

Polish Food and Holidays

The first people from Poland came to America during colonial times bringing with them their industrial skills. Among those early immigrants were the war soldiers, Kosciusko and Pulaski. Polish immigration to America was slow at first. After 1870, the political unrest and religious persecution in their homeland and seeking better opportunities in America, brought millions of Poles to the United States.

The majority of Polish immigrants chose to live and work in cities as factory workers. Thousands of Poles immigrated to Chicago, which today is known as the second largest Polish city in the world. The largest Polish city of course is Warsaw, the capital of Poland.

The Polish immigrants were rich in their cultural heritage and took great care to keep the art of Polish cooking alive. There are many Polish restaurants and bakeries in large cities and suburbs.

Foods Customs in Poland

The eating pattern for most Poles is four meals a day. Breakfast is eaten before work. A second breakfast is eaten at work around 11:00 AM, usually just a sandwich taken from home. Dinner, the main meal of the day, is eaten around 3:00 or 4:00 PM. It usually includes a first course of soup and a hot plate of meat, potatoes and some vegetable (beets or cabbage are common). Supper is eaten at 7:00 PM. It is usually a cold meal; bread, cheese, ham, cucumbers or tomatoes (in season). The office hours for most Polish workers are 7:00 AM to 3:00 PM, thus the main meal follows work. A fruit drink is often served with dinner and coffee or tea is served with the other meals.

Most of the Polish people are Roman Catholic. Fridays are still meatless for much of the population, even when meat is available. The Catholic faith also gives cause for many celebrations, such as Christmas and Easter feasts, and baptism and wedding gatherings, for which traditional meals have evolved.

Easter and Christmas Holidays

Easter - In Poland, Easter is the happiest day of the year, when the Catholic Church celebrates the resurrection of Christ. The Poles have always kept the fasting period during the six weeks preceding Easter.

Eggs are a major item of the Easter celebration. Eggs - symbols of life - are decorated in lovely patterns and different regions of Poland are noted for their special designs.

Throughout Poland, the week before Easter, housewives are busy with spring cleaning and preparing the many dishes that will grace Easter morning tables.

On Good Friday, the eggs are decorated. Some of the eggs are dyed in water in which yellow-onion skins, red-onion skins or beet peelings are boiled. Others are covered with intricate designs using beeswax and bright-colored paints.

Saturday is the day to complete preparations for Sunday's breakfast. Decorated baskets are filled with hard-cooked eggs, cold cuts, sausage, wheat bread, slices of babka (cake-like sweet bread) and mazarke (a rich pastry) and a small lamb (the symbol of Jesus) made of butter. The baskets are taken to church to be blessed.

Swiecone, the festive Easter brunch, consists of all cold food. It is served Sunday morning after church. There is no special menu, but usually there is a cooked ham, many kinds of kielbasa (Polish sausage), fish, and salads.

Christmas – There is something special about Christmas Eve in Poland. This joyous, emotional dinner celebration unites separated families and renews friendships that are often strained by the trying conditions of everyday life.

Each year there is an extra place set at the Christmas Eve dinner table. A lighted candle is in the window facing the street. The candle flickers through the darkness in the hopes that Christ, in the form of a stranger, will join the family for dinner. It may also serve as a beacon to help guide the spirit of any family member who could not travel the distance in person.

As a reminder of Christ's humble birthplace, a handful of straw is placed beneath the traditional white-linen tablecloth. Before the meal begins, a prayer of thanks is given. Slim wafers or pieces of unleavened bread similar to communion hosts, impressed with biblical figures of Christ, angels, lambs or Blessed Mary, are passed to each participant. Several wafers are then taken to the barn and fed to the family livestock - another reminder of the Bethlehem stable. Other blessed wafers had already been mailed to far-away relatives and friends.

No meat is served during Christmas Eve dinner. Christmas Eve is a time of strict fasting, the closing hours of a four-week period of penance called Advent. Although dinner is meatless, it doesn't mean the meal isn't a feast. It begins with at least three different kinds of soups, including a meatless borscht, closely followed by three traditional fish entrees of which at least two are carp and pike. Borscht, a bright red Polish and Russian soup, was originally made with cow parsnip. The Russian word '*borshch*' means cow parsnip. Today, borscht is a beetroot soup, made with meat stock, cabbage, and frequently potatoes and other root vegetables. A seemingly endless array of appetizers, garnishes and accompaniments are served between steaming platters of sauerkraut and meatless pierogies. Pierogies are Polish dumplings that are made with a wide variety of fillings. There are pickled beets, pickled mushrooms, pickled herring and fish in tomato sauce. There is a Christmas Babka and spicy oven-browned poppy-seed rolls served with the meal. After the meal, the Christmas tree is trimmed. Gifts are usually exchanged on Christmas Eve before Midnight Mass or before going to bed.



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