

Where Do Pierogi Come From?

By Robert Strybel

We Polish Americans often think of pierogi as something typically Polish. That is, until we run into members of other ethnic groups who insist that *perohy* (Ukrainian), *pirozhki* (Russian), and *kołduny* (Lithuanian) are rooted in their culinary heritage. Czechs, Slovaks and Hungarians often second the motion. Which of those countries then really did invent pierogi? The answer may surprise you: none of them!

Several years ago, when my wife Majka became Pillsbury's chief Polish-food consultant, she was asked to research the history of pierogi. It turned out that their homeland was actually distant China, and they got to Poland via two different routes. Wonton and rice-skin type dumplings were brought by invading Mongolian hordes to Russia, whence they eventually made their way into neighboring Poland. Filled dumplings and other forms of pasta (including spaghetti) were brought from China to Italy by Marco Polo and other unnamed merchants and travelers. In the form of ravioli, tortellini and other such dishes they made it to points north, including Poland. In other words, Poland's pierogi tradition has had a two-pronged history.

This is not to say that the Orientals of the Middle Ages were feasting on "*ruskie pierogi*" (cheese & potato dumplings with fried onion) or the sauerkraut & mushroom-filled variety. The fillings and pasta pockets were modified over the centuries, as were their preparation methods which included boiling, steaming, deep-frying and baking. The size, texture and shape of the dumplings also varied over time from country to country, and serving styles were adapted to local customs. But the bottom line is that the basic idea of a filling in a dough wrapper had come to Europe from ancient *Cathay* (China).

Both in today's Poland and across Polonia, pierogi preferences vary. In Poland, meat-filled pierogi are preferred by city-slickers, whereas meatless fillings are regarded as being more rural. Among the non-meat favorites are those filled with a mixture of farmer cheese and potatoes and flavored with fried onions. They are known in Poland as "*ruskie pierogi*" (Ruthenian – another name for Ukrainian), because they are believed to have originated in the Lwow region and are usually served with a garnish of fried fatback nuggets ("*skwarki*").

Pierogi filled with farmer cheese may be sweet (even vanilla-scented) or savory. Sauerkraut & mushroom-filled pierogi are a must on many families' Wigilia table, but some enjoy them year round. Potato & fried onion pierogi, once a typical poor man's food from the impoverished formerly Austrian-ruled province of Galicja, are quite rare in today's Poland but have many Polish American devotees.

Typical of the summer months are fruit-filled pierogi containing blueberries, cherries, strawberries or apples which are usually served drenched with heavy sweet cream or sour cream. Pierogi filled with a mixture of buckwheat groats, farmer cheese and potatoes are still popular in the villages of eastern Poland. Pierogi variations include the smallish meat-filled *kotduny* of the northeast and the tiny *uszka* (ear-shaped dumplings) served in bowls of steaming, clear, red *barszcz*. (beet soup).

Be all that as it may, one thing is certain: pierogi have really taken off in America in recent years. Nowadays they are sold not only at the delis, groceries and take-aways of typically Polish American neighborhoods but may also be found in the frozen-food section of Anglo-mainline supermarkets. I have even heard they are becoming increasingly popular at college cafeterias across the United States where students of various ethnic backgrounds find them a tasty, filling and inexpensive meal.

Pierogi are also making a comeback in Poland, where they used to be a strictly down-home type of food that rural *babcias* would make. Now the Polish market is flooded with both frozen and deli-type pierogi with diverse fillings, and the number of restaurants serving them has increased dramatically in recent years. In trendy Warsaw circles, pierogi are being increasingly regarded as chic and retro!

If you're the adventurous type and want to try your hand at making them from scratch, consult "Polish Heritage Cookery." It contains numerous dough recipes and even more ideas for traditional Polish fillings. This cookbook is available at the Polish Art Center in Hamtramck. They are located at 9539 Joseph Campau and their telephone number is 313-874-2242. Website: www.polartcenter.com

* The word pierogi is the plural form.
There is no such word as "pierogies."
The singular form of the word is pierog

Smacznego!