

## TRADITIONAL CUISINE FROM KOPRIVSHTITSA

Any well-read Bulgarian is aware what the town of Koprivshtitsa has given to the Bulgarian National Revival – in terms of education, spirituality, culture and the First Gunshot of Freedom. In practice, the town was a microcosm of the processes underlying the National Revival society in which it had a foremost role to play. Dozens of books, studies and articles have been devoted to the natural givens, history, folklore, education and revolutionary activity of the town huddled in Sredna Gora Mountain. However in terms of both language and cooking, it has been skirted by linguists and ethnologists alike, because it is a town with troubled history revealing lots of migration waves triggered by unrests, pogroms and epidemics. The other reason is that the dialect of this town with a glorious past deservedly occupied, above all due to the literary activity of Nayden Gerov and Lyuben Karavelov, an extraordinarily important place in the making of the Bulgarian standard language. However, my research of both the dialect of Koprivshtitsa people (*Keremidchieva, S. The Dialect of Ropkata. Rhodope Grammar. Sofia, 1993.*), and the culinary practices (see the website of the Interactive Culinary Map of the Bulgarian Language Territory – <https://ibl.bas.bg/kulinar/index.html>) suggests that both display many original and specific features which it is worthwhile describing and analyzing to widen their popularity.

Anyway, let us now enter the kitchen of the old-time and present-day Koprivshtitsa residents and discover the traditional dishes and drinks which locals serve to this day on weekdays and on holidays. And having mentioned L. Karavelov, let us recall his “old-time Bulgarian man” – the Epicurean Hadzhi Gencho with his attitude to food: “*When he was back from church, Hadzhi Gencho would roast a piece of meat in the embers, pour a little red wine, take the salt-cellar and sit down to put his guts into order...*” It would not be an exaggeration to claim that if one reads Karavelov’s novelette *Old Time Bulgarians* (1867) from a gastronomical point of view, he or she would be able to learn a lot about the food and drinks served in Koprivshtitsa at that time. The wines which Hadzhi Gencho drank in the company of Dyado Liben are the subject of a few studies. L. Karavelov devoted whole passages to discuss the town’s unique commemorative boiled wheat stressing that each grain should stand apart, and mentioning other ingredients such as figs, *tlacheni* (finely crushed) walnuts, roasted corn or wheat flour, sugar and honey. To date this dainty is made in the same quite fascinating and time-consuming way; it feels dry and is delicious and full of flavors. It is a mandatory ceremonial attribute during funerals and commemoration of the dead; it is taken to *черкова* (church), and served during commemoration, as well as given out to the relatives and friends of a deceased man.

Besides, Koprivshtitsa residents have old and very specific culinary traditions compared to other places arising from their urban culture and enviable material wealth in the past that resulted from prosperous crafts and occupations such as homespun tailoring, stockbreeding, emigrant work and tax-collection (buying off the tax *beglik* levied on sheep and goats). The diet of the locals as anywhere else is determined by the conditions they live in. And in highland Koprivshtitsa the conditions are fairly rough. Zahari Stoyanov offered a very good insight into this, as he wrote, “*God Almighty,*

*this tiny box of a village, where winter lasts for nine months, where only rye is possible to grow...*” This is very much so, as the small town is located at 1600 m above sea level and on its land neither wheat, nor corn or sunflower can grow. The only crops are rye and potatoes which the locals call *бръбой*. That is why the Koprivshitsa housewife is able to prepare potatoes in many different ways and for all sorts of occasions – fried in lard, baked with the skin and then mashed with white cheese, butter and savory; *бръбой на глави* means boiled potatoes in whole tubers. They also roast and fry meat, but more often on festive occasions. In the past, any relatively well-off Koprivshitsa resident believed it was his duty to mark major Christian feasts by giving out, first thing in the morning, a lamb’s quarter (for St. George’s Feast) or a pork leg (for Christmas) to his poorer neighbors or to widows and orphans. A classical Koprivshitsa expression is the following: “*Ядохме бръбой с мръви и напокон ошав*” (We had potatoes with morsels of meat and oshav [stewed dried fruit] for pudding). Koprivshitsa people used to get everything necessary from relatives living in farming villages, while emigrant workers would bring over exotic fruits and nuts from faraway lands – from Constantinople and even from Egypt – Cairo and Alexandria. Thus damsons which are a rarity here and lack in enough sugar content were popular in a very tasty and favorite recipe of Koprivshitsa locals – *a stew with pork, onions and dried damsons*.

