Overview

Once considered a gastronomic wasteland, Russia’s remarkable and delectable cuisine again is finding its way onto the world stage through commerce, travel, and media coverage. Moscow is becoming a center of culinary innovation in the early 21st century, quickly erasing bitter images of the empty food shelves and state-run restaurants of the Soviet era. Centuries of scarcity, deprivation, and hardship have shaped Slavic culinary aesthetics. Therefore, Russians approach every meal with an unrivaled gusto and sincere appreciation—be it beer and crayfish, or champagne and caviar.

Russia is an inscrutable land on many levels, beginning with the sheer quantity and quality of available foodstuffs. The size of its territory, the variety of its ethnic groups, and its stark history challenge the imagination. The 19th-century Russian Empire included Ukraine, the Baltic nations, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Siberia. The nation was blessed with an abundance of fish from its waters; fruits and nuts from the southern regions; endless variations of grains and hearty breads; the wild game of the forest; and the rewarding berries and mushrooms of the woods. These ingredients remain in Russia today to form the basis of its extraordinary cuisine.

The Russian Federation is the political remnant of the Russian and Soviet empires. Geographically, the Russian Federation stretches from the Baltic Sea to the Pacific Ocean and spans 11 time zones. Siberia alone makes up 10 percent of the earth’s inhabited landmass. Culturally, however, Russia is larger still, extending beyond its imperial boundaries via Russian-language media, established trade patterns, and the presence of its military on the former borders of the Soviet Union.

The 2002 census counted 160 different nationalities in the country, although Russians comprise almost 80 percent of the 145.2 million total citizens. Kazan Tatars number almost six million citizens, making them the second most numerous nationality. Other ethnic groups in Russia that exceed one million people include Ukrainians, Bashkirs, Chuvash, Chechens, and Armenians. This demographic diversity allows Russians to claim most any dish as their own national foods, such as pilaf, dumplings (pelmeni), eggplant “caviar,” or Baltic herring. Incomes and lifestyles in Russia are very stratified, especially since the fall of Communism in 1991. Social stratification is the single most important factor in understanding Russian society throughout its history.

Food Culture Snapshot

Sergei and Katya Aleksandrov are a well-to-do married couple in their late thirties living in a suburb of Moscow with their twins, Sofia and Vassili, who are three years old. Katya works part-time as an accountant, and Sergei sells cars through one of Moscow’s larger dealerships. Their combined incomes allow them to employ a full-time nanny to care for the children and help with housekeeping. Their salary also allows them to eat better-quality food and to afford occasional imported European gourmet items, but their core food choices are very mainstream and representative of the larger population. Russians are very particular about their diet and expend much energy in the acquisition...
and preparation of food. Russians, on average, spend more than one-third of their income on food, a much higher amount than in Britain or the United States.

At a minimum, the Russian pantry will always have potatoes, carrots, onions, butter, and sunflower oil. No traditional dish can be prepared without these basic ingredients. Ketchup, mustard, and spicy horseradish are popular as condiments, and mayonnaise is always on hand for use in traditional Russian potato salads. No spices are really necessary save for salt and ground black pepper, although some families, like the Aleksandrov family, like to experiment with Asian ingredients and various spice mixes.

For the parents, breakfast is dominated by bread and dairy, specifically, traditional Russian soft farmer’s cheese, tvorog, mixed with sour cream and honey. The children eat freshly prepared hot cereal. Popular varieties of hot cereal include oatmeal, cream of wheat, and porridges made from buckwheat, barley, or millet. Hot sweet black tea is the preferred breakfast drink, although sometimes adults prepare instant coffee. The twins drink whole milk.

During the day, Katya and Sergei eat lunch at work. Most large offices have their own cafeterias with a selection of hot dishes, sandwiches, and salads. The nanny makes a hot lunch for the children, often one of the following dishes: vegetable or chicken noodle soup, meatballs with mashed potatoes, beef stew, or chicken cutlets. All main dishes are accompanied by bread and fresh tomatoes and cucumbers. Lunch concludes with a snack of fresh fruit.

Generally, everyone gathers for the main meal of the day around eight o’clock in the evening. Katya is a good cook with a well-developed repertoire of dishes that are hearty yet quick to prepare. Even with full-time help at home, Katya prefers to do most of the cooking herself. She always prepares cereal in the morning, which can take up to an hour (there is no instant oatmeal), and she makes the majority of family dinners. Sometimes the leftovers are served for lunch the next day.

Almost daily the family purchases bread, both wheat and rye, and fresh vegetables such as cucumbers, tomatoes, and dill fronds, parsley, and green onions. Broccoli and cauliflower have only recently become staples of the Russian diet. Pickled vegetables are enjoyed year-round, and cabbage, carrots, and beets dominate the winter menu. The family consumes fruits regularly until the season changes: strawberries, cherries, raspberries, apricots, and peaches in the summer; apples and melons in the fall; and oranges, apples, grapes, and bananas in winter and spring.

The Aleksandrov household would grind to a halt without sour cream and kefir (fermented milk). The amount of milk and milk products Russians consume is surpassed only by the quantity of bread they eat, whether they are city dwellers or country folk. Where the cow is sacred in India, it is part of the family in Russia. Cattle provide some of the products most dear to Russians—milk, cream, fermented drinks, cheese, butter, yogurt, sour cream, and ice cream. Dairy products are the largest segment of Russian agricultural exports after sunflower oil, namely, condensed milk and
cream, yogurt, butter and milk fats, sour milk, cheese, and curds.

The Aleksandrovs’ main protein choices are usually beef, pork, lamb, and chicken. The family enjoys smoked fish as an appetizer. Another important kitchen ingredient is ground beef. The Aleksandrovs use it to make meatballs and cutlets, stuffed vegetables, and the gem of Russian cuisine, pelmeni, similar to ravioli or Chinese dumplings. In a pinch, store-bought frozen pelmeni with sour cream make for a modest dinner. The Aleksandrovs, unusual for a Russian family, have recently sworn off any kind of processed meats—sausages, hams, salami, and so on. Sausage is a daily staple of the Russian diet: for breakfast with cheese and bread, as part of a lunch, as a snack, and for appetizers. Initially, the Aleksandrovs were prompted to forgo sausage in response to their son’s suspected allergic reactions, but after a while they realized that they did not miss it much and felt better without it. For a typical Russian family, several types of sausage would be among the daily food purchases.

Approximately twice a month, Sergei does bulk shopping in METRO, which is similar to warehouse stores in the United States. He buys grains, dried pasta, tea, coffee, sugar, household supplies, basic toiletries, and some canned goods. Like most Russians, the Aleksandrovs use few canned or prepared foods. They buy all their meats, dairy, fruit, and vegetables fresh on a daily basis. Usually Katya buys whatever is needed for the day on her way home from work. Produce is frequently purchased at roadside stands. Occasionally, the family will make a weekend trip to a large farmers’ market for a larger selection of produce, fresh dairy, and meats.

**Major Foodstuffs**

The foods generally associated with Russia include hearty breads; fresh, smoked, and cured sausages; and winter vegetables such as cabbage, beets, and potatoes. Although the beverage that immediately comes to mind with Russia is vodka, the national drink is actually tea. Russians today without difficulty consider all the following foods to be part of their cuisine: Baltic herring and rye breads, Pacific salmon, Siberian ferns and pine nuts, Asian dumplings, Korean pickled vegetables, Central Asian pilaf, shish kebabs from the Caucasus, Romanian **brynza** (feta cheese), Bulgarian peppers, and eggplant from the Middle East.

Throughout the seasons, the markets present an amazing variety of foodstuffs. Starting with the unprocessed or bulk section, the pantry traditionally contains a selection of grains and flours; pulses and dried beans; vegetable oils sold in reused plastic bottles; nuts, almonds, and pistachios; macaroni and vermicelli for soups; rice; and dried apricots, raisins, and dates. The vegetables, in order of quantities sold, include potatoes, cabbage, carrots, tomatoes, cucumbers, beets, turnips, and radishes. Besides apples, pears, and berries, most fruits come from the southern regions or are imported. Though rarely perfect in shape, marked with minor external blemishes, and small in size, most of the fruits and vegetables have a vibrant and distinctive taste.

**Pickled garlic, peppers, and cucumbers are almost always locally produced and homemade.** Most markets have a Korean food section with prepared dishes of spicy pickled vegetables and fish. In the dairy-products section, vendors sell sour cream, fresh cheese (tvorog), aged cheeses, yogurt, and kefir by volume in recycled glass bottles or larger plastic containers.

Grains—specifically, rye, buckwheat, barley, oats, millet, and wheat—are the main staples. Cereals (seeds of cultivated grasses) are of central importance to Russia, so much so that they in many ways define the national cuisine. They form the basis for the delicious breads, filling gruels, savory pies, pancakes (bliny), and dumplings.

Bread buttresses the Russian diet, symbolizing sustenance and hospitality. Russians consume an amazing two pounds of bread per person a day. It is the ubiquitous delight of every meal. The very word for hospitality, **khlebosol’stvo**, derives from the roots **khleb** (bread) and **sol’** (salt), which were traditionally presented to guests as a sign of welcome, warmth, and generosity. In almost-endless varieties, most tables are graced with slices of both white wheat bread and dark rye or black bread.

Kasha, or boiled buckwheat groats, is a Russian cultural superfood, and it is difficult to overrate the symbolic importance of a food that has nourished
a people for more than 1,000 years. It can be boiled with milk or water, prepared sweet or savory, and served for breakfast or as a side dish. Smaller groats are often used to make a more liquid kasha with only milk. Buckwheat kasha can be prepared with almost anything mixed in—eggs, pork, pork fat, liver, onions, mushrooms, fruits, cheese, and so forth. The first buckwheat varieties originated in parts of Siberia and China. As the largest consumer of buckwheat worldwide, Russia is also the number-one producer of the crop. Today, kasha can refer to almost any porridge made from any groats, such as cream of wheat, rice pudding, hot oatmeal, or less commonly barley or millet porridge.

Pies (pirogi) in Russia come in a dizzying array of preparations and presentations. The dough can be leavened or not, salty or sweet. Pies can be round, square, triangular, open, closed, large, small, or fully enclosed like the classic salmon kulebyaka (coulibiac—a complex pastry with salmon, spinach, and rice), for example.

Bliny, one of the few Russian foods known internationally, are small pancakes a little larger in size than a compact disc (five to six inches in diameter). They are a traditional dish at the spring equinox folk festival, Maslenitsa, perhaps symbolizing the sun with their round shape. The yeast batter is what makes the taste and texture distinctive. Piled high with a pat of butter between the pancake layers, bliny provoke a festive reaction. Though traditionally made with buckwheat flour, wheat-flour bliny are now more common.

Macaroni and vermicelli are made from wheat flour and are commonly added to soups. Buttered macaroni is a common side dish that may be served with any meal. The most famous Slavic pasta dishes are pelmeni and vareniki, boiled, filled dumplings. Vareniki are usually larger and often half-moon or triangular shaped, and they come from Ukraine. During the summer, vareniki are filled with cherries, plums, or berries. They can also be made with potatoes, mushrooms, soft cheese, cabbage, and meat. Pelmeni and savory vareniki are generally topped with melted butter or sour cream, but vinegar, mustard, and ketchup are also possible additions.

Russians have a hearty appetite for vegetables, usually served in soups or separately as a pickled dish. Cooked vegetables are also a main component of many salads. Fresh salads are generally made with sliced cucumbers and tomatoes, not leafy greens. Turnips, cabbages, radishes, and cucumbers are considered traditional Russian vegetables. Carrots, onions, and garlic provide the flavors for many savory dishes. One salad that incorporates almost all the customary Russian vegetables is vinegret (made from potatoes, pickled cabbage, and beets in oil).

Potatoes, after bread, sustain the population. The most common and preferred method of preparation is peeled boiled potatoes, garnished with butter, dill, and sour cream. Fried potatoes, similar to home fries, are also widespread. They become exceptionally enticing when fried with bacon and mushrooms.

Russia and cabbage are inextricably bound, and rightfully so. No self-respecting Russian can survive long without fermented or sour cabbage (kvashenaya kapusta). Cabbage is an extremely versatile vegetable, great in soups, stews, salads, stuffings, and side dishes. The sulfurous scent of cooked cabbage seems to permanently saturate most modern apartment blocks in Russia. Cabbage soup (shchi) rates among the most popular national dishes.

Cucumbers, especially the pickled variety, also have a special place in the Russian culinary psyche. Russian pickled cucumbers, like sauerkraut, are pickled in brine and not vinegar. Fresh and pickled cucumbers are added to many hot and cold dishes. It is not uncommon to find salads that contain both pickled and fresh cucumbers.

Whereas potatoes, cabbages, and cucumbers are essential components of the Russian table, mushrooms create magic in the meal. Mushrooms, or griby, are neither plants nor animals, but Russians would swear they have a soul. Many civilizations, including the Slavs, have relied on mushrooms for medicinal purposes, and mushroom hunting in Russia remains a national obsession. Considering the expanse of forest and the assortment of mushrooms, many a lazy day can pass in search of the perfect mushroom patch.
The turnip (repa), rutabaga (bryukva), and red beet (svyokla) form the rearguard of traditional Russian vegetables. Turnips, often pureed or cooked together with meat dishes, were the staple crop of northern Russia until well into the 18th century. Beets were better known in the area of Ukraine, although they are now firmly established as part of the Russian culinary repertoire. The most famous dish from beets is borscht, a beef-based soup with beets, cabbage, and bell pepper.

Countless other vegetables are grown on private plots or at the dacha (small vacation house). Tomatoes, squash, zucchini, radishes, bell peppers, peas, green beans, cauliflower, and leafy greens add color and zest to the Russian table. Many vegetables, especially eggplant, are made into spreads or a “caviar,” which is a cooked mixture of vegetables with tomatoes, onions, garlic, oil, and vinegar that preserves well.

Fruit production is difficult in northerly climes. Therefore, apples, pears, and forest berries are the most common fruits in Russia. Many other fruits are brought in from the southern regions, particularly peaches, cherries, plums, and melons. Watermelons from Astrakhan on the Volga River delta near the Caspian Sea compete with those from Central Asia and the Caucasus in Russian markets. The best melons, however, are imported from Central Asia, along with grapes, dried apricots, and raisins.

Berries and cherries are the quintessential fruits of Russia. The sour cherry (vishnya) and the black cherry (cheryshnya) are the most common varieties. The bountiful assortment of berries is similar to that of Scandinavia, Canada, and the northern United States. Popular varieties include the raspberry (malina); the gooseberry (kryzhovnik); the cranberry (klyukva); the berry known variously as the lingonberry, bilberry, huckleberry, and whortleberry (brusnika); the blueberry (chernika); the rowanberry or ashberry (ryabina); and currants—red, black, and white (smorodina). The delicious strawberry (klubnika) and the wild strawberry (zemlyanika) are a special treat. The berries can be eaten raw as well as frozen or dried for later use. But more often than not they are made into rich preserves, jams, and jellies used in desserts and to sweeten tea.

Fish is most commonly served as a smoked, cured, or salted appetizer. Salted Baltic herring (sel’d’ or selyodka), by far the most abundant and popular, is found in many cold salads or served plain with oil and onions. A mixed platter of cold smoked fish (rybnoe assorti) served as appetizers may include thin slices of eel, mackerel, sturgeon, whitefish, turbot (paltus), shad, and salmon.

Other familiar fish are prepared by panfrying, broiling, or baking, such as salmon trout (forel’), carp (sazan), perch (sudak and okun’), cod (navaga and nalim), flounder, northern pike (shchuka), and catfish (som). Caviar, or fish eggs, is the product most often associated with Russia. The familiar dark or black caviar comes from three particular species of sturgeon: beluga, osetra, and sevruga. The larger, bright red-orange caviar is roe harvested from the Siberian salmon (keta). It is considerably less expensive than black caviar. Recently, trout roe has become a popular addition to the caviar line in Russia.

A family of freshwater fish, abundant in rivers, lakes, canals, and reservoirs, the roach fish (vobla) is perhaps the most humble yet emblematic Russian fish. Salted and dried, it is sold in every market. Paired with beer, it is analogous to the American combination of nuts and beer. Nothing promises a
better evening than several whole dried vobla laid out on a newspaper tablecloth.

It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of meat in the Russian diet. Whether meat is served as an entrée or an appetizer, or simply a frankfurter or a sausage, no meal is considered fully satisfying without some form of meat on the plate. Russia is among the world’s leading producers, consumers, and importers of meat. Beef, pork, poultry, and mutton—in order of preference and consumption—constitute the primary protein types. Shish kebabs (shashlyk) are the ideal method for preparing any meat or poultry in Russia. Marinated meat threaded onto metal skewers is slowly grilled, roasted, and smoked over the gentle heat of charcoal embers.

In addition to shashlyk, beef is generally prepared as fried or baked individual cuts, as part of soups and stews, or as mincemeat for meatballs or various fillings. Zharkoe is a stew of roasted meat, potatoes, and vegetables, traditionally baked in small earthenware pots for hours on the Russian hearth. Sautéed ground beef patties, kotlety, are perhaps the most common meat dish. Ground beef is mixed with breadcrumbs and diced onions and panfried. Frikadelki, from the German Frikadellen, are small meatballs simmered in broth. Ground meat mixed with onions also creates the common fillings for pirozhki (dumplings), golubtsy (cabbage rolls), and chebureki (Crimean Tatar fried meat pies).

Internationally, Russia is probably best known for its sausages. Although the brunt of foreign jokes and derision, Russian kolbasa can rival the finest Italian salami and German wurst in quality. Sausage is generally made from both pork and beef. Rows of fresh sausages, liverwurst, frankfurters, and links fill store display cases. The most prevalent is the cured sausage—smoked, dried, or both. Ham (vetchina) is the most common cured pork product. Among the most flavorful, however, is buzhenina, salted and smoked pork loin. The Ukrainian love for pork has made its way into Russia in the form of salo, cured pork backfat.

The primary herbs in Russian cuisine are parsley and dill (pertrushka and ukrop). They are found on almost every table in a variety of guises: as a dish of whole stalks, an ingredient in most salads, an added flavor for soups and stews, and a garnish for these same dishes. Bay leaves and sweet paprika are often added to soups and stews. In making many Central Asian or Caucasian dishes, cilantro (fresh coriander) is essential. Seasonings are minimal; usually only salt and black or red (paprika) pepper are used in cooking and also found in shakers on the dining tables. Anise, allspice, cloves, cinnamon, and nutmeg are sparingly applied to some pastries and baked goods. Sweeteners traditionally include honey, jams, jellies, and dried or preserved fruits. The most common condiments are mayonnaise, sour cream, butter, vinegar, horseradish, mustard, ketchup, and a couple of Georgian spicy sauces. Mayonnaise is found in every sort of Russian salad, sometimes mixed with sour cream. Horseradish (khren) is grated and mixed with vinegar and served with meat dishes.

In marketing terms, Russia and vodka are inextricable. In reality, however, tea retains the title of the Russian national drink. Beer is the trendy and affordable beverage of choice of the younger generations, while traditional drinks such as kvas (made from fermented rye bread), kisel’ (made from berries), sbiten’ (made from honey and spices), and mead (myod) still hold an important, if not purely symbolic and nostalgic, place in Russian culinary thought and action. Tea (chai) is consumed at breakfast, lunch, and dinner. It is served in the afternoon and as a late-night drink. Russian tea, with lemon and sugar cubes, is served piping hot in porcelain cups with saucers or in glasses with metal holders. It is usually strong and well sweetened with sugar, or perhaps jam and honey. Everyone drinks tea. Even children learn from an early age to enjoy it, no doubt because it is often served with chocolate, candy, wafers, cookies, or other pastries.

Cooking

The kitchen is the principal domestic space for a Russian woman. A great part of her day is spent at the market looking for products, preparing the raw ingredients, cooking, and cleaning. Without the convenience of electric kitchen appliances, Russian women exert tremendous effort in basic kitchen
preparation work. Despite the arrival of processed foods and semiprepared dishes in the 1990s, Russians have taken to them with caution. Whether they distrust foreign products or simply prefer to cook from scratch is open to debate, but the fact is that almost all food is still made at home using only fresh ingredients. This is a time-consuming task, one that only increases as the summer draws to an end. In addition to their daily workload of meal preparation, women are also expected to pickle and preserve fresh produce to last throughout the winter months. Fruits and vegetables are purchased at the height of the season to ensure the best price. Some are eaten fresh, but most are dried, pickled, or preserved.

The staples of the Russian pantry include flour, salt, sugar, and tea. Rice, macaroni, and cereal grains are common dry goods, the culinary term for all items that do not require refrigeration. As living space is always a rare commodity and refrigerators are exceedingly small, many apartment dwellers also use their balconies for food storage. With nine months of cool or cold weather a year, the balcony offers an ideal area for keeping overflow items. Freezer space is even smaller, and most families cycle through their fresh food supplies within a week. Russians forgo putting leftovers into Tupperware or other storage containers, instead placing the cookware or serving dish in the refrigerator.

As most people in the former Soviet Union live in apartments, the kitchen occupies a very small space in terms of total square footage. In the early years after the revolution of 1917, large city houses were transformed into communal apartments, where several families would share the residence, including a kitchen and bathroom. By the 1980s, after a tremendous two-decade-long effort to house its citizens, most of the Soviet population lived in single-family apartments. The standard kitchen equipment is a sink, a gas stove, and a small refrigerator. Most of the preparatory work is done on the kitchen table since counter space is limited or nonexistent. Some wealthy families have added dishwashers if space permits, but in general, all dishes are washed by hand.

The brilliance of Russian women lies in their ability to produce delicious and healthful food with crude cookware and shoddy supplies. The most indispensable kitchen tool in the Russian kitchen is the manual meat grinder. It is used to make ground beef and fillings for pies and pastries. The main cookware generally includes a large stockpot for soup, a cast iron skillet for fried foods, a tea kettle, and perhaps a baking dish. Knives, also made of aluminum or soft steel, quickly dull, no doubt because they also function as a hammer and can opener. Spatulas and cooking utensils are either wood or aluminum. Daily dishware is simple, and the fine china is brought out only for special occasions.

Typical Meals

The quintessential Russian lunch or dinner contains bread, soup, and hot tea. Bread is required at every meal and is placed on a plate or in a basket in the middle of the table and covered with a cloth or paper napkin. At the end of the meal, tea is regularly offered in china cups with saucers.

Breakfast can be as modest as bread and tea, or as elaborate as yesterday’s dinner leftovers such as salads, pickles, fish, and cold cuts. More often than not, most Russians enjoy a simple open-faced sandwich of cheese, ham, or salami with hot tea and a boiled or fried egg. Coffee, generally instant, is also popular, and serving juice in the morning has been on the rise in recent years. Consumption of fermented dairy drinks such as kefir (fermented milk) and prostokvasha (sour milk) generally correlates to the age of the individual. Boiled eggs, omelets, and fried eggs are some of the more familiar offerings. Also exceedingly common, especially for children, is some sort of hot cereal, such as kasha—oatmeal, rice pudding, cream of wheat, and buckwheat. Among the first choices for sweet offerings are tvorog (farmer’s cheese) mixed with sour cream and sugar and three types of pancakes—syrniki (made with tvorog), bliny (thin), and olad’i (thicker). Still, day in and day out, the overwhelming majority of Russians simply have tea and bread for breakfast, perhaps accompanied by cheese or tvorog.

Lunch generally occurs around noon on weekdays and may be served as late as two o’clock on the weekends. Many people eat lunch at work since numerous large companies and institutions have their
own cafeterias. In some new, more prosperous offices, lunch is catered. Since women often work outside the home, few men go home for lunch even if they have the opportunity. Lunch usually consists of soup as a first course (*pervoe*); a protein (meat or poultry), a starch (potatoes, rice, pasta), and a salad, sometimes with *kompot* (a dried or fresh fruit infusion) to drink, as the second course (*vtoroe*); and tea and dessert as the common third course (*tret’e*).

Dinner is served around seven in the evening, after people have had time to come home from work. The mother, or a grandmother if she lives with the family, prepares the meal. Generally it follows the same pattern as lunch: soup, a meat dish and a starchy side, finished off with tea and something sweet for dessert. The ubiquitous bread basket adds bulk and calories to the meal. Potatoes—boiled, mashed, fried, or part of a salad—serve the same satisfying function. The usual condiments for pork, beef, or chicken are ketchup, mustard, or horseradish. Hot dogs, without a bun, are a common dish, with green peas, potatoes, macaroni, or rice served on the side.

Common salads include “vinegret” or the Russian salad (*oliv’ye*) of boiled and diced potatoes and carrots, peas, pickles, and chicken, mixed with mayonnaise. Beets in oil with a hint of garlic make a superb salad, side dish, or garnish. The most universal salad, however, is made from freshly shredded cabbage, perhaps with carrots or a touch of onion, dressed with oil or mayonnaise. Fermented cabbage in salt, less stringent than sauerkraut, is made at home and always ready for the table. Cabbage can also be the primary ingredient for filling savory pies (pirogi) or smaller baked pastries (pirozhki). Mushrooms, when in season, are equally adaptable, being served as the main course, used for fillings, or eaten pickled. The most familiar appetizers are dill pickles and lightly brined cucumbers, but any pickled vegetable can stand in. Cheese, sardines, smoked fish, or cold cuts are the standby appetizers (*zakuski*) on a daily basis. The vegetable menu is generally limited to cabbage, cucumbers, tomatoes, beets, cauliflower, squash, and eggplant.

**Potato and Mushroom Pirozhki**

Pirozhki (sing. *pirozhok*) are the smaller, individual-sized cousins of the larger Russian savory pies, pirogi. Pirozhki are a baked or fried dough with any number of fillings. They may be served with soup and stews or eaten as a snack or appetizer. Some of the more common contents are meat, mushrooms, buckwheat, potatoes, liver, cheese, eggs, and cabbage.

**Filling**

- 6 small potatoes
- 1 large onion, medium dice
- 1 lb mushrooms, chopped
- 6 tbsp butter
- 3 tbsp tvorog or thick yogurt
- 3 tbsp dill, chopped
- Salt and black pepper to taste

**Dough**

- 3 c all-purpose flour
- ½ tsp baking powder
- ½ tsp salt
- 1½ sticks butter
- 3 egg yolks
- ½ c sour cream
- 1 tbsp water

**To Make Potato Filling**

Peel and cut potatoes evenly into large cubes. Boil in salted water until tender. In a separate pan, sauté onions and mushrooms in 4 tablespoons butter. Combine potatoes with tvorog and mash in 2 tablespoons butter, leaving the potato mixture chunky. Mix with sautéed onions, mushrooms, and dill. Season to taste with salt and pepper.

**To Make Dough**

Mix flour, baking powder, salt, and butter until the dough is mealy. Whisk 2 egg yolks and the sour cream together. Add the liquid to the flour mixture until it forms a rich dough. Chill the dough for at least one hour.

Preheat oven to 375°F. Flatten a piece of dough to make a 3-inch circle. Put a tablespoon of filling in the center. Press the edges together to seal them, creating a football shape. Place the pirozhok on a
buttered cookie sheet, seam side down. Make an egg wash with the remaining egg yolk and water and brush on pirozhki with a pastry brush. Bake in the upper third of the oven for 15–20 minutes or until golden brown. Serve while still warm.

Eating Out

Once stereotyped as the land of shortages and sausage queues, Russia now presents an exceptional opportunity to explore dining out as an intersection of economics and culture, of consumption and national identity. From white-tablecloth restaurants to cafeterias to street food, the culinary influences of Russia, the Caucasus, and Central Asia play off each other to create a dynamic restaurant scene. Eating out in Russia is a major event—fun, fascinating, and full of surprises, mostly pleasing ones.

The types of restaurants in Russia can be roughly divided into a few sectors: exclusive restaurants and private clubs, international cuisine, fast-food chains and cafés, restaurant chains, independent midrange restaurants, and, the latest arrivals, coffee shops and beer halls. After European and American businesses’ initial entry into the market, Russian companies quickly countered to dominate urban offerings. Prevailing trends include more midrange restaurants for the ever-expanding middle class, while new fast-food outlets are offering more Russian dishes in response to market demand. Restaurants are also an attractive area of investment for successful Russian businessmen seeking to diversify their holdings. International cuisine ranges from typical European fare (Italian and French) to the Asian options of Chinese, Japanese, Thai, and even Tibetan.

Russian restaurant menus follow a typical format: cold appetizers, hot appetizers, a first course (usually soup), a second or main course, garnitures or side dishes, and desserts. An extensive list of alcoholic beverages is common, including vodka, Crimean wine, brandy, and champagne. Whiskey, gin, and beer and wine from abroad are making major inroads into the beverage market. Many menus even contain sections for cigarettes and cigars.

Until recently, menus varied little. The meal begins with zakuski, literally “small bites,” which are both hot and cold hors d’oeuvres. The cold appetizers often include sturgeon black caviar and salmon red caviar, pickled and fresh vegetables, a dish of assorted smoked or cured fish, assorted cold cuts, mushrooms, and beef tongue with horseradish.

The first course (pervoe) is invariably a hot soup of borscht, cabbage soup (shchi), or boiled dumplings in broth (pelmeni). Main courses of beef, pork, chicken, lamb, and fish—baked, boiled, braised, or fried—are most common. Desserts in a typical restaurant may include fresh fruit or berries, ice cream, and a pastry or two. Sponge cake and simple chocolate candies are also fairly common. Tea and coffee are served as the final course.

