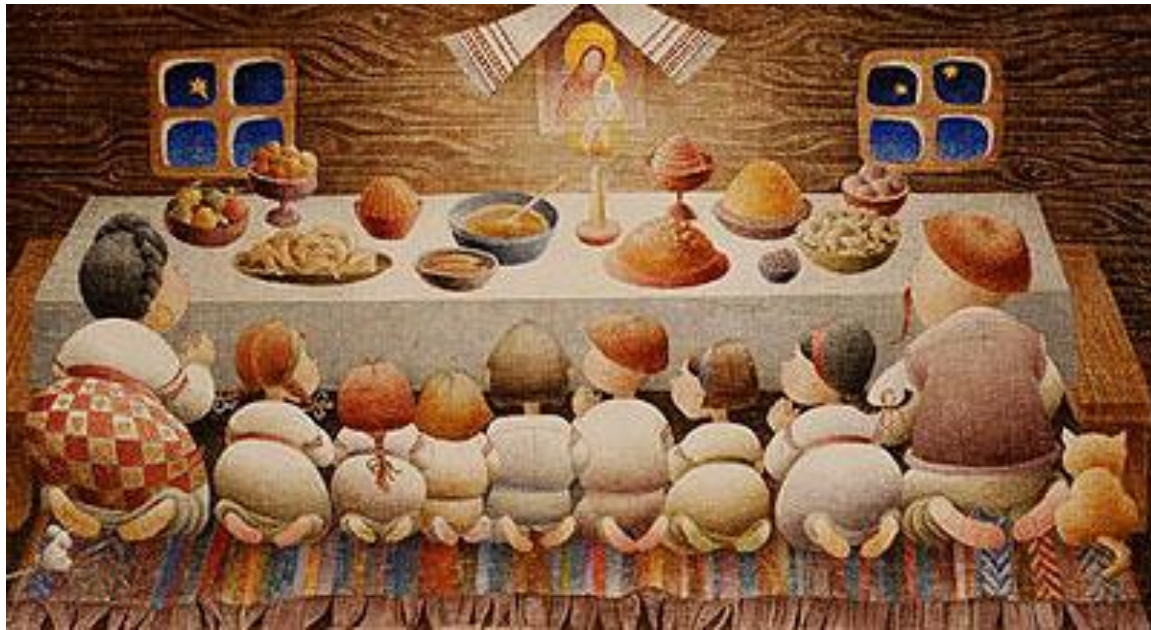


Christmas Eve



Among the Ukrainians, the most beloved of all festivities is Christmas which covers a cycle of important fest days, centering around family and agricultural modes of life, is very colorful, being the most important part of Christmas. Its main feature is the evening meal called “Holy Supper” (Sviat Vechir) in literal translation. According to custom, all members of the family should be that night for a family reunion.

The supper on Holy Night differs from other evening meals, having twelve Lenten dishes, symbolic of the twelve Apostles who gathered at the Last Supper. The dishes are prepared with a vegetable shortening or cooking oil, omitting all animal fat, milk and milk products because Christmas is preceded by a period of fast which ends on Christmas Day after midnight or morning church service. The day of the Christmas Eve is a strict fast in commemoration of the hardships endured by Mother Mary en route to Bethlehem.

The table, set to according to time-honored custom, is first strewn with a small handful of fine hay in memory of the Christ Child in a manger, and over it is spread the very best tablecloth adorned with native embroidery. Bread (kalach), symbolizing prosperity, constitutes the central table decoration. Three round, braided loaves are placed one on top of the other with a candle inserted into the top load, and the bottom loaf encircled with tiny twigs of evergreen. Candles on both sides of the loaves complete the table decoration. If a member of the family has died during the year, a place is set for him in the believe that the spirit of the

deceased unites with the family on that magic Holy Night. A lighted candle is always placed in the window as an invitation to any homeless stranger, or perchance a lost soul, to join the family in celebrating the birth of Christ.

Prior to the evening meal a spoonful of each dish is mixed into the feed of the domestic animals, because animals were the first creatures to behold the new-born Christ. The first star in the eastern sky announces the time for the commencement of the meal. It is the children's duty to watch for the star. Each member of the family, dressed in holiday attire, awaits the customary ritual opening. This is done by the master of the household who brings a sheaf of what called "did" or "didukh" (grandfather), a symbol of gathering of the clan, and greets his family with traditional salutations, expressing joy that God has favored them with good health and general well-being. The sheaf is placed in the corner of the dining room and remains there until New Year when it is taken out and burned. In the cities this tradition has been modified, and the sheaf is replaced with a few stalks of wheat which are placed in a vase, or they may be used as a table decoration.

