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The National Cuisine of Slovaks

The term national cuisine of Slovaks means, first of all, the culinary culture of people living in the countryside and small towns who considered themselves to be of the Slovak ethnicity, as since the Middle Ages larger cities of Slovakia were populated mostly by Germans, Hungarians and Jews whose cuisines differed and originated in a different social and cultural context. In the 19th century, the culinary cultures of the rural and urban worlds started to grow closer due to the development of trade, the first phase of modernization of housing and changes in kitchen equipment. Many people from the country started to work in factories and in cities. Exchange of information was more intense and first cookbooks were published. In spite of these facts, up to these days the Slovak cuisine has not lost its unique rural character by which it differs from the cuisines of neighboring countries. Main pillars of the cuisine of Slovaks have always been dishes based on cereals, cabbage, legumes, potatoes, milk and dairy products, but also meat.

Our Daily Bread

Bread is the basic everyday food of Slovaks. Bakers baked bread for sale in towns since the Middle Ages but in villages people baked their own home-made bread in an oven located in the main room of the house until WW II. They could bake several loafs at once so that they would have enough for the whole week. Bread was baked from rye flour; people living in fertile lowlands mixed it with wheat flour, while people in mountain areas used barley instead. Work related to making bread belonged to the most important household chores and every woman was obliged to master it. People considered bread to be God’s gift and showed it much respect. Its importance is also exemplified by the fact that the word “bread” meant not only this staple food, but also it denoted the whole homestead, livelihood, material wealth and the like. This is reflected in phrases like “ má svoj chlieb“ (literary “s/he has his/his bread”) meaning s/he can earn his/her livelihood, “má ťažký chlieb“ (“s/he has hard bread”) meaning s/he has to work hard for living. Bread played an important role in many customs and festivals as a symbol of prosperity. The best known custom is welcoming of guests with bread and salt. This custom is also a part of the protocol of the president of the state when official guests of the head of the state are welcomed with a piece of bread and salt.

Cabbage alias Sauerkraut

The most popular vegetable in Slovakia is cabbage that is shredded and then packed into wooden, and today also plastic, buckets. Cabbage turns into sauerkraut through the process of lactic acid fermentation that also produces a small amount of alcohol. It can be stored for a long time and used almost all year round. In the past, a bucket with sauerkraut was a must in every house. People were aware of the fact that sauerkraut is healthy and it can protect them from diseases in the winter.

The best sauerkraut is produced in and around the town of Stupava, located nearby Bratislava. There it is called *zelé*. In September up to these days local people shred tons of cabbage and pack it in buckets and crocs. Each family has its own recipe for the best sauerkraut: to cabbage they add various ingredients – mostly salt and caraway seed but also onion, apples, grape leaves, corn knobs and others. When cabbage is well fermented women go to sell it at farmers markets.

Sauerkraut was staple food especially in villages around the Slovak Carpathians. It was often mixed with barley groats, pasta or legumes. It was also commonly consumed fresh together with boiled potatoes. It is also used in the sauerkraut soup - *kapustnica*, *kvašnica* that is still made in most Slovak households at least once a year as a traditional Christmas dish.

Also, whole cabbage heads were buried underground or placed in cold cellars, or they were fermented together with shredded cabbage. Bread or flat breads called *nalesníky* used to be baked on cabbage leaves. In Eastern and Southern Slovakia, a traditional wedding dish is rolled cabbage leaves stuffed with meat and groats called *holubky*, *golubci*.

Lentils, Chickpeas, Beans

During feudalism, legumes used to be a very important part of everyday diet of peasants, craftspeople and servants. Due to their high protein content, that substituted meat in everyday diet, therefore they were consumed during prescribed fasting time. Traditional “Slovak” legumes are: peas, lentils, chickpeas and various kinds of beans originally imported from America. Legumes were prepared as soup or polentas. In Slovakia, meals prepared from legumes had also a ritual meaning and were consumed as a part of wedding or Christmas feasts. To these days, the split peas soup, bean soup or lentil soup are still eaten at Christmas. Still the most popular legume dish is the bean soup with sausage or smoked pork meat – *fazuľovica* which is a well-tested remedy also after an event with abundance of alcoholic beverages.