Special Occasions

Ask Russians what their favorite celebrations are, and the answer varies little: New Year’s, May Day
holidays, and birthdays. For children, the birthday party is the most important festive occasion of the year, rivaled only by New Year’s. Even during the Communist reign of the 20th century, religiously devout people in the Soviet Union celebrated their holidays, be it Easter, Ramadan, or Passover. Religious holidays have now rebounded, yet many secular Soviet ones remain deeply embedded, too. The Russian Orthodox Church still retains the older Julian calendar system to mark the main periods of feasting and fasting. Christmas, therefore, is celebrated on January 7; it is second only to Easter in religious significance.

The typical Russian celebratory meal requires much planning and preparation. The region is well acquainted with famine and hardship, and consequently feasts are intensely appreciated. Finding all the necessary ingredients, not to mention budgeting for them, demands great sacrifice and scheduling. The hosts of a family celebration may spend a week or more getting ready for the big day. The hosts intend not only to impress their guests but also to ensure an unforgettable experience. The table, decorated with a white tablecloth, is usually wholly covered with small plates of appetizers (zakuski), salads, cold cuts, pickled vegetables, and bread. Selections of vodka, wine, or champagne are proudly displayed. The finest crystal and china, usually stored in the living-room cabinets, are dusted and shined for maximum pageantry. Once everyone is seated, a glass is raised in honor of the host or honored guest. Diners help themselves to the hors d’oeuvres, and the plates are passed family style. The evening is often a noisy affair as dishes clang, music or television drones in the background, conversation builds, and more toasts are offered and accepted. A main hot course follows the toasts. Hot tea with dessert completes the evening.

Maslenitsa has become the Russian equivalent of Fat Tuesday or Mardi Gras, the pre-Lenten festival of Shrove Tuesday, arriving in February or March, depending on the Easter date. In general, Maslenitsa is a holiday of gluttony and excess that dates to the pre-Christian era. The pancake (blin) represents the sun, and dozens of bliny are consumed throughout the week. Bliny are eaten with liberal amounts of butter, sour cream, caviar, smoked fish, and jams. They are made with buckwheat or wheat flour, or a mixture of both, with yeast or baking soda as the leavening agent. Orthodox Christianity adopted this holiday, and it was given an additional meaning as the last week before Lent.

During the seven decades of the Communist experiment, all holidays celebrated the glory of labor as well as specific professions, special days of Communist history, and memorials to war, particularly World War II. The grandest of contemporary holidays in Russia is New Year’s Eve, which has become a combination of the Christmas and the Western New Year’s holidays. New Year’s is considered a family holiday, and the table features all the favorite and traditional Russian dishes, including a wide array of appetizers, salads, and bread. A standard

Grechnevye Bliny (Russian Buckwheat Pancakes/Crepes)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ingredient</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Buckwheat flour</td>
<td>2 cups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milk</td>
<td>4 cups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yeast</td>
<td>1 1/2 packages dry active yeast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sugar</td>
<td>2 tbsp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eggs, separated</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsalted butter</td>
<td>4 tbsp melted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salt</td>
<td>1 tsp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All-purpose flour</td>
<td>2 cups</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mix buckwheat flour with 1 cup cold milk. Then stir 2 cups of warm milk into the flour mixture. Mix in the yeast and only 1/2 teaspoon of the sugar. Cover and set aside in a warm place for 30 minutes. Blend the egg yolks with the remaining sugar, melted butter, salt, and all-purpose flour until smooth, and add to the buckwheat mixture. Adjust consistency with remaining milk. Cover and set aside for 45 minutes. Fold whipped egg whites into the batter a little bit at a time. Drop 2–3 tablespoons of batter onto a hot, buttered skillet. Cook for 1 1/2 minutes; flip and cook other side for 30–60 seconds. Serve with the usual garnishes of sour cream, fish, jam, caviar, tvorog, and so forth.
menu often includes red and black caviar, salat oliv'ye, salat vinegret, trays of assorted smoked fish and cold cuts, and pickled cucumbers and other brined vegetables. By the time the main course arrives, hunger has long since passed. Dessert and tea are obligatory at the end of every festive meal, and New Year’s is no exception. The meal usually runs up to and beyond the stroke of midnight. Right before the clock strikes 12 at midnight, a toast with vodka, wine, or brandy is raised to the old year—an appreciative farewell. The first toast of the new year is made with champagne, proclaiming, “With the new year comes new happiness” (s novym godom, s novym schast' em).

Diet and Health

In Russia, food is not only treated as a source of nourishment and fuel but also valued for its preventative and curative role. Eating healthfully keeps a body fit and free of disease. Should they fall ill, Russians have numerous cures using a wide range of foods and medicinal herbs. The variety, purity, and freshness of food in Russia unfortunately are not enough to ensure proper health. Despite the conscious and continual efforts of mothers, wives, and grandmothers to feed and care for their families, health has generally deteriorated since 2000. Food, however, is only one part of the equation for good health.
Russians have several health-related problems in common: a short life expectancy, cardiovascular disease, and general nutritional deficiencies, as well as high rates of tobacco and alcohol use. Specific nutritional problems include the lack of affordability of certain healthful and essential food items, the suspect quality of some foodstuffs, and the absence of public awareness of what constitutes a healthful and balanced diet. Much of the overall decline in health, without a doubt, may be attributed to the social and economic disruptions since 1991. The Soviet experiment can be credited with improving the general diet of the lowest economic classes but not until well into the 1960s.

Quantity and freshness have priority over quality and fineness on the Russian table. Although restaurants and cafés are numerous in the big cities, hearty homemade meals are the ideal both in the countryside and in urban areas. A well-balanced meal should have a main course of fish or meat for flair, a starch (potatoes, pasta, or rice) for energy, and vegetables (often in the form of a cooked vegetable salad) for vitamins. Soup and tea are the bookends of a meal. Dessert would make it complete in the minds of most Russians. At least one hot meal a day is crucial to maintaining good digestion and health. Lunch, according to an earlier Russian tradition, was the main meal of the day. A light lunch is usually taken at work. The daily menu of most Russian families includes a meat or sausage dish. Therefore, the typical diet is very high in protein and animal fat, mostly from low-quality processed, smoked, or cured meats. Most people consume dairy products (usually fermented) daily, including cheese, dairy drinks (kefir, prostokvasha, ryazhenka), farmer’s cheese (tvorog), and, more recently, yogurt. The most common vegetables are potatoes, cabbage, onions, tomatoes, and cucumbers. Vegetables are almost always cooked (and often overcooked), except for tomatoes, cucumbers, and radishes, which are used in fresh salads.

Glenn R. Mack and Asele Surina

Further Reading


Saami

Overview

The Saami are an indigenous people of northern Scandinavia. The names Sami, Sàmi, Saame, and Lapp have all been used to describe the Saami, although the last of these is considered derogative. There are nine different recognized Saami languages, which fall into three main groups—eastern Saami, central Saami, and southern Saami—and are all of the Finno-Ugric language family. The Saami call the territory they live in Sapmi; it is sometimes referred to as Lapland or Fennoscandia. It spans four countries (northern Norway, Sweden, Finland, and the Kola Peninsula of Russia) and is part of the Arctic Circle. Sapmi is not officially recognized by the nation-states within which it exists. There are strong indications that the Saami have lived and managed resources in this territory for at least 2,000 years. There are approximately 70,000 Saami: 35,000 in Norway, 17,000 in Sweden (2,000 in Stockholm), 5,000 in Finland, and 2,000 in Russia. There are also Saami living in Canada and the United States. Rights to resources and land continue to shape the food culture of the Saami.

The Saami have developed a cuisine linked strongly to nature. The conditions in which the diet has evolved include a harsh arctic environment, where winters are cold, snow covers the land most of the year, and the sun is absent for two months in the far north. The Saami are commonly known as reindeer herders, and traditionally this along with hunting and fishing has been the primary food activity of the Saami. For centuries the Saami have led a seminomadic lifestyle following reindeer on their seasonal migrations, but today fewer Saami are herding.

In contemporary society many Saami live in modern housing and have access to a variety of foods and cooking methods, and often their eating habits are influenced by the cuisines of the dominant countries as well as the impact of globalization on agriculture and food production. Yet tradition still plays a key role in defining a specifically Saami food culture, and often those who lead a more urban lifestyle still have links to Sapmi and their cultural heritage.

Food Culture Snapshot

A typical Saami family will differ in what they buy to eat depending on where they live and their occupation. A Saami family living in the urban environment of Stockholm has all the conveniences and variety of foods that large European cities offer. This family would typically shop and eat in a similar way to other non-Saami living in Stockholm. A typical reindeer-herding family, in contrast, has stocks of reindeer meat to eat daily. The meat is obtained from their reindeer and is eaten fresh after slaughter, and the rest is preserved. After the slaughter period, the family relies on stores of frozen and dried or smoked reindeer meat throughout the year. Reindeer herders are generally self-sufficient with supplies of reindeer meat, elk, and fish, but they will buy in other supplies such as potatoes, onions, salt, coffee, sugar, barley, milk, and flour. Reindeer meat can be bought in supermarkets throughout Sapmi and large cities in Norway, Sweden, and Finland; it is
usually bought in frozen slices to be made into sautéed reindeer or reindeer stew.

In coastal areas fish are either caught or bought directly from fishermen or frozen from a supermarket. In the past many Saami who fished also farmed, which provided a good supply of vegetables and dairy for their diet. Today, many foods that are available in large international cities in Scandinavia can also be bought in supermarkets in the north, but sometimes prices are high.

**Major Foodstuffs**

The landscape of Sapmi is environmentally varied, and because it spans four countries, it is also culturally varied. Changes in the dietary staples correspond to the environmental and cultural changes in territory. The Saami diet has traditionally been high in animal protein and fat, and low in carbohydrates. Reindeer-herding Saami still have a diet characterized in this way. Many other Saami have adopted a diet similar to that of the Scandinavian countries they live in. There is a commonly held assumption that reindeer meat forms the basis of protein consumption among the Saami; however, for many, protein is obtained from fish as well, especially for the people living in coastal areas, who get most of their protein from fish. The protein intake of the urban population is more balanced between fish and meat. Inland Saami consume meat, predominantly reindeer, as their main source of protein.

Reindeer meat is a central component of the Saami food culture and is symbolic for the culture as a whole. Even though not all Saami consume it today, reindeer meat is a dietary staple for reindeer herders and many other Saami. Currently only 10 percent of Saami make their living from reindeer herding, yet it is considered an important industry, since reindeer are well suited to the arctic environment and provide the main meat source here. The Saami have undertaken nomadic reindeer herding since the early 1600s; prior to this time, instead of herding, they hunted reindeer. Today, many herders use modern technology such as helicopters and snowmobiles to manage their herds, which has significantly changed the food culture associated with a nomadic life. Reindeer herding is an exclusive Saami right in Sweden and Norway but not in Finland. In Russia, where approximately two and a half million of the world’s three million reindeer live, many different indigenous groups undertake reindeer herding. Even though a large population of Saami lives in cities (Stockholm has the greatest concentration, with 2,000 Saami living there), people living in cities often have links to relatives who herd reindeer. In traditional practices the entire reindeer is used: Skins and furs can be used for clothes; the flesh, inwards, marrow, blood, bones, milk, and linings for food; and bones for implements.

Many of the coastal waters, in particular, the Atlantic Ocean and Barents Sea, offer a rich source of fish that Saami and non-Saami both eat. Fishing was once a means of subsistence, but today, many Saami who live along the coast are employed outside of the fishing industry. Salmon, trout, char, whitefish, grayling, burbot, pike, and cod are all commonly eaten. Inland, there are many lakes, rivers, and marshes, which also provide a rich source of fish. The Tenojoki and Tornionjoki rivers offer a good source of salmon, a fish commonly found in the Saami cuisine. In traditional practices roe from freshwater fish are dried and then used by soaking them in water when needed. In the past fish offered more than just food for many Saami, who in the Middle Ages often paid their taxes using dried fish.

Due to climatic conditions agriculture is extremely difficult in Sapmi territory. However, attempts have been made by Norway, Sweden, and Finland since the mid-1600s to promote agriculture in the north. At best, the growing season is 110–120 days when the temperature is above 41 degrees Fahrenheit (5 degrees Celsius): Short, warm summers with six weeks of continuous sunshine allow some crops, mainly barley, potatoes, oats, turnips, and fodder, to grow. Any other cereals, such as wheat, must be brought in. Potatoes continue to form a major dietary staple for coastal, inland, and urban Saami. Most Saami who have been farmers in coastal Norway and northern Finland learned quickly to rely on a mixed economy and also undertook hunting, fishing, and berry picking, or today buy foods from supermarkets to supplement their subsistence.
Traditionally, fruit and vegetables have not featured heavily in the meals of the Saami. Potatoes, some root vegetables, sorrel, and angelica have complemented meat and fish. Berries have always offered the Saami a good local source of vitamins and minerals and have been a major element of the diet. Berries such as the cloudberry, lingonberry, bilberry, and crowberry continue to be used and are also a source of income. Berries harvested and consumed include the lingonberry, crowberry, blueberry, bog whortleberry, cloudberry, cranberry, rowanberry, raspberry, juniper berry, wild strawberry, bilberry, and arctic bramble. Today, globalization has led to an increased variety of fruit and vegetables available and consumed throughout Scandinavia.

Milk from reindeer was used traditionally to supplement meat and fish as a protein source. Reindeer milk can be made into cheese and used in cooking, and it can be mixed with cloudberrries and frozen to form a type of ice cream that preserves both the cloudberries and the milk. It is a good clotting agent and traditionally is used in a dish called juobmo (juopmu), which combined sorrel with reindeer milk to form a thick souplike dish. Today, joubmo is sometimes made using cow milk and sweetened with sugar and served as a dessert. Today, the milking of reindeer is not common. The movement toward agriculture in the 1950s resulted in a small economy of cow and goat milk in parts of northern Norway and Finland. The Saami through much of the 20th century used goat and cow milk.

Coffee is a major beverage for most Saami; it is consumed in large quantities and is typically very strong. Reindeer herders survive long hours looking after reindeer by drinking coffee. Coffee was traditionally and sometimes still is served with reindeer cheese instead of milk.

Cooking

Today, most Saami live in modern housing, and cooking is done in modern kitchens. Equipment, cooking methods, and access to foods reflect a Scandinavian lifestyle. Traditional Saami society was based on the siida system. The siida consisted of a number of families working together to procure food. The traditional Saami kitchen is part of the goatte, a tepee-like construction. The hearth is in the center of the area, and a cauldron is suspended from the roof. The smoking of meat sometimes takes place here. Men and women both undertake cooking activities. Traditionally, women were in charge of baking the bread and the overall preparation of daily household meals, and men were in charge of preserving and boiling meat. Today, men largely do the reindeer herding and husbandry, and women tend to manage activities surrounding the household.

Fire plays an important role in traditional Saami cooking. A stone slab or wooden board is placed by the fire for baking bread or cheese bread and for grilling fish. Thin cheese bread is made with cheese and potato and is eaten either hot with cloudberrries or cold with hot coffee.

“Cheese Bread”

**Ingredients**

- 2 gal unpasteurized milk
- 1 tbsp potato flour
- 1 tbsp salt
- 1 tbsp liquid rennet

**Method**

Heat the unpasteurized milk to 100°F. Mix potato flour with a small amount of milk, and add with salt and rennet to the heated milk. Stir for 1–1½ minutes, and leave to curdle for about ½ hour. Make a few slits in the curd with a ladle or long knife and leave for 10 minutes to let the whey rise to the surface. Then break the mixture up into small pieces and let stand to allow the whey to collect on the surface. Skim off the whey.

When the curds have formed a cake of cheese, pour onto a wooden cheese board with holes in it, to allow the whey to drain. Bake the curds at 500°F until the surface turns a speckled brown. Turn the cheese over onto a second cheese board, and bake the other side the same way.
Pots and frying pans are useful utensils in Saami cooking because of the large amount of boiling and frying done. Reindeer meat is most commonly boiled or fried. Thin frozen pieces of reindeer meat are often fried in a saucepan with brown sauce. A more traditional method still practiced today is carving thin slices from a frozen shoulder and frying them in a saucepan over a fire or on a stovetop.

Preserving plays a big part in Saami food preparation. Reindeer meat, fish, and sometimes cheese are smoked, salted, dried, or frozen. Historically, preserving has been necessary to provide food supplies throughout the year. Today, many households have freezers where meat can be stored, but in the past the low temperatures and snow provided a natural freezer. Meat is often smoked or dried in small hutlike constructions off the ground and outside the house or on drying racks. Dried reindeer meat is commonly taken to eat while herding reindeer. Dried meat is also boiled with barley to make a soup. Blood is boiled or made into sausages occasionally. Entrails from reindeer and fish are more commonly boiled than fried.

Spoons used for eating porridge, soup, or milk-based foods are traditionally part of the Saami kitchen. They are made from either silver or antlers, and they are typically shaped with a wide curve and uniquely decorated. Other traditional kitchen utensils include a reindeer-milking bowl; a coffee-carrying bag; a brass coffeepot; and a cauldron or pot.

Typical Meals
Defining a typical Saami meal and eating pattern today is difficult since many Saami live like the rest of the population in Norway, Sweden, Finland, or Russia, and there are also regional and seasonal differences in Saami meals. On the coast, fish is the main component of daily meals and is often accompanied by potatoes. Meat is more widely available
today, but traditionally in northern coastal Norway it was reserved for holidays and Sundays. Porridge was a typical meal well into the 20th century, sometimes cooked with berries. In the Kola Peninsula of Russia, for breakfast, some Saami eat salted or smoked fish, or sometimes fish mashed with berries to form a type of porridge. Fish is a major part of a meal in the summer and spring for Saami who herd reindeer. Salmon, arctic char, whitefish, trout, and pike are cooked, poached, or fried for dinner and also smoked or salted. It is common to find coffee brewing on the stove or fire for consumption throughout the day.

Saami who eat reindeer meat as their main protein source often eat it daily. The way it is consumed changes with the seasons. After slaughtering, the meat is eaten fresh, and then it is frozen, dried, or smoked. Reindeer meat is often accompanied by potatoes, berries, or barley and is either sautéed or boiled and made into a soup or gruel. A typical meal, especially for herders, is sautéed reindeer. It is often served with lingonberries or cowberries and mashed potato.

### Sautéed Reindeer

**Ingredients**

- Butter or oil for frying
- Reindeer, thinly sliced (This is easier when the meat is frozen. Reindeer can be bought in frozen pieces or shaved off a frozen shoulder piece.)
- Water or beer
- Mashed potatoes
- Lingonberry jam (available in Ikea) or crushed cowberries in sugar

**Method**

Melt butter or oil in a pan. (Reindeer was traditionally sautéed in reindeer fat.) Add the reindeer slices, and stir so that the meat does not stick together. Put the lid on, and simmer until cooked. Add some water or beer to the pan at the end, and let reduce to a sauce. Serve with mashed potatoes and berry jam.

### Eating Out

The practice of eating out that is typical throughout much of North America and western Europe today is not part of traditional Saami food culture. Historically, eating out was more likely to involve communal eating as part of the siida system that organized nomadic existence.

Saami living in major cities like Stockholm, Gothenburg, and Helsinki have access to a wide range of dining options from typical Western fast-food venues like McDonald’s to the many lunchtime restaurants of Sweden. Similarly, large towns across the northernmost parts of Scandinavia offer a wide range of restaurants serving everything from Nordic fare and pizza to Thai food, a more recent arrival. Traditional Saami foods are also easy to come by in many towns and cities across the northern parts of Norway, Sweden, and Finland. Some restaurants and cafés serve typical national dishes alongside local Saami dishes, with reindeer featuring heavily on the menu. There are also many tourist attractions surrounding Saami food, such as eating traditional meals in a goatte, or reindeer herding, fishing, or hunting; however, there is controversy over the authenticity of some of these attractions and the benefit to Saami people.

### Special Occasions

There are many festivals, holidays, and events in modern Saami culture. Saami and non-Saami share some special occasions, like midsummer, Easter, and Christmas. There are other occasions that are particular to the Saami culture, such as the Saami National Day on February 6. Food is a part of celebrating all of these occasions.

Many special occasions celebrated by the Saami relate to the seasons and nature. Easter is especially important since it marks the change in seasons from the harsh winter months. The time of the year when the reindeer are slaughtered also marks a special occasion when fresh meat is eaten. The bone marrow along with the tongue has for a long time been considered a delicacy. After the reindeer are slaughtered fresh meat is boiled with the bones, and the
marrow is eaten. The liver is also eaten at this time, along with blood balls, which consist of milk, flour, blood, and salt.

Diet and Health

The Saami belief system is heavily linked to nature and features shamanism and the use of medicinal plants. Today, however, shamanism is not commonly practiced, and most Saami rely on the national health system. The World Health Organization acknowledges that many indigenous populations, including the Saami, often have a higher risk of health problems, and this is partly due to social inequalities. In the case of the Saami, sociopolitical rights are closely linked to territory and resources and thus to food and health. Resources and rights to land have been issues at the heart of reindeer herding, fishing, and hunting for centuries. The outcomes for Saami people today are different in the different countries. Policies relating to the Saami have influenced their diet and well-being through herding and hunting restrictions, land disputes, and cultural oppression.

The Saami traditionally have a diet high in animal protein and fat and low in carbohydrates. Fruit and vegetable intake is low even compared with Swedish and Norwegian populations, who are already known to consume low quantities. This type of diet is contrary to most national dietary recommendations, yet there are reported low levels of coronary heart disease in Saami populations who live off a more traditional diet; it is suggested this could be partly due to a high diet of reindeer meat. Reindeer meat has high levels of $\alpha$-tocopherol and selenium and has a fatty acid composition likely to aid cardiovascular protection. Berries have high levels of vitamins and minerals and are important in areas where the sun does not rise for some months of the year.

Environmental pollutants affect the food chain that many Saami rely on. A major health problem occurred in 1986 after the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. Dangerous radioactive substances were scattered across parts of Europe, including Scandinavia. Lichens, which form the basis of the reindeer diet, absorbed high levels of radioactive substances and in return had a major impact on the Saami diet and reindeer consumption. The Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Program has recorded a decline in radioactive substances caused by past nuclear disasters but is concerned about other pollution risks in the arctic food chain.

Kate Johnston

Further Reading


Scotland

Overview

Scotland, a part of the United Kingdom, covers 30,414 square miles (78,772 square kilometers) of land and encompasses roughly 6,214 miles (10,000 kilometers) of coastline, 2,423 miles (3,900 kilometers) of which constitute the mainland coast. Geographically, Scotland can be divided into roughly three main regions: the Highlands, the Central Lowlands, and the Southern Lowlands. Scotland also includes upward of 800 islands, with 130 of them inhabited. The Shetland and Orkney Islands to the northeast, and the Inner and Outer Hebrides to the west, include most of the populated islands. Glasgow and Edinburgh are Scotland’s largest cities and centers of government and culture. Of its 5,116,900 inhabitants, roughly 1.2 million reside in the Greater Glasgow metropolitan area, and almost 500,000 reside in Edinburgh.

Geography and climate historically have played a significant role in the Scottish diet. Rivers and the coastline supply countless varieties of fish, seafood, and edible seaweeds; the Highlands supply game as well as the barley for hundreds of whiskey distilleries; the southwestern region is known for its dairy farming; and the Lowlands supply much of the nation’s soft fruits and vegetables.

Food Culture Snapshot

Ron, Sarah, and their four-year-old daughter Fiona live in the town of Peebles in the Scottish Borders. Ron is a veterinarian, and his wife, a former schoolteacher, stays at home to care for Fiona. Their diet and eating habits are representative of middle-class, educated Scots.

Ron and Sarah start their day at 7 A.M., with porridge or a bowl of cold cereal, bananas, toast and butter, and hot tea. Their daughter usually prefers a soft-boiled egg, toast “soldiers” (strips of toast) to dip in the yolk, and a mug of warm milk. The family typically eats breakfast together before Ron leaves for his practice around 7:45. At 10 A.M., Ron often takes a short break to enjoy a cup of tea with his assistants before returning to his rounds. Sarah likewise often enjoys a midmorning break, taking her daughter with her to a local coffee shop where she meets with other young mothers and their children. While Sarah drinks a mug of coffee and talks to friends, Fiona has a hot cocoa and biscuit (cookie). Around noon, Ron takes a 45-minute lunch break, often eating a cheese and cucumber, or cheese and cress, sandwich that he brings from home, along with a bag of crisps (potato chips) and an apple. He drinks a half-liter of mineral water with his meal. Sarah eats a similar meal at home with Fiona.

Sarah begins dinner preparation around 4 P.M., often making two meals: one for her daughter and one for her and her husband. Like many families, they refer to their dinner meal as “tea” unless they are having a rare “dinner party” later in the evening for friends. Fiona likes many of the foods her parents have later for their dinner, including mashed potatoes with butter, roast chicken, macaroni and cheese, or pasta with cream sauce and peas, but oftentimes Sarah prepares a simple tea for her daughter of porridge and milk with bananas, or toasted cheese and ham with carrot sticks and applesauce. The family generally avoids sweets, but on special occasions, Sarah might make a pudding (a generic
word for a dessert) or buy a pastry from a favorite baker and give her daughter a small serving. Raspberry tart is Fiona’s favorite.

Fiona’s tea is at 5:30, and while she eats, Sarah prepares the rest of her and Ron’s dinner, often cooking the main dish in the oven and keeping it warm until their teatime around 6:30, after Ron has returned home and the two have had a moment to sit down for a glass of wine while talking and watching Fiona play. They eat a green salad almost every night and follow it with a main dish such as pasta and mushrooms, lentil soup, grilled lamb chops with sautéed spinach, or roast chicken with carrots and potatoes. When Ron and Sarah entertain friends for dinner, they start with an aperitif and an appetizer such as pâté and French bread in the living room around 7:00, and then proceed to their formal dining room for a more elaborate meal that will include a soup, a salad, a main dish, and pudding. Sarah’s favorite company dish is baked salmon with a teriyaki glaze and rice pilaf, along with fresh-steamed Asian vegetables, particularly snow peas and bok choy. To commemorate his family’s Highland heritage, Ron likes to follow such dinners by serving cranachan, oftentimes considered Scotland’s national dessert: a parfait-like concoction made with a soft cheese called crowdie, sweetened lightly with heather honey, accented with malt whiskey and toasted oatmeal, and folded in with fresh raspberries. Coffee, whiskey, and a cheese selection with oatcakes follow.

For reasons of health and economy, Ron and Sarah limit eating out to three to four times a month, often traveling into Edinburgh to take in the lively restaurant scene. Italian or Indian restaurants are Ron and Sarah’s favorite choices. When Ron is particularly late at his practice or Sarah has volunteer work, Ron will sometimes stop at their neighborhood fish-and-chip shop to pick up a fish supper (fish, chips, and peas) for the sake of convenience.

Major Foodstuffs

In spite of its small geographic size, Scotland’s numerous microclimates and landscapes result in an extraordinary diversity of raw foodstuffs, many of which are exported throughout the United Kingdom and Europe and also find their way into Scotland’s most famous specialties. Scotland’s mild summers allow for optimal production of both barley and oats. Barley has been Scotland’s main cereal crop since Neolithic times; the Romans are thought to have introduced oats. Roughly 35 percent of the country’s barley is malted for whiskey production, while 55 percent is used for animal feed. In remote areas, including the Highlands and Orkney, some people still use barley flour to make bread, and Orkney is known for its bere-meal bannocks, a griddle cake or scone made with a variety of barley known as bere. Oats remain a popular staple throughout Scotland, with many older people eating slow-cooked porridge with milk and a dash of salt for breakfast and oatcakes with cheese for a snack. Younger people often eat instant porridge, made by emptying a serving-size packet of oats into a bowl and heating it in the microwave with water. Oats are used to make drop scones (pancakes), skirlie (fried oatmeal and onions), and bannocks and are a key ingredient in several of Scotland’s best-known dishes, particularly haggis, a savory blend of sheep’s pluck (heart, liver, and/or lungs) and oatmeal boiled in a sheep’s stomach or, more likely today, in a synthetic casing. Oatmeal is also an ingredient of black pudding (a sausage of oats, suet, spices, and pork blood) and white, or mealy, pudding (a sausage of oats, suet, spices, and onion). Although wheat production is limited in Scotland because of the climate, many Scotland’s mild summers allow for optimal production of both barley and oats. Barley has been Scotland’s main cereal crop since Neolithic times; the Romans are thought to have introduced oats. Roughly 35 percent of the country’s barley is malted for whiskey production, while 55 percent is used for animal feed. In remote areas, including the Highlands and Orkney, some people still use barley flour to make bread, and Orkney is known for its bere-meal bannocks, a griddle cake or scone made with a variety of barley known as bere. Oats remain a popular staple throughout Scotland, with many older people eating slow-cooked porridge with milk and a dash of salt for breakfast and oatcakes with cheese for a snack. Younger people often eat instant porridge, made by emptying a serving-size packet of oats into a bowl and heating it in the microwave with water. Oats are used to make drop scones (pancakes), skirlie (fried oatmeal and onions), and bannocks and are a key ingredient in several of Scotland’s best-known dishes, particularly haggis, a savory blend of sheep’s pluck (heart, liver, and/or lungs) and oatmeal boiled in a sheep’s stomach or, more likely today, in a synthetic casing. Oatmeal is also an ingredient of black pudding (a sausage of oats, suet, spices, and pork blood) and white, or mealy, pudding (a sausage of oats, suet, spices, and onion). Although wheat production is limited in Scotland because of the climate, many Scottish communities still grow their own wheat and use it to make bread and other baked goods. In addition, Scotland is known for its high-quality butter, cheese, and other dairy products, which are often made using milk from the country’s many farms. Other important foodstuffs include salmon, which is famous for its quality and is often smoked or cured and served as a delicacy, and haggis, a traditional dish made from a mixture of sheep’s pluck and oatmeal. In recent years, there has been a renewed interest in Scotland’s traditional cuisine, and many restaurants and cafes are offering dishes that honor the country’s rich culinary heritage.
Scots prefer breads, cakes, pies, and biscuits made of wheat flour.

