

4: 365 Dinners

What we eat is an important part of culture and an expression of identity. Changes in culinary customs have been related to cultural, religious, social, economic, aesthetic, and political transformations. Both in the Middle Ages and in modern times, it was common to have two meals a day—an early lunch and dinner. From the Middle Ages until the end of the 17th century, the dominant flavour in Polish cuisine was spicy, achieved through exotic spices like saffron, pepper, ginger, cinnamon, and nutmeg. For poorer citizens, garlic and onion were common substitutes. There was also a great fondness for sour, vinegar-like flavours. At the same time, sour flavours were combined with sugar or preserves. Foods such as meat, fish, vegetables, and even scrambled eggs were sweetened. Cereal products—bread and groats—constituted about 70% of the food ration for most of the population. Local vegetables were eaten in the form of soups, broths, and bryjas (a buckwheat mash).

Meat and fish, whether boiled, roasted, or fried, were commonly found on the tables of the more affluent classes, while the poorer people consumed them only on special occasions, usually content with just fat or cracklings. The main beverage for all age and social groups was low-alcohol beer, sometimes mixed with pieces of bread or cheese to make a sort of beer soup. Until the end of the 17th century, about one-third of the year was designated for fasting. During these periods, the consumption of meat, eggs, and dairy products was forbidden. However, there was no restraint on consuming alcohol or sweets. Even during fasting periods, grand banquets were held, featuring numerous fish dishes or beaver tail, which was considered a fish. On the tables of wealthy city residents, fish dishes were often shaped to resemble venison. These were true culinary masterpieces.

A new culinary trend arrived from France in the 18th century. It broke away from the earlier practice of combining contrasting flavors. The fundamental principle of this new cuisine became the focus on preserving the natural taste and appearance of the dishes. Local herbs began to be used, and vegetables gained greater popularity.

Throughout the Middle Ages, the primary tool for eating and serving food remained the knife. Both knives and spoons, made of wood or metal, were brought by diners themselves. An exhibit showcases a decorated, carved horn-handled knife, discovered during archaeological research at Castle Square. Portions of food were

taken from a shared dish, with rectangular or round wooden boards, or simply pieces of bread, serving as plates. Solid foods, at least until the mid-17th century, were most often eaten with fingers, even though individual plates were already common by that time. Various types of bowls were typically made from clay, wood, or, from the 15th century, pewter. In wealthy burgher households, imported glass drinking vessels began to appear from the Middle Ages. There is a small but valuable early-dated fragment of a goblet on display.

The Saxon prince Augustus II's accession to the Polish throne in 1697 marked the beginning of a transmission of new cultural patterns to Polish lands. During this period, the 'dining room' became more widespread, increasingly appearing in noble manors and wealthy burgher homes. A new way of setting the table was also adopted. In Warsaw, porcelain and faience tableware began to gain popularity, replacing the previously common pewter vessels, which started to disappear from inventories in the second half of the 18th century. The use of forks became common as well. The changes were initiated by the highest court circles and were subsequently emulated by lower social strata, according to their needs and means.

The widespread adoption of the coal stove simplified and democratized cooking—it became easier, faster, and more accessible. This invention also contributed to the development of other fields, such as culinary guidance. Thanks to the efforts of many authors, the concept of a family meal consisting of one, two, or three courses—a soup, a main course, and a dessert—became popular. Around the mid-19th century, cookbooks and household management books by women began to appear in the publishing market, including works by Karolina Nakwaska, Anna Ciundziewicka, and Wincentyna Zawadzka. However, the most popular author in this field was Lucyna Ćwierczakiewiczowa. Her book titled *365 Dinners for 5 Zlotys*, first published in 1860, became a true bestseller. The exhibition features the second edition of this popular book. It stood out among similar publications for its comprehensive approach to cooking and its lively language. Its originality lay in including seasonal dishes and planning meals for every day of the year. Another strength was the flexibility of its suggestions, allowing readers to choose a simpler yet always nutritious and varied menu.

In culinary publications, there was also an emphasis on the culture of eating and building connections through shared meals. At that time, professional work occupied

men's days, which shifted the time for communal meals from midday to evening. In poorer working-class families, meals were often not cooked at all due to a lack of resources for kitchen equipment and time for cooking, especially if both spouses worked professionally. These families typically ate separately, often in the street or in the cheapest dining establishments.

After World War II, social and political changes, including the widespread employment of women, led to many families no longer having shared meals on a daily basis. On working days, adults often ate in collective dining facilities—such as company cafeterias, milk bars, or fast-food establishments—while children ate at nurseries, kindergartens, and schools. However, most families continued to observe the tradition of shared Sunday and holiday meals.

The political changes of 1989 also impacted home cooking and gastronomy. On one hand, technological advancements and the availability of various kitchen appliances have made home cooking faster and easier, often involving all family members, including the youngest. It has become more of a leisure activity, offering opportunities to explore new flavors and acquire new skills. On the other hand, dining out has become increasingly accessible and popular, both at restaurants and through food delivery services. In recent years, there has also been a trend towards using pre-prepared meals or services specializing in diet-specific meal planning. As a result, shared family breakfasts, lunches, or dinners are increasingly limited to weekends, family celebrations, or holidays.

The changes in family meal practices are illustrated by a table featuring Warsaw tableware from different eras and a drawing by Marta Tomiak depicting scenes of meal consumption from the Middle Ages, the modern era, the 19th century, and the People's Republic of Poland (PRL) period.