

Polish Christmas food is still very traditional and heavily features old-time winter staples such as beetroots, sauerkraut (salt-pickled cabbage), dried mushrooms, nuts, poppy seeds and dried fruits. Nutritionally speaking, many of the ingredients used are really healthy and good for you, especially if one concentrates on savoury dishes and only has a small amount of cake or other sweet dishes.

The main meal is on Christmas Eve, which in Poland we call Wigilia, and it consists of several side and main dishes plus sweet courses and desserts, all adding up to a total number of 12 or 13 (12 - one for each month of the year or 13 - one for each apostle and one for Jesus). We do not eat meat on that day in Poland - only vegetable-based and fish dishes are served. The rest of Christmas is a bit more individual, with families following their own culinary traditions, so the types of food served can vary depending on which part of Poland you go to. However bigos (or hunter's stew, as it is often called) or "ryba po grecku" (fish a la greque - although it has nothing to do with Greece) are often served, as these can be prepared a few days ahead and just reheated when needed, thus saving the busy hostess time during this really hectic period. Another really popular (although quite labour-intensive) dish for both Christmas Eve and Christmas itself is a type of ravioli with a sauerkraut and wild-mushroom filling (in Polish "pierogi z grzybami i kapusta). They are a lot of work, but the final result is certainly worth the effort - yummy (or you can do a cheat's version by just making the filling and stuffing in inside regular or buckwheat-flour pancakes)

To satisfy our sweet tooth during the festive season, we Poles prepare and serve dishes such as sweet soups (almond soup or poppy seed and noodle soup), dry fruit compote and really tempting cakes such as poppy-seed strudel or gateau, honey cake and Viennese cheesecake (my personal favourite and an absolute bliss although not very good for the waistline, so I will not include a recipe here).

If my descriptions got your digestive juices flowing, why not have a go at trying a few of our traditional recipes for yourself and let me know what you think.

Bon appetite (or "smacznego" as we say in Poland)

Honey Cake

10 servings

4 oz Butter

4 lg Eggs

14 oz Honey

14 oz Unbleached flour (all-purpose)

1/2 ts Ground Ginger

1/2 ts Ground Nutmeg

1/2 ts Ground Cloves

1 t Cinnamon

2 ts Baking Powder

Cream the butter and separate the eggs. Add the room temperature yolks, one at a time, to the butter and beat well. Mix in the honey. Sift the flour, baking powder, and spices twice and add to the butter mixture. Whip the egg whites until stiff. Fold a little of the egg whites into the batter, then add the rest of them, folding them gently into the batter. Pour the batter into a greased and floured loaf pan. Bake in a preheated 350 Degrees F. oven until firm on top and a toothpick inserted in the center comes out

clean, about 1 hour. Cool, in the pan, for 10 minutes, then remove and finish cooling on a wire rack.

Christmas Pudding 8 servings

200 g Wheat grain (7 1/4 oz)
200 g Poppy seeds
200 ml Honey (7/16 pint)
100 g Walnuts, chopped (3.5 oz)
100 g Almonds, chopped
50 g Currants (1.8 oz)
4 Figs
4 Dates
1/2 Vanilla pod
1 ts Grated lemon peel
70 ml Rum (1/8 pint)
2 tb Cream
10 Almonds, whole

(Preparation 6 hours)

Wash the wheat grain, leave to soak in cold water for 6 hours. Drain, then pour 2 l of boiling water over the wheat, cover and cook over a low heat for 3 hours. The grains should be soft but not mushy. Strain the cooked wheat and leave to cool. Wash the poppy-seeds thoroughly in cold water, scald with boiling water and drain. Pour boiling water over them, bring to a boil, remove from the heat and leave to stand in a warm place for 3 hours. Drain and mince.

Soak the currants in rum or cognac. Cut the figs and dates into thin strips. Crush vanilla pod in a mortar. Pour the poppy-seeds into a mixing bowl, add cream, honey, vanilla and lemon peel. Grind for 15 minutes, then add the wheat, crushed walnuts and almonds, currants, figs and dates. Mix well and transfer to a glass bowl. Decorate with whole almonds and chill.

Almond Soup - Zupa Migdalowa

6 servings

5 c Milk
1/2 lb Almonds (blanched), finely ground
1 ts Almond extract
2 c Rice, cooked
1/3 c Sugar
1/4 c Raisins or currants
Salt and Pepper to taste

Heat milk just to simmering in a large saucepan. Add all the ingredients; stir until well mixed. Cook over low heat 3 to 5 minutes. Serve hot as is traditional for Christmas, or chill before serving.