**Oatmeal Biscuits**

- 1 c unbleached white flour
- ½ tsp sugar
- ½ tsp salt
- ¼ tsp baking powder
- 1 c old-fashioned rolled oats
- 5 tbsp vegetable shortening
- ¼ c heavy cream
- Water to mix

Preheat oven to 400°F. Sift the flour, sugar, salt, and baking powder together in a large bowl. Add oats. Add vegetable shortening. Rub the shortening into the flour and oats. Add heavy cream, and stir lightly. Add ice water until dough is pliable but still stiff. Roll out to ¼ inch thick. Prick dough all over with fork tines. Cut into squares, and place on a greased baking tray. Bake approximately 12 minutes until brown and crisp. Best topped with butter and a dollop of jelly or marmalade or served with Scottish cheeses.

Scotland’s rivers, lochs (lakes), and coasts provide some of the highest-quality fish and seafood in the world. The nation is best known for its salmon, trout, herring, langoustines, oysters, and mussels. Scotland’s Arbroath smokies (smoked haddock) have been awarded Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) status by the European Commission (meaning the name is legally protected) and are highly sought after by locals and food connoisseurs alike. Several varieties of seaweed, including dulse and kelp, are staples in northeastern coastal communities, as well as throughout the Western Isles, Inner and Outer Hebrides, the Northern Isles, Orkney, and Shetland.

Before the Clearances of the mid-1700s, Highland clans survived by eating venison, game birds, wild boar, and dairy products from their domesticated livestock. They supplemented their diet with wild foods such as nettles and brambles (blackberries) and with the kale, onions, and leeks that families planted in their kailyards (garden plots). Today, many Scots still eat venison, both wild and farmed, along with hare and rabbit. Butchers also sell pheasant, grouse, and partridge when these birds are in season, for those who can afford it. Hunting and fishing are both popular sports.

Scotland is also renowned for its domesticated meats, with Scotch beef having been awarded PGI status in 2004. Aberdeen Angus, Scotch Shorthorn, Galloway, and Highland cattle are esteemed breeds, and many of Scotland’s roasts and rich stews depend on Scotch beef for their depth of flavor. The nation’s highest-quality lamb comes from crossbred sheep, with Cheviot one of the most important breeds. The southwest is distinguished for its dairying industry, and the by-products of cheese and butter have been used to feed pigs. The distinctive rolled Ayrshire back bacon is created from Great White premium-grade pigs that are raised in part on these dairy by-products.

Up to World War II, many Scots produced their own butter, milk, and cheese, particularly crowdie, a pot cheese still popular in the Highlands. Today, the bulk of Scotland’s dairy farming is situated in Dumfries and Galloway, where pasturage is abundant. Artisanal cheese making has been revived due to the efforts of individuals intent on saving or resurrecting Scotland’s culinary traditions. Bonchester
and Kelsae cheeses from the Borders; Caboc, a cream cheese from the Highlands; Dunlop from Ayrshire; Dunsyre Blue and Lanark Blue from Lanarkshire; Orkney farmhouse cheeses; and cheddar-style cheeses from the Isles of Mull and Iona are only some representatives of a thriving artisan cheese industry. Ice cream became an established part of Scottish culinary culture in the 19th century when Italian immigrants who settled in Glasgow and Edinburgh sold it first from carts and then from cafes. Scotland continues to be known for high-quality ice cream, and due to the health of their vast dairy herds, ice cream from Orkney, Dumfries, and Galloway is particularly esteemed.

Over half of Scotland’s soft fruit comes from Perthshire. Raspberries—considered Scotland’s national fruit—as well as strawberries, currants, gooseberries, brambles, and blackberries (a cross between a raspberry and a blackberry) are consumed throughout the United Kingdom. Many Scottish desserts blend soft fruits with cream or crowdie. Much of the country’s vegetable production extends south from Lothian, through the Borders and into the south-western region. The Solway Firth benefits from the Gulf Stream, resulting in milder temperatures. Overall, the Scottish climate lends itself to growing potatoes, onions, leeks, turnips, rutabagas, and cabbages, with these vegetables raised both on industrial and small-farm scales.

Contemporary Scottish cooks showcase the bounty of these native foods while celebrating the Norwegian, English, French, Dutch, and Italian influences that have defined this country’s cuisine since the 9th century. The taste for salted, dried fish and mutton, the prevalence of cabbage in many dishes such as kailkenny (a savory mashed potato and cabbage dish), and recipes for pickled herring are vestiges of Viking influence, evident in the Northern Highlands, the Hebrides, Orkney, and Shetland. Scottish food also owes much to French influence in both technique and dishes, the result of the Auld Alliance formalized in 1295 when Scotland and France united against English invaders. Hotchpotch (a vegetable soup), for example, is similar in composition and name to the French hochepot. Italian restaurants are among the most popular restaurants in Scotland and have been so for many decades running.

Seasonings remain straightforward and simple if one is preparing traditional Scottish specialties. Mace and nutmeg are used in a variety of sweet and savory dishes, from white sauces to puddings. Salt and pepper are the most frequent spices, with garden herbs such as thyme, parsley, sage, rosemary, savory, and chives gracing any number of dishes. Scots also prefer the sharp-sweet taste of native berries, such as rowan, as an accompaniment to game dishes.

Cooking

Up through the mid-18th century, Scots cooked by boiling food in a pot or baking it on a griddle. They preserved food by salting, drying, smoking, or pickling. Many Scottish foods, including clootie pudding (a sweet flour-and-suet pudding boiled in a cloth), porridge, haggis, bannocks, cullen skink (dried haddock and cream soup), and tattie scones (potato pancakes), continue to be prepared according to these ancient methods. In addition to boiling food in a pot or baking it on a griddle, today’s cooks also fry, sauté, braise, grill, broil, and bake foods in an oven, on a cooker, or in a microwave.

In addition to an electric or gas cooker, oven, and microwave oven, a typical Scottish kitchen includes a sink, a refrigerator and freezer combination unit, and sometimes an electric dishwasher. People also use a variety of countertop electrical appliances, including toasters, mixers, blenders, drip coffee-makers, teakettles, and food processors. For those with large gardens (yards), an outdoor barbecue grill is also common.

From the 1990s on, the sale of convenience foods has spiked. The British Council notes that frozen meals, take-out meals, and boxed dinners (such as macaroni and cheese) were worth £11 billion in 2001 and estimated to grow by 33 percent throughout the decade. A wealth of shortcut products, such as pre-washed lettuces and preshredded cheese, have cut the average time that a person may spend preparing a meal down to around 13 minutes. These trends reflect practices in the entire United Kingdom.
Typical Meals

Traditionally, Scottish women were in charge of shopping for food, cooking it, serving meals, and cleaning up. That strict gender demarcation has waned, and in many homes, men are likely to be involved in some or all of these tasks. Contemporary Scottish families often keep diverse schedules, with teenage children and their parents working various shifts and/or involved in an assortment of daily commitments that make it hard for them to cook and eat all of their meals together. Therefore, it is difficult to describe a typical Scottish meal. But there are some commonalities. Most Scots consume three daily meals: breakfast, lunch, and dinner (which might also be called “tea” or “supper”). They likely take a midmorning and midafternoon break for tea or coffee and a snack.

Breakfast can range from a substantial meal to little more than a cereal bar, as can lunch. However, most Scots treat dinner as the day’s most important and substantial meal.

Many Scottish families attempt to convene around the table for dinner, where they help themselves to a variety of foods, with meat often the main course and vegetables and a starch such as rice, pasta, or potatoes as sides. Many people end the meal with a sweet as well, perhaps a chocolate, a slice of cake, or a tart. Over the decades, however, as tastes have widely diversified and many Scots have become more health conscious, dinners might no longer feature meat, or meat plays a secondary role. Roughly 5 percent of adults in the United Kingdom identify themselves as vegetarians, with countless more limiting meat in their diets to as little as once or twice a week.

While most people drink hot tea or coffee for breakfast, their lunch and dinner might be accompanied by a wide range of beverages, from water and fruit juices to soft drinks, particularly Irn-Bru, a bright orange soda reputedly flavored with iron. Spirits such as wine and whiskey are more likely to be consumed with dinner than with lunch.

Aside from these general features of Scottish meals, what people eat and when they eat it depends on their tastes, ethnicity (especially recent immigrants), knowledge about nutrition, age, and affluence. Because of upward mobility and the nature of a global economy, people often move throughout the United Kingdom, and increasingly throughout Europe, on the basis of where they work. Fluidity of movement disrupts or challenges regional customs as well as distinctive regional food traditions. Furthermore, irrespective of geographic location, most Scots have access to a staggering variety and quantity of food, much of it name-brand, prepackaged, and sold in nationally recognized supermarket chains. Seventy percent of Scotland’s food retailing is done in five of these chains.

The following are examples of typical meals of families living in Scotland’s Central Lowlands, a region where the population density is the highest. For those who eat breakfast at home, cold cereal and milk, instant porridge, or toast is common. Orange juice is universally popular at breakfast, as is coffee or tea. Commuters might eat in transit, buying a buttery (roll) and cup of coffee or tea, or a breakfast sandwich of fried egg and bacon placed inside a bap (a soft floury roll). On weekends, breakfast might be a more substantial affair, with some enjoying a “fry up,” or full Scottish breakfast that includes eggs, bacon, lorne sausage (a square sausage slice of minced beef and pork), black pudding, tattie (potato) scones, grilled tomatoes, baked beans, toast, and hot tea or coffee.

Noonday lunch often consists of no more than a sandwich, a Scotch pie (a hot pie of minced beef and gravy), a pizza slice, a salad, a kebab, or a small order of chicken tikka masala (roast chicken curry). Many workers pack a lunch to eat at work, or they order a meal in a work canteen. Others purchase something ready-made from a take-out place or sandwich bar. Occasionally, people make time for a more elaborate restaurant lunch, particularly if the meal involves business. Those remaining at home often pause around noon and eat a sandwich or snack. Primary-school children eat a prepared lunch at their cafeteria, while older children might leave the grounds to find lunch at a take-out shop.

The dinner hour (anywhere from 5 to 7 P.M.) remains an important meal, and families will often
attempt to eat together if possible. Typical meals include minced beef simmered in gravy and served with mashed potatoes and peas, poached salmon with rice and a side salad, grilled sausage with fried potatoes and brussels sprouts, pasta with sautéed mushrooms, a cheese omelet with steamed vegetables, or vegetable-lentil soup and whole-grain rolls. Likewise, a variety of ethnic foods are as typical on a Scottish dinner table as would be more traditional fare, perhaps even more so. Scots often cook or bring in ready-made Asian foods such as stir-fried shrimp, beef pad Thai, or lamb curry. Italian food, such as lasagna, minestrone soup, and spaghetti, is also popular.

Eating Out

As Europe’s first industrialized nation, the United Kingdom was also the first to see its traditional culinary customs give way to consumption patterns that ultimately defined other western European nations. Thousands of rural people throughout Scotland migrated to large industrial centers to find work in factories and shipyards, and in doing so they gave up the space, time, and effort necessary to raise and cook much of their own food. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the streets of Scottish towns and cities were thronged with food vendors selling an extraordinary variety of cheap, filling food, from eel pies to thick slices of steamed currant-studded pudding. Many 19th-century Italian food vendors were so successful selling fish and chips and ice cream that they could leave their barrows and food stalls to build restaurants, cafés, and ice cream parlors. By the 20th century, Scotland had become a restaurant nation, catering to citizens and visitors alike. Of roughly 3,500 restaurants in Scotland, 330 are Italian. Indian and Chinese immigration to Scotland has also made a strong mark on the country's restaurant scene, with over 400 Indian and 350 Chinese restaurants scattered throughout the country.

Scotland’s restaurant history has also been influenced by its ties to France. The art of French pastry and confectionery making, the interest that the French have long given to haute cuisine, and the restaurant culture that has defined Paris since the 1700s have all directly influenced Scottish gastronomy. In the 1800s, Edinburgh was as renowned for its fine bakeries as were Paris and Vienna. Many of Scotland’s finest restaurants today champion the nation’s abundance of high-quality fresh ingredients by showcasing them in sophisticated dishes that blend Scottish tastes and French culinary technique.

Edinburgh’s oldest and most respected pubs and restaurants were initially coach stops that served meals and offered overnight accommodations to travelers. The Grassmarket District houses some of the capitol city’s oldest continuing pubs and restaurants, including the White Hart Inn and the Beehive Inn, both from the early 1500s. Glasgow likewise has a famous and established restaurant history, with some of its oldest dining establishments likewise originally coach inns. Sloan’s, in Glasgow’s city center, was originally Morrison’s Coffee House, dating from 1797, and is reputed to be on the site of the city’s oldest eating establishment.

While Indian, Chinese, and Scottish-French fusion food are all popular, Scotland’s restaurant culture still centers largely around the fish and chip shops, or “chippies” as they are commonly known. Italian and Jewish immigrants often established themselves in Scotland by mastering the art of frying haddock and cod in batter alongside thick wedges of potatoes. The “fish supper” (fried fish, chips, a side of mushy peas) remains for many Scots the most common and popular fast food, and several chippies have become internationally famous. Chippies also sell black and white puddings, Scotch pies, sausages, and, more recently, deep-fried Mars bars. Also very popular are Chinese and Indian take-out places and kebab stands.

Tourism enhances the Scottish restaurant business. Many hotel restaurants have become chief purchasers of traditional Scottish foods, such as oysters, mussels, and venison, that had in earlier times been produced almost exclusively for export. Creative Scottish chefs champion all manner of Scottish foodstuffs, and their consistent purchase of locally prepared gourmet cheeses, sausages, ice creams, and other specialty items in turn helps a now-thriving culture of farmers’ markets and a cottage food industry.
Special Occasions

Scottish holidays and special occasions often involve an abundance of food. Scots’ generosity toward their guests hearkens back to the days of clans, when chieftains plied visitors with food, drink, and good will. The most important holiday is Hogmanay, or New Year’s Eve. Prior to the street parties leading up to the New Year, many Scots eat a celebratory dinner with friends and family. No one dish stands out as traditional, but the time of year lends itself to hearty dishes such as steak pie or lamb stew. Shortbread, oatcakes, an array of cheeses, smoked salmon, and rich puddings are often also on offer. Wine, whiskey, and ale are popular libations. “First footing” (meaning the first person to step over the threshold) occurs after midnight and lasts into the New Year. Many communities still hold to the tradition of considering it good luck when a dark-haired male is the first through their door, bearing gifts of shortbread and whiskey.

Although Christmas was not traditionally a significant holiday, it is now one of the most popular. Christmas dinner often includes roast turkey, “kilted pigs” (chipolata sausages wrapped in bacon), dressing, mashed potatoes and gravy, and a variety of side dishes, perhaps clapshot (potatoes and turnips layered or mashed together), as well as buttered kale. Mince pies, fruitcake, gingerbread, and plum pudding are English foods also associated with the Scottish Christmas feast.

Burns Night, on January 25, is another important Scottish holiday. Started in 1801 to commemorate the birthday of Scottish poet Robert Burns, the holiday quickly built momentum and is currently celebrated worldwide by Scots, who pay homage to Scotland and its most famous bard. Upon being seated for supper, someone is selected to read Burns’s “Selkirk Grace”: “Some hae meat and canna eat, / And some wad eat, that want it, / But we hae meat, and we can eat, / Sae let the Lord be thankit.” The first course is a Scottish soup, perhaps cock-a-leekie (chicken, leeks, and prunes) or a Scotch broth of lamb neck meat, barley, dried peas, onions, leeks, and root vegetables. After the soup is cleared and side dishes of bashed neeps (mashed turnips) and champit tatties (creamed potatoes) are placed on the table, it is common for a piper to “pipe in” the haggis with bagpipes. The host then recites Burns’s “Address to the Haggis,” after which he plunges a knife or dagger into the steaming pudding, cutting the shape of St. Andrew’s cross in the top. A celebratory sweet, typically cranachan, ends the supper. Whiskey is the beverage of choice, as guests make toasts and recite favorite poems by Burns. Restaurants, fraternal organizations, and individual families throughout Scotland participate in this event, with butchers taking orders for haggis several weeks in advance of the supper itself.

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**Cranachan**

1⁄3 c medium oats  
1¼ c heavy cream  
¼ c heather honey (warmed)  
5 tbsp whiskey  
6 oz fresh raspberries

Toast oats on a heavy baking tray for roughly 8 minutes at 400°F until lightly toasted. Cool and set aside. Whip cream until soft peaks form. Slowly add honey and whiskey as the cream thickens. Fold in the oatmeal. In four parfait glasses, put a tablespoon of raspberries at the bottom, add the whipped cream mixture, top with some more raspberries, and finish.
off with more whipped cream and raspberries. Chill thoroughly.

While Burns Night is celebrated throughout Scotland, Up-Helly-Aa is Shetland’s most important holiday, replete with traditional Shetland foods. This midwinter celebration is held in Shetland’s capital, Lerwick, but communities throughout Shetland hold their own smaller festivals. Up-Helly-Aa involves burning a life-size wooden replica of a Viking longboat, thus commemorating Shetland’s Nordic heritage. The blaze begins roughly at 8 p.m., after 800 or so local men dressed as Vikings proceed through the street carrying the boat to the town center. “Attending the halls” takes place after the burning, when residents and tourists alike go to the many parties for feasting. Reestit mutton (a dish of dried, reconstituted mutton), homemade mutton soup, Shetland bannocks, and oatcakes are common fare.

Weddings and birthdays are influenced by English as well as western European traditions and customs. Cake is the most important food for both events, with candles placed on top of a birthday cake to symbolize the celebrant’s age. Wedding cakes are often white with white icing, although the bride and groom’s personal preferences now take precedence over tradition. Because of earlier United Kingdom laws that stipulated a couple marry before noon, the wedding reception is still often called the wedding breakfast, irrespective of the time of day it occurs. Along with cake and champagne, many couples offer their guests a lavish buffet or a sit-down banquet. The bride and groom might choose to invite their families and friends to partake of the loving cup, or quaich, as it is called in Gaelic. Whiskey or wine is poured into the large two-handled bowl or cup (often a family heirloom), and a minister or friend blesses the couple, who drink from the cup first, and then the families and guests, who pass the quaich and take a sip in honor of the couple.

Diet and Health

A strong social welfare system ensures that few in the United Kingdom go to bed hungry; however, a lack of education, cooking skills, and limited access to affordable, healthy food does mean that a significant portion of the population suffers from malnourishment. The government estimates that in 2005, 30 percent of patients admitted to hospitals or nursing homes were clinically malnourished. In Scotland specifically, eating habits are the second major cause of poor health after smoking.

Scotland’s early industrialization not only made it more difficult for people to grow, store, and cook their own food but also altered people’s understanding of their relationship to the land. The vestiges of that legacy are evident in the Scottish love of take-out, restaurants, and ready-made meals and in their penchant to eat quickly. An alarming number of Scots give set mealtimes or well-balanced meals little, if any, priority. People simply eat when they are hungry; they eat what tastes good, what is cheap, and what is readily available. While 40 percent of

In front: homemade pickled vegetables with carrot, cucumbers, peppers, cauliflower, and horseradish. Behind: red peppers in mustard and chopped roasted red peppers. (Goran Andjelic | Dreamstime.com)
the Scottish population consumes fried food two or more times a week, a mere 10 percent eats whole wheat bread. Soft drink consumption has also gone up for both men and women. Younger Scots might have no more than a quick juice-type drink for breakfast, a package of crisps and a sausage for lunch, and a microwaved Scotch pie with chips for dinner, again with a soft drink or a beer.

An aggressive effort is underway to educate the public about the dangers of malnutrition and the importance of eating vegetables, fruit, lean meat, and whole grains. The 1991 white paper, “Towards a Healthier Scotland,” has set a number of goals aimed at stopping Scotland’s rapidly increasing obesity and incidence of type 2 diabetes, including doubling its citizens’ intake of whole-grain breads, whole-grain breakfast cereals, and consumption of fruits and vegetables.

Andrea Broomfield

Further Reading


Overview

The landlocked Republic of Serbia is located in central Europe on the Balkan Peninsula, bordered by Hungary to the north, Romania and Bulgaria to the east, the Republic of Macedonia to the south, and Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro to the west. Serbia has had a tumultuous history punctuated by foreign invasions, economic instability, political battles, and disputed land battles between Serbia and other former Yugoslavian states including Kosovo and Montenegro. On June 5, 2006, Serbia claimed independence, and, consequently, the state of Yugoslavia was dissolved.

Serbia has an estimated population of 11 to 12 million people; however, all data dealing with population are subject to considerable error due to the dislocations caused by military action and significant political instability. In mid-2003, Serbia’s population was estimated at 10.5 million people, with 50 percent residing in urban areas and 40 percent living within rural areas. Serbia has an ethnic Serb majority with the country’s population also including substantial minorities of Hungarians, Roma, Albanians, and Bosniaks. There is also a substantial number of refugees and internally displaced persons, many of them ethnic Serbs from the former war zones of Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo. Belgrade is the capital of Serbia and is the largest city in the country, with an estimated population of 1.5 to 2 million. It takes its name, which translates as “white fortress,” from the large stone walls that enclose the old part of the city. It is in the north of the country, on a cliff overlooking the meeting of the Danube and Sava rivers.

Consistency and growth in food production, processing, and distribution and in food-safety control are real challenges in the process of Serbian economic development, with the food industry making up 60–80 percent of primary agricultural production; the favorable natural and climatic conditions represent a solid basis for agricultural development. Climate and geography have a significant influence on Serbian food production. Serbia has a continental climate of cold, dry winters and warm, humid summers with well-distributed rainfall and a long growing season, as well as mountainous terrain. This facilitates extensive cereal production as well as fodder crops to support intensive beef and dairy production. The fertile plains of Vojvodina supply much of the nation’s grain and sugar beets, while the hilly central areas of Serbia specialize in dairy, fruit, and livestock. Key foodstuffs include grain, cotton, oilseeds, maize, sugar beets, wheat, potatoes, chicory, grapes, plums, vegetables, tobacco, olives, rice, and fodder. Livestock include sheep, cattle, and goats.

Food Culture Snapshot

Bojan and his wife, Ljiljana, have been married for 14 years and live in the town of Novi Sad, near the Danube. Bojan works as a policeman, while Ljiljana, like the majority of Serbian women, is responsible for all domestic duties, including cooking.

Breakfast is usually taken early, around 6–7 A.M. Before breakfast Bojan and Ljiljana will almost always have a black coffee called Turska kafa. With breakfast they will have either tea, milk, or juice and rakija (clear
spirits)—both of which are homemade and in which Ljiljana takes great pride. These accompany several pastries or bread served with butter, jam, yogurt, sour cream, and cheese, accompanied by bacon, sausages, salami, scrambled eggs, and kajmak (clotted cream).

Ljiljana prepares the family lunch between 10 and 11 A.M. Lunch predominantly consists of three courses—soup, a meat-based dish, and a dessert, which in most cases will be a baked cake or pastry such as baklava. Dinner is eaten between 8 and 10 P.M. and consists of many of the same foods eaten at breakfast, unless, of course, dinner is a celebration, in which case Ljiljana and her husband will prepare a proper meal (similar to that taken at lunch).

Major Foodstuffs

The swift collapse of the Yugoslav federation has been accompanied by bloody ethnic warfare, the destabilization of republic boundaries, and the breakup of important inter-republic trade flows, resulting in serious impingements on the development of a sustainable food industry in Serbia. Consequently, current food production in Serbia is variable, closely following fluctuations in political and economic stability. Largely, Serbian food-production levels meet both direct consumption and demand from the food-processing industry, with sufficient surpluses to allow for exports. However, the low standard of living and purchasing power of the Serbian population prevent significant growth in demand for agricultural products and foodstuffs.

Despite impingements on growth, the agriculture industries represent one of the most important economic footholds in Serbia, accounting for approximately 35 percent of the gross domestic product in 2005, with agricultural production at 14.5 percent and the food-processing industry at 20 percent. Crop production dominates the gross agricultural product (58%) with livestock production at 42 percent.

With well-distributed rainfall, Serbia has a long growing season for the production of fruit, grapes, and cereals as well as for livestock and dairy farming. The fertile plains of Vojvodina produce 80 percent of the cereals and most of the cotton, oilseeds, and chicory; Vojvodina also produces fodder crops to support intensive beef and dairy production.

Cooking

Serbian cuisine is largely heterogeneous with heavy Mediterranean (Byzantine/Greek), Oriental (Turkish), and Hungarian influences. The cuisine is varied because of the turbulent historical events influencing the food and people, with each region having its own subtle peculiarities and differences in traditional dishes.

A number of foods, notably pickled fruits and jams, are made at home in Serbia. Accompaniments such as rakija (fruit brandy), slatko (fruit or rose petal preserves), jams, jellies, various pickled foods (notably, kiseli kupus, or sauerkraut), ajvar (eggplant and pepper relish), and even sausages are all homemade.

Different dishes made with beans are popular, as well as peppers and sour cabbage (sauerkraut) leaves stuffed with ground meat, rice, and spices (sarma). There are various salads: The most popular, srpska, is made of tomatoes, peppers, onions, and dressing; the variation with cheese is called sopska. Pitas are made with many fillings, salty or sweet, the most common sort being gibanica (pita leaves filled with cheese, cream, and eggs); those filled with paprika, cheese, and sour milk (yogurt) are also a popular cooking choice both at home and in local restaurants. Peppers are a common ingredient in many dishes.

Meat is eaten in all forms (boiled, fried, roasted), in many kinds of dishes. Traditional sausages and meat-based dishes are made of pork, beef, mutton, kid, or chicken, all of which Serbs prefer roasted on a spit. Fish is also popular, and regions along the Danube are famous for their fishermen’s pots (alaska corba).

The national dish, called cevapeci, is a small meat patty, highly spiced and prepared on a grill. Other Serbian specialties include proja, a type of cornbread; gibanica, a thin, crispy dough often filled with cheese and eggs; sarma, cabbage leaves filled with meat; and djuveć, a vegetable stew. Pita (a type of strudel) and palacinke (crepes) are popular desserts. After a meal, coffee is prepared in the Turkish
style, boiled to a thick, potent liquid and served in small cups.

Family meals play an important social role in Serbian culture, with food preparation having a strong part in Serbian family tradition. Families, depending on their economic standing, will pay between 8 and 40 dollars per day on food, and the women are generally responsible for preparing meals. Food preparation often involves daily trips to the markets, with many families visiting markets after 11 A.M. to find cheaper foodstuffs, before the markets close.

Families and friends use the meal as a celebration feast and an opportunity to exchange ideas, celebrate friendships, and often sing traditional Serbian folk songs. Daily meals are often improvised in a simple manner, with lunch (the main meal) consisting of maize bread and cottage cheese, and two or three types of pork sausages with peppers, onions, and boiled eggs. Slatko and sweet bread is also common.

Celebration meals or meals for special occasions tend to be copious and consist of numerous dishes from entrée-style soups in winter to cabbage salads during summer or the sopska salad—a salad of tomatoes, cabbage, and cheese. Main dishes generally consist of grilled meats cooked on wood fires and fish such as carp, perch, and trout from the rivers of Serbia.

**Typical Meals**

Serbian cuisine is heavily influenced by Greek and Croatian cooking. Despite these strong influences, Serbian food items and dishes have evolved, achieving their own culinary identity. Food preparation is a strong part of the Serbian family tradition. Serbia has its own gastronomic tradition founded in processing of milk into white cheese and kajmak (a kind of cream cheese similar to clotted cream). Other specialties include proja (cornbread), kacamak (corn-flour porridge), gibanica (cheese and kajmak pie), prsuta (local smoked ham), čvarci (cracklings), and phtije (meat aspic). Staples of the Serbian diet include bread, meat, fruits, vegetables, and dairy products.

The majority of Serbians consume three meals daily, breakfast, lunch, and dinner, with lunch being the largest, following Mediterranean fashion. In rural areas, up to five meals are consumed particularly during the exhausting summer work in the fields. Breakfast generally consists of eggs, meat, and bread, with a dairy spread called kajmak. Lunch is the main meal of the day and usually is eaten at about 3 P.M. in the afternoon. A light supper is eaten at about 8 P.M.

Serbs eat a lot of wheat bread, made with or without yeast. Bread is the basis of all Serbian meals and is part of everyday meals as well as special celebrations and when hosting guests. Although pasta, rice, potatoes, and similar side dishes have entered everyday Serbian cuisine, bread is still served with these meals. Bread is often made in the home or purchased from bakeries and shops; making bread at home using barley, millet, and rye is more common in Serbian rural households. A traditional Serbian welcome is to offer guests bread and salt. Bread also plays an important role in religious rituals. Some people believe that it is sinful to throw away bread regardless of how old it is.

The national food of Serbia is cevapcici. This caseless sausage is made of minced meat, which is grilled and seasoned. Many Serbian dishes comprise various sorts of meat such as lamb, pork, and veal.

