Christmas in old Krakow: the tables of the haves and have nots

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It is hard to say what a typical Christmas Eve dinner menu from Krakow looks like because the city has been influenced by many different traditions. Christmas Eve dinners in Krakow consist of dishes from Ukraine, Rhutenia, or Vienna which was famous for its confectionery. Let us take a closer look at what it used to look like.

"On Christmas Eve every family goes to great effort to serve a better than usual dinner; it used to be eaten in the evening only after the first star had risen. The rich feasted on large and expensive fish, the poor on more modest fare, but on this day, tables were always set better than usual. In the houses of craftsmen with small kids, a fir or spruce branch was decorated with apples, nuts and sweets and hung from the ceiling, it was always called an orchard" - wrote Ambroży Grabowski in 1840.

In her book about typical Krakow cooking, Maria Gruszecka includes the following dishes on the Christmas Eve menu: red borscht with dumplings, almond soup, fish pasties, kale with chestnuts, roast pike, pike perch with eggs and dumplings with plums. Poppy seed pudding and custard with chaudeau sauce were served for dessert on Christmas Eve. Dinner was finished with, among others, *kutia*, but also apples, nuts and dried fruit.

Maria Kietlińska recalls one year when Christmas Eve dinner was organised at the house of Alfred Stojowski. The cook was drunk and ruined one dish after another – for instance he added capers instead of raisins to the almond soup! Thanks to these blunders we get a description of some of the dishes at that dinner. There were three soups (as Kietlińska took down: "in line with the countryside tradition"): fish soup, borscht and almond soup, pike with mayonnaise, carp in Polish sauce (that was replaced by pike by the blind drunk chef), fried tench and crucian carp.

One of the festive dishes was also strudel with poppy seed: wheat *kalach* with braided dough sprinkled with nigella seeds. In Krakow, just before Christmas, those cakes were so large and heavy that they were transported by sleigh.

The Christmas Eve tipple appears to have a long tradition in Krakow. "Krakow commoners (...) celebrate this day with copious amounts of vodka consumed. (...) Now (in 1840) this possibly harmful custom dwindled but still an enormous amount of spirit is consumed in Krakow each month because, as reliable sources claim, Krakow locals drink 10 thousand pots of spirit per month".

Sources:

Ambroży Grabowski „Wspomnienia”, Kraków 1909, t. 1, s. 271-2

Maria z Mohrów Kietlińska „Wspomnienia”, Kraków 1986 r., s. 269

http://muzeumkolbuszowa.pl/aktualnosci/467-mak-2015