

BREAD AND SALT MEAN HOSPITALITY IN UKRAINE

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Long ago early Ukrainians were engaged in agriculture and were strongly attached to their land and its fruits. Ukraine the breadbasket of Europe has a rich soil, which produces grain in great abundance. Ukrainian homemakers developed a variety of artistic-looking breads. Bread was regarded as one of the holiest foods because it contained wheat, a staple of life. Over the centuries Ukrainians developed rituals and traditions, which became deeply rooted in their lives.

The ancient tradition of offering a guest bread and salt dates back many centuries. Bread and salt were once considered necessary ingredients for health in daily consumption. Guests in Ukraine are offered a circular bread (klib) and a mold of salt (sil) on an embroidered ceremonial cloth called a rushnyk (pronounced roosh-nick) by their hosts. The hosts greet their visitors with a humble and heartfelt greeting - "With this bread and salt we greet you. We invite you to preserve the Ukrainian culinary arts, by teaching and passing on these traditions to your loved ones - Welcome - Vitayemo!"

When offered to a guest, the protocol requires the guest to accept the bread and salt in their hands while bowing their head slightly in thanks, kissing it, and then handing it back to their hosts. Often a small piece of the bread is broken off by the guest, dipped in the salt and then eaten. If it is part of a family gathering the bread may be eaten, put aside to be eaten later or taken to one's home.

The bread represents hospitality, the warmth of Ukrainian hospitality from the rich black fertile soil of Ukraine. The salt symbolizes friendship, an eternal friendship that will never sour because salt is never corrupted by time therefore, never loses its taste.

In ancient Greece, over two thousand years ago, bread and salt were offered to guests as a greeting. About 2,500 years ago, ancient Ukraine called Scythia at that time, was a granary for Greece with wheat grown on its steeps. In these ancient times Greek colonies such as Tyras, Chersonese (near Sevastopol), Panticapaeum (today's Kerch) and Olbia where settled along the Black Sea coast of Ukraine. This tradition symbolizes the link of Ukraine with the roots of its Greek culture.

Bread and wheat have always been important elements of Ukrainian life in culture and folklore. A variety of distinctive national breads play an important part in the national customs and traditions of Ukrainian culture. The decoration of bread became a form of art for Ukrainian women. Every major event and holiday in Ukrainian life has its special bread. For Christmas, Easter, weddings and funerals bread and wheat form the central traditions.

At Christmas there are either three large round braided loaves, one on top of each other, or a oblong braided loaf of bread made from wheat flour called the kolach, as the centerpiece of the Christmas Eve dinner table (Svyati Vechir). The more traditional round braided loaves of bread are from the Kyiv region of Ukraine, while the oblong loaf is from the Ternopil and Lviv regions of Ukraine. Kolo means circle in Ukrainian and symbolizes good luck, bountiful life, general welfare and eternity. In the middle of the kolach, a candle is placed which is lit before the start of dinner and burns all night.

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At Easter the paska or Easter bread is made with eggs, butter, and other good things to produce a rich loaf which is taken to church in an Easter basket at dawn to be blessed (svyatyty) by a parish priest. Premium bakers take pride in the ornamentation that decorates the top of the paska. The cross, rosettes, twists and pine cones formed of bread dough add to the beauty of the paska.

The Easter babka is a rich bread that is also traditionally served at Easter. The baka is rich, tender, fine textured, spongy and light. It is baked in a tall round pan and sometimes coated with an icing glaze at its top.

The name "baba" in Ukrainian means "grandmother" or "older women" and the diminutive form is "baka". Some Ukrainian historians believe that the babka may have had its early roots in ancient Ukrainian culture where women priestesses were the authority figures who performed various religious rituals using the baka as a ritual bread in their

ceremonies for the fertility of the soil.

It is an established historical fact that the matriarchal system once existed in Ukraine. Some traces of this matriarchy are evident in some ancient traditions, common law, ritual song, status of women, and family relationships. Archeological excavations in Ukraine have shed some light on this subject. In the excavated ancient settlement of the Trypillian Culture (3000 to 2000 B.C.), archeologists have found a consistent recurrence of numerous clay, female figurines. Archeologists assume that they are definitely linked to matriarchy.

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At a funeral wake or panakhyda in Ukrainian, a large kolach is the centerpiece of the dinner table while small kolachi are placed at each person's place setting. A kolach was also placed on the coffin of the deceased and then left behind on the gravesite, a symbolic reminder that the soul lives on.

At weddings is where the art of bread in Ukraine reaches its highest form. The korovai is the wedding bread. It is a large circular sweet bread decorated with symbolic figures made of dough such as cones-symbolizing fertility and doves-symbolizing love and faithfulness. Other symbols such as the sun and the moon are also used. After it is baked, it is then decorated with green periwinkle leaves. It is considered holy therefore, when a guest is offered a piece of the korovai, it is customary to use a napkin as a sign of respect.

Ukrainian folklore considered the making of the Korovai an important ritual in itself. It required a strict observance of custom were the number "seven" played an important part. The korovai had to be made by seven young women selected from seven happily married couples. These seven women were required to draw water from seven different wells and to use flour from wheat that grew in seven different fields. Other ingredients such as eggs and butter also had to come from seven sources. (bwl 3/04)

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