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**Cevapcici (Sausage)**

1 lb minced lamb  
1 lb minced pork 
1 lb minced veal  
3 cloves fresh garlic, peeled and finely chopped  
1 large onion, peeled and finely chopped  
Salt to taste  
2 tbsp freshly ground black pepper  
3 tbsp hot Hungarian paprika or sweet paprika  
1 tsp freshly grated nutmeg

Mix together lamb, pork, veal, garlic, chopped onions, salt and spices until thoroughly combined. Roll meat mixture into a long, ¾-inch cylinder. Cut links at 4-inch intervals. Or you can use a sausage extruder. Place on a plastic wrap-lined plate, cover
with more plastic wrap, and refrigerate for 1 hour to firm. Panfry in a large nonstick frying pan for 8 minutes, turning frequently until brown on all sides. Serve with yogurt sauce.

**Yogurt Sauce**

1 pt plain yogurt
Juice of 1 lemon
½ cucumber, peeled, grated, and drained for 1 hour
2 cloves fresh garlic, peeled and crushed
Salt and white pepper to taste

Combine all yogurt ingredients in a bowl. Serve immediately with cevapcici.

**Eating Out**

Dining out in Serbia is considered a serious opportunity for social bonding and a feast, with Serbs having a strong passion for eating meat in as many ways as they can think of cooking it. A typical restaurant meal might begin with kajmak—a salty cream cheese spread—on bread. This is followed by smoked meats such as ham and meat preserves such as jellied pork and garlic. For the main course, the most popular dish is meat patties, grilled and served with onion and mixed vegetables. This is usually accompanied by vegetable dishes such as chopped tomatoes with onion and cheese. Fish dishes are rare and are significantly more expensive given that the fish has to be brought in from the coastal regions. Dessert is usually a choice of fresh fruit, sweet pastries, and cakes.

**Special Occasions**

Food plays a central role in the cultural life of Serbians, particularly during ceremonial occasions such as Christmas, Easter, religious holidays, and weddings. The Christmas feast is an elaborate occasion. On Christmas Eve, people eat Lenten foods (no meat or dairy products) and drink hot toddies (warm brandy with honey). The following day, the meal generally consists of roast pork and a round bread called *cesnica*. On Krsna Slava, a family’s patron saint’s day, another round bread, called *kolac*, is served, as well as *zito*, a boiled, sweetened wheat dish. For Easter, boiled eggs are a traditional food. The shells are dyed and decorated in elaborate patterns.

“Wedding feast cabbage” is a special dish consisting of large chunks of cabbage mixed with many different kinds of meat and spices, which is boiled for many hours. On feast days or special celebrations an abundance of different dishes are prepared and can include cheese, kajmak, boiled eggs, and ham (smoked or dry), which are all served as starters. These dishes may be followed by soups such as the famous Backa soup, which is made with four kinds of meat. Vegetable dishes made of string beans, potatoes, and cabbage are very popular. Dessert includes a variety of cakes accompanied by *slivovica* (plum brandy), served hot or cold depending on the season; local wines; homemade fruit juices; and coffee.

**Diet and Health**

Since the early 1990s Serbia has undergone considerable demographic, economic, and nutritional transitions that compromised the population’s food supply, especially for low-income socioeconomic groups. Reliable food production, processing, and distribution and food safety are real challenges in the development of the Serbian economy. Consequently, during the last decades many demographic, social, economic, and political changes influenced the food supply as well as dietary patterns in Serbia and resulted in a nutrition transition with an increase in the number of noncommunicable diseases. These have been the leading causes of morbidity, disability, and mortality for decades. The available data clearly indicate that smoking, hypertension, and physical inactivity as well as obesity are responsible for the greatest mortality burden, contributing 5.5 percent of total years of life lost in males and 7 percent in females. Diet represents one of the most relevant lifestyle risk factors contributing to the double burden of diet-related noncommunicable
diseases. Overweight and obesity represent important public health challenge in Serbia.

Prevention of nutrition-related disorders is one of the major concerns of the Ministry of Health. There are several health-promotion and prevention programs in which regulation of body weight is an important issue; therefore, prevention of overweight and obesity is included as one of the high-priority objectives. According to the findings of the 2006 Serbian Health Survey, based on the body mass index (BMI), 38.3 percent of adult Serbians had an optimum body weight, while one in two adults in Serbia was overweight or obese (54.5%), with 36.2 percent categorized as pre-obese and 18.3 percent as obese.

In 2005 the Ministry of Health set up an expert task force to develop the “Nutrition Action Plan for the Republic of Serbia.” Key objectives of this action plan with respect to diet and health include ensuring a safe, healthy, and sustainable food supply and promoting healthy nutrition for all age groups. The key focus is to stop the increasing tendency toward obesity in children and adolescents, to eliminate micronutrient deficits across the population, and to monitor dietary habits.

The most frequent intestinal infectious diseases in 2006 in Serbia were diarrhea and gastroenteritis (44.55%) followed by bacterial intestinal infections (26.51%), bacterial alimentary intoxications (12.06%), and salmonellosis (9.41%)

Katrina Meynink

Further Reading


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Overview

The Slovak Republic has the unique distinction of being the geographic center of Europe and one of its youngest countries. Roughly halfway between the North Sea and the Urals, the Mediterranean and the Arctic seas, this country has had many different political borders and has been influenced politically and culturally by both eastern and western Europe.

A tumultuous political existence has strengthened cultural markers in the region. The Slovak nation, whether recognized politically or not, has a strong connection with language, cuisine, and religion. Slovak foodstuffs and cooking are upheld and cherished as an emblem of its people and deeply tied into folk sentiments. As the country is increasingly integrated into the European Union, the foodscape is also rapidly changing. This “meat-and-potatoes” cuisine is being supplemented with imported foods through the marketing and Western supply chains of multinational food retailers.

Slovakia’s high mountains extend across its northern border with Poland. The Danube River forms the border with Austria. The Czech Republic borders Slovakia in the northwest, and the Ukraine in the east. The southern low hills and plains that border Hungary offer rich farmland for raising livestock and growing grains as well as for a strong regional viticulture.

The Slovak Republic has been a parliamentary democracy since 1993, when it broke with the Czech Republic following the Velvet Revolution in 1990. Due to conservative leadership following the breakup, Slovakia was slower to warm to relations with western Europe. Not until a pro-Western government was elected in 1998 did Slovakia start to track into becoming a member of the European Union. The country joined the European Union in May 2004; it has been a member of the Schengen area since 2007 and adopted the Euro at the opening of 2009. The opening up of the borders to the West has rapidly changed the foodscape. More Slovaks are commuting across borders, more students are traveling to the West to study, and more foreign workers are moving into the small country. As such, the foodstuffs that are available and being consumed are becoming more similar to those of western Europe.

While the larger cities in western Slovakia are becoming more cosmopolitan, the remote and inaccessible mountain towns remain set in traditional foodways. In central Europe, Slovakia has the most people living in rural areas. Forty-five percent of the people live in towns of 5,000 or less, and 14 percent in villages of 1,000 or less. Many Slovak dishes are tied to folk traditions of the rural regions, which are celebrated with performances of song and dance troupes in traditional dress. Regional dishes are served, such as stuffed cabbage rolls from the east, Hungarian goulash from the south, and schnitzel from the west.

Slovakia is ethnically uniform with 85.5 percent considering themselves Slovak, 9.7 percent Hungarian, 1.7 percent Roma (although some estimates put that number closer to 10%). The country is 69 percent Roman Catholic and 9 percent Protestant. There are 3,000 Jews who still remain in the country, reduced from a population of approximately 120,000 before World War II.
Each cuisine is tied closely to ethnicity. The birth of the Slovak consciousness was tied up in the revolutions in the mid-19th century. Pan-Slavism was a dominant philosophy at the time. Aiming to rebel against the Hungarian political influence, religious leaders, philosophers, and poets helped to codify the Slovak language through literature, song, religion, and other cultural markers. Cuisine is a cultural marker by which Slovaks have also made themselves ethnically distinct.

Food Culture Snapshot

Katerina and Martin Jurov live in a village of less than 1,000 people in the central southern hills of Slovakia. Martin works as a wine inspector for the government among the local vintners in the wine-growing region. The couple owns a single-family home sitting on approximately one acre of land.

Katerina’s food sources come from a combination of products grown at home, grown by her friends and neighbors, purchased in the small village market, and purchased in a large supermarket about 15 miles away. The Jurovs have a large vegetable and fruit garden as well as a small barn where they raise a few pigs a year. Their sons live in the capital, Bratislava, and in the United States. Katerina spends time in both places and eats a wide range of food from around the world, but she likes traditional Slovak meals, too.

Major Foodstuffs

Slovak cuisine is extremely seasonal and follows the harvest through the winter months with different foodstuffs. Using simple ingredients many hearty dishes are made that are appropriate to the season. For example, in the northern hills people gather mushrooms and dry them to add to soups throughout the year. Beets, peppers, peas, and cucumbers are popular vegetables.

Local fruits, such as apricots, walnuts, cherries, Italian plums, and apples, are abundant in farmers’ markets during the harvest. Imported fruits are very popular as many people remember the managed food systems under Communism, which deprived people of tropical fruits throughout the year. Today, these fruits, such as pineapples and mandarin oranges, are cherished and eaten year-round.

Although the number of vegetarians is growing, meat and poultry are still nearly ubiquitous on the dinner plate. Beef, turkey, lamb, and chicken are popular, but pork makes the most regular appearance on the plate. The sausage, kolabasa, is used in soups and served with brown bread as pub fare. Roasted pork is served with stewed stone fruits and dumplings, and ham is a common topping on pizza. Bacon is also a common topping for dumplings and pirogues (stuffed dough pockets). It is also served in breakfast breads like pagačik, which is made from lard and bacon bits.

Staple starches are potatoes, rice, and wheat breads. Potatoes are used in dumplings, soups, and latkes (a fried potato pancake). Rice is not native to the country, but it is very popular. It is served beside roasted meats and usually prepared with Vegeta, a spice mixture made of onion, garlic, parsley, and chicken.
flavoring. Wheat is found in pastas and breads in the region. Brown and rye breads are served with sausages and soups, but a dietary staple is roshky. These are small, oblong-shaped buns made from bleached white flour. They are served beside cold meats or are stuffed with hot dogs for snacks.

Fats used in Slovak cooking are mostly canola oil, lard, and butter. While lard was the traditional fat, many health-conscious cooks have turned to olive oil and other healthier fats in their cooking.

Slovakia produces a wide variety of regional cheeses. Cheeses have become an important folk-heritage item for which producers have gained political protection under European Union geographical status. The most popular of these cheeses are bryndza and Slovensky Oštiepok, a smoked sheep's cheese. A popular dish is vyprazene syr, or fried cheese. This is a small block of hard cheese such as Gouda that is breaded and deep-fried and served with sauce.

Cooking

Home processing is still widely practiced to preserve the flush that a harvest brings. Many city dwellers have weekend cottages with small kitchen gardens, and rural villages are composed of single-family homes with large yards. The produce from these kitchen gardens is seasonally consumed as well as preserved as jams, pickled vegetables, smoked meats, and alcohol. Equipment for preserving and processing foods is kept in these weekend homes.

Slovaks have a few pieces of equipment that are essential to traditional cooking. When the American company Kmart opened in 1993 in downtown Bratislava, the company allocated three yards of space to displaying meat grinders to accommodate Slovak cooks. They also carried special tools to grind poppy seeds and nuts for filling pastries. A special halušky strainer to make the small potato/wheat dumplings is also unique to the region.

Vegetables were traditionally processed or pickled for consumption, but with the rise in Western retailing, many vegetables and salads are now served fresh. Most meals in restaurants are served with some shredded cabbage with vinegar, a radish, and some corn.

Slovaks are very careful to not waste food, and processing fruit into alcohol is another means of preserving excess food. Slivovica and jablakovica, eau de vie from plums and apples, are the most commonly made liquors. Despite being illegal, many distilleries exist in private homes. Some towns have set up local distilleries for people to process their own mash. Furthermore, in the western hills, the people make homemade wine, usually in soda bottles, to be consumed at everyday meals. Although home beer brewing is not as common, manufactured Slovak beers are popular at home and in pubs.

In the ethnically Hungarian south, the dishes are spicier, with hot paprika adding heat. Goulashes, pepper salads, and Tokaj wine are common. Although Hungary has the reputation as the major wine producer in the region, the Tokaj wines produced in the Hungarian areas of Slovakia are rivals to those of the southern neighbor. This is a white wine with a distinctly musky sweetness.

The Roma (Gypsy) population has a cuisine that is difficult to describe as the Roma exist in several different economic strata within the Slovak state and have very diverse eating habits. Most Roma live in various states of poverty. Slovakia has had a dubious human rights record in its policies aimed at the Roma populations, and this ethnic group tends to be underrepresented and given little attention in official reports. Some Roma families are fully assimilated to the foodways of modern Slovakia, shopping, eating, and celebrating within the mainline traditions, but some settlements in underdeveloped Roma villages in the east do not have modern kitchens. The cooking is done mostly in a pot over an open fire with cabbage, potatoes, and roasted meats as dietary staples, supplemented by fresh fruits and sweetened tea.

Typical Meals

Breakfast starts early, with hot coffee and tea served with cold cereals, muesli, bread, butter, and ham. Lunch is the largest meal of the day, and it is customary to take this in two courses. Soup is served as a first course followed by a larger plate with a meat, a starch, and maybe a vegetable. It is common
to sit together as a company or a group to take the meal. Dinner is smaller and consists of only a bowl of soup or a sandwich served around seven or eight in the evening.

Slovaks have an unofficial national dish, bryndzové halušky, which is tied into the shepherding traditions of the mountainous north. This dish is composed of dumplings made of potato and wheat flour, topped with lardoons (small strips or cubes of pork) or bacon, onions, and an unpasteurized sheep-milk cheese, bryndza. This cheese won European Union geographical status in 2008 as a regional food of Slovakia.

### Bryndzové Halušky (Dumplings)

**Serves 4**

**Ingredients**

2 lb russet potatoes  
½ c milk  
2 eggs  
1 tsp salt  
1 c flour  
½ lb bryndza cheese (or feta)  
½ lb bacon or lardons, cubed  
1 tbsp oil

**Equipment:** Large pot, wooden cutting board or specialized halušky strainer

Boil water in a large pot.

Peel the potatoes, and grate them into a bowl. Mix with milk, eggs, and salt. Add flour in spoonfuls until a stiff dough forms, and knead into a ball.

Method 1: On a wet cutting board spread out dough. With a knife cut off small ½-inch pieces into the boiling water.

Method 2: Push dough through a halušky strainer into boiling water.

Boil for 4–5 minutes, until the dough comes to the surface. Scoop the dumplings out of the water. Fry the bacon until crisp. Caramelize the onion. Top dumplings with bryndza cheese, bacon, and onions.

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Eating Out

The restaurant culture died during the 75 years of Communism, but it is growing back at a fast pace. Although Slovakia has a number of pubs and restaurants in many towns, it is uncommon for families to go out to dine together. The family meal is usually eaten at home. People will congregate with friends and coworkers to go to a pub or a restaurant.

Today, the streets of Bratislava are lined with Mexican, Italian, Chinese, and vegetarian choices catering to the many tourists and business travelers to the city. But smaller towns may have only a pub, which will serve a simple meal. All of this is changing with rapid globalization. With the opening of the borders, the migration of its peoples, and integration of Western supermarkets, there will be a lot more change to come into the region in the future.

But for now, the foods and foodways of the Slovak republic are tied to the rich traditions of a people attached to their mountainous home.

Special Occasions

Celebrations and banquets in Slovakia are multicourse sit-down dinners. Weddings are large affairs with the celebration lasting all day into the next morning. It is traditional for a family to have
a special pig slaughter for the occasion, preparing sausages for the guests.

The Slovak Christmas is similar to that of its northern neighbors in the Czech Republic. A traditional carp meal will start at the Christmas market, where the family will buy a 10–20-pound carp from a pool in the market. The fish is then kept in the bathtub for several days before Christmas Eve, when it is then roasted or fried and served with potatoes and kapusnica, a spicy cabbage soup. Dessert is vianočka, a braided yeast cake.

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**Kapusnica**

*Serves 10*

- 2 tbsp lard
- 2–3 medium onions, diced
- 1½ lb fresh pork (a fatty cut), cubed
- 2 tbsp sweet paprika
- 1 tsp caraway seeds
- 1 small ham hock
- 2 lb sauerkraut
- 2 8-in. kolabasa (Polish sausage), sliced into small rounds
- 3–4 garlic cloves, pressed
- 1 full handful dried mushrooms
- 10–12 prunes
- 2 diced apples
- 2–3 grated potatoes

1. In a large pot heat the lard over medium heat until it melts. Add onions. Cook until translucent.
2. Add fresh pork with paprika and caraway. Cook until the meat is browned. Cover with water, add the ham hock, and simmer for ½ hour.
3. Add sauerkraut and cook another 15 minutes.
4. Add kolabasa, garlic, mushrooms, prunes, and apples, and simmer for 1 hour.
5. Add potatoes, and cook another 15 minutes until soft.
6. Serve this immediately, or let it sit for a day while the flavors fully develop. Serve with warm rye bread.

Many Slovak families in villages or with ties to villages have performed a zabjiacka. In this ceremony, a family or community comes together to slaughter a pig. The whole animal is used. The fresh meat and tenderloin will be eaten in the coming days, but smoked sausages made from the pig, as well as the lard, can sustain a family for months. These ceremonies take place during the late fall and winter so the slaughter can be done outside without the need for refrigeration.

*Brelyn Johnson*

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**Further Reading**


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Slovenia

Overview

A part of central Europe, the Republic of Slovenia is situated at the crossroads of the Alpine, Pannonian, and Mediterranean areas. Prior to its independence in 1991, it had been a part of the state known for decades as Yugoslavia. The current population of Slovenia amounts to 2,053,740 people inhabiting an area of about 7,722 square miles (20,000 square kilometers). With over 90 percent of its population being Slovene, Slovenia is a not a multicultural country. Autochthonous Slovenes also live in the neighboring countries of Italy, Austria, and Hungary; about 500,000 Slovene immigrants live in other parts of the world. Since 57 percent of the population is Catholic, 2.3 percent Serbian Orthodox, and 2.4 percent Muslim, religion does not play a key role in the life of many Slovenes.

In the first half of the 20th century, Slovenia was predominantly agrarian, with most of its population living in the countryside and tilling the land. Larger towns were scarce. Although the gradual industrialization after World War I changed this situation to a certain extent, 66 percent of Slovenes still worked in agriculture in 1921. At present, their number amounts to only around 4 percent.

Food Culture Snapshot

Marko, Alenka, and Tina Novak are the members of a Slovene family living in Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia. Marko and Alenka are university graduates, while their 14-year-old daughter Tina is in the ninth grade. At approximately 7 A.M., the family meets for breakfast. The first common meal of the day, breakfast is usually prepared by Alenka. It consists of bread or toast spread with butter and jam, or with honey, and occasionally the bread is eaten with salami and cheese. Tina usually eats muesli, cornflakes, or another cereal with milk or yogurt. While the parents drink coffee with milk, the daughter drinks fruit tea or juice.

Between 10 and 11 A.M., each family member eats a light meal. Marko and Alenka eat at their workplace, and Tina, like all students, eats a school lunch. This meal usually consists of a sandwich or a roll with yogurt, milk, or juice. Sometimes they also eat a piece of fresh fruit such as an apple, a pear, or an orange.

The principal meal in Slovenia is lunch. After returning from work and from school, Marko, Alenka, and Tina have lunch together, which generally takes place around 3:30 or 4 P.M. It is mostly prepared by Alenka, with occasional assistance from Marko and Tina. Lunch is made up of several warm courses. Many times it starts with a vegetable, beef, or chicken soup. The main course usually consists of either pasta with meat or vegetable sauce; potatoes with fried meat or with cutlets and gravy; or risotto with chicken meat or with mushrooms. Consumed simultaneously with the main course, the most common salad is made with lettuce or with radicchio; in the summer, the salad can be made from tomatoes, cucumbers, or green peppers while in winter it is mainly made from sauerkraut or pickled garden beets. Lunch occasionally ends with fruit or with dessert such as ice cream, fruit salad, or pudding topped with whipped cream.

In Slovenia, dinner is a less important meal than lunch. Each member of the family usually eats it separately, mostly around 8 P.M. Dinner customarily does not consist of warm dishes; instead, it is often bread...
with different spreads or with cheese, ham, or salami, combined with tea, fruit, or yogurt. Alenka occasionally prepares foods from her childhood that are very popular with her family: milk rice or groats; cornmeal with milk or coffee substitutes; pancakes with jam; or Kaiserschmarrn (a light, eggy pancake, shredded and served with fruit preserves).

In recent years, the family has tried to eat more wholesome foods. Marko frequently buys foodstuffs, particularly vegetables and fruit, in an open-air market where vendors sell their organically grown food. Family members eat less sugar, especially white sugar, and less animal fats. Dishes are often prepared with olive or rapeseed (canola) oil. They try to include sea fish, for instance, mackerel, cod, or sole, in their weekly menus at least once; the fish are usually fried or grilled. With the exception of bread, fruit, and vegetables, which are bought daily from smaller grocery stores, the family habitually purchases food in large supermarkets once a week. Believing that homegrown food is tastier and of higher quality, Alenka, Marko, and Tina are especially glad to be able to obtain certain vegetables and fruits from their country relatives.

**Major Foodstuffs**

Until the 1960s, Slovene farmers worked the land for their own household needs, primarily to feed their families and less to market their crops. Until this time food culture in Slovenia was still very much geographically differentiated, and staples were not yet being bought in stores. According to ethnological classification, there were traditionally four major types of food culture in Slovenia. The eastern, Pannonian type was based on crops like wheat and buckwheat. Meals made from wheat and buckwheat flour consisted of different types of pasta, leavened pies (which were often filled with cottage cheese), and breads. Dishes were flavored with sour cream and cottage cheese, red pepper powder, or poppy seeds. Abundant crops of pumpkins, not grown anywhere else in Slovenia, yielded excellent pumpkin oil, which was widely used in cooking.

The northern, or Alpine type, was typical for the hills, mountains, and forest areas of the north. With the exception of corn and buckwheat, its harsh climate does not provide adequate conditions for agriculture but is suitable for animal husbandry and alpine dairy farming. The food culture of this region was thus based mainly on dairy products such as milk, sour milk, curd, and cheese and on corn and buckwheat mush. Venison, which was rarer in other parts of Slovenia, could also be found on the tables of local households. Game meat was also cured and made into sausages and other meat products.

In central Slovenia, farmers planted tuberous vegetables such as potatoes and turnips. Buckwheat and millet porridge, boiled in water or milk, was prepared frequently, as were cabbage and turnips. This was the first Slovene region to include the potato in its daily meals, starting in the 19th century. Prepared in a number of ways, potatoes quickly became very popular.

With its warm Mediterranean climate and karstic soil (limestone with many fissures), western Slovenia’s food culture was much like that in neighboring Mediterranean countries. The barren soil, not rich enough to produce cereals, is suitable for raising sheep and for growing olive trees and certain kinds of vegetables and fruits: tomatoes, zucchini, chicory, figs, **kakis** (persimmons), and pomegranates; farmers also grow many different types of grapevines. Among the most frequently consumed foods, usually included in most meals, were polenta, which substitutes for bread; thick vegetable soups called minestrone; vegetable and meat sauces; fish; and the widely used olive oil.

Changes in the traditional food culture were introduced gradually and were connected with the growing mobility of the rural population. More perceptible changes started to take place at the end of the 1950s, and especially in the 1960s, when the rising standard of living in Slovenia resulted in an increase in its population’s purchasing power.

During this period people gradually stopped baking their own bread and certain other foods themselves. Instead of making sauerkraut and sour turnips; sour milk, cream, and cottage cheese; meat products (for example, several varieties of sausages made from pigs raised and butchered at home); and
beverages such as apple cider, made from home-grown apples, people purchased these foods from stores. Like bread, which was obtained in bakeries and grocery stores, people increasingly bought meat products, for instance, salami, sausages, and cold cuts; dairy foods, such as yogurt, sour cream, and whipping cream; industrially made pasta; rice; pastries and other sweets; and industrially made beverages such as beer, mineral water, and other soft drinks, particularly sodas.

At present, Slovenes’ food culture mainly consists of bread and farinaceous products, potatoes, meat and meat products, and dairy products. Vegetables, pulses, and fruit are less important. Slovenia has over 100 varieties of bread, prepared by large as well as family-owned bakeries. Wheat flour is an ingredient of pasta whose many kinds are either handmade or made by machines, for example, certain types of dumplings such as žlikrofi, krpice, and fuži; and noodles. There are also other popular and widely consumed wheat-based dishes, for instance, mlinci (dried pancakes), crepes, the Kaiserschmarrn, different strudels, and the so-called gibanci, leavened pies with a variety of fillings. The once widely popular porridge and mush, which in the past represented the basic Slovene dishes and were prepared from buckwheat, millet, and cornmeal, are now seldom consumed.

The potato was first used in the first half of the 19th century as a food for human rather than animal consumption, but it was already widely popular by the end of that century. Slovenes prepare it in a number of ways. It can be cut into pieces and boiled; mashed; roasted; prepared as French fries; or cooked as home fries, namely, boiled, sliced, and then fried with onions, which is by far the most popular potato dish in Slovenia.

Until approximately the 1920s, most Slovene families consumed meat and meat products only on rare occasions, generally on Sundays and holidays. The meat served at those times was inexpensive, for example, the meat of home-raised rabbits and pigs or store-bought beef. Due to their high price, venison, veal, and poultry were far too expensive for most people. Many families reared one or two pigs, which were butchered in wintertime to provide a supply of meat, meat products, and lard. A variety of sausages—for example, blood sausages, liverwurst, the pečenice (sausages that are boiled and then fried), hams, prosciuttos, stuffed stomachs, salamis, and bacon—were also made. Equally important was the preparation of lard, particularly of cracklings and minced lard; as a substitute for meat, these were used in the preparation of all daily meals. Due to a higher standard of living and animal farm factories, which in the 1960s brought meat prices down, meat-consumption patterns changed considerably. Many Slovene families now eat meat several times a day. Eaten frequently, pork and various processed pork products (for example, sausages, spareribs, the shoulder blade, prosciuttos, salamis, and the like) are still very popular. There is also an increasing consumption of poultry, particularly chicken and turkey meat, whereas beef, veal, and venison can be found on Slovene dining tables more rarely.

Fish was less prominent in the diet of Slovenes. Until the 1930s, freshwater fish, for instance, trout, sheatfish, huchen (in the salmon family), pike, barbell, and carp, was consumed almost throughout the Slovene territory. Along the Drava and Cerknica Lake, barbell and carp were also dried to be eaten in winter. Inhabitants of the coastal region of Primorska ate mostly sea fish, particularly sardines, European anchovies, mackerel, codfish, and tuna. First preserved in salt, the fish were kept in stone receptacles or dried to be used in winter, when they were prepared in a sauce. After World War II, sea fish became widely popular throughout Slovenia, partly due to a growing interest in, and the promotion of, healthy nutrition.

In the past, milk and dairy products were more important ingredients of meals than they are today. Most milk is now consumed for breakfast and with a light snack before noon. The consumption of yogurt and whipping cream has generally increased. Sour cream and cottage cheese, which are also eaten with bread, are used to prepare many Slovene dishes such as dumplings and strudel. Slovenia also produces butter and a variety of cheeses; two of them, the mohant (semisoft, yellowish, and pungent) and the tolminc (similar to Swiss cheese), were each given the status of products with the designation of origin.
As in the past, vegetables and fruit play no major role in the food culture of Slovenia. Legumes, particularly broad beans, lentils, kidney beans, chickpeas, and green peas, which were once eaten very frequently, were no longer grown in large quantities after World War II. By far the most frequently consumed legume of today, the kidney bean is one of, or the principal, ingredient of soups, sauces, and salads. Prepared with fat, it is eaten together with sauerkraut and potatoes. Salad is eaten frequently, particularly iceberg-type lettuce, but also spring lettuce, lamb's lettuce, endive, and radicchio. Slovenes often eat kale, sauerkraut, and turnips in wintertime. In the period after World War II, Slovene menus started to include vegetables that had come to Slovenia from other parts of Europe, for example, tomatoes, green peppers, cauliflower, broccoli, eggplant, zucchini, spinach, and mangold (a kind of beet).

Written reports on fruit growing and fruit consumption date from as far back as the 17th century. Mentioned are apples, pears, plums, cherries, sour cherries, peaches, apricots, walnuts, quinces, currants, and gooseberries. Just as important were forest fruits, particularly raspberries, huckleberries, strawberries, and mushrooms. While most of these fruits used to be dried or boiled, they are increasingly eaten fresh. The consumption of other fresh fruits, such as imported oranges, tangerines, clementines, and bananas, is equally on the rise.

Spices were already used when the Slavs settled the territory of present-day Slovenia. In the late Middle Ages, spices used for seasoning were the following: garlic, onions, juniper berries, anise, celery, cumin, capers, mustard, mint, lovage, rue, parsley, bay leaves, and cress. More affluent families were already using expensive imported spices such as cinnamon, pepper, saffron, nutmeg, cloves, and ginger. However, until the middle of the 20th century, Slovene homemakers generally seasoned dishes with domestic herbs, most of which were grown in their own gardens or yards: yarrow, basil, parsley, cumin, marjoram, chives, tarragon, thyme, sorrel, chervil, onion, and garlic.

In the more distant past, Slovenes drank mostly water, sometimes also beer, mead, and cider. It was not until modern times that wine and hard liquor became more widely drunk. Richer families also drank coffee, hot chocolate, and tea. Until the middle of the last century, Slovenes ordinarily drank only what they had at home, for example, water, homemade cider, and cheap homemade wine. After that period, the consumption of store-bought beverages, particularly beer, mineral water, sodas, and juices, has been steadily increasing. Since the 1960s, coffee has become widely popular among Slovenes.

