

Holiday and Everyday Dishes of the Virovitica Region

The traditional link between certain types of food and holidays is deeply in folk customs. It is difficult to imagine Christmas without roast meat or Easter without ham, eggs and horseradish. This link was even stronger before, that is, there was a symbolic level on which a deeper meaning was associated with food. On weekdays, people took humbler meals, sometimes only to take the edge off hunger. This means that there was an obvious distinction between everyday and holiday dishes. Dietary habits change as lifestyle changes. Although better material life conditions have changed traditional menus, old dishes evocative of times past are still prepared on holidays, gathering the family around the table.

Key words: holiday dishes, everyday dishes, Virovitica

Introduction

Virovitica is the centre of the Virovitičko-podravska county, situated between the river Drava to the north and the hillsides of Bilogora, Papuk and Krndija to the south. Our research focused on the villages around Virovitica: Vukosavljevica, Špišić Bukovica, Bušetina, Turanovac, Gornje Bazje, Rušani, Detkovac and Brezovica. The research of food was carried out in the villages of Rušani, Špišić Bukovica and Vukosavljevica in 2004. We also used data from the catalogue to the exhibition “Annual Customs of the Virovitica Region”, collected over years by Danica Draganić.

Holiday Dishes

Food plays a special role in annual customs. Every custom is associated with a certain sort of food, which also reflects hidden customs from pre-Christian times. Church regulations impose fast and abstinence during Advent and Lent. Fast-days are Good Friday, Ash Wednesday, Christmas Eve and a fasting week every season. Fast is followed by abundance of food, especially on Christmas and Easter tables. Catholics still observe the fasting rules, although church regulations are much more lenient now, so that fast and abstinence is obligatory only on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. However, these rules are not strictly adhered to by everyone. There are cases where the grandmother fasts, even though she is not obligated to due to her old age, while other household members do not. Lenten fare has also changed: the fast-day menu now includes fish, but no longer the traditional foods like *žufnjara*, a dish prepared with crushed pumpkin seeds.

In the Virovitica region of the first half of the twentieth century, every Tuesday and Friday in Advent were regarded as fast-days. Abstinence from meat was also a rule, so that lard was replaced by pumpkin seed oil, wheat flour by corn flour, while yeast was not used at all. Typical Lenten food in the village of Špišić Bukovica consisted of beans with pumpkin seed oil (*koščičino ulje*), potato cakes (*šogačice s krumprom*), corn pudding (*kuruznjača*) and unleavened flat bread. Christmas Eve was another fast-day. In the village of Gornje Bazje, dinner consisted of *žufnjara*, which was made of strudel dough strewn with pumpkin seeds crushed in the mortar and passed through a sieve.

Everything connected with Christmas should ensure prosperity in the year to come. This is also related to the ancient custom to celebrate New Year on the 25th of December. Even the poorest families did their best to eat abundantly on Christmas, even if it was beyond their means. In Špišić Bukovica, a bowl or a small trough containing various grain sorts, three types of onions, horseradish, honey, walnuts, beans, a bowl of jelly, brandy and the Christmas cake were placed in the middle of the Christmas table covered by an embroidered tablecloth. All chores performed in Christmas Eve were vividly described by Jana Tovarović from the village of Rušani (October 2, 1996):

“On Christmas Eve, women were very busy from dawn to dusk. In the morning, we get up right after three o’clock. First we knead the bread dough ready, using the yeast set to prove the evening before, then prepare the dough for the cakes, crush the poppy seeds and grind walnuts for the leavened-dough roll. A specially decorated loaf of bread is made for the Christmas Eve dinner table, with ornaments in the shape of a cross and some smaller flower-shaped ones. My mother goes to knead the dough for nine loaves of bread, baked in the baker’s oven. It is fast-day, nobody eats anything, but brandy and wine are drunk on an empty stomach. Small honey and other biscuits are baked as well as form cakes with raisins, of various flavours. Some older people fast, some children too, and you bustle around the cakes and biscuits, this was the worst for me. Meat was prepared for the jelly, earthen bowls were washed, hens were caught for the soup, meat was

prepared for the roast, turkeys, geese. Beans were cooked to be eaten meatless with garlic and onions on Christmas Eve. Everything was ready by early evening.”

The jelly on the Christmas table was made of rather fatty pieces of pork, as opposed to the meatless diet on fast-days. Having returned from the Christmas Eve Mass, one should eat a little jelly and roast and thus begin the new period. A good start was supposed to ensure prosperity throughout the year.

Shrove-tide, the time preceding Lent, was marked by abundance and intemperance. In the village of Gornje Bazje, a hen was slaughtered for lunch on Carnival (*Fašenjak*). This was believed to prevent the hens from hanging on the fence. Doughnuts with a hole in the middle (*kovrtanji*) were deep-fried. Because of the holes, which were necessary so that the masked people could stick them on rods, such doughnuts are called *kukulele* in the village of Rušani. A hen was also slaughtered there. In the village of Vukosavljevica it is believed that everything would die this year if a hen was not cooked for the Carnival. Besides the hen, sauerkraut with dried ribs was also a Carnival dish. The same dishes are still prepared for *Fašenjak*, although their symbolic meaning is forgotten. When the masked groups come to a house in Vukosavljevica, they sing:

<i>Za konoplje i za lan</i>	<i>For hemp and flax,</i>
<i>i za masni kovrtanj.</i>	<i>And a fatty doughnut.</i>

Lent was a time of privation because the supplies were exhausted and some food had to be saved for Easter. Good Friday was a great fast-day. Lenten puddings were baked and eaten with a glass of good brandy.