By visiting the Interactive Culinary Map one can watch how the local dishes are cooked by Koprivshitsa master Mrs. Penka Tsvetkova. She is an accomplished *у̀редница* as locals dub a good housewife and a bustling housekeeper and she prepares the inimitable Koprivshitsa-style *бохча-тутманик* (*bundle heart-cake*). This is a kind of heart-cake which is time-consuming to make and requires certain agility and other skills. Once the dough is knead it is divided into 24 balls, and from them small *туптѐта* (cakes) are made. In groups of three these are stuck together with butter and then eight *нѐтупи*, as they call the sheets of pastry here, are rolled out by hand. Penka made these sheets so thin and fine that the pattern of the oilcloth over which she rolled them out showed through them. Tireless and energetic she did all this with a lot of love, patience and superb skill. The end-product is a creation of puff pastry. The Koprivshitsa women made this many-layered heart-cake long before present-day Bulgarian ladies got accustomed to widespread use of puff pastry which rose to popularity in the 1990s as it was introduced to the mass market for the first time. The buttery bundle heart-cake literally melts in the mouth. In the past the cake was baked in a special copper baking dish. Even today in some Koprivshitsa households, one can come across 10 to 15 copper pans shining like the sun and of different size and depth for various dishes and pastries. Indisputably food prepared in them has superior taste.

A signature local pastry which the team of the project has not found in other places so far is the so-called mlin (*млин*). It is made with very thin pastry sheets sprinkled in between with plenty of walnuts and sugar. Mlin is not unlike baklava, however no syrup is added to it. The same pastry sheets are used to make *зелник* pie with stewed sour cabbage used as stuffing.

Another specific dish from this part of the country is the delicacy *зѐтѐва мандѐжа* (the dish for the son-in-law) – poached eggs, pronounced as follows: *ѐйца на ђчи*. When the candidate to become son-in-law is already a fiancé and sports a new status, he ought to visit his future mother-

in-law dubbed *баба* here. Then she would most often prepare this delicious dish with plenty of butter and white cheese. The dish is similar to *яйца по панагюрски* (eggs the Panagyurishte style), but is made without yoghurt and its key strength is white cheese which is first laid on the plate. The eggs are “veiled” and sprinkled over with melted butter, a little bit of oil and flour to remain smooth.

A traditional old ceremonial dish served at weddings, christenings and other festive occasions, which however is an everyday treat today, is *stew with dried damsons*. Key in its method is the use of a handsome amount of pork and pork ribs and finely chopped onion. As was already made clear, damsons could not grow in this high-mountain town, but Koprivshitsa people were able to get hold of all necessary supplies that their land failed to yield – from other places. Hadzhi Gencho always kept supplies of dried apricots, chick-peas, walnuts, carobs, and what not for his occasional snacks. The stew is absolutely delicious offering to the palate a subtle balance between the sweet and salty. On the menus of local taverns it is served under the name “an Old-Bulgarian dish”. It is easy to cook and beside its good taste it is also healthy, because the damson is a powerful antioxidant.

Although the old masters are no longer around, the celebrated Koprivshitsa lukanka (flat sausage) is the local meat product which accounts for the culinary glory of the town. Its “secret” method is listed at the entrance of the *Lyuben and Petko Karavelov* Museum-House. In winter time, Koprivshitsa sausages can still be seen swaying on the graceful balconies but elderly people comment with regret that they do not boast the great taste of old-time ones. This may be true, but what really matters is that the locals keep the ancient culinary traditions of their grannies and mothers and make their best to hand them down to posterity.

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