Cooking
Before the introduction of kitchen stoves and with the exception of the western part of the Slovene territory, where food was cooked over an open hearth, food was generally cooked in ovens. The clay pots used for this purpose could be placed on a sill in front of, or next to, the stove door and pushed into the stove itself when necessary.

By far the simplest way of preparing food was boiling; it was also the least expensive because it required neither lard nor cooking oil. Needing less attention, the simmering food also enabled the homemaker to do other chores. Since most homemakers also worked in the fields and tended farm animals, the finished dishes could easily be reheated upon their return. In certain areas local homemakers prepared food solely in the morning before
leaving for the field or the family vineyard. When family members returned home the food was ready to be reheated and served. Some of the most common dishes, prepared in this manner at least until the middle of the 20th century, were gruel, mush, barley, dumplings, boiled potatoes, cabbage, turnips, soups, and sauces. Farinaceous foods, for instance, zlivanka (a type of cottage cheese cake), Kaiserschmarrn, leavened pies, and dumplings, were baked in the pekva, a clay baking pan, or in pans. Meat and meat products such as blood sausages, the pečenica, and the mavžlji, which were made of chopped pork or intestines and wrapped in pork membrane, were also prepared in the pekva but were consumed on very rare occasions.

Frying was not as popular as boiling and baking. Employing lard, either plain or mixed with minced meat, homemakers generally made roast potatoes, cabbage, cold mush, polenta, and occasionally offal, for example, liver. In a small part of the Slovene territory, food was cooked in kettles, suspended on a chain, over an open hearth; some dishes were baked under a large lid called the čepnja. Separate pieces of meat or even whole animals were spit and roasted; this traditional way of cooking has been preserved up to the present.

First introduced in more affluent Slovene households in the middle of the 19th century, wood- and coal-burning stoves became very popular after World War I. Such modern stoves and greater availability of cooking oil, which made baking and frying cheaper and more accessible to most households, made it possible to more often prepare the dishes that up to the 1960s were made mostly on holidays. Today, the most popular types of kitchen stoves are electric and gas ranges and electric ovens. Electric or gas barbecue grills, pressure cookers, deep-fryers, and electric bread makers are also widely used.

**Typical Meals**

Due to their great variety it is extremely difficult to describe the daily meals typical for Slovenia in the past and in the present. Meals varied according to regions, the financial and social position of households, and their rural or urban origin. Generally speaking, Slovenes eat three meals a day: breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Students also eat a light meal at school, while some adults consume it during their working hours. The principal meal is a hot lunch, which is the heaviest meal of the day. Dinners are generally more modest.

In the past, farmers’ breakfasts usually consisted of mush or polenta with milk or sour milk and ersatz coffee made of barley. Some families also ate boiled potatoes or mush and sauerkraut. This breakfast did not significantly differ from the one eaten by poorer urban dwellers, who had mostly corn mush or bread, and ersatz coffee. White bread was consumed only in wealthier families, who also ate rolls and croissants; butter, jam, and honey; and at times eggs, cold cuts, and cheeses. The usual morning beverages in these families were coffee or cocoa.

In the second half of the 20th century, breakfast started to change significantly. The main ingredients of breakfast have become bread or rolls spread with butter or margarine, jam, or liver or other kinds of pâtés, or topped with salami, sausage, or cheese; eggs are eaten occasionally. Ersatz coffee has been replaced by real coffee or tea. Some people now include in their breakfast various kinds of cereal, yogurt, and fruit. While breakfast used to be eaten very early in the morning, it is now consumed between 6:30 and 7:30 a.m.

In the past, farmers used to eat lunch at noon. It consisted of different kinds of soups and starchy dishes made from potatoes, sour turnips, kidney beans or fava beans, barley, millet, or buckwheat. These might be made into porridge or dumplings, or some other variety of mealy dishes, for example, zlivanka or kvasenica (both are a type of cottage cheese cake). In the summertime they ate salad greens. Meat was eaten sparingly. During the period of heavy farming chores, homemakers served smoked pork. In towns, less-well-to-do families ate potato or vegetable soups with Kaiserschmarrn, dumplings, or strudels; sometimes they ate mush or potatoes served with sauerkraut or turnips. In prosperous families, soup was always followed by a main course consisting of meat dishes such as cutlets, boiled beef, or roast meat, served with potatoes or rice, bread dumplings, pasta, or vegetable side dishes.
such as peas, cauliflower, spinach, or asparagus and salad. These meals always ended with dessert.

In the present, Slovene families have lunch upon returning from work, which is between 3 and 4 P.M. Since lunch is their main meal, all family members try to eat it together, which owing to the many obligations of adults and children alike is becoming increasingly difficult. Lunch is usually made by the mother. It consists of soup made from beef or chicken, potatoes, kidney beans, or kohlrabi. Soup is followed by the main course, which can be stewed meat, goulash, fricassee, cutlets, or ragout made from minced meat, and so on. Meat is served with pasta, potatoes, or rice and with a salad. Once very popular, mush, polenta, and porridge are now very seldom seen on Slovene dining tables. They have been replaced by new dishes and ingredients, particularly those that have been taken over from Italian cuisine and have become very popular: pizza, tortellini, lasagna, and gnocchi, all served with a variety of sauces. Some urban families also like Asian food.

Dinner has always been less important than lunch. Farmers used to eat dinner after they had finished their chores and returned to their house at dusk. Their dinner often consisted of dishes such as corn or buckwheat mush, boiled potatoes served with sauerkraut or turnips, salad, pumpkins prepared with flour and lard, or porridge made from millet boiled in milk. Poorer urban families ate mush with ersatz coffee; kidney bean or potato salad; or grits made with milk. Well-situated urban families ate bread, sausage, eggs, cheese, crepes, omelets, or rice pudding.

Family members now often eat dinner separately. It usually takes place between 7 and 9 P.M., depending on their hunger or when they were able to return home. Their dinner generally consists of bread with a variety of spreads or with salami, cheese, or ham. It can also be yogurt, a salad, or at times also pancakes or milk pudding.

Eating Out

Roadside inns have offered simple dishes and beverages to passing merchants and travelers since ancient times. Sources from the Middle Ages to the 18th century bear witness that the food offered to the guests in inns was bad, tasteless, and quite expensive. More important than the food was the sale of drinks, mostly wine and low-quality beer. At the beginning of the 18th century these two commercial areas were separated. This was due to an increase in road and river traffic, and in trade. The construction of the South Railway from Vienna to Trieste in the period between 1846 and 1857 significantly influenced the development of the catering trade in the Slovene territory.

Dishes that were being offered in Slovene inns before World War II were typical of the so-called Viennese cuisine. Important were novel meat dishes, among which goulash and cutlets, particularly the Wiener schnitzel, were the most popular. Lunch at an inn noted for its “good plain family cooking” consisted of the following dishes. To start there were soups such as beef soup with homemade noodles, pea soup, soup with groats or liver dumplings, or perhaps cauliflower, spinach, or tomato soup. Then there would be meats, such as roast pork, veal, venison, Wiener and Parisian schnitzel, fried or roast chicken, capon, roast turkey, goose, or duck. Side dishes included potatoes, especially fried, mashed in skins, or French fried, which appeared at the beginning of the 20th century; boiled or stewed rice; fried potato rolls or bun dumplings; and salad. Guests could also choose among different puddings, Kaiserschmarrn, crepes with homemade jam, stewed fruit, and so on.

Certain foods were also sold in the street. Street vendors offered rolls with cooked sausages, particularly frankfurters, and rolls with sausages made of horse meat or of grilled meat, for instance the čevapčici (meat patties) and the ranjii (roasted skewered meat).

Among the most popular restaurants since the mid-1970s are those that serve Italian food, particularly pizza and lasagna. In the last decade and a half, a segment of the Slovene population started to frequent restaurants serving Chinese, Indian, Thai, and Mexican food.

Special Occasions

Until the middle of the 20th century, the food culture of the Slovene population depended on the days of the week. While Slovenes generally observed the
fast on Fridays, their Sunday diet was richer than during the week, with the meals usually including food that was pricier and of better quality. The same can be said of festive foods served on holidays; those that celebrated the end of difficult farm chores, for example, harvest and vintage; and those prepared when farmers butchered their pigs in wintertime. In contrast, birthdays and name days ordinarily did not require any special food; the only exceptions were weddings and sometimes baptism feasts.

Families tried to include in their Sunday meals richer meat dishes and farinaceous desserts generally not eaten on weekdays. Although there were people who ate meat, for example, sausages, spare ribs, or ham, even for breakfast, meat dishes were generally served only for lunch and dinner. A typical Sunday lunch started with a meat soup, usually a beef broth with homemade noodles or with grits or liver dumplings. The main course could be the beef that had been boiled to make the soup, for instance, or smoked pork with horseradish; prosperous families also ate roasted veal or pork, tenderloin, or fried chicken. The homemakers baked dessert, for example, a bundt cake, an apple or cottage cheese strudel, or a leavened pie with filling. Dinner often consisted of food that had been left over from lunch: leftover pieces of cold roast or chicken, a salad, and dessert. Many Slovene families still eat very similar dishes on Sundays.

Christmas and Easter have always been among the most important Slovene holidays. Christmas preparations started several days ahead of time with the making of Christmas bread, cookies, and the potica (nut roll). This was also the time when most Slovene families butchered a pig to have an abundance of fresh meat and sausages for Christmas and New Year’s celebrations. The day before Christmas was traditionally a fast day that was devoutly observed. During the day, people ate only legumes, vegetable soups, or mush; some of the more affluent families had fish. On Christmas Eve, meat was allowed once again, particularly after families returned from midnight mass. Traditionally it was either blood sausages or the pečenče, or roasted pork; the urban middle class sometimes ate fish such as boiled trout or fried carp. The festive meal ended with the potica (a roll filled with nuts, poppy seeds, or a chocolate filling, more rarely with a carob, hazelnut, or coconut filling), homemade festive cookies, and fruit bread. Fasting is generally no longer observed, and new dishes have become a part of Christmas menus: for example, beefsteak tartare; French salad, which is a mixture of diced potatoes, peas, cucumbers, eggs, and mayonnaise; and sponge and layer cakes.

Another important Slovene holiday is Easter. Traditionally, the foods consumed on Easter have not changed for centuries. Families prepare a basketful of Easter food, the so-called žegen. The žegen consists of boiled or baked ham, or of the šoblek (filled pork stomach) in alpine regions, or prosciutto in Istria; homemade sausages; white bread made with or without milk; horseradish; and the pirhi (boiled colored eggs). Traditional Easter pastries are the potica, the ptički, and the menihi (small pasties made from leavened dough made of fine flour). A typical Easter dish from central Slovenia and Primorsko is the aleluja. Made of dried turnip peels, the aleluja evokes the memory of the time of severe famine during the Easter of 1529.

**Aleluja**

**Ingredients**

- 1 lb dried turnip peels
- 1 c flour (for example, buckwheat)
- ¾ qt water
Wash turnip peels, and soak them in water for 3 days; the water needs to be changed every day. Boil them, then strain and chop. Add them to salted water or to water in which the Easter ham was boiled. When the water starts boiling, add flour. Make a hole in the middle, and pour in hot lard and cracklings. Serve immediately.

Diet and Health

In the past centuries, the main preoccupation of the Slovene population was to ensure enough food, which, despite the meager means generally available for its purchase or cultivation, had to be prepared in a way that would provide enough energy for the heavy physical work that was required daily. Not much attention was paid to health or special diets. The two general exceptions were childbirth and severe illness. New mothers and the sick were given special food and beverages to restore their health as soon as possible so that they could return to work.

After a woman had given birth, her family had to provide adequate quantities of wine to renew her strength and vigor. The habit of giving wine to new mothers has been documented throughout the Slovene territory. She was also given a loaf of good white bread and a hen for hen soup, which was believed to possess special powers. Another dish recommended for new mothers and for those who were sick was the *tirjet*. It consisted of slices of white bread first dipped in wine and whisked egg and then fried.

Those who had problems with constipation were given pieces of dried pears or prunes soaked in water; equally recommendable were horseradish, which is a strong purgative, and lukewarm whey. Diarrhea was fought with dried huckleberries, dried pears, the *prežganka* (soup made from water and browned flour), and water in which unhusked wheat had been boiled for several hours.

Those who were anemic had to purify their blood with raw meat, particularly horse meat, fresh sauerkraut, and turnip shoots. Certain plants and vegetables, for example, dandelion, watercress, elder shoots, and wormwood buds, were believed to help as well. In case of dropsy, swooning, bronchial disease, nerves, and worms, folk medicine advised substantial quantities of garlic. Onions helped cure pulmonary diseases, colds, and rheumatism.

Today, interest in a healthy diet has increased primarily due to a growing number of articles in the printed and electronic media. According to experts, Slovenes consume too much fat, sugar, pork, and alcohol and too little fruit and vegetables. In view of this, the Ministry of Health has organized different activities and programs to promote the consumption of fruit, vegetables, and unsaturated fats.

Maja Godina-Goliča

Further Reading


Spain

Overview

Spain is a country with a remarkably diverse landscape and climate, from the mountainous snow-capped north to the arid plains of La Mancha to the hot Mediterranean climate of the south, plus the Balearic Islands and Canary Islands. This climate has shaped not only the type of plants and domesticated animals that flourish but also the cooking techniques, mealtimes, and nutritional status of the population.

The culinary culture of Spain is understood through the various peoples who have settled or invaded the Iberian Peninsula through its long history. The original inhabitants may be represented by the surviving Basque culture, whose language and dominant blood type are completely unrelated to those of any other European group, who from prehistoric times utilized the native flora and fauna. Herbs that still grow wild fit the general Mediterranean flavor profile of seasonings and include oregano, thyme, rosemary, and garlic. Spain has also been suggested as a separate independent site of domestication for the fava bean, which is still eaten commonly and featured in stews like the Asturian fabada. While wild deer populations have dwindled in the ensuing millennia, wild boar is still highly prized, as are rabbit and hare, not to mention the bounty of shellfish enjoyed along the coasts, which were rigorously exploited by the native inhabitants in prehistoric times.

The first major civilization that settled southern Spain was the Phoenicians, who came originally from what is now Lebanon. After having settled in northern Africa they set up trading posts in Gadir, founded in 1104 B.C. (modern-day Cadiz), and Cartagena, which was named for their African trading hub Carthage. The Phoenicians introduced one of the single most important ingredients in Spanish culture—the olive. Although these probably arrived much earlier, the Phoenicians also brought with them eastern Mediterranean wheat and most likely cattle-rearing techniques, which provided meat from sheep, goats, and cows as well as dairy products. Olives, wheat, and cattle products form the core of Spanish cuisine as they do throughout the Mediterranean.

There were also ancient Greek settlements on the northeastern coast of what is today Catalonia, and evidence suggests that it was the Greeks who introduced the cultivation of grapes and, of course, wine to Spain. Almonds also date to this period as well as cultivated fruits. Celtic groups also settled in Spain in what is today known as Galicia, whose name is cognate with both Gaul (modern-day France) and Wales. Northwestern Spain is thus distantly related also to the Irish and Scots. The tradition of curing hams has often been ascribed to the Gauls, although there is no historical evidence that they were the ones who invented the process.

Thereafter, Spain was conquered by the Romans, who apart from building major metropolitan centers—such as Italica, the remains of which lie outside Seville, replete with amphitheaters, baths, and waterworks—also introduced the large-scale slave-operated plantations known as latifundia. Spain not only supplied much of the empire with food but also was known for certain specialty products such as garum—a fermented fish sauce used extensively.
in Roman cooking. Agricultural authorities such as Columella were Spanish, not to mention writers like Seneca as well as several emperors.

The Romans also encouraged migration to Spain from throughout the empire, and in the case of Jews forced them from their homeland in the province of Judaea after the destruction of the second temple in 70 A.D. For the next millennium and a half Jews would comprise a significant part of the population. They were easily identified by their food practices, in particular, their abstinence from foods considered unclean by kosher dietary laws, namely, pigs, rabbit, and shellfish. There still exist dishes in Spain ultimately descended from Jewish cuisine, particularly stews based on chickpeas, originally called adafina, which would have been cooked on Friday night before sundown for consumption the following day on the Sabbath, when fires were not allowed to be lit.

Christianity was another important introduction in late antiquity. Although official dogma and a liturgy had not yet been settled, Christianity introduced a wide variety of fasts and feasts. Eventually these became a set calendar of holy days during which abstinence from meat and meat products was commanded, most importantly during the period of Lent. Asceticism, the conscious denial of bodily pleasures, including food, as an act of penance, became a cultural ideal, though perhaps practiced rigorously only by the holiest of people. The celebration of the Eucharist in the form of bread and wine meant that cultivation of grapes and wheat was required, and it was often monastic communities who carried out these activities in periods of turmoil and social unrest in the wake of the collapse of Roman rule.

With the collapse of the Roman Empire in the fifth century, the Visigoths, a Germanic tribe from central Europe, invaded and set up a kingdom eventually centered in Toledo. Although they never displaced the local inhabitants, they did introduce Germanic taste preferences, such as that for beer, which is very popular in Spain to this day, although one might find that surprising in a Mediterranean culture. A good picture of Visigothic cuisine can be found in Isidore of Seville’s *Etymologies*, a mostly fanciful dictionary of the origins of words that inadvertently reveals many popular ingredients. For example, Isidore believed that the word malum (apple) derived from the word malus, meaning “evil,” in Latin and thus explained the apple as the original fruit of the tree of knowledge in the Garden of Eden.

In 711 the Visigothic Kingdom was conquered by Moors from northern Africa who not only pushed much of the Christian populations far to the north in small, relatively weak kingdoms but also introduced Islam, which has its own variety of fasting (during Ramadan) and dietary laws—abstinence from pork and alcohol. Many Christians and Jews stayed behind and adopted Arabic as their language. For many centuries the three religions coexisted in relative peace in what is known as *convivencia*, exchanging ideas, especially scientific and medical knowledge, as well as recipes. The center of Moorish culture was the flourishing city of Cordoba, not only the largest and most splendid city in Europe at the time, but also a center of learning. The Moors introduced many new foodstuffs, the names of which in modern Spanish are all directly derived from Arabic. Thus, there are artichokes (*alcachofas*), eggplants (*berejenas*) and spinach (*espinacas*), lemon (*limón*), rice (*arroz*), and sugar (*azúcar*). They also used techniques of irrigation and intensive cultivation (especially for fruits), which were well beyond any developed elsewhere in Europe.

Very gradually the small Christian kingdoms in the north, Leon and Castille, Aragon, Navarre, and the County of Catalonia, began to reconquer land from the Moors in a process that took several centuries, the Reconquista. Timed precisely with the Crusades, this was seen not only as a way to gain territory but also as a kind of holy war against the infidel, which especially sought to regain the ancient capital of Toledo. While not complete until the fall of Granada in 1492, the Spanish kingdoms now found themselves ruling over a heterogeneous population of Jews and Muslims as well as culturally Arab Christians called Mozarabs. At times there was peace and continued interchange, at other times
forced conversions and persecution. In fact, the Inquisition was founded primarily as an institution to uncover less than thoroughly converted “New Christians,” or *conversos*, who might still be lighting candles on the Sabbath or keeping their kosher laws in private. Otherwise, the Middle Ages were a vibrant period in Spanish culinary history, and cookbooks were produced such as the *Libre de Sent Sovi* and eventually another by Rupert of Nola. Medieval Spanish cuisine followed some trends popular throughout Europe, including the heavy use of spices such as pepper, cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg, and ginger imported from Asia; vinegar- and sugar-laden sauces thickened with breadcrumbs; and the use of almond milk and rose water. These were in fact largely inherited from Islamic cuisine, but they would have a permanent impact on Spanish food. Some dishes descend directly from this period, like *escabeche*, fish that is fried, then preserved in vinegar and spices and served cold.

Probably the most important event influencing Spanish cooking, if not the entire world, was the discovery of the Americas by Christopher Columbus in 1492. He was, of course, not trying to discover anything new but sought a west-bound route to Asia across the ocean, which was then thought to be one ocean. This was intended as an easier route than that discovered by the Portuguese, which went around the southern tip of Africa, across the Indian Ocean, and ultimately to the spice islands in what is now Indonesia. Had there been no American continents, Columbus’s plan would have made perfect sense—and he knew, as did everyone, that the world is round. It was only the earth’s circumference that he miscalculated, and to his dying day Columbus believed his discoveries lay somewhere slightly east of China. Moreover, the long delay of his enterprise was due to the fact that Ferdinand and Isabella were busy conquering Granada and then subsequently expelling the Jews (Sephardim), most of whom went to live under Ottoman rule in Turkey and Greece and through northern Africa.

The introduction of tomatoes, peppers, squash, beans, and, although they took a long time to be adopted, potatoes would transform Spanish cuisine. From Mexico also came chocolate, which became the preferred drink for the Spanish nobility and thereafter for everyone. Most important, it was sweetened with sugar, grown increasingly in the Caribbean by African slave labor. By the end of the 16th century Spain controlled the first global empire, including most of the Caribbean, Mexico, and Peru as well as the Philippines in Asia and much of Italy as well as the great Portuguese Empire in Africa, India, and Asia after the crowns had been united under a common ruler from 1580–1640.

The 17th century may be considered the golden age of Spanish cuisine. Even though much of the land was depopulated through emigration or natural attrition, the royal court was then the most splendid in Europe and indeed set culinary fashions everywhere. Grand cookbooks by royal chef Francisco Martínez Montiño were published as well as lesser ones like that of Domingo Hernández de Maceras. The quintessential dish of this period is the *olla podrida* (which literally means “rotten pot,” or in French *pot pourris*), a wild combination of tongue, lamb, pigeons, sausages, chickpeas, turnips, chestnuts, and other ingredients stewed down into an indistinguishable but utterly delectable stew. Recipes appeared in English, Italian, and French cookbooks as well. This age came to an end only after two civil wars in midcentury and the failure of both the economy and the Hapsburg progeny. A war of succession fought by several European powers ultimately put a French Bourbon on the throne, but it left Spain, ironically, a relatively backward and impoverished nation, as it would remain into the 20th century. The only major cookbook published in this era was by Juan Altamiras, and it was reprinted throughout the 19th century.

The invasion of the French in the 19th century left the country in turmoil and gave its colonies in South America a chance to win independence. Civil war in the early 20th century ensured that Spain would continue to be impoverished. It would not be until the second half of the century that Spain would emerge among the modern industrialized nations of Europe and once again become a world power economically.
Alicia Rios was born in 1943 and grew up in Madrid; although she never suffered from hunger, she was very conscious of the misery and repression around her through the dictatorship of the Franco era. Her father was a geologist from Zaragoza in Aragon who would bring special foods home from his field trips, bought directly from farmers and fishermen. His family would send them cherries and peaches from the mountains in the north, thick red wines from Cariñena and Somontano, and vegetables from the banks of the Ebro. Her mother came from the Costa Blanca, specifically from a village named Benissa near Alicante, where she grew citrus trees, grapes, white and black figs, and melons, as well as tomatoes and eggplants, in a garden near the sea. She also kept chickens and rabbits. Here, there were as many different paellas as there are days of the year, changing from season to season, incorporating whatever mother earth had to offer.

With this love of food Alicia went on to work in vegetarian restaurants and eventually opened her own macrobiotic restaurant, La Biotika, in 1978, followed by Los Siete Jardines in 1982, both in Madrid. She was married in 1970 to a man from Andalusia, from whom she learned a whole new repertoire of traditional bourgeois cooking. He passed away in 1999.

Today, she runs a company of food-performance art (Ali&Cia) that stages edible cityscapes around the world. Participants from neighborhoods throughout the city contribute a building or block made entirely out of foods from their own ethnic traditions, and the events culminate when the whole city is consumed.

She lives by herself in Madrid. Around 9:30 A.M. she eats a breakfast of mostly fresh fruits and porridge with walnuts, a single date, honey, and a dash of extra-virgin olive oil. At 3:30 or 4 P.M. she eats lunch, which starts with raw vegetables, followed by potaje, a kind of solid soup with fresh cod, chickpeas, vegetables, and sometimes lentils or meat. This is accompanied by whole-grain rice, a glass of wine or beer, and some cheese for dessert, after which she takes a brief siesta. She rarely goes out for tapas with friends, as most Spaniards do, but waits for dinner, which may include a vegetable soup, fish, or an omelet with bread, olive oil, and ham, and perhaps some tomato. She also likes intense dark chocolate.

### Major Foodstuffs

The staple grain of Spain has always been wheat, despite the cultivation of barley, oats, and other grains throughout history. Wheat is used foremost in bread, which forms the basis of practically every meal in some form, and Spanish cuisine is unthinkable without it. Interestingly, bread is usually served directly on the table rather than by putting it on little plates, nor is it served with butter. In Catalonia it is often toasted and flavored with garlic, salt, a drizzle of olive oil, and tomato, which is cut and rubbed directly onto the bread, which constitutes a kind of signature regional dish called pa amb tomàquet. Wheat also features in rolls (roscas), many pastries, fritters, and pies (empanadas). The soft interior crumbs of bread are used for migas (fried crumbs) and as a thickener in gazpacho, which is a direct descendant of medieval soups, with the addition of tomato. The Spanish also eat noodles, especially the fideos of the east coast, which are thin, short lengths like spaghetti, cooked in a skillet like rice for paella in a dish called fideuà.

Rice is another important grain, and the technique for cooking it by frying in oil first and coloring it with saffron as in the classic paella ultimately goes back to medieval Arab cookery and is related to the pilaf and biryani introduced from as far away as India. The rice grown here, however, is mostly short-grained; the most revered are called Calasparra and Bomba. Paella recipes vary widely across Spain, though the classic version comes from Valencia. Paella may include shrimp and clams, a spicy sausage called chorizo, beans, and chicken. The classic version should not include fish, though, but rather rabbit and snails. What constitutes a proper paella is a hotly debated topic, and most people would distinguish this kind of mixed paella from a seafood paella. Whatever the ingredients, it must be cooked on a large metal paellera pan, preferably outdoors over a fire of vine cuttings. The dish should not be stirred as it cooks, but the rice is left
to gradually absorb the liquid, which results in a crispy layer at the bottom of the pan, said to be the best part.

Corn is less important historically and was used mostly for cattle feed, but today Spain is a major producer and importer of corn. Much of this still goes into fodder, corn oil, or other industrial products, but there are some cornbreads, notably in Galicia and Asturias, but most Spaniards seem to dislike corn or consider it a food of poverty or only a porridge for babies (maizena). This may be due to the fact that corn that has not been nixtamalized (treated with lime—the mineral calcium hydroxide) does not supply a full range of nutrients, as it would in a Mexican tortilla, and may lead to pellagra if it forms the staple starch.

Potatoes are certainly not as popular as elsewhere in Europe, but they do feature in the classic Spanish tortilla. This word merely means “little tart,” and the Mexican corn tortilla simply adopted the Spanish term. In Spain it is basically thinly sliced potatoes and onions fried in olive oil, then drained and mixed with just enough eggs to hold them together. The potato and egg mixture is then returned to the pan, cooked on one side until light brown and then flipped over using a plate and cooked on the other side. It is not really an omelet per se but closer to a frittata, though perhaps the literal translation, “little cake of potatoes,” is just as good. It can also be served cold or put on bread for a sandwich.

Beans are and always have been central to Spanish cuisine. The first types used were fava beans, black-eyed peas, and other Vigna species that are native to Africa. Lentils and chickpeas were introduced from the Middle East, and all other beans that are today classified in the Phaseolus genus come from the Americas and include kidney beans, lima beans, black beans, pinto beans, and so on. Spaniards do not generally distinguish these, and many varieties from the Americas are believed to have always been grown in Spain. Beans are featured in soups and stews, often with sausage in many regional classics, or they are served cold marinated in oil as an appetizer.

Spanish cuisine makes great use of vegetables, especially those introduced by the Moors—asparagus and artichokes, spinach, and eggplant in particular. These are usually sautéed or mixed into other dishes, but with the exception of spinach, they can also be grilled and marinated and served cold or battered and fried in fritters. Many vegetables like lettuce, endive, cucumbers, and carrots are served raw in salads. Turnips are often featured in cooked stews like cocido or olla podrida, as are mushrooms. To lend flavor, countless Spanish dishes include onions and garlic. Among the New World vegetables the tomato is the most important, but peppers and zucchini are also important, all of which are featured in cooked recipes. Along with these, olives are perhaps the most ubiquitous of Spanish appetizers. Depending on the variety they may be picked just as they begin to turn black, then lightly cracked and soaked in successive changes of water for about a week until the bitterness is gone, then brined with herbs and garlic. But green and completely black olives are also popular, as are capers, the bud of a shrub. Along with olives they are used in cooked dishes as well.

Salmorejo Cordobes (Cold Pureed Salad)

This recipe is a thicker version of the popular gazpacho, often served with ham and bits of hard-boiled egg on top. It can be made in a food processor but is much more fun to make in a big mortar, pounded with a pestle. This should not have any water added and is essentially a cold pureed salad.
Serves 2

4 or 5 perfectly ripe tomatoes
2 slices stale peasant bread with crust removed
1 clove garlic
½ c extra-virgin olive oil, preferably Spanish
A dash of vinegar
2 thin slices ibérico or serrano ham
1 hard-boiled egg

Start by pounding the tomatoes in your mortar or whizzing them in the food processor. Add the bread, torn into small pieces, and garlic, and continue pounding until you have a smooth consistency. Drizzle in the olive oil; you can add more if you like. Add salt and pepper, and a dash of vinegar to taste. Pour the thick soup into wide bowls, and cover with shreds of ham and thin slices of egg.

