



Poppy, spices and buckwheat - oriental influences in Krakow's cuisine

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Oriental influences are among the earliest ones to be noted in the culinary arts of Krakow. All this is due to the city's presence on the most important trade routes of mediaeval Europe.

Already in the thirteenth century, under the auspices of Tatar Khans, the Genoese renamed the old Greek port of Theodosia to Kaffa and started trade with the West of Europe, along the so-called Tatar route that led through Lviv and Krakow. Along with Armenian and Jewish merchants, first valuable spices and roots reached Krakow. The so-called Malmsey (Greek wine) travelled all the way from Greece, specifically from Crete, through Lviv to Kraków. Later, all wines from today's Greece and Turkey were called this way.

The East gave Polish cuisine buckwheat, poppy seeds, sherbets, dried fruit, preserves, fruit fried in honey, nougat, makagigi (cakes made of honey, poppy seeds, nuts and almonds) or halva. The Eastern ways of preparing meat also started to be used in Polish cuisine: marinating, chopping; skewers, tartare; serving meat (mainly mutton) with dried fruit and marinated vegetables - Hanna Szymanderska writes in the introduction to the "Encyclopedia of Polish Culinary Art".

In the 17th century, oriental influences grew even stronger, despite the fall of Kaffa in 1609. What became popular were spiced preserves, such as figs with cloves or ginger. Poles started enjoying oriental sweets, which consisted of mixtures of nuts or almonds with sesame seeds or raisins. Krakow at that time had special stores supplying the burghers with oriental goods, as Jabłonowski writes about in his book. In the 1830s, as Russians took over the Tartar trading route, Krakow started enjoying sesame bars and halva.

Oriental influences are also visible in the first Polish cookbooks, which contain dishes prepared in Tatar, eastern or "Sultan-like" way. Łukasz Gołębiowski in his book "Houses and Courts" writes that Polish knowledge about meat conservation techniques, such as marinating meat in herbs, stems directly from Oriental inspiration.

Buckwheat groats, sometimes called "Tatar groats", are popular not only in Krakow, but throughout the whole South-East Poland. It is used as stuffing for dumplings, pig or duck before it is roasted. The classic Krakow economic student dinner - buckwheat groats with kephir - has fully eastern roots, as it is assumed that kephir originates from Caucasian highlands. Eastern cuisine also gave Krakow its Christmas dishes - kutia, almond soup or poppy seed cake are all dishes of oriental origin.