Members of the family and servants gather around the table. The meal begins with the Lord's prayer and then a thanksgiving grace appropriate to the occasion. The first and indispensable dish is kutya, a preparation of cooked wheat dressed with honey, ground poppy seed, and sometimes chopped nuts. This ritual dish, of a very ancient origin, has survived hundreds of generations without losing its importance in the Christmas festivity. It starts the meal in a ceremonial manner. The head of the family raises the first spoonful of the kutya, invoking God's grace, and greets the family with the traditional Christmas greet: "Khrystos Rodyvsya" (Christ is born), to which they all reply in unison: "Slavim Yoho!" (Let us glorify Him). Following this ritual everyone must partake of the kutya, if only but a spoonful. The exact meaning of kutya has been lost. Scholars of the folklore generally believe that originally it symbolized the spiritual clan unity of all living and deceased members. Agricultural prosperity may have been a secondary symbol.

Kutya may be followed with an appetizer of pickled herrings or pickled mushrooms, or with a serving of borsch, after which comes one or more preparations of fish and various other traditional dishes, ending with a dessert of stewed dried fruit, or fruit varenyky, and the Christmas pastries and nuts. Everyone must have at least a small serving of each dish.

Caroling

While many of the Ukrainian Christmas Eve customs are of a solemn nature, the custom of caroling is joyful and merry. Ukrainian Christmas songs or carols have their origins in antiquity, as do many other traditions practiced at Christmas time. There are two main groups of Christmas songs in Ukraine: the *koliadky*, whose name is probably derived from the Latin "calendae" meaning the first day of the month and which are sung on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day; the second group of Christmas songs is called *shchedrivky*, which is a derivation from the word meaning generous. The latter are sung during the Feast of the Epiphany.

Both *koliadky* and *shchedrivky* have pagan elements in them, but many have been Christianized. For example, one pagan carol tells of a landowner who is awakened by a swallow and told to make preparations, because three guests are coming to his house: the sun, the moon and the rain. In the Christianized version the three guests become Jesus Christ, St. Nicholas and St. George. The very popular Ukrainian carol in the United States, "Carol of the Bells", in its originality is a *shchedrivka* and tells of a swallow (herald of Spring) that has come to a landowner's house and asks him to come out and see how rich he is, how many calves he has, and so on.

The themes of Ukrainian Christmas songs vary. Many, of course, deal with the birth of Christ and that occasion's joyful celebrations, and many of them have apocryphal elements. Another group of carols contain purely pagan mythological elements. Still another group deals with Ukrainian history of the 9-12 centuries, mostly with the heroic episodes in the lives of some of the princes that were favorite among the people. One of the largest groups of carols are glorification songs - glorifying the landowner, the farmer, his wife, his sons, his daughters, every member of the family. These songs glorify their work as well as their personal traits.

Caroling required extensive preparation. Each group had a leader. One member dressed as a goat. Another as a bag carrier, the collector of all the gifts people would give them. Yet another carried a six-pointed star attached to a long stick with a light in its center, which symbolized the Star of Bethlehem. In some places the people even had musical instruments, such as the violin, *tsymbaly* (dulcimer), or the *trembita* (a wooden pipe about 8-10 feet long, used in the Carpathian mountains by the Hutsuls).

Caroling was not a simple singing of Christmas songs; it was more of a folk opera. The carolers first had to ask for permission to sing. If the answer was yes, they entered the house and sang carols for each member of the family, even for the smallest child. Sometimes they even performed slow ritualistic dances. They also

had to present a short humorous skit involving the goat. The custom of the goat accompanying the carolers has its origin in the pagan times when the goat represented the god of fertility. The skit showed the goat dying and then being brought back to life. This also symbolized the death of Winter and the birth of Spring. The caroling always ended with short well-wishing poems, appropriately selected for each home.

Koliadky and *shchedrivky* are the oldest groups of Ukrainian folk songs. They are sung by Ukrainians at Christmas time throughout the world.

Vertep - Christmas puppet theater

A venerable form of Ukrainian puppet theater, regarded as distinct from the Polish *szopka*, the Belarusian *betleika*, and the Russian *petrushka*. The origins of the name *vertep* may be related to the verb *vertitysia* 'to whirl,' as do rays about a star. The *vertep* performance is a standardized enactment of the Nativity with merry interludes depicting secular life, in the style of an intermede. There are 10 to 40 *vertep* characters, typically among them a sacristan, angels, shepherds, Herod, three kings, Satan, Death, Russian soldiers, gypsies, a Pole, a Jew, a peasant couple, and various animals. All the hand puppets are usually operated by one person, the *vertepnyk*. The *vertep* is also the two-level stage in the form of a building in which the performance takes place, the religious part on the upper level and the secular part on the lower.

