

Moravian Cuisine

by Dave Cleary

Chlebíčky

Chlebíčky are an open sandwich with a collection of toppings - usually 3 or 4 per slice, a delectable combination of ham, salami, sausage, sliced hard-boiled egg, cheeses, cream cheese, cucumber, tomato, pepper, with perhaps a slice of pickle or a leaf of lettuce. Other than having this mix of toppings, the other thing that makes chlebíčky unique is the use of a spread instead of butter.

Originally a smooth creamy potato salad went on the bread, but over the years people have become creative and now use fish paste, egg spread, lobster salad or a perennial Czech favourite called Vlašský salát.

Credit for creating the first chlebíčky is given to Jan Paukert in 1916 with the opening of his eponymous deli. This original chlebíček had a slice of white bread topped with this now-famous potato salad, a slice of Prague ham, Emmental cheese, Hungarian salami, a piece of hardboiled egg, and a slice of tomato. There are, however, disagreements over the exact makeup of the first chlebíčky.

But why did Paukert design this delicacy? Legend has it that the Czech painter Jan Skramlík, whilst indisposed on a ladder at the time, asked Mr. Paukert to prepare a snack that would fit into his hand. This seemingly



trivial request made the name of both the bistro, Jan Paukert Lahůdkářství, and its founder. It is not considered to have any particular impact on Skramlík's fortunes.

It was not long before many other Prague cafes cottoned on to the success of the chlebíčky, and from there it spread to the rest of the country, with each proprietor putting their own twist on the idea. However, the recipe for the potato salad - used as a spread under the toppings, and a key element that made the original so unique - went to the grave with its creator in 2010. Hang on a moment. In 1916 he created chlebíčky yet did not die until 2010. How old was he when these things happened? It is well-established that Jan Paukert Lahůdkářství opened its doors in 1916 and that chlebíčky were on the menu. Further research reveals documentary evidence stating that Jan Paukert died aged 91 in 2010.

How is this possible? By the quaint, or wierd (depending on your point of view), tradition of naming your first son after his father. Many people have conflated the two Jan Paukerts into a single person. Whichever way you look at it, the chlebíčky created by the father, or the bistro resurrected by the son down the line, the name Jan Paukert is an indelible part of the history of Czech cuisine.

Kyselica

This is the Moravian version of cabbage soup, the kind with potatoes and meat, usually sausage, that can be found all over the slavic parts of Europe. This version really belongs to the part of the region called Moravian Valašsko (or Wallachia for the anglicised version) which is the very south-eastern corner of the country where it butts up against Slovakia, separated by a small mountain range.

These mountains are called the Beskydy mountains - Moravskoslezské Beskydy, or in Slovak, Moravsko-sliezske Beskydy - and are primarily in the Czech Republic with a small section reaching into Slovakia. It lies on the historical division between the regions Moravia and Silesia, hence the name. What the devil has all this got to do with soup?

The history of both communities dates the introduction of this style of soup to the arrival of Romanian shepherds to the area sometime before the 17th century. However, there is one crucial difference between the way the two make Kyselica.

On the Moravian side of the mountains, it's made with pickled / sour cabbage, aka sauerkraut.

On the Slovak side of the mountains, it's made with fresh grated cabbage.

Kyselica is traditionally eaten for breakfast, it ensured the village men, when heading out to work for the day, left with a full stomach and sufficient strength and energy to keep going for the whole day in the fields and forests.

The soup has been a staple of the Wallachian diet for many years, and is likely to be the inspiration behind the coining of the mantra, “brambory a zelí – živí se všemi věky”; “potatoes and cabbage - it feeds all ages”. It is easy to picture a *babička* (Czech grandmother) in her plain smock spooning the remaining *Kyselica* into the children’s bowls at lunchtime, once again and imploring them to eat by repeating this over and over.



Frgály

What do champagne, yoghurt, cornflakes and tofu all have in common? And what is the connection to a Moravian speciality called Frgály? First of all they are all famous foods eaten all over the world, but a more interesting connection is that they were all first created by accident.

Frgály could be said to be the world's tastiest mistake as its name means something that has gone wrong. One tale about the origin of the name is that people were originally trying to make koláč but the dough didn't rise properly and what came out the oven was the flatter frgál instead.

Moravian Wallachia is a mountainous region located in the easternmost part of Moravia in the Czech Republic, near the Slovak border. This is where the Valašský frgál originated. These days, the delicious pastries are exported all over the world.

