



Regional Features of Baking and Decorating a Korovai

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Abstract

This article will discuss regional characteristics in the baking and decoration of korovai, Ukrainian ritual bread, baked for many years in different areas of Ukraine and an important symbol of cultural identity. The task herein is to systematize local ways of preparing and decorating korovai, so as to bring out their symbolic meaning and role in maintaining the national heritage. Its study became relevant due to increasing globalization that tends to erase specific regional traits; there arises a need for documentation of ethnocultural traditions. This novelty in scholarship arises from a thorough analysis of poorly researched discrepancies between Eastern and Western Ukraine, wherein connections among decorative elements, ingredients, and local cultural codes are determined. A comparative analysis based on five sources is used as a research methodology, ethnographic data being one of them. It has formed the history, nature and social factors of regional features of korovai. Thus, differences will affect not only decor but recipe too. Ritual practice was highlighted as an important factor in passing cultural heritage, which needs to be supported by educational initiatives and traditions popularization. The article will be useful for ethnographers, cultural scientists, historians, cooks, and specialists in the field of preserving intangible cultural heritage about regional traditions of Ukraine.

Keywords: Korovai, Ukraine, Regional Traditions, Ukrainian Cuisine, Wedding Ceremonies, Decorative Art.

INTRODUCTION

Korovai is a real symbol of Ukrainian culture and it unites and accompanies people at the most important events in life: weddings, baptisms, family celebrations, and receptions of dear guests. Symbolic round korovaies are made with great care and love. Ukrainian bakers put their souls into this festive bread, endeavoring to invest it with profound meaning and ancient traditions.

The tradition of korovai is of great antiquity, gradually developing in the general ritualized structure of Slavic bread as a sacred manifestation of the gift of life and fertility—the main expression of welfare. Its round shape is the realization of the solar disk associated with the sun as a source of heat and energy. In ancient times, the old Slavs believed that through the form of bread they would be able to convey to people the very forces of nature and the blessings of higher powers. In subsequent centuries, these legends were woven into Christian tradition, but the symbolism of korovai remained unchanged. Christian tradition alongside this symbolism has not changed the symbolism of the korovai, embodying prosperity, happiness, and unity.

Korovai is not just a treat. Korovai is an important element of rituals. Most people note this during the wedding—that age-old korovai symbolized blessing for a long, happy, and

fruitful life of a young family. korovais were not only baked for weddings. They were available for the ritual reception of the guest. The house owners go out to greet those arriving with a korovai and salt—this moment is meant to emphasize their hospitality, cordiality, and generosity of the new house owners. This tradition is still being observed in many places and regions in Ukraine.

MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

To study the regional peculiarities of baking and decorating the korovai, a corpus of five sources was used which consisted of popular science articles, materials from cultural institutions and commercial organizations. General information on the symbolism, ingredients, and traditional technologies of preparing the korovai was presented in the newspaper article [1]. A source from the Mykolaiv Regional Center of Folk Art [2] exposed the regional features of wedding ceremonies related to the korovai, specifically discussing decoration techniques, and ritual songs that go with its formation in the southern parts of Ukraine. An output from the Kyivkhib firm [3] reflected contemporary methodologies of baking the korovai within the capital region, and local varieties of wheat were used along with the adjustment of recipes for mass production. General information on the traditional Ukrainian wedding bread and

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its photos were presented in an online catalog entry from the Art Prezent website [4]. The methodology of the work was based on the comparative analysis of regional practices. For instance, the materials from the Girko website [5] allowed to compare the traditions of decorating the bread in Lviv (emphasis on geometric ornamentations and symbols of the Carpathians) with those from Kharkiv — “trees of life” and Poltava — plant ornaments.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Making korovai in different regions of Ukraine is developing common features inherent in the entire territory of the country and unique features that reflect and fix local customs. Let's first consider the process of making korovai at weddings in detail.