Cabbage Rolls 4 servings

2 lb Ground Beef (lean)
1/2 c Rice, uncooked
1 Medium Onion, diced
1 Green Pepper, diced
2 Eggs
1 Cabbage, large head

2 qt Tomato juice
Salt and Pepper to taste

Cut the core of the cabbage out with a knife, then put the hole where the core- was, side down in a steamer over boiling water. Let it sit for about 10 minutes and remove. Several layers of the outer leaves should be soft enough to remove from the head. When you've removed as many as you can, return the head to the steamer to soften more leaves. Take a sharp knife and remove as much of the central vein as you can. FILLING: Mix all the other ingredients together in a bowl. work it with your hands until the eggs and other ingredients except the tomato juice are thoroughly mixed into the meat. Now, take a glob of mixture and set it in the hollow of a deveined leaf, with the end that was near the core towards you. Fold the end nearest you about / way over the mix. Fold the left side over the mix and then the right side. Roll about / turn away from you so that the "seam" is on the bottom. Place in the pan seam side don and continue with the other leaves.* When you've made the last cabbage roll, pour in the tomato juice to cover. Bring to a boil then simmer for at least one hour.

Note: This is not usually served during Christmas Eve, but can be prepared for the rest of the holiday. The recipe can also be made vegetarian by substituting beef with chopped walnuts.

Fish in Horseradish - Ryba w Sosie Chrzanowym 6 Servings

2 Carrots
2 Celery rib
1 Parsley root
1 Onion, quartered
5 Peppercorns
1 Bay leaf
6 c Water
2 lb Fish fillets (carp, sole, pike or similar fillets)
3 tb Butter
3 tb Flour
3/4 c Horseradish, prepared
1 ts Sugar
2/3 c Sour cream
2 Egg, hard-cooked, peeled & sieved
2 ts Salt
Pepper to taste

Combine vegetables, dry seasonings, and water in a saucepan or pot. Bring to a boil; simmer 20 minutes, then strain. Cook fish in the strained vegetable stock 6 to 10 minutes, or until fish flakes easily. Remove fish from stock. Arrange on serving platter and cover with plastic wrap. Chill.

Strain fish stock and reserve 3/4 cup for horseradish sauce; cool. For horseradish sauce, melt the butter in a saucepan, then blend in flour until smooth, making what the French would call a roux. Add the cooked fish stock gradually, stirring constantly. Cook and stir until the sauce boils and becomes thick and smooth. Remove from heat and stir in horseradish, sugar, salt, sour cream, and eggs. Cool for 15 minutes. Pour the horseradish sauce over the chilled fish, and garnish with shredded lettuce.

Herring Marinated in Sour Cream

4 servings

6 Pickled herring, drained
1 lg Onion, peeled and chopped
1 Garlic clove, crushed
6 Eggs (hard-cooked), peeled and chopped
1 Apple, cored and chopped
1 ts Lemon juice
1 c Sour cream
2 tb Dill or parsley (fresh), chopped
1/4 ts Salt
1/4 ts Pepper

Cut herring into small cubes. Mix herring with onion, eggs, apple and lemon juice. Combine sour cream, garlic, salt and pepper; add to herring mixture and mix well. Sprinkle with dill or parsley. Serve with rye bread.

Sauerkraut with Mushrooms - Kapusta Kiszona z Grzybami 6 servings

1 oz Mushrooms, dried (or use about 1/4 lb fresh mushrooms)
1/2 c Warm water
1 lg Onion
2 1/2 ts Butter
1 1/2 lb Sauerkraut, rinsed and drained
1/3 c Water
2 tb Flour
Salt and Pepper to taste

Soak the dried mushrooms in 1/2 cup of warm water for 1 hour. Sauté mushrooms and onion in butter in a skillet 3 minutes. Add sauerkraut to mushrooms; cook and stir for 10 minutes. Blend 1/3 cup water into flour. Mix with sauerkraut and simmer for 15 minutes. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Serve with good quality (preferably fresh) pasta such as tagliatelle, spirals or bows. Or use as a filling for pierogi or pancakes

Note: To use this as a filling for pierogi or pancakes, it is best to mince the sauce using the meat mincer. You can also increase the amount of dried mushrooms used to 3 or 4 oz for a more luxurious and festive taste.

Pierogi (Polish-style raviolis)

6 servings

2 Eggs
1/2 c Water
2 c Flour
1/2 ts Salt
Pepper to taste

Mound flour on kneading board and make hole in center. Drop eggs into hole and cut into flour with a knife. Add salt and water and knead until firm. Let rest for 10 minutes covered with a warm bowl. Divide dough in halves and roll thin. Cut circles with a large biscuit cutter. Place a small mound of filling a little to one side on each round of dough. Moisten edge with a little water, fold over and press edges firmly together. Be sure they are well sealed to prevent the filling from running out. Drop the pierogi into salted boiling water. Cook gently for 3 to 5 minutes. Lift out of water carefully with a perforated spoon. The dough has a tendency to dry while you are working. A dry dough will not seal completely. We suggest rolling out a large circle of dough, placing small mounds of filling far enough apart to allow for cutting, and folding the dough over the mounds of filling. Then cut with a small biscuit cutter and seal firmly. Never crowd or pile pierogi. The uncooked will stick and the cooked will lose shape and lightness.

Note: Pierogi can be frozen after boiling and they keep well. I prefer all my pierogi fried in butter and onions and seasoned with salt and pepper. They should be fried on a medium low heat till golden brown.