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## The Influence of Mediterranean Culture on Polish Cuisine in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Era

### ABSTRACT

The article explores the Mediterranean influences on Polish cuisine in the centuries that followed the adoption of Christianity at the end of the 10th century. This memorable act brought Poland into the circle of Western culture anchored in the Greco-Roman tradition, which also heavily impacted the everyday life of representatives of all strata of Polish society. The author draws attention to the variety of such contact, which includes the journeys of clergymen, diplomatic missions, and trips of young people to universities. Trade and economic exchange, as well as the activity of Italian merchants and craftsmen on the Vistula, also had a strong bearing on the refashioning of the culinary culture. The breakthrough moment was the arrival in Krakow in 1518 of Bona Sforza—who became the wife of the Polish king Sigismund I—and her many courtiers.

**KEYWORDS:** Kingdom of Poland, Italy, medieval cuisine, Mediterranean culture

### STRESZCZENIE

Wpływ kultury śródziemnomorskiej na polską kuchnię w okresie średniowiecza i wczesnej nowoczesności

W artykule poruszona została kwestia wpływów śródziemnomorskich na kuchnię polską w okresie po przyjęciu pod koniec X wieku chrześcijaństwa. Ten wiekopomny akt wprowadził Polskę w obszar niezwykle bogatej kultury zakotwiczonej w tradycji grecko-rzymskiej, silnie oddziałującej również na życie codzienne przedstawicieli wszystkich warstw polskiego społeczeństwa. Autor zwrócił uwagę na różnorodność tych kontaktów, do których zaliczyć należy podróże duchownych, misje dyplomatyczne oraz wyjazdy młodzieży na studia. Duży wpływ na przemiany w obrębie kultury stołu wywarły też handel i wymiana gospodarcza oraz działalność nad Wisłą włoskich kupców

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i rzemieślników. Za moment przełomowy należy uznać przybycie do Krakowa w 1518 roku w towarzystwie licznych dworów Bony Sforzy, która została żoną króla polskiego Zygmunta I.

**SŁOWA KLUCZE:** Królestwo Polskie, Italia, średniowieczna kuchnia, kultura śródziemnomorska

The early Middle Ages were a time of deep social and political change in Europe, but it was also a period of impressive stability. During this long period of time food production and food processing were not undergoing any significant change. Until great geographical discoveries the same plants and farm animals were used that had been known to ancient civilizations (Garnsey, 1999). The only changes that could be observed had to do with food preparation and storage technologies. During that period we witness a slow decline of the Roman Empire, and at the same time an emergence of new barbaric states. It was the period the great world cultures and religions developed, and a new type of farming based on feudalism originated. At that time the Old Continent was inhabited by peoples who gave rise to modern European civilization. Also the division of Europe into Roman, Germanic and Slavic countries happened during that period. It was then that the cultural, social and culinary differences for which Europe is famous were formed.

The ancestors of Poles appeared in Central Europe following the Germans moving to the West at the end of the 6th century after Christ. Their cuisine was simple and limited to obtaining food from hunting and gathering. Animal husbandry and primitive farming were not so widespread in the Early Middle Ages. It seems that except raw and roasted meat, some wild plants such as sorrel and borscht were used to prepare soups. The skill of pickling vegetables and preparing sour soups and borscht also comes from this early period of Polish history (Dembinska, 1999, p. 10). The origin of medieval Polish cuisine goes back to the year 966 and is strongly associated with the baptism of its ruler, Prince Mieszko I. The decision, which he made was not an easy one. By that he not only introduced his subjects to a completely new civilization and cultural area, but also he put the country in the new international reality. Reception of Christianity made it possible for a new state to overcome threats and join a vibrant and energetic Western civilization. It was born on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea and in ancient times spread to many regions of Europe. The important constituents of this civilization were the table culture and highly sophisticated etiquette. At the time it was brought in to Poland in the 10th century, it was a mixture of ancient and Christian traditions.

