Magiczny Kraków

Christmas Eve in Krakow: mushrooms, fish and poppy seeds

2019-07-31

Christmas Eve supper called *wigilia* is clearly the most important meal of the year in most Polish households. In many homes Christmas Eve customs are followed closely and traditional dishes are made that are not served on any other day of the year.

There are quite a few superstitions related to Christmas Eve and some of them are related to food. There should be twelve dishes on the table and everyone should sample each one; before people sit down for supper they should share a Christmas wafer called *opłatek*. Different dishes are served during *wigilia* depending on the family traditions. Krakow is strongly influenced by Jewish and Austrian cuisine as well as French, due to the aristocratic customs of the past.

People sit down to supper when the first star appears in the sky and having borscht with dumplings called *uszka* with mushroom filling is a must. Its taste differs in every home as the proportions of vegetable bullion, mushrooms and beetroot change. Sometimes instead of *uszka*, borscht is served with croquettes and in the Podhale region – with a special variety of runner bean. As an alternative to borscht, some people serve mushroom soup with square pasta called *łazanki* or fish soup. In the old times in Krakow, people also ate sweet milk-based almond soup.

For centuries the key ingredient in most Christmas Eve dishes was freshwater fish. Currently, carp is the culinary symbol of Christmas Eve supper. It is a relatively recent tradition – it dates back to the late 40s and apparently it was Hilary Minc – minister for industry – who came up with the idea to serve carp for supper on 24th December. The fish is usually served breaded and fried. Some families from Krakow prepare Jewish-style carp: pieces of fish are boiled in a fish stock and served in aspic with onion, almonds, and raisins. Another important fish on the table for *wigilia* is herring marinated in various spices and condiments.

Meat-free dishes based on seasonal ingredients are usually prepared in every house. These include: cabbage, split peas, and dried mushrooms, as well as dishes such as *łazanki*, *pierogi* with various fillings, *kulebiak* (a stuffed pie), *gołąbki* (cabbage rolls) and cabbage with split peas. The dishes are seasoned with nuts and dried fruit, for example raisins or prunes.

Prunes, other dried fruit and nuts are also an important ingredient of Christmas desserts, for instance *kutia*, popular in the former Galicia region, which consists of wheat grain mixed with minced poppy seed, honey, walnuts, almonds and raisins with the occasional addition of other dried fruit and nuts.

Poppy seed is also the key ingredient in the popular *makowiec* cake and poppy seed strudel. Many locals order Christmas cakes in traditional pastry shops and there are long queues in front of the most famous ones such as Michałek on Krupnicza. Besides *makowiec*, Viennese cheesecake is another popular Christmas dessert in Krakow. During Christmas Eve supper, people drink *kompot* made of stewed dried fruit – mainly apples and prunes that aids digestion after all the seasonal delicacies.