Holly Saturday was marked by preparations for Easter; baking leavened-dough rolls, cooking ham and eggs. The yeast for the leavened roll would be mixed on the evening before with flour, water and sugar. In the morning, the yeast would be kneaded with flour, lukewarm milk and some salt. If it was available, an egg would be added as well. This was characteristic only for a holiday, Easter in this case, because eggs were usually sold. The leavened dough roll was filled with cheese, walnuts and poppy seeds crushed in the mortar. After World War II, chocolate and cocoa became available and were used, mixed with flour and milk, to fill the rolls.

The fasting ended with the partaking of the Easter meal. In the morning, women would fill a basket with boiled eggs, ham and cakes and take it to the church for the blessing (*posvećenje*). By partaking of this food, the blessing would be transferred to all household members. In Špišić Bukovica, ham, eggs, salt, bread, leavened roll, Easter leavened form cake (*kovrtanj*) and the indispensable horseradish were taken to the church. On their way back home, women would race to arrive home first. It was believed that the fastest woman will have the most diligent farm labourers and the fastest harvest. When the blessed food was brought home, the people first lit a candle on the Easter cake and ate the horseradish “for health”.

Everyday Dishes

On weekdays, meals were much humbler due to poverty. In most cases, eggs were eaten only on Easter, because they were collected for hatching or sold to buy paraffin oil, tobacco, matches and yeast.

Jana Tovarović described what people ate on weekdays in the village of Rušani: for breakfast, there were dishes like *kukuruzni žganci* (hard-boiled corn mush, polenta), *frigana čorba* (thick flour soup), *bošpor*, *šterc* and *tarana* (grated dough). *Frigana čorba* is eaten with bread. If eggs are stirred into it, it is called *popjevačka*. *Bošpor* is a sauce made of wheat flour, i.e. a thick roux which can be cut by knife if cooled. It is also eaten with bread. *Šterc* is obtained by browning the flour and pouring warm water so that lumps are formed. It was eaten on its own, but older people ate it with onions as a salad. *Tarana* was made of leavened dough, actually from remnants of the bread dough. It was kneaded in the trough previously used to knead the bread. The dough thus obtained would be formed to pellets and dried “to last for several dishes”. Boiled potatoes, carrots and parsley would be seasoned with onions fried on lard and then one or two handfuls of *tarana* were added. It was tasty and people loved to eat it.

Lunch consisted of beans, *rušanski gumboci*, bean salad, flat noodles with cheese or poppy seeds, peas and broad beans, runner beans, cabbage, boiled corn. Beans were cooked with two onions in plenty of water. When they were done, the water (*čorba*) was drained, the onions thrown away and the soup brought to boil again. *Rušanski gumboci* is a dough kneaded from wheat flour with water and salt (possibly also without salt, because it was expensive). Pieces of it are torn by hand and thrown into the soup, where they cook until they swim on the surface. The soup is then seasoned with red peppers and lard. The drained beans were braised on lard or prepared as a bean salad. Peas or broad beans were braised with onions on fat.

Lard was predominantly used for cooking. Oil was used only on modern wedding parties, in which case the information was spread far and wide across the village. Even lettuce salads were seasoned with molten lard mixed with some cream. The lard and oil ratio in the diet was 90:10 until the 1960s, when the material conditions improved. Today, this proportion is just the opposite: oil is used much more than lard, mainly because it is healthier.

The Sunday meal began with a hen or chicken soup (“a cockerel, because it would be a pity to waste a pullet”) with flat noodles. People prepared potatoes *u slapu* (“potatoes are added to hot fat with some paprika and covered with water”), roast potatoes and whole potatoes baked in the oven (*verna*). Salads were made of cabbage, paprika, tomatoes (*jabučica*) and onions. They also baked cakes: leavened rolls with poppy-seed, walnut, cheese or cocoa filling.

On days of extensive work, meat preserved in fat and potatoes *u slapu* were served. The meat preserved in fat was also added to stews (*čušpajzi*). At spinning sessions they

would bake a *prova*, which is made of corn flour with milk and some cheese added. If wheat flour was used, they called this dish *mutnjara*.

On pig-slaughter days, greaves (*čvarki*) were given to all neighbours and relatives, who would return the service when they slaughtered a pig, so that the greaves were always eaten fresh. Blood sausages were made of cooked pig blood, small pieces of meat and meat from the pig head, seasoned with salt, pepper and paprika, and cooked buckwheat, rice or corn. They were eaten fresh as well. Meat sausages were covered with fat.

In times of great privation, food meant literally life, which is why it was highly regarded and imbued with symbolic and allegoric meanings. In contemporary times of overabundance, these meanings are lost. We no longer depend on the seasons, because almost all foodstuffs are obtainable at any time. What remains, therefore, is only the traditional link between food and holidays, which is observed out of sentimental reasons, respect for tradition or out of habit.

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