Each region in Medieval Europe had slightly different culinary traditions, but they all included old Roman elements. Like in ancient Rome, the basic food was based on bread, olive oil, and wine (Weiss Adamson, 2002, pp. 2–13). Because in the northern regions of Europe there were difficulties in growing olives and grapevines, these products were often replaced with butter and beer. After the adoption of Christianity, there was a need to grow grapevines even in the far north. The wine could not be replaced during the Holy Mass by any other drink, and importing it from distant countries was expensive and often difficult. So the local people were taught to grow grapevines even in the Northern areas. It should be said here that the climate in the Middle Ages, until the mid-fourteenth century, was much warmer in Europe than it is today and in the areas such as Poland, it was possible to make wine without any problems. It is worth mentioning that the largest producer and exporter of wine in the Middle Ages was not Italy or France, but West Germany which had a wide belt of vineyards stretching along the Rhine, where the famous Riesling was produced.

A large impact on the diet of old Poland had prohibitions introduced by Christianity, especially those related to fasting. There were proclaimed by the clergy but often supervised by secular authorities, which severely punished for violating them. The habits that accompanied the Lent period in the Middle Ages were much more restrictive than today.<sup>1</sup> It was forbidden to eat not only meats but also dairy products, including eggs, butter, cheese, cream, and even milk. This prohibition applied to everyone regardless of age, marital status or social background. The period of Lent in Poland in the Middle Ages lasted nine weeks. In the liturgical year, there were 192 days of fasting during which the choice of dishes was limited. During fasting days, vegetables, fruit, and fish were primarily eaten. There was no problem with them near natural water bodies such as seas, lakes, and rivers. In other cases, in the inland places, fish ponds were dug. A lot of them existed around large urban centers. For instance near Krakow, the place I come from, which is a former capital of Poland, there are still dozens of fish ponds which served that purpose and operate to this day. The ponds were the reservoirs of fresh eels, pike, sturgeons, and trout to be delivered to the royal court, as well as to the episcopal palace and monasteries, and to the tables of rich burghers throughout the year. Poor people could afford only cheaper fish, such as carp. The most famous one was from the town of Zator (Lirski, 2007, pp. 11–22). Carp was also very popular in Jewish communities. Already in the Middle Ages, there were many

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1 For more on the Jewish, classical, and Christian motives and practices of fasting in the Middle Ages, see Grimm, 1996.

recipes for preparing this fish, which were common to Poles and Jews. One of these is the so-called “Sweet-and-Sour Jewish-Style Carp.” Today the Polish people both in-country and abroad eat carp in various types for Christmas Eve supper. Salted Baltic herrings were also popular. The fish was brought in barrels from the seaport of Gdansk and came from both their own fisheries and from the Scandinavian countries, primarily from Denmark and Sweden (Frandsen, 2004, pp. 145–167; Dembinska, 1999, pp. 99–103). It is interesting that in Poland, in the Middle Ages beavers were also considered fish because of their scaled tail. It was used to prepare a special, nutritious soup. It was so popular that even today you can find it in some restaurants in certain regions of the country.

The religious and cultural relations with Rome caused the need for numerous contacts with Italy, not only commercial exchange. At first, from Poland, clergy, priests and religious in matters of their churches and monasteries went to the Apennine Peninsula. Often their stays extended to several weeks, several months and even several years. It was time for them to learn about the dishes, products, and flavors of the best cuisine in the medieval world. They were new, better and addictive experiences. No wonder that after returning to the country they tried to familiarize them with their companions by bringing the necessary products and trying to prepare Italian favorite dishes. The second channel of contacts were Italian merchants who imported sought goods, including food, into Central Europe. There were two main routes connecting Krakow, the capital of Poland, with Italian ports, which were large centers of trade in food products. The first road led south through the Alps to Venice, which is on the coast of the Adriatic Sea. The second route is the road to the east, which ran through Lvov, in today’s Ukraine, to the Genoese Kaffa colony in Crimea on the Black Sea coast (Małowist, 1947; Hryszko, 2004). Krakow was at the intersection of these two old trade routes, and for this reason, it was the most important hub in Central Europe in the trade of exclusive, oriental goods (Carter, 1994, pp. 43 ff). In Medieval Poland apples, pears, and plums were known, thanks to the Cistercian monks who taught new methods of pruning and grafting fruit trees. Peaches, sweet melons, lemons, and oranges, which grow in southern countries were imported to Poland. They began to be brought to Poland along with other exotic products, like figs, raisins, and dates already at the end of the fourteenth century (Carter, 1994, pp. 198–199).