The most popular fruits in Spain include apples, grown mostly in the Celtiberian north. Quinces are also popular; they must be cooked, most often in the form of membrillo, a solid quince paste that is served with cheese. Citrus fruits like lemons and oranges are grown widely in the south largely due to Arab influence. There are also dates, figs, and pomegranates. The former are also dried, along with peaches and apricots, which are also made into jam. Among nuts, almonds are perhaps the most important, and one typically finds a plate of salted almonds, especially the delicate thin-shelled marcona, which have a higher oil content than U.S. almonds, alongside a plate of olives and perhaps some cheese as a favorite snack. But there are also walnuts, hazelnuts, and pistachios as well as pine nuts, which are used often as a garnish with raisins in traditional Arab-influenced dishes. Chestnuts have also been very important historically as a starchy ingredient in stews, and today they are candied.

The most common meats used in Spain are beef, including the meat of bulls that have been killed in bullfights; lamb and mutton; and especially pork. The Spanish have a particular reverence for ham, especially serrano and above all else the jamón ibérico de bellota, for which the pigs are allowed to eat acorns, which gives their flesh an incomparable nutty flavor. Such hams are always served raw and thinly sliced, much like Italian prosciutto, but quite distinct. Many bars feature a whole ham fixed to a stand from which thin slices are carved to order. Pork is also used to make sausages ranging from spicy chorizo to varieties made from the pig’s head or even blood as in the case of butifarra. Although familiar cuts of pork provide everyday fare, among the pinnacles of Spanish cuisine is the whole roasted suckling pig, associated mostly with Castile.

Poultry is also popular: chicken, turkey, and smaller game fowl like pigeon and quail. These can be sautéed, stewed, fried, made into broth, or featured in more complex mixed dishes. Rabbit is also very popular and used much like chicken, though its flavor is quite different.

Along with meat, dairy products are important in Spain, above all else cheese. Many types of cheese are eaten frequently, made from either cow, sheep, or goat milk. Manchego made from sheep is the most familiar in this country, but there is also Mahon from Minorca, Zamorano from Castile, Idiazábal from the Basque region, Tetilla from Galicia (in the shape of a woman's breast), and Cabrales, a pungent blue cheese.

Fish is also loved by the Spanish, traditionally eaten fresh along the coasts and rivers and more often cured and transported inland. Dried salted cod is one of the most unique; called bacalao, it is actually fished in the North Sea or Newfoundland, or it may be merely dried on the coast of Norway as stockfish. Bacalao provided protein during times of fasting when meat was forbidden, and it is used in many dishes such as bacalao alla vizcaina or codfish pil pil, which is made with oil, garlic, and chili peppers and served in a little clay dish. Preserved fish are also popular. Anchovies are often marinated in vinegar (boquerón) rather than salted and preserved in oil as in Italy. Tuna also is cooked and preserved in oil or dried (mojana) and eaten thinly sliced like ham. Fresh fish are also eaten everywhere today, along with squid and octopus, as are shellfish such as shrimp, crabs and langoustines, clams (including the distinctive narrow razor clam) and tiny cockles, sea urchins, conch, oysters and mussels, and
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scallops. As the symbol of Saint James (Santiago), the patron saint of Spain, scallop shells were used by pilgrims as a kind of souvenir. Although people along the coast consume shellfish fresh, especially in tapas bars known for their seafood, most Spaniards are also happy to eat these canned and keep a stock in their cupboard.

For flavoring cooks in Spain use a wide array of herbs and spices common throughout the Mediterranean like parsley, thyme, oregano, rosemary, and basil. Fennel seeds and cumin are also used as well as imported spices like cinnamon and cloves. Saffron is the spice most readily associated with Spain, which colors dishes bright yellow. It is the stamen of a crocus flower, meticulously picked by hand, which until recently was the most expensive flavoring in the world until vanilla overtook it. Another spice that has gained recent attention abroad is Pimentón de la Vera, a smoked paprika that comes in sweet and bitter varieties and lends a beautiful deep flavor and color to cooked dishes.

Wine is central to Spanish culinary culture, ranging from deep ruddy Rioja and Ribera del Duero to light effervescent cavas—the Catalanian equivalent of champagne. But wine grapes are grown practically everywhere throughout Spain, from the far western Galician coast to Alicante on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean. There are also a number of specialty wines, the most celebrated of which comes from Xeres and Sanlúcar de Barrameda on the southern tip of Spain, popularly known as sherry. These are made using the solera system whereby the barrels are exposed to air and oxidized and constantly refilled as the content evaporates. Then they are fortified with alcohol, making them stronger and more durable than most other wines. They can be either bone dry (fino) with a woody aroma and sometimes even a hint of brinyness to medium amontillado and oloroso and sweet versions known outside Spain as cream sherry.

Spain also produces distilled liquors such as brandy, anise (flavored with the seed of the same name), and absinthe, which is made from the herb Artemisia absinthium. Until very recently the active component thujone was believed to be toxic and was outlawed in most of the world, though not in Spain. It is traditionally taken by putting the alcohol into a special glass on top of which sits a perforated spoon and a cube of sugar. Cold water is drizzled on top, which creates a louche, or swirling green clouds in the glass.

There are other unique Spanish drinks such as horchata made from tiger nuts—actually the tuber called chufa (Cyperus esculentus). Since the 16th century Spaniards have been avid drinkers of chocolate, made not as it was among the Aztecs with chili peppers and various flowers, but sweetened and flavored with cinnamon. It has been proposed that chocolate was an ideal drink for the Spanish nobility, whose cultural ideals included indolence and the life of leisure, as compared to the northern countries, whose Protestant work ethic led them to drink coffee. In fact, both drinks contain caffeine,
and Spaniards are as avid coffee drinkers as any people in the world. As elsewhere in the world, there is also a great variety of mass-manufactured soft drinks.

Cooking

In Spain, many pots and pans are still made of clay. There are many advantages apart from affordability and beauty. Low-fired earthenware ceramics cook food differently, mostly because the heat is evenly distributed and gently retained rather than directed powerfully from below, creating hot spots that may burn as with modern metal pots. Moreover, food must be cooked gently, so although it takes longer, the flavor is ultimately deeper and richer rather than seared or scorched. Such pans will range from small, flat, shallow pans called cazuelas to covered ollas for soups or stews to large stewpots called pucheros. The cazuela can be placed directly over a gentle fire for cooking with oil or placed in the oven, and it doubles as a serving vessel as well. Other unique vessels include the porrón, a glass decanter for wine with a long, straight spout that pours a thin stream of liquid directly into the mouth, and also the bota, a goatskin bag seasoned with pitch on the interior, which is also used to squirt wine into one’s mouth.

The mortar and pestle is also an essential Spanish implement and can be made of ceramic, stone, or olive wood. It is used to make cold soups like gazpacho as well as sauces like alioli, an emulsified garlic sauce.

A typical way to begin a recipe is with a sofrito or sofregit in Catalan. It is chopped onions and garlic cooked slowly in olive oil with tomatoes and sometimes other vegetables like red or green peppers. This is then used as a base for soups or stews, or it can be used in fillings for empanadas or even to cook fish like snapper or tuna in a pan.

Stewing is a common and economical technique that takes little more effort than assembling the ingredients and letting them cook slowly together in a pot. The cocido Madrileño is a typical example, though unlike most stews, the broth or caldo is served first, sometimes with cooked rice or noodles in it, separate from the vegetables, which are served second, and the meats, served last, arranged on a platter. The typical base is chickpeas along with vegetables like cabbage, carrots, potatoes, and turnips. With these an array of meats are cooked such as pork belly, fresh chorizo sausages, morcilla blood sausages, beef shanks and other soup bones, and a stewing hen.

Sautéing is probably the quickest and easiest cooking method, with ingredients merely placed in a pan with olive oil or rendered lard. Deep-frying is also popular for small fish or vegetables covered in batter and fried. Grilling is used most often for small fish like sardines and sausages as well as vegetables. Roast meat is very highly appreciated, whether small cuts, joints, or whole suckling pigs or lambs; roasting is best done beside an open flame, slowly turning on a spit, but it can also be done in a wood-fired oven. Normally this would be used for baking bread, but traditionally many dishes were simply cooked in an open red earthenware dish, placed directly in the horno until crispy and browned.

Before modern canning technologies, food would often be salted and dried for preservation or kept in oil. The former include not only hams and sausages but also dried vegetables like peppers, fish, and legumes; practically anything that could be preserved was, as a means of survival.

Spain is also home to some of the most avant-garde experimental cuisines to be found anywhere, most notably in Ferran Adrià’s famed elBulli, often recognized as the best restaurant on earth. Here, one will find scientific instruments used to cook, to deconstruct and reconstruct food into new and exciting forms. Although these techniques have not had a great impact on household cooking, they have become popular in restaurants worldwide and are beginning to be used in homes. The sous vide method in which food is gently poached at a low temperature, vacuum sealed in a plastic bag, may soon become familiar.

Typical Meals

Spaniards eat a very small breakfast, or desayuno, that usually consists of nothing more than coffee or hot chocolate and maybe a piece of bread or pastry,
if anything. It can be eaten at home or quickly at a bar on the way to work. The equivalent of the American breakfast is almuerzo, eaten before noon and usually consisting of coffee and a bread roll, but it can be something a little more substantial, and even be accompanied by wine. In the past farmworkers would eat a larger meal in the morning to fortify them for the day of work ahead.

On holidays people may eat a midafternoon snack of tapas, but normally they wait for lunch, or comida, eaten around 2 or 3. This is a full meal and can contain several courses and last a few hours. Traditionally people would go home to eat lunch, and they would take a siesta afterward in the hottest part of the day, but increasingly they go out to restaurants and then go back to work. A merienda, or snack, may be eaten, mostly by children, late in the afternoon between 5 and 7, mainly because dinner is eaten so late. For the same reason people often go out for tapas (the meal being called tapeo) after work, between perhaps 7 and 9. This meal will almost certainly include an aperitif like sherry, wine, or beer, plus several little plates that can include absolutely anything. In Spain the place where tapas are eaten is not a restaurant but more like a bar, and one stands. Commonly the tapas are served with napkins, which are tossed on the floor, and after a crowd passes through the tapas bar, it may look like a disaster hit.

Dinner, which can be as late as 11 P.M., is usually a smaller meal eaten at home with family members, in structure much like lunch. On holidays, however, it can be a much larger meal, eaten out. It will also consist of several courses with soup or salad to start, a meat or fish main course, plus a dessert such as flan or cake but just as often merely a piece of fruit.

Eating Out

Restaurants in Spain range from simple neighborhood joints to Michelin-starred white-tablecloth restaurants. elBulli was rated the best restaurant in the world for several years in succession, and the economic upsurge of Spain has meant that people eat out a lot and demand high-quality food at every type of dining establishment. Spain is currently at the forefront of what is popularly known as molecular gastronomy, cooking using scientific implements, new combinations of unusual ingredients, and plates arranged in novel and surprising ways. Many Spanish chefs dislike this term, though, preferring to call what they do simply nueva cocina (new cuisine). Sometimes recipes in such restaurants are variations on traditional dishes, perhaps deconstructed, but just as often they depart completely from traditional Spanish food. Like all food trends there are many imitators whose foams, colloidal suspensions, edible menus, and the like are pale imitations of the real innovators.

Restaurants are open for full meals both late in the afternoon and very late in the evening, and formal multicourse meals are served at both seatings. The Spanish love to eat out and socialize, whether at tapas bars, taverns, fondas (a kind of informal restaurant), cafés, or proper restaurants. Quite recently one also finds ethnic restaurants serving Chinese, Indian, Italian, or Turkish food; these may also offer a take-out menu. There are now some fast-food chains and pizzerias, but they are not as successful as elsewhere in Europe, nor can they compete with the local tapas culture.

Tapas bars are a thriving business throughout Spain and can get extremely crowded, with people standing elbow to elbow, packed in like sardines, at the best sites. Spaniards usually visit such bars in the early evening, going in groups, and often hitting
several spots in one tapeo. One will find olives and lupins everywhere, as well as pickled vegetables on skewers (banderillas), little ceramic dishes of shrimp or fried squid, and slices of toast with tomato, cheese, ham, or blood sausage, but there can also be more substantial dishes that must be eaten with a fork, like cooked seafood, vegetables, or patatas bravas, which are fried potatoes served with spicy tomato sauce or garlic mayonnaise. The most renowned tapas bars are found in Andalusia in cities like Seville. The word tapas literally means “covers” and may derive from a piece of paper that covered a glass to keep out flies, or hold a little snack. Or it may mean a cover to the stomach when one drinks alcohol. Traditionally one would pay per plate, which were counted by white marks made on the wooden bar. Each plate holds only a few bites, and if one wants a larger portion one orders a ración. In the Basque country tapas are called pintxos (from the word for toothpicks, used to hold the little mouthfuls together) and nowadays may include wild experimental combinations of exotic ingredients.

**Special Occasions**

Spain is a largely Catholic country, though increasingly it is becoming secularized. Traditionally this has meant fasting on Fridays, during the entire season of Lent (40 days leading up to Easter, minus Sundays), and, for the especially devout, for the vigils on saint’s days, Advent, and several other holy days. To fast in this case meant abstinence from meat, cheese and dairy, eggs, and any animal products, like lard for cooking. In much of Spain this was not a terrible hardship as there is abundant oil for cooking, bounteous fish and vegetables, and especially legumes. But it did mean forgoing many favorites like ham and sausages, and in rural and mountainous regions fasting periods could be austere.

The Spanish have also been known for centuries for their parsimonious diet, subsisting on much less food than other Europeans, largely because of the heat. This, at least in the minds of foreigners, was compounded with their intense religiosity, sparing use of alcohol, and preference for many small meals scattered through the day rather than large, hearty, and substantial meals. While there may be some truth to this, the Spanish do have many celebrations. The tradition of Mardi Gras, or Carnival, a huge festival of excess preceding Lent, was abolished in the course of the Catholic Reformation in the 16th and 17th centuries. There have been revivals recently, though, which are essentially street festivals, bereft of their original religious purpose. While these are not as raucous as those of New Orleans or Rio de Janeiro, many Spanish towns manage to throw a big street party.

Street festivals are also popular during the feria, or bullfighting season, when stalls line the streets and people cook big pans of paella, grill sausages, and serve various kinds of street food, beer, and wine. There is usually loud music playing and flamenco dancing. The feria was originally solely a religious holiday, though, held during Easter week, or during Advent preceding Christmas. Christmas Day, like elsewhere, is an occasion for a big, formal sit-down meal at home with relatives. Special cookies are made as well as marzipan, nougats (turrón), and crumbly cakes like mantecados, which melt in the mouth. Candy and presents arrive on Twelfth Night, or the Feast of the Epiphany, January 5–6, when a king cake (roscón de reyes) is served, containing a bean or little ceramic baby. Whoever finds it is crowned king for the day.

Saint’s days are also holidays; that commemorating Saint John (San Juan) on June 24 is popular,

![A pile of mantecados and polvorones, typical Spanish sweets. (Shutterstock)](image)
as is traditionally Saint James’ (Santiago) the next day. As in the rest of the Hispanic world, All Saints’ Day is also celebrated, by eating chestnuts, candies in the shape of dead men’s bones, puffy buñuelos (doughnuts), and other pastries. Likewise rites of passage—baptisms, confirmations, weddings, and funerals—are celebrated with festive foods.

Diet and Health

Much of Spain would until recent decades have been included among those people who ate a so-called Mediterranean diet, consisting of a small amount of animal protein, many fruits and vegetables, healthy oils (predominantly olive), and fish high in omega-3 fatty acids. This was not the case for mountainous parts of Spain and in particular the north, but in general the Spanish diet was parsimonious and healthy, though political turmoil certainly did add its share of poverty and malnutrition. With economic prosperity, Spain can now be said to share with other nations the problems of hyper-tension, obesity, diabetes, and a diet relatively high in saturated fat, salt, and processed sugar. Cardio-vascular disease is on the rise. This is compounded by an increasingly sedentary lifestyle, with people working at desks in an increasingly service economy and fewer people performing manual labor. Even agriculture, which a mere generation ago would have been physically very demanding, has been mechanized on par with industrial-scale farming in the wealthiest of countries. Ironically, the Spanish are also increasingly health conscious, and manufactured foods specifically designed for maintaining an ideal body weight, as well as low-calorie and low-cholesterol foods, are now commonly seen in grocery stores.

Ken Albala

Further Reading


Sweden

Overview

Located on the peninsula of Scandinavia, the Kingdom of Sweden is one of the largest countries in Europe. Approximately 9.3 million people share a land with many natural resources, forests, mountains, rivers, lakes, and shorelines; Sweden has harsh winters in the north and mild weather in the south. Sweden is one of the least densely populated countries in Europe, and about 80 percent of its inhabitants live in cities, mostly in Stockholm, the capital, on the coast of the Baltic Sea; Malmö, in the southernmost part of the country; and Gothenburg, on the west coast. The climate varies considerably from north to south due to the country's shape, and thus the foodstuffs available to Swedes in different parts of the country also vary greatly. Sweden is divided into three general areas: Götaland in the south, Svealand in the middle, and Norrland in the north, each with its own culinary traditions, strongly influenced by climate, geography, and available foodstuffs. These three areas are in turn politically divided into 21 regions or counties characterized, in part, by their own local gastronomy.

An important aspect of Swedish culture and tradition in general is the Lutheran or Protestant heritage, even though very few Swedes regularly attend church activities. However, the strong Lutheran heritage, more specifically the belief in “not craving more than one needs,” has clearly marked Swedish culinary traditions, which may appear simple to foreigners since herbs and spices have been sparingly used. At the same time, there has been a tendency to embrace foreign dishes, which has led to an increase in the variety of herbs and spices on offer, while more traditional Swedish menus are enjoyed during holidays and on special occasions. Since the 1960s, when pizza became a major Swedish dish, Middle Eastern kebabs, Chinese, and more recently Tex-Mex–inspired foods have been incorporated into mainstream Swedish food consumption.

Food Culture Snapshot

A mainstream family living in downtown Stockholm, the Nyströms consider themselves open to new tastes while maintaining their families’ traditions. Sanna and David both work full-time, like most Swedes, and have one 10-year-old daughter, Lisa. Their neighborhood has several supermarkets in which Sanna and David buy most of their food. Several new bakeries sell sour-dough bread, which has recently become very trendy; it is expensive by Swedish standards, and the Nyströms seldom buy the bread, but they love the smell that surrounds the bakeries. In the area there are also many coffee shops, all offering take-out caffe latte and lunches; however, during weekdays it is almost impossible to get a seat since they serve pasta, pie, and salad lunches that are very popular. Both Sanna and David go out to eat on workdays, even though a few coworkers have lunch boxes with them. The Nyströms spend little time shopping for food and cooking during the week.

Sanna, David, and Lisa usually start their day with a complete breakfast. They are similar to other Swedes who follow the Swedish National Food Administration’s food pyramid and nutrition advice. They believe that a good breakfast is important and thus often eat oat porridge with low-fat milk and lingonberry jam, a
glass of fruit juice, and coffee or tea. Sometimes they have packaged cereals or toast with boiled eggs. The Nyströms do not worry about lunch since Lisa, like all children in Sweden, is served a free lunch at school. The school lunch menus are varied and include regular Swedish and international dishes, milk, bread, and salad. Since most parents work full-time, children are offered a midafternoon snack in the Child and Youth Center that is located near the school and where Lisa regularly spends her afternoons. Sanna and David arrive home around 6 p.m. and take turns making dinner. They both love food, cookbooks, and watching food programs on the television but lack the time to make elaborate recipes so they settle for ready-made meals or quick and easy dishes such as boiling potatoes and warming frozen fish fingers or Swedish meatballs in the oven.

On Saturdays, the Nyströms visit a nearby farmers’ market and purchase different kinds of vegetables. Popular choices are beets, which they boil and eat with melted butter and salt; salad greens, such as spinach; and trendy vegetables, for example, ramsoms (a wild relative of chives), which have become very popular. Sanna, David, and Lisa eat lunch at one of the numerous restaurants that serve food from different cultures; a favorite is Lebanese food, but they sometimes purchase take-out sushi. Often, they prepare dinner at home and love to try out new recipes of modern Swedish home cooking, which are quicker to make than more traditional ones.

**Major Foodstuffs**

Sweden has only 5.93 percent arable land, while the rest of the country is comprised of forests, lakes, mountains, and coastlines. Fish and seafood, especially salmon and shrimp, are inexpensive; wild game is a traditional part of Swedish home cooking; locally grown vegetables are available during the summer months but otherwise are imported, along with fruits and meat.

Sweden’s most important grain crops are wheat, rye, barley, and oats. Barley is mostly used for animal feed, but wheat and oats are a part of Swedish daily fare. A very popular breakfast is oatmeal with berry jams and milk, and wheat flour is used in creamy gravies and pastries. Rye is an indispensable ingredient in Swedish knäckebröd, or crispbread. Rye and oats also are combined or used as the main ingredient in breakfast porridges. Sugar beets are also cultivated in the southern part of the country. Sweden is practically self-sufficient regarding sugar because of the processing of sugar beets into refined sugar. Swedes consume the most candy and sweets in the world.

Potatoes are a favorite crop in Sweden, even though the yield is not large enough to feed the whole population, and, therefore, a certain percentage is imported. Potatoes are often divided into several categories according to when the potato is harvested and the best use for it. Fresh, early summer potatoes are a must on all Swedish tables during the summer. They are small and their skin is so soft that they do not have to be peeled; just washing the dirt off is usually enough. Starchy potatoes are mostly used in mashes; less starchy, firmer varieties are often boiled or sautéed. These are more frequent during the fall and winter months.

Other root crops frequently used in Swedish cuisine are carrots, rutabagas, and beets. Carrots are often just grated and served as a salad on the side. Rutabaga mash is a traditional Swedish side dish and is sometimes mixed with mashed potatoes. Boiled summer beets are popular with butter and salt, while fall and winter beets are preserved in brine and consumed throughout the year.

All sorts of cabbages are available year-round in Sweden. Spring cabbage, with its tender leaves, is used for making kåldolmar, the Swedish interpretation of eastern Mediterranean dolmas. Filled with minced meat and served with creamy gravy, mashed potatoes, and lingonberry jam, this dish is one of the most important in Sweden. Cabbage is also used for making skånsk kålsoppa, a winter soup with homemade broth and salted pork. Red cabbage is a delicacy from southern Sweden and is irreplaceable on the Christmas table.

Pork may be the most commonly used meat in Swedish households. Many different varieties of pork sausages are eaten, such as the thick falukorv (Falun sausage, similar to bologna), a favorite of children, and the isterband, made of pork, rye, and
potatoes. Pork steaks appear regularly on Swedish tables, and bacon and salted pork are used to flavor different soups, such as the popular ärtsoppa (yellow pea soup), traditionally eaten on Thursdays. Beef is also eaten regularly even though it is more expensive than pork. Swedish köttbullar, the traditional meatballs now available throughout the world at IKEA restaurants, are made of one part minced pork and one part minced beef, depending on one’s budget and taste. Swedish meatballs must be served with gravy, potatoes, and lingonberry jam.

Wild meats are a staple in the northern parts of Sweden and have seen a comeback in more urban areas. Supermarkets now have different cuts of wild boar, elk, moose, and deer for sale, so Swedes do not have to go hunting to be able to prepare wild game stews, hamburgers, and steaks. Hunting is a common fall activity, and Swedish homes often have very large industrial freezers in which to preserve the game. Even in urban households, the standard refrigerator does not include a small freezer but is placed beside an independent freezer of the same size.

Several dairy products are part of Swedish daily meals. Milk is a compulsory drink for children and is also used in porridges. Cheese in Sweden is most often made from cow milk and is very popular. Many different varieties, such as västerbottenost, a strong aged cheese from northern Sweden, and the mild hushållsost, literally “home cheese,” are easily available throughout the country. Messmör (whey butter), a spread, and messost (whey cheese), a cheese, are both made from milk whey, butter, and sugar and are a must on crispbread. Cream with different quantities of fat is used almost every day in Sweden. “Cooking cream” makes gravies creamy, sour cream is used in dips and cold sauces, and whipping cream is irreplaceable in pannkakstårta, an easy-to-make birthday pancake cake that originated in Norrbotten (North Bothnia) and is now very popular everywhere in the country.

**Pannkakstårta (Birthday Pancake Cake)**

*Makes 12–15 medium-sized pancakes*

**Ingredients**

- 1 c wheat flour
- ½ tsp salt
- 2½ c milk
- 3 medium eggs
- 3 tbsp butter

In a large bowl, blend the wheat flour and the salt. Add 1¼ cup milk, and beat until the dough is smooth. Add the rest of the milk, and beat again. Add 1 egg at a time, beating well before adding the next. Melt 2 tablespoons butter, and blend it into the batter. Set aside for 30 minutes.

In a large frying pan, melt 1 tablespoon butter on medium heat. Pour approximately ¼ cup batter into the pan, and fry for about 1 minute, then turn...
over and fry until golden brown. Put aside to cool on a plate.

**For the Cake**

2 c whipping cream
Sugar to taste
1½ c berry jam or fresh berries of your choice

In a bowl, whip the cream, and add sugar to taste. Place one pancake on a cake plate or other serving dish, spread some berry jam or fresh berries on the pancake, and top with 2 tablespoons whipped cream. Cover with 1 or 2 pancakes and repeat the process until all pancakes have been used. Decorate with whipped cream and fresh berries. Serve cool.

Fish is eaten at least once a week in Sweden, preferably on Tuesdays, and may be prepared in many different manners. Fish casseroles are often served in schools, and fish fingers with mashed potatoes are a children’s favorite. Herring, both pickled and fried, has been an important staple in Sweden and is often eaten with potatoes and crispbread. Seafood, mostly shrimp and crayfish, is inexpensive. A delicacy that is available once a year is *surströmming*, fermented herring, served with bread and sometimes potatoes with a glass of milk on the side. Fish roe is also common in Swedish households, mostly in the form of *kaviar*, which, even though the names are similar, does not have anything in common with Russian caviar. Swedish kaviar is a spread eaten on bread with cheese and cucumber slices or on boiled eggs, and it may be used in fish sauces or sour cream seafood dips.

Sweden produces several kinds of alcoholic beverages, of which the most well known is Absolut vodka. Vodka and *akvavit*, the “water of life” made from potatoes, are irreplaceable on holidays. They are served with meals, cold, in small glasses, and are drunk in one shot, followed by a sip of beer. Akvavit is flavored with different kinds of spices, for example, dill, coriander, and caraway seeds; many Swedes make their own spice blends that they add to unflavored akvavit, which is then left to steep for several weeks.

Favorite nonalcoholic beverages are *saft*, a berry or fruit concentrate; water flavored with cucumber, lemon, or orange slices; tea; and coffee. Swedes are some of the world’s biggest consumers of coffee, and the *fika*, coffee break, is compulsory in most workplaces in the country, where workers take coffee breaks twice a day. There are many varieties of coffee in Sweden: espresso, cappuccino, café au lait, and regular brewed coffee. Coffee shops are found on almost every corner in cities. Coffee and tea are often accompanied by an American-style muffin (called *muffins*), brownies, or more traditional Swedish pastries.

Desserts and sweets, cookies, cakes, and pastries are very popular in Sweden. Many recipes have French origins, though they have been adapted throughout the years. Others are originally foreign, such as Italian *pannacotta* (cooked sweetened cream solidified with gelatin), which is now sold in portion-sized containers in most supermarkets. A favorite in Sweden is *ostkaka*, which is very different from its literal translation of “cheesecake”: It is a pudding or curdlike cake of cream, sugar, egg, almond, and bitter almond, served warm with cloudsberry jam and sometimes whipped cream.

**Cooking**

Swedish cuisine has a rural heritage that is simple though time-consuming. Boiling, frying, and baking are the most commonly used techniques, and,
in summer, barbecuing meats, vegetables, and fruits has become very popular during the last few years. Most stoves and ovens are electric, though a few households have older gas-fueled stoves, which are becoming quite popular in higher-income households. Microwave ovens are found in almost all Swedish homes and workplaces, where fully furnished kitchens are often available to workers. Preserving food by pickling, drying, and smoking is part of the rural heritage, and the techniques originally became popular in order to store foodstuffs during the harsh winter. Nowadays, foods from all over the world are available in most supermarkets, and preserving food is not necessary. However, the tradition of picking wild berries and mushrooms and preserving them is still very much alive today in Sweden.

**Typical Meals**

Since Swedes are very health conscious, they believe in starting the day with a good breakfast consisting of at least a couple slices of bread, preferably crispbread, with ham, cheese, and some cucumber slices. Sometimes breakfast consists of boiled eggs or oatmeal porridge with berries or jam and milk. Adults drink tea or coffee, while children often have a cup of hot cocoa.

Lunch is an important meal and is usually eaten around noon. Depending on the day of the week, since Swedes maintain the custom of eating fish on Tuesdays and soup on Thursdays, restaurant lunch menus vary from Thai noodles, sushi, and Swedish meatballs as well as a vegetarian alternative dish to more traditional fish casseroles, yellow pea soup and Swedish pancakes, or light salads or pies. Submarine sandwiches are also popular lunch choices.