The ceremony of baking the korovai marks the beginning of the marriage process. Married women, family members or close friends traditionally participate smiley happy then frown lips sad to wish the new family wealth and prosperity. Sometimes all the married women from the side of the bride are participating, except for widows or childless women. It is customary to invite an odd number of korovainitsy—apparently, seven or nine, is considered even luckier. Still, in some regions, an even number is preferred as a symbol of the unity of the couple [2].

The bakeshop stood dressed with branches of viburnum laden with berries, a plant whose symbolism as a mediator of the ancient love binding a recently wed couple did not raise any doubts. Korovainitsy sun themselves and wear a wreath of periwinkle as they gather together in the house of the brides on Thursday or perhaps Friday just before the wedding. This young hostess was led in her performance by one of the foremost old korovainitsas — a woman from a harmonious marriage with good children — through whom she transferred welfare to the young couple. She kept the house in a good state of mind because the mood of the place had an effect on the bread, thereby on the future life of the married couple.

Flour, butter, eggs; Sifted flour, kneaded dough with added butter, margarine, and honey - all performed to represent a sweet life for the bride and groom. All of this was done to the chant of ritual songs. The dough having been placed in the oven, the designated korovainitsa would strike the walls with a shovel, while the others danced around a dezha (a tub for dough) holding the dezha aloft to the ceiling three times. The loftier the korovai must rise, happiness awaited the young couple that much more high.

A ready korovai symbolized the destiny forecast. Even and fluffy — happiness, cracked — troubles. No overbaking was allowed. The top of the korovai had an ornament made of dough: corn and grapes as a sign of the wealth for the coming family; guelder-rose - for beauty; birds and swans are the symbols of faithfulness; the sun and the moon stand for the bride and groom. Inserts were also available; sometimes

they put a coin inside, and the person who found it was considered lucky. The korovai was also left for 1-2 days after baking to ‘mature,’ it would then acquire a pleasant smell. The main thing was the division of the korovai: the middle part went to the new family; the lower part to the musicians; and the rest among the guests, that is, divided according to their hierarchy. All these accompanied with funny wishes and presents underline the strengthening harmony in the family and society at large. A typical korovai can be seen in Figure 1.



Fig. 1. Typical korovai [3]

The main points common to the ways of preparing a korovai include yeast dough, which is the main one used to prepare that very korovai. This bread is soft and fluffy due to the dough, which characterizes bread with images of abundance and well-being. This or that aspect remains identical anywhere from the East to the West of Ukraine underlining how bread is related to images of wealth at home.

Another common feature is that korovaies usually come in a round shape, which definitely is not accidental and has a very deep symbolic meaning associated with the sun, eternity and the life cycle. The circle in the Ukrainian tradition even now is more of a unity concept among the family members and a continuous life rather than festive rituals, making the korovai very much an integrated part of celebration, of which the center is a wedding.

Eastern Ukrainian baking and decoration traditions of the korovai are quite unique. This reflects the local cultural expression of values with an emphasis on family traditions. One of the features most prominent includes the use of shoes and owls as figurine decorations. Both bear strong

symbolism. Shoe dough represents the mother of the bride and can be applied to the journey of her life, to support, and to leadership within the family, thereby underscoring her main role in the life of the young couple that is also an acknowledgement of wisdom or the male on the side of the bride as a mentor and head of the family. The ethnographic data reveals that these two decorative pieces articulate wishes for family well-being and wisdom, significant symbols within the eastern Ukrainian rituals. Korovai in East Ukraine do not feature complex decorations but, rather, simple forms with symbolism decorations- anything sophisticatedly decorated. In Western regions, korovai is multileveled and is usually richly decorated with flowers or grapevines. korovaies are of one tier, and the details are minimal, yet very expressive. It is again the same simplicity that reveals the classical approach toward the aesthetic and semantic value, where aesthetic components are treated as secondary as compared to meaning. The simplicity of form introduced in the table decorations at the same time reflects the family and collective values typical of that region. For that reason, sometimes the simple forms undertake much more for the table decorations, namely the continuous importers of very important cultural powerfulness.