In Wallachia itself, frgály began spreading their sweet aromas about 200 years ago, when they were prepared for the year's biggest holidays, feasts, festivals and weddings.

Most of today's frgály are sweet using a variety of local fruit such as plums, pears, apricots or the perennial favourite of blueberries. There are alternative toppings, one of the most popular is poppy seeds, and there is a sweet version made from cabbage. The taste of frgály was good enough to earn it PGI (protected geographical indication) from the European Commission. Moravian frgály is firmly established as a quality product that is exported to a number of neighboring countries.

Olomoucké tvarůžky

Czechs are rightly known for their beer, they also have their own versions of various dishes - their take on the meat, sauce and dumplings is called Svíčková and is the default dish at weddings and other special occasions. But cheese? Many cultures have at least one cheese that is recognised outside of the locality in which it is produced; but very few people think immediately of cheese when thinking of Czech cuisine. Unless you have tried Olomoucké tvarůžky that is.

Many visitors upon entering a pub or restaurant that specialises in Olomoucké tvarůžky will comment on the ripe smell, and wonder if it is the yeast in the beer, or perhaps unwashed locals. Some may even notice the odd donut-shaped golden circles on the plates carried by the serving staff. Few are genuinely ready for their first experience of what is generally considered to be the only original Czech cheese - Olomoucké tvarůžky.

Although it is not possible to give an exact date for the birth of this delicacy, tvarůžky dates from at least the early 15th century. The first recorded use of the word '*tvarůžky*' to describe the food was in 1583. At the time most of the cheese produced was known as "*selske tvarůžky*", farmer's cheese, with the eponymous moniker Olomoucké tvarůžky being used by the local markets and traders as its popularity spread through the 1600s.

So what is Olomoucké tvarůžky, and what makes it so special and unique?

Olomoucké tvarůžky is a type of curd cheese made from fat-free quark and salt with a dash of sodium bicarbonate and a pinch of calcium carbonate

alongside dairy culture. Although the facts of the ingredients don't really tell the story.

It is a soft cheese that is ripened and once matured has a unique spicy flavour and a strong (many would say pungent) smell. The outside surface is a golden yellow colour but when cut there is a noticeably lighter core; it is made into circles, rings, and sticks and has a sticky semi-soft to soft consistency.

You can eat tvarůžky straight from the pack (although you might want to wait a moment after opening to let the odour dissipate somewhat) with, for instance, bread. Connoisseurs describe it as quite versatile as it can be fried, marinated, used as a stuffing, or even, though many find this hard to believe, as part of a dessert! Recipes are available for use in strudel and pancakes amongst others.

The first person to produce Olomoucké tvarůžky on a larger scale was Josef Wessels and his wife Anna in 1876. The company remained in the family, being first run by their son Alois - who gave his initials, A.G., to the company; and then their daughter and son-in-law Františka and Karel Pivný, who continued the legacy from 1917 to 1948. After a period of nationalisation and long-term decline in the post-war and Soviet eras, the tvaruzky factory was returned to the families of its original owners as part of the restitution process from 1 January 1991. Descendants of Josef Wessels are now the only producers of the Olomoucké tvarůžky.

The company website is [here](#)

Zelene pivo

For many Czechs there is nothing more natural in the world than their relationship to beer, and this is encapsulated in a Czech saying, “*Kde se pivo pije, tam se dobře žije*”, which translates as “*Where beer is drunk, life is good.*” There is much one could say about how and why Czechs love their beer so much, but perhaps we should let a few simple statistics do the talking.

Every year the Japanese company Kirin Holdings, producers of Kirin Beer, publish the Global Beer Consumption Report, which summarizes the details of global beer consumption in 170 major countries and regions. The data is accumulated from industry statistics and questionnaires sent by Kirin to brewers’ associations.

The Czech Republic has led this table on a per capita basis for 28 consecutive years! And the gap at the top is not small, or one that will close quickly. In 2020 there were four countries with a consumption volume of over 90 litres per capita - in order they were Austria, Poland, Romania and Germany. The Czechs doubled that at 181.9 litres of beer per person per year.

Think about that for a moment. The *combined* consumption for the second and third highest-ranked countries, only just beats the number one.

For every time a German drinks a beer, somebody in the Czech Republic drinks two. Or three beers for every one beer drunk in the UK. In Poland, it is the equivalent of every person of drinking age having one beer every four

days; for Czechs, every two days. The research comes from Japan, where the amount drunk per person in one year is finished by their Czech counterpart at the beginning of March.