### **Ärtsoppa (Yellow Pea Soup)**

**Serves 6**

**Preparation:** 2–3 hours

**Ingredients**

- 6½ c dried yellow peas
- 8½–12 c water
- 1 lb salt pork (or bacon)
- 2 tsp dried marjoram or thyme

Cull and rinse the yellow peas. Put in a large bowl and cover with water. Leave to soak overnight. Drain the soaking water, and put in a large pot. Cover with 8½ cups cold water, and bring to a boil. Skim. Slice the salt pork or bacon into 1-inch cubes. Add to the soup and cover. Boil on medium heat until the peas feel tender and the soup is creamy, about 2 hours. Skim often and remove any pea shells. Add dried marjoram or thyme, and serve in bowls with some spicy sweet mustard on the side.

Around 2:30 P.M., it is common in Sweden to eat fruit or have a coffee break with something sweet, which may be a couple of cookies or a pastry.

Dinner on weekdays is regularly simple, with many ready-to-heat dishes or take-out foods available. Many Swedes with tight schedules choose to cook during weekends instead. However, some dishes, such as korv (sausage) stroganoff with rice and all sorts of meats (beef, pork, chicken) fried with vegetables and often noodles, a Thai- and Chinese-inspired cooking method, are popular weekday meals.

Swedes are very interested in cooking, and weekends are reserved for trying new recipes or creating new menus. Weekends start on Friday evenings, when taco dinners or fajitas are a popular choice. On Saturdays and Sundays, recipes from all around the world are cooked. In urban areas, it is not unusual to make Korean bibimbap (rice topped with vegetables and slices of meat) or Peruvian ceviche (raw marinated fish) to share with friends. Traditional Swedish meals are often reserved for holidays.

**Eating Out**

Swedes often eat out, in particular in cities, where many restaurants serve weekday lunch menus. Also, there are many popular street stands that offer hot dogs, hamburgers, and kebabs that share their customers with McDonald’s and Burger King. Most
pubs and local bars offer similar menus, of which steak and fries is often the most inexpensive choice, even though they also often serve Swedish home cooking such as pytt i panna, a hodgepodge of potatoes and meat leftovers sautéed with onions and served with fried eggs. However, dining out in Sweden is often expensive at regular restaurants, which are often led by well-known chefs, who during the last few years have been inspired by traditional Swedish home cooking to create modern versions of their grandmothers’ recipes. Many restaurants specialize in fish and seafood or garlic-based dishes, while others concentrate on serving wild game or vegan food.

As Swedes are very interested in foreign foods, there are many restaurants that have Middle Eastern, Chinese, Korean, Thai, American, Greek, Indian, and Pakistani menus. One of the most popular choices for eating out with friends is restaurants that serve Spanish-inspired tapas.

**Special Occasions**

Sweden has a Christian heritage, and therefore Swedes celebrate Christmas, Easter, and All Saints’ Day. However, Christian celebrations have been influenced by pre-Christian customs and sometimes foreign traditions, which have contributed to create very Swedish holiday festivities.

Christmas is very important in Sweden, even though it is no longer expected for families to celebrate Christmas Eve or share a meal on Christmas Day. Many younger Swedes celebrate with friends or travel abroad during the holidays. Nevertheless, some traditional Christmas customs are irreplaceable for many Swedes. In early December, restaurants begin to serve the traditional *julbord,* Christmas table, which includes many if not all of the compulsory Swedish Christmas dishes. Swedish meatballs, Christmas ham, red cabbage with raisins, several kinds of pickled herring, smoked salmon, sausages, cheese, crispbread, and boiled potatoes are just some examples of the wide variety of dishes on the Christmas table. Almost all employers invite their staff to a Christmas lunch or dinner consisting of the traditional Christmas table. However, during the last few years new menus have become popular, and it is not unusual to share a Pakistani- or Lebanese-inspired Christmas table. Sweets are also very important during the holidays, and many children bake Swedish *pepparkakor,* gingerbread cookies, at school or at home. These are a must on the festival of Lucia, which celebrates the Italian Saint Lucia as the one who brings the light, on the early morning of December 13.

The Christmas table is a variation of the traditional Swedish smorgasbord that also is a part of the summer festival of *midsommar,* or Feast of St. John, celebrated in late June on Midsummer’s Eve. Everywhere in Sweden, people celebrate summer by singing and dancing around a Maypole decorated with flowers and share a meal that consists of a great variety of herring, salmon, and shrimp dishes, the irreplaceable meatballs and boiled spring potatoes, lots of beer and akvavit, and bowls of strawberries and cream for dessert. The festivities begin around noon and stretch well into the night.

Summer is the most important season in Sweden due to the climate, which is cold and very dark through the long winter months. Therefore, starting in early June, fresh produce is a treat, and Swedes look forward to celebrating summer with strawberries and cream cakes, a favorite on summer birthdays; rhubarb pie with vanilla cream; and fresh greens. Summer is also the time for connecting with...
nature, and it is common to spend as much time as possible outdoors, eating most meals in gardens and on balconies. Swedish forests are rich with many kinds of berries, and families often spend their summer days picking berries and mushrooms. Fishing is also a favorite summer activity, and it is not unusual to see fishermen in downtown Stockholm, which has many good fishing spots.

In August the *kräftskiva*, crayfish party, is celebrated outdoors and in the company of family and friends. The menu is simple: lots of crayfish with dill flowers, crispbread and cheese, and akvavit and beer. The idea is to have a shot of akvavit for each crayfish claw on one’s plate and to sing one of the many traditional songs before downing the shot. As the theme is crayfish, the table and its surroundings are decorated with paper tablecloths, napkins, cartoon plates, bibs, and plastic glasses, all decorated with crayfish and crayfish-related themes, and one or several paper lanterns representing the man-in-the-moon is hung from tree branches.

For Easter, Swedes decorate their homes with twigs and bright-colored feathers, and their children, both boys and girls, dress as *påskkärringar* (Easter witches who according to old Swedish beliefs congregated on the evening before Good Friday) and go out trick-or-treating. The Easter bunny usually makes an appearance on Easter Sunday, and both children and adults receive or trade as presents large cardboard eggs filled with candy and other sweets. Traditionally, Easter is celebrated by eating a variation of the smorgasbord, with cold shrimp, fish, and egg dishes and occasionally a lamb roast. In recent years, other dishes have become popular, and nowadays each family may create their own Easter menu; some may have Tex-Mex food, while others might make Vietnamese spring rolls.

**Diet and Health**

Swedes are very health conscious; many work out regularly and make mindful choices about the foods they eat. A lot of people are vegetarians or vegan, and others avoid red meat and pork. Recently, eating foods with a low glycemic index has become very popular, and many restaurants now offer at least one dish with a low glycemic index.

A few years ago, a journalist published a book about additives and preservatives, and Swedes were shocked about the high content of unnatural ingredients in their favorite foods. Therefore, many Swedes now check the ingredients on packaged foods and try to avoid those they do not consider natural. A chain of supermarkets has taken advantage of this trend and is now marking “real food” to make it easier for their customers to find more natural products.

Another important trend is the strong movement toward organic and locally produced foods, which takes up a large part of the media discussions. Many cookbooks that deal with organic, regional, local, and unprocessed foods are published every year in Sweden. Food blogs are also very popular, and there are several that have organic and natural food as their favorite subject.

Sweden has a strong rural tradition, and many Swedes have a passion for nature and everything related to growing and cultivating plants. In many cities people may rent a small patch of land for growing their own food, and it is common for those who do to spend several days at a time in their lots, which most often have a small shed in which to spend the night. Recently, growers have organized small local markets, which have become very popular, in which they sell their surplus. Many who do not have access to arable land grow vegetables and even fruits at home, and it is common to see balconies in Sweden overflowing with cherry tomato plants and different kinds of herbs.

*Gabriela Villagran Backman*

**Further Reading**


Granqvist, Carl Jan, and Lena Swanberg. *Swedish Culinary Classics: Recipes with History*


Overview

Switzerland is located in central Europe, landlocked between Italy, France, Germany, Austria, and Liechtenstein. The country is divided into three regions—the Alps, the Jura, and the Central Plateau—and 26 cantons. German, French, Italian, and Romansch are the country’s four official languages. Its 7.6 million inhabitants are 65 percent Swiss German, 18 percent Swiss French, 10 percent Swiss Italian, 1 percent Romansch, and 6 percent of other origins. Immigrants are numerous in Switzerland, having come most recently from the Balkans. Serbo-Croatian is now the fourth most spoken language in the country, and 4.3 percent of the population is Muslim, compared to about 42 percent Catholic and 35 percent Protestant. The country’s quality of living is high, and the average life expectancy is about 80 years.

Much of the country consists of mountains (the Alps cover 65 percent of its surface, with the Jura making up another 12 percent), with its highest peak, the Dufourspitze, towering at 15,203 feet. Many lakes adorn the landscape—the largest are Lake Geneva, Lake Constance, the Lake of Neuchâtel, and Lake Maggiore—which makes for a diet rich in fish specific to each lake and region. About a third of the country’s land is farmed.

Switzerland’s public transportation is abundant and efficient. The country boasts one of the world’s densest rail systems, ranging from intercity express trains that go from Zurich to Geneva, with two stops in between, in about three hours to regional trains that cover medium-size towns, connecting them to larger urban areas. Postal cars serve smaller towns and mountain villages, while boats connect cities around lakes.

What the Swiss cook and eat is still very much influenced by the ingredients found in each region, but immigration, travel, and a large variety of prepared foreign foods available in supermarkets have diversified the Swiss palate. A Chinese hot pot is as likely to be the centerpiece of a dinner among friends as cheese fondue is. Stores close at 6:30 p.m. on weeknights and 4:30 p.m. on Saturdays, and they are closed on Sundays. Convenience stores in major train stations sell a variety of foodstuffs, including fresh fruits and vegetables, allowing commuters to shop on their way home.

Rustic dishes that contain high-calorie foodstuffs, such as potatoes, cheese, pasta, and sausages (sometimes all together), and seasonal vegetables are most typical of Swiss cuisine. These long-standing traditional foods date back to a time when most Swiss worked outside, on farms, in forests, or in the mountains.

Food Culture Snapshot

Marc and Valérie Münster live in Bern, the Swiss capital, in the top-floor apartment of a three-story house converted into office and residential space near the center of town. Marc is half Swiss German, but they both grew up in the French part of the country and moved to Bern after he finished his master’s degree in geology and she her doctoral degree in law. Marc works an hour away, in Bienne (Biel), as a director and area manager for a company that educates corporations and individuals on sustainable development. Valérie works for the government in Bern, as a legal officer,
and travels often. They became parents in September 2009 and as a result reduced their work schedules. Marc now stays at home on Wednesdays, while Valérie does so on Tuesdays and Friday afternoons. They are committed to eating local, seasonal foods and buy mostly Swiss-grown products, organic if possible.

Like many Swiss people, their refrigerator is on the small side, so they tend to shop several times a week for quantities of food sufficient for a day or two of meals. They mostly purchase vegetables, cheese products, rice, and pasta, limiting their meat consumption to a couple of times a week. The vegetables they buy are fresh and seasonal rather than frozen, even when shopping at the supermarket, with the exception of dried green beans, a popular Swiss product. They cook dinner every night but sometimes resort to the high-quality prepared foods that are widely available in Swiss supermarkets, such as premade rösti (a potato pancake), premade tart dough for savory tarts, pre-cooked vegetables, and jarred sauces.

Like most Swiss urban areas, Bern is still surrounded by agrarian land and farms, even if housing developments are also prevalent in the countryside. Farmers come to the farmers’ market that takes place in front of the Federal Palace and in nearby streets every Tuesday and Saturday morning. The Münsters shop there every Saturday morning, unless they are out of town, purchasing vegetables, meat, and cheeses to use during the week, and flowers. They typically buy a variety of sausages (some of which are ground on site at the market by the butcher once they pick their meat) from the region, both fresh and cured. Local cheesemongers offer both regional specialties, such as Belper Knolle (a spreadable cheese flavored with garlic and pepper), and cheeses that come from other parts of Switzerland.

In addition to cheeses of all sorts, dairy products such as yogurt, milk, and cream figure prominently in the Münsters’ refrigerator. They purchase plain or Greek yogurt to mix with cereals and muesli in the morning, and fruit-flavored yogurts to eat at the end of a meal. They rarely purchase or make dessert for weeknight meals, preferring instead to eat a yogurt and a fruit. They also frequently purchase chocolate bars, which they’ll eat as an afternoon snack or after dinner.

The Münsters make their own sparkling water with a Soda-Club. They drink it throughout the day and with lunch and dinner. They drink tea and coffee with breakfast and an espresso after a meal. They often have a beer—usually from Appenzell—before or with dinner on weeknights. On weekends or when friends visit, they serve Swiss wines, which they purchase directly from the producers during tastings in Valais.

### Major Foodstuffs

Each canton has its own preferred and most well-known foodstuffs, some of which are not available in other regions and might even be the specialty of only one or two producers. Other products that originated in one particular location are available—and loved—in the whole country.

True to the country’s image abroad, cheese is a major Swiss foodstuff. Swiss people consume dozens of varieties of cheeses, however, not just Emmental (what is called Swiss cheese in the United States). Gruyère is usually available as salted, semisalted, mild, aged, and from the pastures (made while the cows were pasturing in the mountains in the summer, which makes it distinctly fruity). Sbrinz is another hard cheese that is eaten raw or grated onto dishes that are then cooked. Tilsiter has a softer texture that is closer to that of Emmental. Vacherin Mont d’Or comes from the canton of Vaud, but its distinct round pine box appears in cheese cases everywhere throughout the winter. It is made from lightly cooked milk and has a pale orange rind. It is eaten raw but also baked in its box with garlic and white wine until melted. Tête de Moine, from the Jura, is a round cheese that comes with its own stand and blade that turns around the top of the cheese (the girolle) and allows the diner to “shave” it into flower-shaped portions. Tomme Vaudoise is a small, round, soft cheese originally from Vaud that is eaten raw or baked (often breaded in the latter case). Many Swiss eat a piece or two of cheese before or in lieu of dessert on a regular basis. Cheese is also baked, melted, grated, and incorporated into other dishes, allowing for endless variations and preparations.

While cuts of meats such as steaks and roasts are expensive and as such eaten sparingly, sausages
feature prominently on the Swiss table. Raw, cured, or smoked sausages, such as the St. Galler Bratwurst (a boiled veal sausage that is roasted or grilled), Landjäger (a smoked beef and bacon sausage eaten cold), and longeole genevoise (a raw pork sausage that includes lard in its composition), are often served alongside röstis or another starchy dish. Cervelas is among the country’s most beloved foods. This beef-and-pork boiled sausage is a staple of the Swiss barbecue, grilled both in backyards and at campsites. It is also prepared raw in salads, with potatoes, or on its own in the typical Würstsalat (sausage salad).

A cold-smoked pork and cabbage sausage made in the canton of Vaud is cooked and served with boiled leeks and potatoes, in a typical dish called papet vaudois. Sausages of all kinds are as available at local butchers (most towns still have one) as they are in larger supermarkets, which often have a meat counter. Butchers also have stands at farmers’ markets.

Bündnerfleisch is one of the most prized Swiss meat products. Legs of beef are cured in salt and spices for several weeks, before being air-dried for 10 to 15 weeks, during which they are also pressed so as to extract moisture. It is traditionally made from cows raised in Switzerland, but cheaper versions, for which the cows are raised abroad, have appeared on the market in recent years.

Thanks to its numerous lakes and rivers, fish figure prominently in the Swiss diet. Perch fillets are one of the characteristic dishes found all around Lake Geneva in the summer. The small fillets are breaded, fried, and served with a squeeze of lemon and French fries. Ombles-chevaliers, also from Lake Geneva, are mostly eaten poached with a white wine and cream sauce. Lake and brook trout abound. Blausee Bioforellen, located on the Blausee in the Bernese Alps, are the only organically farmed trout in Switzerland. Its highly acclaimed varieties include rainbow, river, and salmon trout. Feras are found in most parts of Switzerland, including the Tessin, where they are sautéed and served with a vegetable marinade, and St. Gallen, where they are served with an onion and tomato sauce.

Grains, such as rice, polenta, oats, wheat, and spelt, are popular both as side dishes and as vegetarian main dishes. Polenta and risotto are traditional to Tessin, the Swiss-Italian canton, but appear on all tables. Most of the oat consumption comes as part of Birchermuesli, the traditional Swiss breakfast cereal mix. Potatoes are also used in large quantities, to make dishes such as rösti, potato gratin, and spätzli (ragged noodles made from a thick batter).

Bouillon cubes (most likely to be Knorr or Maggi brand) are a staple of the Swiss pantry. While some cooks undoubtedly make their own stocks, many use this shortcut for dishes such as soups, risottos, and stews. Maggi Würze, a sauce similar in color and flavor to soy sauce, is also a frequently used seasoning. A weeknight dish that most children eat consists simply of small macaroni pasta doused in Maggi Würze.

Bakeries and pastry shops abound in Switzerland; no small town is without its fresh bread supply, even if it takes the form of a bread depot where a baker from another town drops off bread for sale (at a convenience store, for example). In larger towns that have several pastry shops, each will often distinguish itself with a specialty. As a result, it is not unusual for customers to frequent several stores depending on what they need. Typical sweets found in the pastry case include carac (a ganache tartlet covered in green fondant and adorned with a chocolate pastille more typical of the French part of Switzerland), flaky pastries called mille-feuilles, baba au rhum (cylindrical sponge cakes doused in rum), fruit tartlets, and chocolate slices. Most shops also sell petits fours, and the more sophisticated ones add chocolates to their offerings.

Many pastries and cakes retain their origin in their name even though they are available elsewhere. The following are among the most popular ones, available both in mass-produced versions in supermarkets and in independent pastry shops.

Appenzeller Biberli, a lightly spiced dough shaped as a round or a rectangle and filled with almond paste, is a specialty of Appenzell that makes its way into all treat bags given out for St. Nicholas or Christmas (alongside cookies, chocolates, mandarins, and peanuts in their shells). It is available in supermarkets year-round, but pastry shops often make it just around the holidays and press its top in a special mold that adorns it with a St. Nicholas
or other seasonal design, for example. Carrot cake (Rüebliorte) is a specialty from Aargau, while Zug is known for its kirsch-flavored cake (Kirschtorte). Kirsch is a clear spirit derived from cherries. Walnut tart, from the Grisons (Engadiner Nüsstorte), is widely popular around the country. All supermarkets sell mass-produced, snack-size ones, while pastry shops throughout the country make their own version, which consists of pâte sablée (a sweet crumbly pastry crust) and a mixture of walnuts and honey. Some versions are open-faced and others completely enclosed in dough. Pear bread (Birnbrot) from Glarus has also made its way to the rest of the country; its filling includes pears, kirsch, nuts, and spices, encased in pâte brisée. Basler Leckerli, originally from Basel, is a hard cookie made from a dough that includes honey, candied citrus peels, and spices.

Fruit syrups, either commercial or artisanal, are popular throughout Switzerland. Elderberry, raspberry, and black currant are among the preferred flavors for these concentrates of fruits and sugar. Because only a small amount of syrup is mixed with water, it is a favored alternative to sodas.

Rivella is among Switzerland’s best-known drinks. The soda, whose classic version is Rivella Red, contains milk serum, as well as herb and fruit extracts. Its lighter version, Rivella Blue, was the first low-calorie soda in Europe. Rivella Green (green tea–flavored) and Rivella Yellow (with soy serum rather than milk serum) are more recent and not as widely consumed. Sinalco, a German soda that is the oldest European soft drink, is also a popular beverage, as are Coca-Cola products.

Swiss wines are an important feature of the country’s gastronomy. Swiss people drink wine with food rather than on its own. Hot, spiced wine is a staple of street fairs and community events in the winter. The Valais, a canton in southwestern Switzerland, benefits from a warm and dry climate that makes it ideal for wine production (it is also one of the top fruit-producing regions). As such, its wines represent 40 percent of the total Swiss production. Fendant (a white wine made with Chasselas grapes) and Dole (a blend of Pinot Noir and Gamay) are its most well-known wines, but other varietals, such as Sylvaner and Petite Arvine, are gaining in popularity. Chasselas, Pinot Noir, and Gamay are also the varietals most found in Vaud and Geneva, while Merlot is most abundant in Ticino, the other three top wine-producing cantons in Switzerland. Blauburgunder is a reputed Pinot Noir from the Grisons.

Cooking

While their reliance on ready-made products has increased, the Swiss still cook regularly. The Swiss kitchen does not include many appliances and gadgets. A handheld blender, for soups and purees, and a handheld electric whisk are more common than countertop appliances that would perform the same duties. A food processor will typically be the largest appliance in the kitchen, tucked away until needed. Many typical Swiss dishes, as well as weeknight meals, require few special techniques and can be made in one pot. Chopping onions or shallots and garlic might be the most complex task a cook will accomplish while making dinner. Many households will, however, own a fondue caquelon and a raclette oven—used for melting cheese, which is scraped onto toast.

Swiss cooking uses the standard techniques of the Western kitchen, including sautéing, boiling, roasting, braising, and grilling. A number of Swiss dishes are stewlike and as such are cooked for a long time on the stovetop. The oven is much used for gratins and baked goods.
Betty Bossi is an essential cooking partner in Swiss kitchens. This fictional woman represents a culinary empire that includes monthly magazines, cookbooks, utensils, and food products. The recipes range from classic Swiss dishes and their modern interpretations to international cuisines and focus on specific dishes, such as cakes. Even if they do not subscribe to the magazine, most Swiss cooks own at least one Betty Bossi cookbook. Many “family” recipes also have their origin with Betty Bossi.

Because eating out is often expensive and apartments are usually of comfortable size, even in cities, Swiss people frequently invite each other over for dinner. A weekend meal will include appetizer, or at least hors d’oeuvres to enjoy with a beer or a glass of wine, and dessert, often homemade, but a cake from a nearby pastry shop might also make an appearance.

**Zürich Veal Stew**

*Serves 4*

All-purpose flour

\( \frac{2}{3} \) lb veal cutlets, sliced by hand

\( \frac{1}{2} \) lb veal kidneys, sliced by hand

Salt and freshly ground black pepper

Unsalted butter

4 shallots, finely chopped

\( \frac{2}{3} \) c sliced white mushrooms

1 c dry white wine

1 c heavy cream

Beurre manié (recipe follows)

1. Lightly flour the cutlet and kidney pieces, and season with salt and pepper.

2. Heat butter in a pan over medium-high heat. Add the cutlet pieces, and cook until golden brown, 6 to 8 minutes. Remove to a plate and set aside. Repeat the process with the kidney pieces.

3. Add more butter to the pan, and add the shallots. Cook until translucent, 3 to 4 minutes. Add the mushrooms to the pan, then deglaze with the wine. Return the meats to the pan, then add the cream and stir in the beurre manié until completely incorporated.

4. Season with salt and pepper, and cook until the stew comes together as a creamy mixture. Serve over rösti, spätzli, or rice.

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**Beurre Manié**

\( \frac{1}{2} \) c flour

\( \frac{1}{2} \) c butter

Prepare the beurre manié by working the flour into the butter with your hands.

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Baking is as essential to the Swiss cook as knowing how to prepare meat and vegetable dishes, particularly during the holidays. The Swiss exchange homemade cookies for St. Nicholas and/or Christmas, so ovens see a flurry of activity in December. Many typical cookies include almond or hazelnut flour, which are available in all supermarkets. During the year, much of the baked goods include fruits and are eaten with coffee or tea in the afternoon and as dessert. Children often assist with the baking process, helping to perpetuate family traditions. Most people buy bread at their local bakeries but still make Butterzopf (tresse), a bread that looks like and has a texture similar to challah, on weekends.

Gardens are a popular feature of the Swiss landscape. Residents of the country or the suburbs often grow small plots of vegetables and might have a fruit tree (apple, pear, or cherry) in their backyard. Most towns and cities rent plots to apartment dwellers, who garden after work and on weekends. Neighbors often benefit from their generosity in July and August, when even a small plot results in bountiful crops of zucchini, tomatoes, greens, and fruits such as blackberries, currants, and mirabelles (a small, yellow plum). Blackberries and wild strawberries grow alongside less trafficked roads and in the mountains, becoming part of the menu.
for people out on a stroll. Foraging also applies to mushrooms, which appear in many Swiss dishes, such as meat stews or on their own in a cream sauce and served over bread, for example. Much of these homegrown and foraged vegetables and fruits are cooked right away, but they are also canned (whole or processed into sauces or jams, for example) to be eaten throughout the year. While younger generations do not can as much as their parents and grandparents, food-preservation methods nonetheless are important.

Typical Meals

While not always perfectly so, typical Swiss meals tend to be fairly balanced. A green salad is often served after the main dish, which can be as simple as a vegetable gratin. The Swiss still cook many of their evening meals at home, and as such they like simple, healthful dishes that can feed the whole family with a minimum of fuss.

Coffee, tea, and milk are equally popular for breakfast. Many Swiss households own coffee machines (Nescafé being the most popular brand), which they use in the morning and throughout the day. Nearly all workers take a coffee break at some point in the morning and in the afternoon, often going to a café or cafeteria to sit down with a coffee or espresso. Most major cities now have at least one Starbucks, but coffee on the go is nowhere near as available or popular as it is in the United States. Typical mealtime beverages include still or sparkling water, often mixed with fruit syrups, and wine. Beer is drunk more frequently separate from meals, outside of the home on a weekend afternoon or before dinner when coming back from work. A digestif, most often in the form of a fruit- or herb-based schnapps, such as kirsch, Williamine, or
Appenzeller, often appears at the end of a weekend or special-occasion meal.

*Café complet* (the French term is used in all languages) is a long-standing staple weekly meal in Switzerland, now often enjoyed on a Sunday night. While its name comes from coffee and that beverage or chicory was likely served, with much milk, in earlier decades, that is no longer always the case. The meal centers on bread and various types of cheeses and spreads, with no cooked items.

When making desserts, fruit- and custard-based preparations prevail among Swiss cooks. *Süssmost-creme* is a classic dessert, originally from Thurgau and mostly found in the German part of the country, that is made with apple juice, eggs (whole or yolks only depending on the versions), cream, and sugar. Crème brûlée and mousses are equally popular at home and in restaurants. Fruit tarts and cakes appear on the Swiss table at least weekly. High-quality prepared doughs are available in the refrigerator (rather than the freezer) cases of supermarkets and can be used immediately, which allows cooks to have dessert ready in minutes once they cut up fruits and spread them over the dough.

Swiss people get up early and often get to work by 8 a.m. Many sit down for a breakfast consisting of bread and jam or cereals, but others will eat a croissant on the go or wait until the morning break to have a yogurt and a fruit. When not working close enough to go home for lunch (the lunch break lasts at least one hour), Swiss workers will eat the prix fixe menu offered by a nearby, inexpensive restaurant or their company’s cafeteria. Plenty of shops offer sandwiches, savory tartlets, and hot dishes to go. Because of increased commuting time, many Swiss people don’t get home until 6:30 or 7 p.m., but they still take the time to cook. As a result, dinner most often consists of a hot meal, even if it is a simple one that makes use of shortcuts. A weeknight dinner often includes a salad, which is served after the main dish, and fruit for dessert.

**Eating Out**

Switzerland boasts nearly 19,000 stand-alone restaurants and about 4,200 restaurants located in hotels. Half of all meat products eaten in Switzerland are consumed in restaurants. The high volume of tourists, particularly in larger cities and in mountain towns, is partially responsible for such a large number of eateries. While take-out places and cheaper ethnic eateries (often of the fast-food type) have gained in popularity over the last 20 years, a dinner out is still something that is enjoyed at most once a week, because restaurants tend to be expensive. Many Swiss also work away from home and might eat at their company’s cafeteria or in a café at lunchtime. Smaller villages will have at least one tavern, where locals will stop for coffee in the morning and afternoon and beer or wine in the evening—but often after eating at home. Many of the larger taverns, some of which also offer rooms to rent, often have a rustic bar on the first floor and a more formal restaurant upstairs.

It is possible to eat in restaurants that are several hundred years old. The Hotel les Armures in Geneva, whose restaurant offers Swiss specialties, dates back to the 17th century. Landgasthof Löwen, in Heimiswil, is a tavern and inn that dates back to 1340. Their emphasis on typical dishes does not close this type of restaurants to the younger generations, who eat this type of food just as they will sushi and other more contemporary fare in trendier settings.

Pizzerias are extremely popular, thanks to their flavorful yet affordable offerings. Most are still owned by Italian immigrants, who represented the largest immigrant group for more than 100 years, until immigrants from the former Yugoslavia began arriving in larger numbers in the 1990s. Pizzas are available for takeout or delivery in most cities (albeit with limited options), but most people still go out to eat them.

While they do not allow for full meals, pastry shops are an integral part of Swiss eating-out habits. No weekend stroll would be complete without a stop for coffee or tea and a pastry at one of the town's shops.

**Special Occasions**

The uninitiated might not find special-occasion meals to be much different from regular ones. The
ingredients are simple; some more expensive cuts of meats might be used when cooking for a special occasion at home, for example, but seasonal vegetables and a start will accompany it.

Raclette and fondue are not reserved for special occasions, but they are not exactly typical meals that would be consumed weekly either. They are the occasion of a gathering, even if it is a casual one on a Saturday night. Many Swiss households own a raclette oven (an electric contraption that has room for eight small, square, nonstick cheese holders) and an earthenware fondue pot (a caquelon), but people still often enjoy those foods out, at one of the many rustic restaurants and inns that serve them throughout the country. The type of cheese used for raclette bears that name. It is available in supermarkets in vacuumed-sealed packages or freshly sliced from the local cheesemonger. The type and blend of cheeses used for fondue varies from region to region. A classic combination is the half-and-half (moitié-moitié), which features an equal quantity of Vacherin and Gruyère and is typically associated with the canton of Vaud, even if available in other regions.

