

Halupki: A Symbol of My Family's Cultural Identity

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Halupki is a traditional Slovak dish made from meat, rice filled cabbage rolls and tomato sauce. Photo credit: Marco Verch.

Food is a quintessential mode of cultural expression. Nearly all cultures around the world have customs associated with the preparation and consumption of food, ranging from holidays and massive feasts to simply sitting down for a quiet family meal in front of the television. The traditions rooted in food can also carry significant memories related to one's family or life experiences. This is true for many in the

United States where there is a rich history of immigration comprising communities from nearly all corners of the world. In addition to their contributions to American innovation, entrepreneurship, and progress, immigrants brought with them culinary traditions that were then passed down through the generations.

My own family is a testament to this tradition where a handful of recipes have continued to be

relayed from parents to children. These recipes are traditional dishes or derivative of foods from the Eastern European culture, especially the modern-day countries of Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Poland. As a Slovak American, two of the most common recipes prepared and served at my family's gatherings are *haluski*—which consists of eggs noodles cooked with chopped cabbage and onions—and its derivative variant, cottage cheese and noodles. The latter is a comfort food and one of my favorite dishes, easily prepared with egg noodles, cottage cheese, butter, salt, and black pepper. Despite the popularity of *haluski*, however, arguably the most important traditional food in my family is *halupki*, a Slovak form of stuffed cabbage rolls.

Preparing *halupki* is a task that typically requires several dedicated hours to complete. It begins with boiling cabbage in a stock pot. Once it is cooked well enough to peel, it must be peeled by hand and left to cool. The preparer must then create a filling of meat, rice, and vegetables and stuff it into rolls of the cabbage leaves. After smothering the rolls in sauce, the food must be left to stew for several hours. Popular throughout Eastern Europe, cabbage rolls are a traditional dish seen in many countries, most notably Poland. *Halupki*, however, has roots in the culture of the Slovak and Czech peoples.

The tradition of *halupki* in my family arrived in the United States in 1925 with the emigration of my maternal great-great-grandmother, Mary Guzzi, and her husband, my great-great grandfather, from the former Czechoslovakia. Mary, affectionately called “Bubba,” and her husband arrived in the United States by boat and eventually settled in Pittsburgh's Monongahela Valley. To this day, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, is known for the culinary and cultural impact of Eastern European immigrants throughout the region. As the culture blog [Popular Pittsburgh](#)

attests, the greater Pittsburgh area has the largest ethnically Slovak population of any city in the world outside of Slovakia. Mary's immigration brought a unique contribution to the cultural tapestry of the region. Her recipes, especially *halupki*, helped further the traditions of the old country in the United States.

According to my grandmother, Mary would make the recipe frequently, especially during family gatherings and around the holidays. After her passing, the recipe for *halupki* was handed down to the women in my family, with one in each generation taking on the responsibility of preparing and serving the dish. Most recently, the dish was prepared by my great aunt Jodele, “Aunt Jodi,” to whom I was very close, until she unfortunately passed away last year. It has yet to be decided who will continue with the time-consuming responsibility of preparing the dish, although the recipe is well known by both my mother and grandmother.

Family food traditions play an important role in preserving the heritage of cultural groups while honoring and preserving the history and values of the community. As Irina Dumetriscu rightly notes in her [The Atlantic](#) article, “food offers ways of telling stories about who we are and where we come from.” Along with *haluski*, *halupki* carries both familial and cultural significance to me, and is a way of telling my story. Growing up, I was taught that the dish was an important part of my family's heritage as it represents one of the only Slovak traditions that my family still observes. When eating *halupki*, my mother, aunt, and uncle would reminisce about their time in the Tamburitzans, a youth Eastern European heritage folk ensemble, while my grandmother and Aunt Jodi interjected stories of Mary from the past when cultural ties were stronger. Consumption of the meal allows for a feeling of attachment to the

culture of the old country of Czechoslovakia, which is no longer a unified nation due to the political conflicts that took place over the course of the twentieth century. Through the preservation of food traditions, families can not only feel closer to other members of their family,

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but to their own cultural identities as well.

In his book *Food: The Key Concepts*, Warren Belasco writes about how food can serve as a personal identifier by triggering personal memories or cultural ties. For my grandmother, preparing and eating *halupki* is a special experience because it brings back memories of spending time with and eating alongside family members who have passed away over the years. When discussing her “Bubba,” she recollected how Mary was a “character” who had a sharp wit and was not afraid to be blunt. My grandmother also talked about how Mary would secretly smoke, and the young kids would sneak up on her causing Mary to frantically try to extinguish and hide the cigarette. The dish also brings back important memories for me, as it reminds me of spending time with my Aunt Jodi, whose loss I am still mourning. Whenever I smell the scent of the dish being prepared, I cannot help but remember visiting her house for the holidays and interacting with the distant family

members that would gather there from around the region. It is evident that certain foods can help establish and rekindle relationships with our cultural environment and those around us.

In addition to creating identity through memories, food can also work to bridge a communication gap between different generations and cultures. In the book *Food as Communication—Communication as Food*, Carlita Greene and Janet Cramer describe how food serves as a form of nonverbal communication through ritual and shared experience. By consuming food together, family members—and people in general—can shed their varying backgrounds and engage in a shared ritual of enjoying a meal. My grandmother often muses about how food like *halupki* served the purpose of creating shared moments of understanding with her Bubba in an otherwise apparent intergenerational gap where certain values might have shifted in different directions for both. Mary did not understand some things about American culture or technology, and my grandmother did not understand Mary’s struggles in the old country; they both understood food. Food brings people together to create a shared experience, and *halupki* carries that power in my family’s culture.

As the most important traditional recipe in my family, the Slovak stuffed cabbage dish *halupki* serves as a constant reminder of the cultural contributions of my great-great-grandmother Mary Guzzi’s immigration. Through her traditions and values, Mary made an impact on not only the Slovak community of Pittsburgh, but the entire cultural tapestry of the United States. A profound exhibition of cultural identity, the dish evokes memories of the old country of Czechoslovakia and of those important to us in the family that have been lost to time ■