An American Gift

After the discovery of America, the European continent was introduced to potatoes that became a life-saver to those living in mountain areas. First records about potatoes in Slovakia are from the 17th century, but it was only from the half of the 18th century when they became known and grown on a large scale. Typical potato-growing regions were the mountain areas of Orava and Spiš. Most regional names of potatoes: *krumple*, *erteple*, *švábka*, *grule*, *bandurky* indicate that potatoes came to Slovakia from Germany. At first, potatoes were cooked unpeeled by boiling in water or roasting in charcoal. Peeled they were consumed with fermented milk or with fresh or sautéed sauerkraut. Gradually, potatoes dishes became more popular, they were used for soups and various side dishes. Grated or boiled potatoes were mixed with flour as its replacement. This way various dishes made of flour and potatoes – typical for the Slovak cuisine, were concocted. These are mostly boiled meals such as *halušky*, *šúlance*, *fučka*, *džadky*, or oil fried pancakes known as *haruľa*, *zemiaková baba*, *lokše*. Mixing of grated boiled potatoes with bread flour is also typical for Slovakia. This kind of bread is still commonly sold in groceries stores.

Potatoes were also put in legume, cabbage, vegetable or mushroom soups. Typical for the Tatras foothill region of Liptov was the dish known as *liptovské droby* made by stuffing sheep or pork sausage casings with grated seasoned raw potatoes and then boiled or roasted.

Dairy Goodies

The Slovak cuisine traditionally uses cow or sheep milk; goat milk and dairy products are used to a lesser extent. Common are milk soups, prepared by boiling small pasta in hot milk. Milk was also used in most cereal polentas such as millet, corn, buckwheat which were either

boiled in milk or milk was added to the cooked dish. From the half of the 19th century drinking of the so-called white coffee became popular – it was made from various coffee replacement and milk and consumed for breakfast. Milk, fermented milk or cream mixed with flour were used as thickening of legume, fruit or potatoes dishes.

Especially in the summer, milk leftovers were used for making cottage cheese either by letting them turn sour or by inducing the fermentation process with vegetable juices or animal rennet. Cottages cheese was eaten with boiled pasta or as pastry stuffing. It was also preserved by salt and packed into large wooden buckets or ceramic crocs.

Typical for the mountain regions of the Slovak Carpathians was breeding sheep in large herds that from the spring to the fall lived in open-air mountain farms called *salaše* built on mountain pastures. Sheep were guarded and milked by shepherds whose leader was called *bača*. The main product of sheep farming was sheep cheese that was also the basis of other products – the main of which was *bryndza*. From the 18th century traders would buy pieces of cheese from sheep farms and deliver them to small dairy plants. There they let the cheese mature and dry, then it was crumbled, thinned with salty water and ground in special mills. Processed *bryndza* was then packed in wooden buckets called *geletas*. Stored in this way bryndza was distributed not only all around Slovakia, but also to Budapest, Vienna or Prague. Good bryndza should be smooth, creamy, with an aroma of fermented milk and slightly greenish in color. Bryndza is the most famous Slovak culinary specialty and *bryndzové halušky* – small gnocchi made out of flour and grated raw potatoes mixed with bryndza and sprinkled with fried bacon bits are the most frequently offered Slovak national dish. Bryndza was also used in a spicy soup called *demikát*.

Other traditional dairy products made from sheep milk are smoked and steamed cheeses that used to be made at sheep farms. *Bača* would make smaller gobs of fresh cheese with his hands and soak them in warm water, when they softened he would press them into an egg-shaped wooden vessel. Then they put it into salty water to harden and placed it above a fireplace to smoke it. This cheese is called *oštiepok*.

Another traditional product is *parenica*. It is sheep cheese that was first kneaded and then let to sour. When it was soaked into warm water it became elastic and could be stretched in long stripes, rolled up or braided. Traditional areas of production of bryndza, smoked and steamed cheeses was Northern and Central Slovakia. Although these products are now commercially manufactured they still belong to the most popular and best on the Slovak market.

