «Пісні голубці з картоплею, традиція приготування та споживання») was included in the National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage Elements of Ukraine.**

Ingredients

For the cabbage rolls:

1 medium white cabbage
200 g millet
40–50 g dried wild mushrooms
(porcini or other forest mushrooms)
1 medium carrot, finely diced
1 medium onion, finely chopped
50 ml vegetable oil
Salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste

For the mushroom sauce:

400–500 ml mushroom stock
(reserved from cooking the mushrooms)
1 medium onion, finely chopped
1–2 tablespoons plain flour
2–3 tablespoons vegetable oil
1 bay leaf
Salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste

Instructions

Place the dried mushrooms in a bowl and cover with warm water. Soak for 1–2 hours. Without changing the water, transfer the mushrooms and their soaking liquid to a saucepan. Bring to a boil, then simmer for 30–40 minutes, or until tender. Remove the mushrooms with a slotted spoon and chop them finely. Strain and reserve the mushroom cooking liquid for the sauce.

Remove the core and place the whole cabbage in a large pot of boiling water for several minutes, removing the softened outer leaves as they become pliable. Continue until you have 12–16 large leaves. Trim the thick central ribs from each leaf to make them easier to roll.

Rinse the millet thoroughly under warm running water. Cook according to the package instructions until just tender, not mushy. Drain well and allow it to cool slightly.

Heat the vegetable oil in a frying pan. Add the chopped onion and diced carrot and cook over medium heat until softened. Add the chopped mushrooms and



cook for another 3–5 minutes. Combine the vegetable and mushroom mixture with the cooked millet. Season generously with salt and freshly ground black pepper. Allow the filling to cool before assembling the cabbage rolls.

Place a cabbage leaf on a work surface. Spoon about 2 tablespoons of filling onto the lower part of the leaf. Fold the sides over the filling and roll up tightly into a neat parcel. Repeat with the remaining leaves and filling. Arrange the cabbage rolls seam-side down in a lightly oiled casserole dish or heavy saucepan.

Heat the vegetable oil in a saucepan. Add the chopped onion and cook until golden. Sprinkle in the flour and cook, stirring constantly, for 1–2 minutes. Gradually pour in the warm mushroom stock, whisking continuously until smooth. Add the bay leaf and season with salt and black pepper. Simmer gently for 5–10 minutes, until the sauce thickens slightly.

Pour the mushroom sauce over the cabbage rolls until it covers them about two-thirds of the way up. Cover the casserole. Bake in a preheated oven at 180°C for 40–50 minutes, or gently simmer on the stovetop over low heat for the same length of time, until the cabbage is completely tender.

Serve the cabbage rolls hot with plenty of the mushroom sauce spooned over them. Traditionally, they may also be accompanied by browned onions cooked in oil or melted butter. During the Christmas Eve fast, the dish is prepared entirely with vegetable oil, making it a rich yet meatless centrepiece of the festive meal.



6. Braised cabbage – Тушкована капуста

Mikola Markevitch, 1860

Preparing cabbage for the winter required the participation of several family members. Apples are added to the wooden barrel with the cabbage, and in the south of the country, watermelons. This flavours the cabbage while also giving the fruit a new flavour. Braised cabbage is a common dish in Ukraine, prepared depending on the region or preference as fresh cabbage or sauerkraut, with various additions like mushrooms or prunes. Usually, in winter, it is sauerkraut; recipes vary, with sweet pepper in the south, pickled cucumbers in the Cherkasy region, and beetroot in other regions. Lenten cabbage must be prepared with dried mushrooms or fish, seasoned with vegetable oil and thickened with flour or millet. To achieve a rich flavour, it is best to combine these two ingredients in a single dish.

Ingredients

500 g sauerkraut
500 g fresh white cabbage
400 g fish fillets (carp, crucian carp or zander)
40–50 g dried mushrooms (preferably porcini)
2 tablespoons millet groats or wheat flour
(for traditional thickening)
2 onions
4–5 tablespoons of vegetable oil
Salt, peppercorns, bay leaf, and a pinch of caraway seeds, to taste.

Instructions

Rinse the dried mushrooms, soak for 2 hours, and cook in the same water (20 mins). Remove the mushrooms and chop them. Do not discard the mushroom stock. Cut the fish fillets into pieces, season with salt, coat in flour and fry quickly in oil until golden brown (the fish will finish cooking later in the cabbage). In a deep saucepan (preferably cast-iron), mix together the shredded fresh cabbage and the rinsed sauerkraut. Pour in half the mushroom stock, add pepper and a bay leaf, then simmer covered over low heat for 35–40 minutes. Fry the finely chopped onion in oil until golden brown. Add the chopped mushrooms and fry together for a further 5 minutes. If using millet, pour boiling water over it and add to the cabbage halfway through the simmering time. If using flour, toast it in a dry frying pan until light brown, mix in the remaining cold mushroom stock, and pour it into the cabbage 10 minutes before the end of cooking. Add the onions and mushrooms to the softened cabbage and stir. Gently arrange the fish on top, pressing it lightly into the cabbage. Sprinkle with caraway seeds, cover and simmer over a very low heat for a further 15 minutes.





Reconstruction of the Christmas Eve supper table, Sierpc Open-Air Museum, Poland

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Reconstruction of the Christmas Eve supper table, Radom Countryside Museum, Poland



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This book will guide you in the discovery of the rich culinary heritage of Christmas Eve in Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine – three countries united by centuries of shared history and culture. Bringing together historical research and 24 traditional and contemporary recipes, this book explores the origins, symbolism, and regional diversity of Christmas Eve tradition. From ancient ritual foods to modern family favourites, it reveals how festive culinary traditions have evolved while preserving their social meanings and cultural significance. More than a collection of recipes, this book celebrates Christmas Eve as a living intangible cultural heritage that connects generations, strengthens family bonds, and transcends national borders.

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