

## Memories of Christmas Food

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In my home town of Teplitz, Bessarabia the Christmas baking and food preparation often started in November. This was a busy time of year that involved much thought and preparation. Our families were tight-knit and these family relationships became even closer at Christmas time, when families observed the custom of visiting back and forth in each other's homes. In all of these events, delightful foods played a central role. Both warm and cold dishes were served. The warm food generally centered around goose and young chickens that were hatched late in the year. My mother made very tasty dishes along these lines. Generally, a festive meal started with Nudlesuppe (Noodle Soup generally containing chicken, seasoned with carrots and onions); then came the meat dish accompanied with rice and raisins steamed in milk, home-made noodles or roasted potatoes. Since by that time of year we had no fresh vegetables left, we used vegetables we had pickled in the fall. Usually this included a spicy red beet sauce. For dessert we were served bowls of Geelee (colored, flavored gel made from red or green 4"x 6" square sheets dissolved in a specified amount of hot water then allowed to chill and set up) or Schneeballen which was a dessert in which egg yolks and milk were prepared into a cooked vanilla pudding, then the reserved egg whites were beaten until stiff then scooped onto the pudding. I'm telling you, no matter how full one was there was always room for a Schneeballa. And yet the feasting was not finished. After celebrating, exchanging memories and a few glasses of wine, everyone felt good. Around 9 PM my mother went into the kitchen to set out the cold platters. These women had their hands full! Today, it is hard to imagine how they managed without gas ovens, microwaves or even electricity. In Teplitz, our village mothers cooked on mud brick stoves. Heat was controlled by adding or removing cast iron rings. To keep prepared dishes hot was another challenge - to accomplish that my mother used the mud brick house furnace that had an oven space to keep things warm.

The cold platters offered a variety of items. Sometimes purchased items were served such as olives and pickled herring. More typical were the homemade Suelze (in Russian Kaladjez) which is head-cheese, along with sausages and pickled vegetables. As was common among the families, my parents developed their own specialty: smoked goose thighs and breast. Was that ever tasty!

To close out the evening, Mom served tea and baked goodies, along with Judanuesla (peanuts). Why were these called Judanuesla? I have two stories about that: One story says that the village folks first came to know about peanuts when they purchased them from a Jewish merchant. The other story says, "Jews only eat the best!" and so this shows the high regard in which peanuts were held.

Tea preparation in Russia was a fine art. In Russian high society, water for tea was heated in a Samovar or a water-heating apparatus. At home we had a Tschainik, which was a triangle-shaped teapot. It was topped by a small Tschainik or triangle to hold the tea leaves as the water percolated. The most important step was to gradually heat the water in the lower Tschainik or pot. After the tea was percolated to the correct strength, it was poured into the tea-cups. My grandparents had special glasses they used to serve tea.

My Oma Zacher was an artistic person. For holiday meals, each dish was beautifully served. In addition, the table was always set using hand-embroidered napkins and tablecloth. When my grandmother Zacher made Geelee she would shape it into cubes or stars and serve it in a fancy glass bowl. It was so pretty that one hated to cut into it.

Cookie baking was done according to recipes brought from the Old Country (Germany). During hard times when money was short, the expensive ingredients were shorted in the cookies. I especially remember the tasty Hutzelbrot (fruitcake) that my mother made. We always had lots of dried fruits and we mixed this with our own walnuts. These Hutzelbrot were always baked well in advance so that they could soften up prior to the holiday time.

Now, we children also liked candies. Purchased candies were rare and only a few were purchased to be saved and used for special guests. But we children were not left without candies because our mothers know how to make home-made candies. One candy my mother made was of milk, chocolate powder and walnuts. After boiling the mixture to the correct consistency, mother rolled the mass to a 1/2-inch thickness. When the candy was cooled sufficiently, she cut the candy into squares about 3/4-inch by 1 1/2-inch size. For every-day, such candy was then ready to serve. But on Christmas, these candies were wrapped in blue or red paper napkins cut into squares. After wrapping a piece of candy, Mother would twist the ends of the paper and then snip the ends of the paper into a fringe to give a festive look.

While we had few luxuries, we were rich just the same. The memories of these homemade events are so special to us. I would not exchange my memories for the more commercial things of today. These memories of my childhood are precious to me. While I cannot bring back those times, I can think of them often and I take pleasure in sharing them with you.

Merry Christmas.