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**Cheese Fondue**

Serves 4

If you are a real garlic lover, you can also add a clove—thinly sliced or finely minced—to the fondue itself, for a more pronounced taste.

1 clove garlic  
\( \frac{1}{4} \) tsp cornstarch  
\( \frac{3}{4} \) lb Gruyère, cut in small cubes or grated  
\( \frac{3}{4} \) lb Vacherin, cut in small pieces (or substitute a soft, ripe cow-milk cheese)  
\( \frac{1}{2} \) c dry white wine, preferably Fendant  
1 tbsp kirsch or more to taste  
Freshly ground white pepper  
Plenty of thick-crusted peasant bread, torn or cut in pieces

1. Rub an earthenware fondue pot with the garlic clove.  
2. Dissolve the cornstarch in a couple of tablespoons of the wine. Place the Gruyère and Vacherin in the pot, and add the wine, the dissolved cornstarch, and the kirsch.  
3. Place the pot on the stovetop over medium-low heat, and stir with a wooden spoon until the cheese melts and everything forms a homogeneous mixture.  
4. Light a container of Sterno canned heat or chafing gel, and place in the appropriate receptacle in the fondue burner stand. Place the fondue pot on the stand. Make sure that the cheese doesn’t come to a boil. You can control the heat dispersed by turning the cover of the burner to open or close its ventilation holes.  
5. Dip the pieces of bread into the fondue by placing them on long-handled forks. Once you finish the
fondue, be sure to allow the last thin layer of cheese to crust up and form a religieuse. You can remove it by poking it with your fork—if you are lucky it will come out in one piece, but otherwise just enjoy the pieces you manage to get.

For special occasions, the Swiss tend to purchase desserts at the local pastry shop rather than make their own. While cakes are not heavily frosted, the ones found in most bakeries for special occasions have buttercream frosting in flavors such as chocolate, coffee, and vanilla. They can also be covered in marzipan. Guests might bring petits fours, to enjoy with coffee and a digestif after the meal.

Several dishes are served for Carnival (usually in February), such as the Basler Mehlsuppe, a soup made of roasted flour typical of Basel, and beignets and fried doughs of all kinds. The Bern onion fair features plentiful onion dishes. A chocolate cauldron filled with marzipan vegetables celebrates Geneva’s liberation from the Savoyards every December 10, in an occasion called l’Escalade.

Diet and Health

Like many European countries, Switzerland has seen its obesity rate rise over the last 20 years. According to the Federal Office of Public Health, 37.3 percent of Swiss adults have a body mass index greater than 25, which makes them overweight. One out of five children is overweight—a number that has quintupled in 20 years. A decline in physical activity, as both work and leisure become more sedentary, and a diet of high-calorie foods rich in fats and sugars are to blame.

Generally, however, the Swiss lifestyle offers a better work-life balance than other Western countries. While freelancing is not very common, employees can often reduce their work schedule once they start having children or to pursue side activities. Having more time at home means that people cook full meals and bake often. Even the larger cities are close to mountains and lakes, so outdoor activities are part of the everyday life of most Swiss citizens, from a simple walk or a multiday hike at high altitude to boating and skiing.

Grains and dairy products appear frequently on Swiss tables, as do vegetables. Because of its cost, meat is typically not consumed daily. Many still take the time to sit down for breakfast, which includes muesli or bread slices with jams rather than sweet pastries. This makes the Swiss diet a generally balanced one.

Anne Engammare McBride

Further Reading


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Ukraine

Overview

Ukraine is a large eastern European country. Its territory covers 233,090 square miles. It is bordered by Russia, Belarus, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, and Moldova, as well as the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov. The Dnieper, the Dniester, and the Buh are the three major rivers in Ukraine. Ukraine is a unitary republic divided into 24 provinces (oblasts) centered around large cities. Its population of just over 46 million people consists of ethnic Ukrainians (77%), Russians (17.3%), Moldovans, and Romanians (0.8%). There are also significant minorities of Belarusians, Bulgarians, Tartars, Jews, Armenians, and Greeks. This diversity is also reflected in Ukrainian cuisine, its ingredients, and its culinary techniques. Ukraine, throughout its history, has been subject to numerous invasions and domination by foreign powers. These influences also led a diverse and multirooted culinary tradition.

Religion also plays an important role in Ukrainian culinary traditions. Of those Ukrainians who are religious, 76 percent are Ukrainian or Russian Orthodox Christians. Eastern-rite Catholics make up 8 percent of the religious population, while Roman Catholics and Protestants make up 2 percent each. Less than 1 percent of the population is Jewish or Muslim. Under Soviet rule, religion was strongly discouraged, and today over half of Ukrainians claim to be atheist or to belong to no faith. Despite this, religious holidays and holiday dishes remain popular.

Food Culture Snapshot

Oleh and Viktoriya Shevchuk are a young couple living in Kiev, the capital of Ukraine. Oleh owns a small construction company building summer homes outside of Kiev. Viktoriya is an economist working for a private bank. They have no children. Their eating habits have been shaped by both traditional and Soviet foods that their parents served at home, as well as modern influences. Being middle class has allowed the Shevchusks to travel to western Europe and to Mediterranean resorts. They like the gourmet foods they sampled while traveling. Since they both have busy work lives, the Shevchusks also like the new convenience foods that are available in Ukrainian supermarkets.

The Shevchusks live in a typical “bedroom” district of Kiev, on the left shore of the Dnieper River. Like most other people living in the countries of the former Soviet Union, their sources of food are the supermarket, small local shops, and farmers’ markets. The Shevchusks shop together at the markets and supermarkets. As they return home after work, they make small, everyday purchases of bread, cookies, and soft drinks at the small local shops. The Shevchusks own a car and once a week drive to the nearest large supermarket, which is a part of the MegaMarket chain. There, they stock up on porridge grains, convenience foods like instant noodles, and cold cuts, milk, and eggs. Since they are young and have had greater exposure to the western European diet, the Shevchusks purchase many items that are not traditionally Ukrainian such as dry breakfast cereal and yogurts. At the Levoberezhny
market, which is not far from where they live, the Shevchuks shop for vegetables and fresh meat. Just like their parents, they try to maintain good relationships with specific stall owners, who then supply them with the better and fresher vegetables and cuts of meat.

Major Foodstuffs

Ukraine was traditionally seen as the breadbasket of eastern Europe, and it continued to play this role under Soviet rule. Unlike the relatively cold and poor-soiled terrain of its northern neighbors, Russia and Belarus, Ukraine’s land was able to support a wheat-based cuisine. Millet and rice play a popular but secondary role. Rye and oats are much less important as grains in Ukrainian culinary traditions, but sourdough rye breads are also common. Various breads, cakes, and filled and plain dumplings are all usually made of wheat flour, sometimes in combination with milled buckwheat.

Vegetables and legumes are also very important to Ukrainian cookery. Beets are the most iconic and popular of the vegetables used in Ukrainian cooking, providing a key ingredient in its most well-known dish, a rich soup known as borsch. Beans and lentils are used in soups but are also mashed and served mixed with fats or in combination with other vegetables. Carrots, tomatoes, pumpkins, potatoes, and corn are also very important in Ukrainian cuisine. In western Ukraine, where the influence of Balkan cuisine is quite strong, corn is a major source of starch in the form of a local version of polenta known as mamalyga, which is often eaten with a salty sheep-milk cheese. Potatoes are not as common as is in the cuisine of Russia, or especially Belarus, but they still are very popular and commonly presented as a side dish, often in combination with other vegetables or even fruit. Potatoes are also used to obtain starch for use in jellied desserts. Onions, turnips, and cabbage are also important, with cabbage used either raw, fermented, in soups, or stuffed and stewed. Eggplants were seen as “foreign” in the distant past but have now become quite common in Ukrainian cuisine.

Meat is also a popular ingredient. Pork is the most common meat for Ukrainians. As in other traditional cuisines, every part of the pig is used. Lard, or sala, is particularly common in Ukrainian food. It is cooked or preserved, often through salting or smoking. Lard is used as an ingredient or as a fat for frying. Many Ukrainian dishes, including doughnut-like desserts, are fried in rendered lard. Lard is used with other meat ingredients to make them moist. Eating pork became an important source of national and religious identity because, in the early-modern era, Ukrainians constantly fought the Muslim Turks and Tartars. Beef became popular only in the late 19th and 20th centuries, since bufalo (traditional bovines in Ukraine, not to be confused with the American bison) were beasts of burden rather than sources of meat. In the west and the south of Ukraine, lamb is a common source of meat as well. Ukrainians do not eat horse meat, but Ukrainian Tartars still use it as an ingredient in their traditional dishes, usually served only on holidays. Chickens, turkeys, and ducks are also eaten in Ukraine. Fish, especially carp, is a popular ingredient for soups and is also prepared in aspic. Herring, salted or marinated, is a popular appetizer, often associated with Jewish Ukrainian cooking. In the south, on the Black Sea and Sea of Azov coasts, saltwater fish is caught in great variety.

Eggs are also commonly used in the rich dishes of Ukraine. They are either fried plain or prepared as rich, multi-ingredient omelets. Eggs are also an
important ingredient in dough for dumplings and holiday breads and pies. Milk is used as a base for soups or a liquid for boiling dumplings. It can be soured and drunk or made into other drinks and cheeses. Cottage cheese, tvaroh, is popular throughout the Ukraine, while bryndzia, or feta cheese, is popular in the west and in the coastal south of the country.

Fruits such as apples, pears, plums, and cherries are eaten fresh or cooked in drinks and desserts. Berries, such as strawberries, raspberries, blackberries, and currants, are also popular ingredients. Watermelons and an endless variety of other melons are eaten as desserts, preserved, or used in main dishes. Fruit can also be used in savory dishes such as soups and condiments. Sunflower seeds are popular in many dishes but are also eaten roasted as a snack. They are also used as a major source of sunflower oil, which is very common in Ukrainian cooking.

Ukrainian food is not particularly spicy but is quite flavorful. Onions, garlic, dill, caraway seeds, anise, mint, and red and black pepper, as well as bay leaf and cinnamon, are used as common spices and flavoring agents. Vinegar is also a common condiment.

Cooking

Ukrainian dishes tend to be fairly complex, including multiple ingredients that surround, modify, or amplify one central ingredient. This is particularly well illustrated by borsch, the world-renowned soup that became symbolic of Ukrainian food in general. Borsch can contain up to two dozen ingredients in addition to beets, the definitive ingredient of this soup. Borsch is generally based on pork or beef stock, to which other ingredients are added. In some cases, when borsch is prepared in the style of Odessa (a southern port city) or Poltava (a city in central Ukraine), a goose or chicken stock is used. Ukrainian cuisine, unlike Russian food, favors sautéing (smazhennie) ingredients before they are introduced into other dishes. Beets are either sautéed or baked before being placed in the stock. Vegetables—carrots, parsnips, tomatoes, and sometimes turnips—are also sautéed and then added to the soup. All ingredients are added in a particular and usually precise order, depending on the recipe. Kiev borsch recipes included beet kvass (a fermented malted beverage). Poltava-style borsch is made with goose and wheat-flour dumplings. Chernigov-style borsch features apples, tomatoes, beans, and squash, while Lvov-style borsch, influenced by the cuisine of the Austrian Empire of which it was once a part, has sautéed frankfurter sausage added to it just before serving.

While borsch is perhaps the best-known Ukrainian dish, the cuisine also includes kulesh, a somewhat less famous but nonetheless traditional soup. At its most basic, kulesh is a millet, potato, and lard soup-porridge, originally meant to be prepared in the open field. It is very filling and easy to prepare. Since it was developed by the mobile Cossack warriors, kulesh can be prepared from various ingredients on hand. When moving over long distances by water, Cossacks could replace the potatoes and millet with underwater tubers of river plants, and lard could be replaced with almost any other protein.

Kulesh (Millet, Potato, and Lard Soup)

Boil 6 to 8 cups of water with 2 teaspoons of salt. Once the water boils, add half a cup of millet and cook until done. Cube 6 potatoes, add them to the porridge, and cook for an additional half hour. Meanwhile, fry 2 or 3 finely chopped onions in about 5 ounces of speck (or other dry-cured smoked ham). Once the potatoes are ready, add the onions, speck, and a tablespoon of chopped parsley to the soup, and cook for an additional 5 minutes before serving.

Ukraine has a great variety of flour-based dishes. Slavic practices, and possibly even some Turkish influences, have mixed to create Ukrainian dumplings: vareniki, similar to Polish pierogi. Ukrainians fill vareniki with cherries, sweet or savory cottage cheese, sautéed onions or shkvarki (fried poultry or pork skin cracklings), and fat. Almost any filling can be used, including potatoes, liver, cabbage, beans, or sweet fruit and poppy seeds. Pampushki are very small buns made of raised yeast dough that can be made from buckwheat or wheat flour and then either
Halushky (Dumplings)

Make a thick dough from 3 cups flour, 2 eggs, ½ cup water, and 1 teaspoon salt. After kneading the dough let it rest for 15 to 20 minutes under a towel, and roll it out to a thickness of a little less than half an inch. Cut into small squares. The cut halushky should rest for another 20 minutes to dry. Then drop into boiling salted water. They should be ready when they float to the surface. They should be eaten hot with butter, fried speck or bacon, or melted lard and cubed ham.

Milk and eggs are important components in Ukrainian cooking. Milk is usually simply drunk or soured into yogurt-like drinks and cottage cheese. A typically Ukrainian milk dish is ryazhenka. This is a thick, sour milk that was baked first. This caramelizes the milk sugars, giving ryazhenka a color like café au lait and a lightly sweet-sour flavor. Eggs are traditionally made into yaishni, rich omelets with cream or sour cream and flour, with many other ingredients. Hard-boiled eggs can also be baked in sour cream or chopped, mixed with raw eggs, and fried into patties.

Meat in the past had been eaten mostly on holidays, but in the years after World War II it became much more common. Meat, particularly pork, is usually prepared in two stages: first sautéed, then stewed with vegetables and flavorings. Lard may be used as a frying fat. Water, broth, or kvass can be used as a stewing liquid. Shpundra is an exemplary dish of this kind: Small cubes of pork are fried in lard and then stewed in kvass with beets. Meat rolls or cabbage rolls stuffed with meat are common preparation techniques as well, producing dishes called zavivantsy. German and Polish culinary practices have introduced pattylike dishes of finely chopped ingredients including meat (especially pork) or vegetables, mushrooms, and eggs. Since traditional cuisines call for every part of the animal to be used, Ukrainians prepare kendiuakh, the stuffed stomach of a pig, filled with spiced and finely chopped head meat. Poultry, whether chickens, ducks, geese, or even turkeys, is commonly made into broths and soups and often stewed with sour cream sauce or together with rice, or halushky. Sausage is a common way to preserve meat. Kovyba, homemade sausage, is made soon after the slaughter of pigs. Cleaned intestines are filled with chopped meat, lard, salt, garlic, and pepper. These sausages are either fried or smoked in ovens. Sausages are preserved by packing them into clay jars and sealing them with lard. Kyshka, blood sausage, is also made, as is headcheese (zeltz).

The fish served in Ukraine varies by region due to the country’s geography. In the north and center of Ukraine, river fish, particularly carp and pike, are popular. In the south, along the Black Sea coast, saltwater fish are more common. Everywhere, salted or marinated herring is popular as an appetizer. Southern Ukrainian cuisine is well known for fresh sea fish that is fried and served very simply with a side of potatoes. Northern and central Ukrainians use a mixture of river fishes to make soups, fried fish, or fish served in aspic.

One of the most popular dishes in Ukrainian cuisine (salo), smoked salted pork fat with garlic and bread. (iStockPhoto)
Vegetables are common in the fertile Ukraine. They can be prepared as side dishes with meat or made into soups. Many vegetables are often mashed and dressed with onions, poppy seeds, oil, and vinegar, and served as a main course or an appetizer. Beans, beets, and squash can be prepared as “caviars” of this type. Mashed potatoes mixed with mashed beans and poppy seeds are called *tolchonka*. Vegetables can also be prepared with grains such as wheat berries, millet, or rice to make rich porridges. Almost every vegetable can be preserved this way, and Ukrainians are fond of salted tomatoes and cucumbers, and even salted watermelons. Mushrooms are picked in the woods and are dried, pickled, or eaten fresh. Mushrooms are made into soups and can be fried and served with potatoes.

Fruit and berries—apples, plums, strawberries, raspberries, gooseberries, and many others—are often eaten plain. They are added to savory dishes, especially borsch, or served with meats. Fruit and berries are made into the traditional sweet dishes *uzvar*, fruit *kholodets*, and fruit *babki*. Uzvar is made of meticulously cleaned fruit (fresh or dried) and raisins boiled in water and sweetened with sugar or, more traditionally, honey. Spices, such as cinnamon, cloves, and lemon zest, are used to flavor uzvar. The whole mixture is cooked until the fruit is soft and then chilled to thicken the dish. Kholodets is made of fruit, sugar, and spice syrup mixed with pureed fruit and then chilled. Fruit babki are essentially fruit puddings made of mashed fruit mixed with eggs and flour, baked, and eaten while still warm. Fruit is also often made into a jam or *povidlo*, a thick fruit butter most traditionally made out of plums. Sugar is usually added toward the end of cooking the fruit, letting the povidlo remain light-colored.

Ukrainian desserts can also be made out of dough and then either baked or fried and served with a sauce or a topping. Baked pastries are usually made with choux pastry (a light, airy dough made with butter, water, flour, and eggs) rather than yeast-risen dough. These include *bubliki*, small bagels of choux pastry that are baked and topped with powdered sugar. *Puhkeniki* are doughnuts that are either fried and smothered in jam or filled with jam and then fried and topped with powdered sugar. *Shuliki*, simple cookies made of sweet dough with poppy seeds and honey, are broken into pieces and allowed to absorb a sauce of poppy seed, milk, and honey. *Korzhiki* are a slightly thicker version of shuliki, or they can be made with hazelnuts and just served plain. Simple fried cookies, *verguny*, are extremely popular in Ukraine and, like borsch, have many regional variations. They are made of thick, sweet dough made with the addition of rum, brandy, or vodka. The dough is rolled out thinly, cut into small strips, and fried in melted lard. When ready, the cookies are dusted with powdered sugar and can be eaten hot or cold. *Solozheniki* are another common dessert, consisting of light, rich pancakes wrapped around a filling and then baked under a meringue. The pancake dough is runny and made with more milk and eggs than flour, while the fillings tend to be made of one of the traditional Ukrainian ingredients of fruit, fruit jam, or poppy seeds.

Traditional Ukrainian beverages can be divided into alcoholic and nonalcoholic varieties. Vodka, known as *horilka*, has been popular since the 17th century. It is often flavored, most commonly with honey and hot pepper. The Crimean Peninsula is well known for its wines such as the Masandra variety. *Medovukha*, or mead made from fermented honey and water, is an ancient beverage common across Europe and still popular in Ukraine. Beer (*pyvo*) is also very popular among Ukrainians. Nonalcoholic beverages include the traditional fermented kvass, which can be made out of a single or multiple ingredients including bread, beets, and fruit. Yeast is added to the warm mixture, which is then allowed to ferment. Tap water often is seen as unsafe, so most Ukrainians either boil the water they drink or consume the many mineral waters on sale across the country. Tea and coffee are popular beverages, as are more recently introduced sodas, including many of those consumed in western Europe and the United States.

**Typical Meals**

Breakfast (*snidanok*) in Ukraine traditionally tends to be fairly filling, but this has been changing. Dishes
mixing grains and fats are common. These could include buckwheat-flour- and lard-based lenishky (a gruel) or buckwheat cooked as porridge with the addition of butter. Farina and oatmeal are also common breakfast porridges. Various egg dishes, whether elaborate yaishni omelets or just eggs boiled or fried sunny-side up, are commonly eaten. French toast is a popular dish, usually served with savory toppings such as meat or cheese, rather than sugar or jam. Meat dishes such as frankfurters or meat patties are often served for breakfast. Sandwiches with sausage, cheese, pâtés, or other toppings are well liked. Ryazhenka and cottage cheese, or cheese fritters, are popular breakfast dishes made with milk. Milk itself, as well as buttermilk, and tea or coffee are commonly served as breakfast beverages. In recent years, yogurts and dry cereals have become more popular, particularly among younger Ukrainians.

Lunch (obid), the midday meal, was traditionally the main meal of the day, but with new work schedules this distinction has often been transferred to supper (vecheria). The main meals of the day are likely to include a soup, a main dish, and a dessert, and sometimes also an appetizer. As with every meal in Ukraine, bread is an important accompaniment. While vegetables play an important part in Ukrainian cuisine, salads of raw vegetables are less common. They are served as an appetizer, often made of cabbage or tomatoes and cucumbers dressed with salt, pepper, oil, and vinegar. Other appetizers could be salted or marinated fish such as herring or anchovies; marinated mushrooms or vegetables; or rich salads with meat and potatoes dressed with mayonnaise. The appetizer course can be accompanied or even replaced by a shot of vodka (horilka). Winter meals usually include a borsch or cabbage soup, such as kapusniak, or other soups made with grains or mushrooms. Chicken broth with rice or noodles is also popular, as are soups made with milk and pasta. If in the past a rich soup or stew and bread would be the only food served at an everyday lunch, today there is often a meat-based main dish, served with starch side dishes. Most common today are meat-based stews (especially made with pork) and fried patties (bitkil). These are served with a porridge (especially buckwheat), macaroni, or rice. The stews can also be accompanied by halushky or pampushki. Desserts, depending on the meal, can range from a simple kompot (fruit compote), uzwar, or kis-sel’ (sweetened juice thickened with starch, with fruit added) to fancier pastries, creams, or cakes. Drinks that are served with dinner could be the traditional kvass, mineral water, or soda, with coffee or tea accompanying dessert. The lighter evening meal is often similar to breakfast. Porridge, eggs, and fritters (meat or vegetable), as well as tea served with cakes, cookies, or preserves, round out the meal.

Modern Ukrainians now have lives scheduled around work patterns similar to those in western Europe or the United States, and their meal patterns have also changed. Many snack foods are now sold, including chips, popcorn, and puffed corn (like corn pops, salty and sweet), as well as the more traditional roasted sunflower or pumpkin seeds. Convenience foods, such as instant soups or noodles, have become the normal midday meal for many students and office workers.

Eating Out

Eating out has increased over the course of the 20th century. Traditionally, Ukraine had some country inns where simple meals were served along with alcohol. In the 19th century, Ukrainian cities acquired more restaurants in the European sense as well as Russian-style traktiry, or roadside inns with simple restaurants. In the Soviet era, eating outside the home was encouraged, and communal canteenas sprang up both in the cities and attached to plants and collective farms. The most recent development has been the appearance of fast-food restaurants such as McDonald’s. The communal canteens and restaurants mixed traditional Ukrainian dishes with those from the rest of the Soviet Union. Ukrainians, when eating out, often expect this mixture of cuisines on the menu, which is likely to include Russian caviar appetizers, grilled meats from the Caucasus, and pilafs from Central Asia. French-influenced dishes such as mushrooms baked in cream sauce (julliene) have become iconic for fancy restaurant meals. Even plain canteen-served foods are drawn from many ethnic
traditions. An example of an ethnic food served in a canteen would be the Tartar-influenced azu, or roasted beef served with a tomato-based sauce and pickles.

Modern Ukraine has fewer Soviet-style canteens and many more cafés serving light foods along with teas and coffees. Fast-food restaurants are very popular. McDonald’s and other international chains share space with Ukrainian-owned fast-food establishments that often serve traditional foods such as vareniki (stuffed dumplings) or bliny (little pancakes). Simple snack bars selling hot dogs and drinks are often located around major public transportation stops. Beer pubs serving Ukrainian and international beers have become very popular. Kebab stands have become common in large cities, as they are in the rest of Europe.

Special Occasions

Bread, like in other Slavic cultures, is considered sacred and is used to commemorate important life events, with some special breads tied to specific occasions. In the distant past, bread baking was a ritual occasion and seen as a sacred act. Even today, when welcoming guests, Ukrainians serve bread and salt as a sign of hospitality. In addition to special breads, other ritual dishes are made to commemorate many holidays. Paskha, the rich Easter bread, is made out of yeast-raised wheat dough, with eggs, milk, and spices, especially ginger and saffron. Western Ukrainians tend to decorate the paskha with dough ornaments such as a cross and keep it low and round, while the Russian-influenced eastern Ukrainians make paskha into a tall but plain glazed bread. This bread is not eaten until it has been blessed in church with other Easter foods during the Easter service. The Easter meal is also the time to serve babka, a rich bread made with eggs, raisins, sugar, and spices, which usually includes lemon zest, saffron, and vanilla. Elaborately painted eggs (pysanki) are an important part of Ukrainian Easter. Other rich egg and meat dishes are served during Easter, a major ritual feast. Shuliki cookies are the traditional food for church holidays (such as the Feast of Transfiguration) that are celebrated in August.

The Christmas season is a major occasion for ritual foods. On Christmas Eve, meat and milk are not allowed, so the supper that evening is a collection of vegetable and fish-based dishes. Beans or peas are mashed and dressed with onions, garlic, and oil. A meatless borsch flavored with kvass is served, as well as a sauerkraut soup (kapusniak). Porridges, stewed fruit, and dumplings with poppy seeds are also served. The meals on Christmas Day itself are very rich and include roast meats, rich borsch, fried homemade sausages (kovbasa), and studnets, meat set in jellied aspic and served cold. Symbolically connecting the meal to the birth of Jesus in a manger, hay is spread under and on the table. As the Christmas season is symbolically connected with the life cycle, certain foods served on Christmas are also served during funerals. Most commonly, these foods include kalach, a round, braided bread symbolizing
the cyclical nature of life, and *kolyvo or kutia*, a dish of boiled grains with poppy seeds and honey. The grains and seeds allude to death, rebirth, and the harvest. Finally, fish dishes, especially carp, are a traditional part of Christmas suppers. As caroling, or *koliaduvannia*, is a common Christmas tradition in Ukraine, the carolers are rewarded with gifts of food: pastries, pancakes (*oladky*), or even whole sausages.

Weddings, with their connections to fertility, are an occasion for special breads and other foods. The *korovai*, primarily a wedding bread, is made of a rich egg dough with sugar and spices for flavoring and color. It is circular in form and has decorations made out of dough on top of it. The bride and groom go around it and are then given pieces of it to eat. In some regions of Ukraine, other traditional breads are used. In the west, *dyven* is a rich bread shaped into a circle or a wheel that is carried by the bride. She looks through it to see a bright future. In other regions, small buns called *shyshky*, or pine cones, are baked, as is *lezhen’,* a long bread made with eggs and a coin baked in.

Soviet holidays such as the New Year and Victory Day, celebrating victory during World War II, are important for many Ukrainians. Festive foods introduced during Soviet rule include the *oliv’ie or stolichnyi* salad, a mixture of potatoes, peas, carrots, and meat dressed with mayonnaise. At family picnics, at summer houses, or on beaches, many Ukrainians like to grill marinated pork or lamb shish kebabs (*shashlyk*).

**Diet and Health**

Many younger Ukrainians see the traditional Ukrainian diet of starchy foods along with fatty pork as unhealthy. Today, the population of Ukraine, like that of the rest of Europe, is heavily urbanized. The traditional diet, created to restore the strength of people engaged in heavy farm labor, is no longer relevant to modern work and life. Indeed, in the 20th century, a diet rich in fat and carbohydrates, along with industrial pollution, heavy smoking, and drinking, has contributed to a rise in cardiovascular disease among Ukrainians. Ukrainians also argue that the traditional diet was varied and natural and should be retained instead of consuming industrially processed and imported foods. Pollution from the 1986 nuclear disaster at Chernobyl is also a major concern.

Ukrainians retain many traditional folk remedies for various disorders, as modern medicine is poorly funded and often seen as corrupt. Herbal teas are used to soothe a system out of order. Chamomile tea is used in case of a stomachache. Black tea with honey and lemon is used to soothe sore throats. Alcohol, honey, garlic, and even hot milk are seen as medicinal for many respiratory disorders. Strong-smelling herbs and garlic have been seen as not only medicinal but also useful for scaring away evil spirits. These beliefs have been retained in the Ukrainian countryside and were resurrected after the fall of the Soviet Union.

**Further Reading**


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Ken Albala, Editor, is professor of history at the University of the Pacific in Stockton, California. He also teaches in the gastronomy program at Boston University. Albala is the author of many books, including *Eating Right in the Renaissance* (University of California Press, 2002), *Food in Early Modern Europe* (Greenwood Press, 2003), *Cooking in Europe 1250–1650* (Greenwood Press, 2005), *The Banquet: Dining in the Great Courts of Late Renaissance Europe* (University of Illinois Press, 2007), *Beans: A History* (Berg Publishers, 2007; winner of the 2008 International Association of Culinary Professionals Jane Grigson Award), and *Pancake* (Reaktion Press, 2008). He has co-edited two works, *The Business of Food* and *Human Cuisine*. He is also editor of three food series with 29 volumes in print, including the Food Cultures Around the World series for Greenwood Press. Albala is also co-editor of the journal *Food Culture and Society*. He is currently researching a history of theological controversies surrounding fasting in the Reformation Era and is editing two collected volumes of essays, one on the Renaissance and the other entitled *The Lord’s Supper*. He has also coauthored a cookbook for Penguin/Perigee entitled *The Lost Art of Real Cooking*, which was released in July 2010.

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