Fig. 2. Multi-level korovai [4]

Having gone through general characteristics of regions of the east of Ukraine, it can be observed that baking traditions in the western part help to bring new insights to this phenomenon. This can be also seen quite vividly Polissi because the korovaies over there are striking due to their size and intricacy, apparently reflecting the complexity and magnificence of the local rituals. Among them are korovaies, both single-tier and multi-tiered, though in most cases the latter serves as the core element of any festivity. The multiple tiers indicated not merely the artistry of the bakers but also

the high regard with which the occasion, for which the bread is produced, is held. The korovaies apply intricate decorations made out of dough—flowery, lines of grapevines, birds—and these decorations carry much meaning with them: flowers for life and beauty; grapes, wealth; and finally birds, freedom and family happiness. The artistic korovaies owe their unique appearance to the great culture of Lviv, her architecture, and popular crafts. One typical such example is, patterns can look like an embroidered design or woodcarving, every korovai becomes a real work of art that carries within it the very spirit of the West Ukrainian region.

Other areas of Ukraine have their own characteristics in the traditions of baking the korovai, determined by local conditions and preferences. For example, in some areas, regional ingredients like honey or dried fruits are put into the dough; these endow the bread with a characteristic taste and aroma. The shape of the korovai may be different: it is preferred to have elongated or oval korovaies in some places, while elsewhere round remains the traditional form preserved as an emblem of the sun and of unity. In some places, small extra korovaies called “shihka” are baked with the main korovai; these are presented to guests as an expression of good luck and hospitality.

One of the most common simple techniques is the use of braids normally placed along the sides of the korovai. Braids woven from the dough usually represent unity and strength of family ties—two significant Ukrainian values. This element highlights the relationship between family members, their coherence, and mutual support, which becomes a major theme for the wedding ceremony due to the functionality of the korovai as the two families coming together in one marriage union. Due to the ease of braids execution, this type of decoration is affordable even for those bakers who are not professionals, but its concept will keep intact the inviolable idea of family connections. The other important element is ears of wheat; these are represented as fertility and prosperity which are concepts very much related to the fertility of Ukraine and its heritage. Ears of wheat on the korovai—this is a frequent motif in the wedding tradition. It basically pretends to wish that abundance and prosperity be in the house of the newly created family. This symbol speaks about the value of the land and harvest in the life of the people, but particularly it speaks about hope for a great future with all good. It isn't actually at all difficult to mold ears of wheat from dough, but the presence of this very ancient symbol on the korovai does very much to bring out the feeling of an affinity with nature and the circle of life.

Flowers, roses, and camomiles do not only make the korovai good but also carry a certain symbolism in them. In this case, flowers made of dough symbolize beauty and life - it also underlines the festive mood. Indeed, in the Ukrainian thematic cultural intro, flowers serve as symbols of joy combined with youth and harmony, which motivates the need for ritual bread to be well decorated.”

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dough symbolize beauty and life - it also underlines the festive mood. Indeed, in the Ukrainian thematic cultural intro, flowers serve as symbols of joy combined with youth and harmony, which motivates the need for ritual bread." These can be done without high professional training, but it turns out that they help you turn the korovai into a real work of art, where it is nice to look at topical positive emotions. For instance, there are bird shapes, widely presented on korovaies, mean freedom and happiness - these very much required in the wedding ceremony. Grapevines, another popular element, symbolize abundance and wealth, to show their connection with nature and fertility, which are not in actuality very significant for this region where winemaking tradition hails. Roses or daisies in floral arrangements bring visual harmony to the korovaies and express life and harmony; the motif is inspired by local crafts like embroidery. Skill and time go into these patterns, which demand extreme attention to detail; they become a fundamental aspect of high complex decoration techniques.