Unfortunately, traditional mountain sheep farms are a long-gone memory. When a visitor comes across a *salaš*, it is usually a rural style restaurant offering traditional dishes and beverages.

Bacon and Sausages

Traditionally, in Slovak villages pig slaughtering takes place at the end of the autumn and beginning of the winter. In the past, mostly sheep were slaughtered and processed, in the 20th century pigs became more wide spread. The most popular home-made pork products in Slovakia are smoked bacon and sausages. Slabs of pork fat are coated in salt, seasoned by garlic and soaked in salty water. Then they are let to dry and smoked. Smoked bacon used to be popular esp. among men who would eat it raw or grilled on a campfire after a day of hard work in the field or forest. Also scrambled eggs (*praženica*) with bacon were one of popular “caloric bombs”. Diced fried bacon was used to season pasta dishes or polentas. Fried bacon mixed with flour was used for roux as food thickening. This way, dishes gained their flavor of bacon and garlic, typical for traditional Slovak cuisine.

Sausages are made out of chopped or minced meat of the highest quality mixed with salt, caraway seed, red paprika powder, allspice, black pepper – according to the local tradition and desirable palate. The mixture was stuffed into pork casings and slowly smoked. Well-smoked

sausages will last until the summer. Sausages are eaten cut into small pieces with bread and onion, cooked in sauerkraut or legume soups, and they are a part of the traditional Christmas and Easter menu. There are several regional variants of sausage production in Slovakia: e.g. *záhorácké*, *spišské*, *zemplínske klobásy* the recipes of which have been applied also in commercial production. Nevertheless, even present-day Slovaks still look for the opportunity to buy home-made sausages directly from their makers.

As the best sausages are regarded those produced in Slovak enclaves in Southern Hungary, in the region of Vojvodina in Serbia or in North-eastern Croatia. These sausages are longer and larger than those made in Slovakia and they are seasoned with mild or hot paprika. Combined with white bread, fresh bell peppers and tomatoes they belong to European culinary miracles. The most famous of them are sausages from the Hungarian Bekescsaba region - *čabianska klobása*.

Wine and Spirits

In Slovakia, no celebration can take place without wine and spirits. Wine growing is widespread mostly in the area of the Lesser Carpathians around Bratislava, in the Nitra region and in Eastern Slovakia in the Tokaj region on the Hungarian borders. In these regions the largest amounts of wine are consumed and sold. High quality white and red wines that have also always been exported are produced here. To these days, vintage festivals, during which young wine called *burčiak* is being sold, are held in vintner towns at the beginning of the fall.

Visitors can also taste other specialties – the most popular is the roasted goose or duck with potato flat bread called *lokše*.

In mountain regions of Slovakia people preferred various distilled alcoholic drinks called *pálenky*. From the half of the 20th century most of them have been commercially manufactured, but people in the countryside can still distill their own spirits in local distilleries. The most popular are those distilled from fruits, especially from plums that are used to make *slivovica*. A Slovak specialty is *borovička* – Slovak gin, made from alcohol distilled from fruits of the juniper bush. A warm alcoholic beverage called *hriatô*, *hriate* is a Christmas tradition. It is made of good *pálenka*, honey and pork lard or butter.

Slovaks have never been too conservative as far as their own culture is concerned. This is related to the fact that they have always lived in multiethnic and multicultural environment from which they gained inspiration and adopted different cultural elements. This holds true also about their culinary culture. Many dishes commonly consumed in Slovakia originate in the Hungarian, Austrian, Czech or Balkan cuisine. In the past 20 years, meals originating in even more distant and exotic countries – Italy, France or China, have gained popularity. Mainly children and the youth prefer the symbol of globalized culture – fast food. However, this doesn't mean that people have forgotten their traditions. On the contrary, in most Slovak cookbooks and restaurants we can find dishes with the name *traditional*, *typical*, *Slovak* which have their roots in the traditional culinary culture of Slovakia that we just introduced to you. Even the present-day Slovaks know them and like them, and consider them as part of their national identity.

Translation by Eva Riečanská