

What's in Our Pascha Basket?

Growing up, my family's traditions were a great hodge-podge of Carpatho-Russian and Romanian, with quite a bit of Antiochian thrown in for flavor (ahhh, spinach pies!). As a teen-age girl, one of the most vivid things I remember is attending Great Friday services at St. Mark's, an Antiochian parish where the women still wore mourning veils for Christ's "burial", and the chants of the funeral dirges were so beautiful they filled every waking moment for weeks afterward ("Every generation, to Thy grave comes bringing, Sweet Christ, its dirge of praises!").

Great Friday was the most solemn time: my family fasted all that day (no water, not even a tic-tac), and left the TV and radios off. Everything was silent in recognition of His sacrifice for us; I don't even remember complaining, because that would have made noise. And when services were over late Friday night, we drove home, or more often through the hills of central Pennsylvania to my Grandmother's.

In both places, we were greeted with the smell of baking bread, ham, and kielbasi: preparations had begun for the Pascha basket my father (and later, my boyfriend/fiancé/husband Bill) would struggle to carry to and from church for the Resurrection Liturgy and the food blessing that followed.

When I was young, I never knew why we were eating these strange "basket foods" after fasting for Lent. I didn't like ham; I wanted lasagna and meatballs! I didn't want horseradish; I wanted Arby's! But as I grew older, and wiser, and stayed up later (in the kitchen with Grandma, Mom & Auntie Sue, talking late into the night), I learned how to prepare these foods, and what they meant:

- Pascha, a rich egg-based bread sweetened with raisins, represents the "Bread of Life", Christ. My family always baked half a dozen paschas in small coffee cans, so they were round when you sliced them. [My Grandma always turned the pascha over before she cut it, and said, "In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit," cutting off three small pieces from the bottom as she did so. These pieces were put on the window sill to dry out, then eaten throughout the year, like Holy Bread, when one of us was sick.]
- Christ's Biscuits, were small round rolls made from the same dough as the pascha, brushed with egg as they were baking so the tops were shiny and deep brown. They always had icing crosses on the top. Again, they symbolize the Bread of Life.
- Pysanki, decorated hard-boiled eggs, are a symbol of the Resurrection: Jesus came out of the Tomb just as a chick comes out of an egg. My family always had bright pink eggs dyed with onion skin (like the one Mary supposedly offered to Pilate when she visited him after the Resurrection), and eggs decorated with pussy-willows, crosses, swirls, and "Christ is Risen! Christos Voskrese!" [As children, it was our job to prepare the eggs using the pysak (a "quill pen" for applying melted wax to eggs) my

Grandfather had made before he died. My mother always removed the wax after the eggs were dyed, because she never scorched them! Depending on how close to "western Easter" it was, we would use an egg-dye kit for some of the eggs, so our baskets sometimes included marbled, glittered, or Mickey-Mouse eggs as well. We never included the glossy black "Ukrainian" eggs made with toxic dyes, even though we made them throughout the year for show. Basket stuff was meant to be eaten!]

- Kielbasi and Ham are in the Pascha basket to symbolize the sacrifices made before Christ's perfect sacrifice; they are the basket's allusion to the Old Testament. I've recently read that meat in the Pascha basket also symbolizes the calf sacrificed when the Prodigal Son returned home; the meat is a celebration of our return to Christ.
- Horseradish and Spicy Mustard are included in the basket to remind us of the bitter drink given to Christ at his crucifixion, vinegar and gall. [My Grandma sometimes dyed the horseradish pink with beet juice, to symbolize the Blood shed by Christ.]
- Butter, usually whipped and flavored with almond, was included in the basket to symbolize the Lamb of God, the Sacrifice made for the world. [Some families used a lamb-shaped mold for their butter, which made the symbolism even stronger. We leave ours in a block, but carve a cross into it.]
- Salt, which was traditionally used to preserve food, represents the Truth of his eternal message. [When I married, my Grandmother gave me a special crystal shaker for my basket salt as a gift; she has used her shaker for over 70 years!]
- Egg-cheese (actually called "rrrrroot-KA", which might be spelled "hrutka") was the adult's favorite basket food; it was a rich, sweet scrambled-egg lump that they sliced, salted, and ate cold on pieces of pascha. [I have never tried to make it myself, but have my Grandma's recipe.]
- Sweets: Our family's Pascha basket never included chocolate or other candies, but I plan to slip in a chocolate egg and marshmallow lamb for my 18-month-old daughter this year. The symbolism is there, and as long as she grows up knowing the meaning of the foods in the basket, the sweets will never be confused with the plastic Easter baskets filled with sugar and stuffed rabbits sold at K-Mart.

The foods were prepared and loosely wrapped, then displayed in a sturdy basket so everything could be touched by the Holy Water when blessed after the Resurrection Liturgy. A decorated candle (and matches) were tucked into the side of the basket, and it was covered by an ornate cloth. The full basket was heavy, so we didn't worry about it tipping over in the car.

The candles used in my family's baskets came from many sources: the candles used during Procession, made at Camp Nazareth, or purchased at the monastery. After we married, Bill and I used the candles we held during our wedding ceremony; this year, we'll use one of Katie's baptismal candles.

My family's collection of basket covers is vast: every woman has contributed one or two beautifully-stitched linen pieces, some with colorful bands and crosses, some with embroidered icons. A different one is chosen every year. Many families used fine linen napkins (or the cloths used to bind the hands of a wedding couple) as basket covers. [My own cover is very plain, with a peti-point "southwest" border in teals and oranges. My Mother's cover (with the Theotokos) was once used as an icon at Sts. Peter and Paul's, when the old church burned down many years ago and the church was rebuilt.]

My Grandmother was always very strict about basket food: it was never to be shared with non-Christians, and never to be slipped under the table to the cats or dogs (she saved a bit of ham, unblest, for Spanky and Jackie). The shells peeled from the hard-boiled eggs, the scraps of ham, and the bread crumbs were carefully collected after each basket-food meal and buried in the rose garden or burned. They were never thrown out with the trash, because they were blessed.

If your family has never taken a Pascha basket to be blessed, our family's Pascha basket traditions may give you some ideas for starting your own; if your family regularly prepares a basket for the celebration of the Resurrection, take some time to pass down meanings of the foods and their preparation to your children. Everyone will enjoy being involved: baking, decorating, eating!

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