Vertep performances date back to the late 16th century. They reached their height in popularity in the second half of the 18th century. Many students from the Kyivan Mohyla Academy contributed to the development of *vertep* puppet theater; its two-part performance was in part a reflection of the academy's style of theatrical productions. Itinerant preceptors were also responsible for popularizing *vertepy*. In time the specifications as to *vertep* stage architecture; the number, character, and construction of the puppets; and costumes, music, and scripts became well defined. The foremost village *vertepy* were in Sokyryntsi, Baturyn, and Mizhhiria. The secular part in *vertep* performances often contained references to contemporaneous events; a Zaporozhian Cossack puppet, for example, appeared during the reign of Catherine II.

Vertep theater declined in the mid-19th century. It has retained a symbolic significance, as in the miniature Nativity scene displayed in Ukrainian homes during the Christmas season and the Christmas carolers dressed up as *vertep*

characters. In the 20th century *vertep* theater has been revived as a *zhyvyi* ‘live’ *vertep*, with live actors faithfully re-creating the traditional village *vertepy*.

Traditional meals for Sviat Vechir (Ukrainian Christmas Eve)

According to the Ukrainian tradition, the whole family gathers at one table during the Christmas Eve dinner. Since ancient times Ukrainians have followed such rules - you shouldn't eat anything all day, and only late in the afternoon, when the first star appears in the sky, you can start dinner.

The Christmas Eve is a symbolic holiday when Ukrainians cook 12 special festive dishes. It should be noted that Christmas Eve falls on the last day of the Christmas Fast, so all meals must be lean. Today, in our “virtual” festive menu, we're going to talk about 12 traditional Ukrainian dishes for Sviat Vechir (there are many other Ukrainian meals you can cook for Christmas Eve and we're going to share them with you in our following articles).



Kutia



Kutia is a porridge made from unground wheat, rice, barley or oats with the addition of sweet ingredients like honey, jam, dried fruits, etc. Grains symbolize the eternal life and sweet additives - heavenly bliss.



Borsch



This hearty soup is often cooked with meat but there are lent recipes of this dish for Christmas Eve. Ukrainians usually use dried mushrooms, beets, carrots, beet kvass, dairy butter, and flour. The lent soup is often served with small buns called “ears.” These buns are made from dough and are stuffed with mushrooms.



Mushroom gravy



Such a light sauce is just perfect for the lean table. It includes dried mushrooms, bulb onions, flour, oil, and spices. This sauce should be very thick, similar to modern cream soups.



Varenyky



For Christmas Eve Ukrainians cook savory dumplings stuffed with cabbage. To make them you should knead simple dough using water, flour, and yeast. Then stuff each dumpling with the mixture of stewed cabbage and onions.



Holubtsi



Holubtsi (cabbage rolls) is a traditional dish usually made of cabbage leaves, rice, and meat. Yet since the festive Christmas table should include lean dishes, Ukrainians use a mixture of potatoes, mushrooms, onions, and carrots instead of meat. Cabbage leaves are filled with vegetable stuffing, fried in a pan with a little vegetable oil, and then stewed in tomato paste.



Herring



A very simple but delicious and spectacular snack. To pickle herring, you'll need the fish divided into portions, bulb onion, and a marinade made of water and spices. It is important to prepare the herring in advance, as it should be marinated for at least 24 hours.



Marinated mushrooms



Mushrooms are great to use not only in soups and as fillings but also as a separate snack. The marinating process is somewhat similar to the one used to pickle the herring: you'll need mushrooms, marinade, and... time) To cook the marinade use water, vinegar, and spices. Before pouring the marinade over preboiled mushrooms, cool it.



Jellied fish



The gentle taste of jellied fish will perfectly complement the lean Christmas Eve table. To cook the dish you'll need fish, bulb onions, carrots, vinegar, gelatin, and spices. This dish has to be refrigerated before serving since jellied fish needs time to set.



Stewed cabbage



It's one more simple dish that has a rich and pleasant taste. It is believed that each housewife cooks stewed cabbage in her own way but the general rules are the same: you should chop the cabbage, stew it in a pan with vegetable oil and water, and stir in some

extra ingredients to taste (for instance, tomato paste, bulb onion, cucumbers) before you get the dish done.



Haricots



Haricots can be used to cook a salad or stew. To cook the salad, boil white haricots, combine them with grated onions, sliced bell peppers, tomato paste, and vinegar. If you want to make the stew, cook the haricots together with dried mushrooms, bulb onions, and garlic.



Pampushky



An integral addition to Ukrainian borscht. These are small buns made of yeast dough based on wheat flour. For the festive Christmas table, they are prepared in a special way: Ukrainians add the sweet filling, fry buns in oil and sprinkle them with powdered sugar. Such pampushky are very similar in taste to donuts.



Uzvar



It's a light and useful drink made using dried fruits. You can choose fruits to your taste - dried apples, pears, prunes, raisins or a mixture of different ingredients. Boil dried fruits in water and then add honey.

The Ukrainian Christmas Eve dinner is both symbolic and delicious. You can try to cook one dish from this festive menu, some of them or serve all twelve traditional dishes at your Christmas table!