“Kde se pivo pije, tam se dobře žije”

Life must be very, very good in the Czech Republic.

As an aside, Slovakia typically ranks in and around the top 10, with 81.7 litres per capita in 2020. So it really is a Czech thing. If you think these numbers sound crazy, well yes they do, but you can check them for yourself [here](#).

Probably the most well-known Czech beer is the fabulous Pilsner Urquell, brewed in the western town of Pilsen, close to the border with Germany. But most towns have their own local favourite, and there are many micro-breweries all over the country.

And then in 2005, Starobrno - the biggest brewery in the Moravian capital of Brno - brewed something rather different. For Easter they made *Zelene pivo*, Green beer.

The week leading up to Easter is Holy Week, and in much of Central Europe the Thursday before Easter, the day commemorating the Last Supper, is known as Green Thursday (in Czech this is *Zelený čtvrtek*). One widely accepted explanation refers to the green vestments priests wore to celebrate Easter Mass, and the green sprigs sinners doing penance wore pinned to their clothes.

In Czech, this led to a tradition of eating fresh greens, such as spinach, salad and even nettles on this day. Nowadays many people living in Czech celebrate *Zelený čtvrtek* with *Zelene pivo*.

In an interview with Radio Prague in 2017, Zdenka Mindlová, at the time the Brand Manager for Starobrno, described how they made the beer turn green:

“The bright green colour is a combination of several factors. One is the use of a special malt which helps to achieve that colour, another is the use of certain herbs which are part of our secret recipe and the third factor is a green liquor which is added to the beer. So, all these factors together contribute to the unique colour of our green brew.”

An article about Green Beer and featuring the interview can be found [here](#).

The idea caught on and now many breweries produce a special green beer for Easter and many towns and villages have integrated *Zelený čtvrtek* with *Zelene pivo* into their Easter celebrations. In Brno this usually means live music, food stalls and an outdoor party in one or more of the town's squares.

It may only be for one day each year, but there is something special and unique about sitting outside on a warm spring day drinking a cold green beer.

Main courses

Řízek

Commonly known as schnitzel in the English speaking world, this is a dish that hints at Moravia's past as part of the Austro-Hungarian empire. If a popular folktale can be believed then the recipe for schnitzel / Řízek was brought to Vienna from Italy by a Bohemian general called Joseph Radetzky. Supposedly, he mentioned enjoying a tasty veal steak in Italy, popularly known as cotoletta alla milanese. When he returned, the Austrian emperor, Franz Joseph I requested the recipe. Whether this story is true, it does not hide the fact that the people of Moravia are willing to broaden their horizons when it comes to food.

Unlike the more traditional Wiener Schnitzel, generally the Řízek consumed here tends to be pork or chicken rather than veal. Although perhaps the defining feature remains the same, namely that it is breaded and fried. One thing they do have in common is how they're typically served. All varieties tend to be served with some form of potatoes, a slice of lemon, and some cucumber salad.

Smažák

Smažák, or Smažený sýr to give it its full name, is an incredibly popular dish that can be found on most menus, sometimes as the sole vegetarian option. This is even the case in some Chinese and Vietnamese restaurants across Moravia. Fried cheese dishes can be found throughout Europe from Saganaki in Greece to Malakoff in Switzerland.

There is evidence to suggest that it was originally served in Czech during the First Republic in the interwar period, but that it only became more widespread and popular during the 1950s. As well as being a lifesaver for vegetarians eating out, it's also popular among students as a cheap meal.

The Czech version of Smažák is perhaps unique among the world's fried dishes for the way in which it is served. It is most often seen next to a portion of chips and a pot of tartar sauce. For people from many other countries, tartar sauce is usually associated with seafood, but they cannot deny that it goes just as well with Czech fried cheese.

Phở

One thing that sometimes surprises visitors from other parts of Europe or America is the abundance of Vietnamese restaurants in Brno. Brno hosts a large number of Vietnamese restaurants for its size. Vietnamese guest workers originally came during the communist period as guest workers. The Vietnamese government hoped that these people would learn skills which would contribute to the further industrialisation of Vietnam.

Following the fall of communism, many of these workers remained in the Czech Republic. Some of these workers helped to introduce Vietnamese food to the people of the Czech Republic. Walking round Brno, it's hard to avoid seeing signs which say pho. Vietnamese food has become a part of the gastronomic landscape with some people even cooking it for themselves at home.