We know from historical sources that about a hundred Italians lived in Krakow around 1500. Most of them were rich burghers—merchants and bankers. Certainly, in their homes, the cooks prepared meals in Italian fashion. A very large group of Italians came to Krakow in the spring of 1518 together with Bona Sforza the Princess of Bari. She became the

wife of King Sigismund I. The wedding “per procura,” what means that the king was not personally present, took place in Naples on December 6, 1517 (Pociecha, 1949, p. 207; Petroni, 1835, pp. 562–563). The wedding reception lasted for one month, and a large delegation of Polish aristocracy and nobility of several hundred people participated in this splendid event. During that time lavish feasts, banquets, and festivals were organized and the best Apulian cuisine was served to the guests and the people of Naples (Sada, 1987, pp. 41–61).

A few months later queen Bona came to Poland with a court of almost 300 entourage, among which were, not only secretaries, clergy and scholars, but also some great cooks (Smolucha, 2019, pp. 31–41). After their arrival to Krakow, they were employed in the royal kitchen in the Wawel Castle. Queen Bona established such type of garden on the Wawel Castle Hill, where eggplants, artichokes, squashes and different varieties of lettuce, previously unknown in Poland were grown. She also grew other important herbs in cuisine, such as basil, oregano, and rosemary.

A large number of beautiful, young Italian ladies from the Queen’s court soon attracted an attention of young Polish aristocrats. It was a bit of a scandal, but those young men founded the “Drunkards and Gluttons” Society (in Latin *Bibones et Comedones*), which was dedicated to Bacchus and Venera—the gods of Wine and Love (Pociecha, 2005, p. 31). The young court ladies, against the will of the Queen, were more than happy to attend the feasts and parties organized by this company. Some of them got married to the sons of rich Polish noblemen. As you might suspect, these ladies introduced Italian cuisine to their new homes. The last important element of these Italian influences and contacts are Polish students at Italian universities, at Rome, Bologna, and Padua, where 1,400 Poles studied only during the Renaissance (Szczycki, 1997, pp. 37–47; Golemo, 2010, pp. 64–65). One can easily imagine that on return to their homeland after such a long stay, many of them had completely changed their eating habits and food preferences, which must also have had an impact on their immediate surroundings. These were the main factors of transformation in Old Polish cuisine, which I will try to explain in details in a moment.

The cuisine of the various states differed more in the quality and quantity of dishes than in the ingredients used. The rich could afford not only filling dishes but also delicacies such as venison, white bread, sweets, expensive spices, and mead. Poor people had to settle for inferior types of meats and fishes. So it was very common among them custom of preparing dishes from tripe, liver, hearts, and lungs. As a matter of fact, it is still very popular in Poland nowadays. Even pig ears and tails were eaten, which were used to fill the famous headcheese, called in Poland “salceson.”

The word comes from “salsiccia,” which means sausage in Italian (Cavaciocchi, ed., 1997, p. 559). It may be interesting to know that Italians themselves use the term *coppa di testa* for that product. But this dish comes from the ancient Roman cuisine, and is known in various parts of continental Europe and even in Greece and Great Britain (Allen, 2015, p. 12).