In the northwestern regions, in particular in Volyn and Polissya such complexity also reveals itself within the baking of multi-tiered korovaies, which sometimes overshadows itself as a true work of art. They are often more strongly decorated, reflecting the richness of local traditions and the importance of the holiday on which they are prepared. The formation of multiple tiers emphasizes the high degree of mastery in baking and gives the bread royal-looking features. Such korovaies are able to occupy the central place in the very essence of festive events, among them wedding parties. Specific decorations on korovaies might involve rich outlines of flowers, birds with wings spread, and grapes; sometimes, however, guelder roses are used—these being the national symbol for love and faithfulness. See Figure 3 for an example of a decorated korovai.



Fig. 3. Decorated korovai [5]

For the creation of decorations of such complexity, master confectioners use a special basic dense dough, which differs from the basic dough used for korovai. This basic dough is made without yeast; water, flour, and salt are the only ingredients that go into its preparation, it is only this that helps it to keep its shape while baking. The absence of rise in the contingent nature of decorative elements - birds, flowers, or grapevines - retains their clarity and expressivity even after heat treatment. Such details make the durability of the decorations important; detailed in statues where everything, no matter how small, has an impact on the general composition. Use of a special basic dense dough reveals not only the technical skill of bakers but also brings out the functional aspect of the art of decorating korovai, in creating long-lasting and symbolically rich elements.

The recipes for korovai, a Ukrainian holiday bread, carry more of a cultural gustation than culinary tradition. In short, a basic recipe includes wheat flour, milk, eggs, butter, yeast, sugar, and salt, the major components of such ambrosia. Dough preparation, korovai formation, ornamentation, and baking compose the general stages. The criteria accepted alongside the ingredients in these stages make the korovai not only typically Ukrainian but also at times typically from specific regions, illustrating the very collaboration between kitchens and cultures. The ingredients in the regular recipe for a korovai have a sort of functionality correlated with and dependent upon everything else in a local lifestyle. Ukraine has developed agriculture and Ukraine has access to wheat flour, which is a principal component for bread from any point within its borders, making it an almost liquid part of baking. Milk is added to make the clumps soft and mild in flavor; indeed, the emphasis on the tradition of dairy product use in Ukrainian cuisine actually is best. The eggs hold the dough together and give it a golden crust for all holiday baking. Butter is for flavor, making the korovai full-flavored and aromatic; and yeast, for fluffiness, gives the dough ample lift. The process wishes sweetness, sugar of course for the holiday treat, and salt wishes for prominence of taste to bind and balance.

It all starts with dough kneading where a thorough mixture of all ingredients is executed until a homogeneous mass is formed, later it is left to rise in warmth. Then comes korovai shaping — a round korovai as per tradition; it's a sun and cycle-of-life symbol that underlines cultural meaning of this product. Decorating also plays a big role in this process, there are ornamental elements made of dough — braids or spikelets placed onto the surface of the bread — they don't add only aesthetic but also symbolic meaning. And the process ends with baking in the oven until a golden crust; that gives a good look and a pleasant texture to the korovai. The difference between stage versions, however, lies in the deviation of korovaies from the generic recipe depending on the locality, hence proving how much it tempts the korovai with local characteristics. These ingredients and the very process of production unite with traditional elements in how

