

Some thoughts from Father Aron Maghsoudi

The tradition of blessing easter baskets will be observed at Noon on Holy Saturday at the Resurrection church. If you haven't participated in this tradition before, please consider this yearly custom of gratitude and joy (even if you aren't of Eastern European heritage). Catholicism worships soul and body, a feast of the senses, an elevation of the natural to the supernatural. The smell of paska, garlic kolbasi, and incense on Holy Saturday - ah the sweet smell of resurrection!

Blessing of easter foods helps to link the altar of the church to the altar of our home, a special blessed meal to be enjoyed on the holiest day of the year.

In addition to the customary foods such as ham, kolbasi, bacon, salt, eggs, and horseradish there are many customs practiced that are limited to regions or specific ethnic groups. If you chose to use them as a guide that's great, but feel free to modify according to taste, ethnicity, or current situation – just make sure you come and get your easter foods blessed.

Here are ten random Easter basket musings you might consider...

1. Hrudka, Cirac, or Easter Cheese, is customary among Slovaks, Rusyns, Ukrainians, and only Poles who come from southeastern Poland.
2. The bread varies. Poles bake Babka (often with raisins), Rusyns have their turmeric filled Paska, Slovenes commonly put Potica in their baskets, which is more of a nut roll. Hungarians use a braided bread known as Husveti Kalacs. You can find recipes for each on the internet.
3. Wine regions such as Hungary and Croatia typically include wine in their basket. It isn't uncommon for Magyars to also include plum brandy, known as Palinka (often homemade). Some put beer in the basket if they gave up drinking for lent.
4. The Polish custom often includes a plate or platter in the bottom of the basket that is only used for Easter foods.

5. Perhaps the most traditional egg dye is the golden brown of onion skins. Kroszonki (common in the Silesia region of Poland) are eggs dyed and later adorned with detailed floral patterns that are delicately carved, or scratched, on the surface. The Ukrainian custom of pysanki is well known and uses a stylus to apply hot wax over patterns that is then melted after a series of dye baths. While a solid reddish brown is common for eggs in Croatia, in the northeast of the country soot mixed with oak is used to make a dark brown color. Slovenes, and others, typically wrap their eggs with leaves of herbs or plants then dye them in natural dyes made from onion skins, turmeric, blueberries, or beets.

6. Croats often place green onions in their basket, occasionally radishes as well. They are also more apt to put actual lamb in the basket instead of ham. As a Croat priest once said to me, "Croats invented lamb." Pussy willows, the first flower of spring, symbolize resurrection and often adorn baskets, especially in Slovakia and Poland.

7. Prior to Pope Pius XII's Holy Week changes in 1951, the Easter Vigil was celebrated on Saturday morning. This meant that holy water and fire for incense were available before noon on Saturday (enter the ever controversial with or without holy water debate). Greek Catholics don't typically bless the baskets the day before, but after their Easter liturgy. In Roman Rite Lithuania people brought holy water home from the morning Easter Vigil Mass and lit their coal from the Easter fire (before the vigil was moved to the evening). Taking the coal lit from the Easter fire they put it in their cook stoves and cooked their easter meal. They then sprinkled their basket with holy water at home.

8. The meal is typically served cold after attending Mass. The coldness of the food was an early sign of equality - the burden of cooking coupled with the desire that all could eat the meal together extends to everyone, including mom and baba who were otherwise typically tied to the stove.

9. In some communities, the priest goes to individual houses to bless baskets. The beloved priest was also be gifted with goods from the baskets of his parishioners.

10. Butter, which reminds us of the sweetness of Christ, is sometimes formed into lamb sculptures (or taken from a lamb mold). Margarine makes the lambs look orange.