The first European cooking manuscripts, which have survived to our times go back to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Medieval Polish recipes were made in manuscripts and survived only to a small extent. The first recipes contained only ingredients, and they did not say much how to prepare dishes. They were developed and copied for the rich—the clergy, nobility and rich middle class. We can not find in them any reliable information about the food of the lower social groups. One of the first and the most popular books of this kind entitled *Compendium ferculorum* was written by Stanisław Czerniecki, who was the cook and secretary of Aleksander Lubomirski, a very influential nobleman, was produced much later, in the seventeenth century. But the content of the book was based on the medieval recipes. The book consists of three chapters and contains 333 recipes. The first part describes meat dishes, the second chapter contains recipes for fish dishes. In this part, you can find how in old Poland fish sauces had been prepared. The last part of the book has a number of recipes for dairy dishes and among them you can find how to prepare pies and cakes (Czerniecki, 2009).

It is important to remember that the work not only provides information on how to cook and prepare food but also must be read in a larger context of, we can say, the table culture. This is a manual of how to stimulate taste and imagination of guest, how to surprise and charm them, by preparing and serving dishes in a spectacular and theatrical way. Like today, ordinary water was an important drink. But, in the Middle Ages, fresh, potable water was only in the countryside, where there was access to clean springs and wells. In the cities, the wells were polluted, full of dangerous bacteria, and the water was not safe to drink even after boiling. For this reason in Polish cities mainly beer was drunk. It was produced in urban breweries, but also in monasteries, mainly Franciscan and Cistercian ones (Besala, 2015, pp. 22–50). Beer was consumed even in the morning, usually in the form of the famous beer soup. The medieval beer looked and tasted a little different from the modern. Very few filters were used in the production of beer, as a result of which the drink was cloudy, did not foam and had the consistency of a soup. The alcohol content was low, ranging from 1 to 5%, so light beers were served even to children. The beer was also unstable and was not suitable for longer storage. Very early on, experimenting with flavor additives began. To this end, hops began to be added, which became widespread in the 13th century. Due to this ingredient, it

was possible to store and preserve beer much longer. That gave birth to the brewing business (Dembinska, 1999, pp. 78–80). Breweries operated in virtually every major city of the kingdom. In Małopolska, the most famous ones were located in Bochnia, Wieliczka, and Niepołomice. It is worth mentioning that there were as many as 25 breweries in medieval Krakow, and that Silesia was famous for the export of beer to Italy and other places (Dobosz, 2017, p. 283).

With the arrival of a large number of Italians in Poland, as well as after the mass returns of Polish students from Italy after graduating in the fifteenth century, beer began to be slowly replaced, especially in rich homes, by wine imported from southern countries. Classic Italian wines were drunk, mainly produced in the Veneto region, but also sweet Malvasia imported from the Greek islands. The white wine called Moscato de ‘Polachi (or Moscato of Poles), which was cultivated in the hills of Colli Euganei, west of Padua (Cantù, ed., 1859, p. 997), enjoyed great fame in the Republic of Saint Mark at that time. Purportedly, the name Moscato de ‘Polachi derived from the large number of Poles studying at the University of Padua. After returning to their homeland on the Vistula River, they also contributed to a change in culinary tastes and a popularization of wine drinking in Poland in the 16th century (Barycz, 1965, p. 196 ff; Bystroń, 1933, p. 490; Smółucha, 2016, p. 54–55).

In the 16th century, high-quality wine from Hungary began to be imported to Poland: red wine from Eger and delicious white Tokaj. Krakow was an important center of Hungarian wine trade throughout Europe, a remnant of which is the huge cellar spaces extending for miles under the Old Town Square (Carter, 1994, pp. 301–314; Dembinska, 1999, pp. 75–78). They are known to all who have visited Krakow at least once, because currently all the best restaurants and bars are located deep underground in these venues. At one time, there were thousands of barrels of wine propped against the walls of these premises.

As can be seen, the numerous interactions with the Mediterranean world—mainly with Italy—which started at the end of the 10th century with Poland’s adoption of Christianity, had a profound impact on the culinary culture of the country. These relations were well-developed by the end of the Middle Ages and during the Renaissance. The presence of a large Italian colony in the capital city of Krakow and the extensive trade of Italian merchants on the trade routes leading from the Black Sea and the Adriatic Sea widened the Polish culinary repertoire with new products and increased the quality of meals. These Italian influences began to weaken towards the end of the First Polish Republic, when the fashion for French culture began.

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