the basic recipe is acclimated with realia. In other words, in parts of Eastern Ukraine, honey might be mixed into the dough, echoing bee-keeping practices and imbuing the bread with an appropriate aroma. In Western Ukraine, perhaps sour cream could be used instead of milk, to give a richer flavor that is more in keeping with the dairy traditions of that part of the country. Such diversity of variations indicates the way in which resource availability and specific cultural conditions modify the basic recipe, retaining its fundamental form and essence. So, korovai becomes more than just bread, it speaks diversity: Ukrainian culture and its culinary legacy. There are several regional modifications of the korovai recipe, one such example being practiced in Ukraine, which illustrates how the simple composition of ingredients is adapted to local traditions and available resources. This emphasizes how culinary art is deeply connected with the culture and economy of regions. In the east of the country, beekeeping is also very well established and respected and people there usually use honey instead of sugar in the dough of their korovai. This gives the bread a special sweetness and aroma, making it taste better and unique in its own way. This strategy is inherent in the Eastern regions, for instance, such cities as Kharkiv and Poltava. It is known that in those cities not only is honey available, because of well-developed beekeeping; it is also treated with respect; it is a part of the life of local culture. The use of honey in place of sugar underlines the connection of culinary practices with the traditions of the region because beekeeping is significant in the life of communities. This becomes more than an ingredient. This is a part of the regional identity.

In the west, among regions rich in dairy farming conditions, for instance, in the Lviv or Ivano-Frankivsk regions, cream addition to the dough for the korovai sometimes occurs. Dairy products impel bread to be soft with a slightly sour flavor, harmonizing with typical culinary preferences in the region. The addition of cream or sour cream indicates this western agricultural orientation, wherein animal husbandry and dairy production are the staple sources of economy and daily life. Such an alteration of the recipe improves the flavor of the korovai esthetically, and this, indeed, also shows how traditional dishes are adapted to the resources then available, maintaining their cultural importance and identity against other versions. The linkage of regional variations to the resources and preferences is also recorded by the way that general ingredients from the locality are incorporated into the korovai's basic recipe. The east uses honey, a cheaply affordable and treasured product to sweeten the product, thereby supporting the beekeeping tradition and indicating its role in local culture. Cream or sour cream is added in dairy regions of the west, making the dough richer and the korovai softer, blending with the tastes there. These differences show how culinary art responds to the economic and cultural environment under which it develops, so that besides just being a festive bread, it acts as a unique statement of regional identity harmonizing the sheer diversity of traditions and resources in Ukraine.

CONCLUSION

Korovai is much more than a culinary product: it embodies profound social and spiritual values and thus occupies key positions in the life of every person and the culture of Ukraine. The lozenges are filled with hospitality, respect, and goodwill to meet the main great life events: weddings, christenings, and receptions of dear guests. It gives visibility to wealth, happiness, and strength of a young family at weddings. In the natural ornamentation and round shape of korovai reminiscent of the rising sun, it is closely related to deep-seated beliefs and nature. Youth look up to the elders for guidance in this art which makes the Ukrainian nation only because it forms many generations and passes on the Ukrainian heritage by creating its traditions and identity. Korovai becomes much more than a treat; it unites different generations and becomes a focal point of cultural values.

Regional diversity of the korovai baking and decorating traditions mutually underlines the wealth and versatility of Ukrainian cultural heritage. For example, in the east of the country, alongside the shoe- and owl-shaped figures which embodied family welfare and wisdom, simple korovaies sufficed on the other hand in the western region, Lviv, multi-tiered masses of flowers, vines, and birds bring about the splendor of local rituals and folk crafts. There are recipes for different regions, adapted to local resources and preferences: honey in the east, cream in the west. Such differences show not only the creativeness of tradition conservation but also the multiform impact of cultural differentials, historical eventfulness, and natural lending on every appearance of every region of Ukraine. The rules of baking and decorating bread support the passing of cultural heritage traditions onto future generations. As regards globalization and urbanization, phenomena that reform the specifics of a locality, respecting such differential ways can enable the korovai to stay a dynamic part of cultures rather an item for a museum setting. Therefore, it is important to begin training young bakers, conducting master classes and festivals, and covering traditions in the mass media and educational programs because through it actual craftsmanship is created to make the piece of bread into a symbol of national and family hearth. Only through such active measures will we be assured that the enormous store of Ukrainian culture, manifest in this bread of festivity, will be passed on from one generation to the next with its depth and beauty intact.

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