

# Typical Ingredients in Czech Meals

Czech Republic lies in the moderate climate of Central Europe. The local climate provides a little bit of everything. Because the Czech Republic has all four seasons, the range of accessible local ingredients varies along with the weather.

## Czech evergreens



The most popular and most widely used ingredients and crops are those with the longest durability. Despite the invasion of supermarkets and cheap food from abroad, there are still households which grow their own crops, so they have to stockpile

it in cellars for winter. Almost three quarters of the year, or maybe the whole year around, you can have on your plate potatoes, beetroot, carrot and root vegetables in general. The Czechs are very keen potato eaters. As well as in some other countries, in the Czech Republic potatoes also provided valuable nutrition in the times of food shortage and famine in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Another typical vegetable is cabbage which is similar to other cole crops as broccoli, cauliflower, or Brussels sprouts. Cabbage is a typical vegetable for many East European countries, as well as for China and Japan. Typical Czech ways of preparing cabbage is to stew it with spices, or to put the chopped cabbage in a sweet and sour pickle. Cabbage is used in Czech pastry, as a part of various pickles, soups, as a side dish, in salads and so on. Carrots and other root vegetables are typically used in broths and with roast meat. We also grow and consume quite a lot of legumes as peas and beans and Czech fields provide fertile soil for various types

of cereals which lay foundation for Czech pastry and baking which is also very popular.

No kitchen could do without onion and garlic which are necessary taste boosters in many meals. As for the fruit in Czech cuisine, it is used as preserves, for jams and compotes, as well as typical Czech fruit cakes and other pastry. The most widely grown and used types of fruit are apples, peaches, strawberries, pears, or apricots. In some parts of Moravia plum also is very popular, yet for slightly different reasons than cooking, although cooking is included. Plum is the core of good homemade spirit called slivovice.

## Spices

The traditional spices used in the Czech cuisine are both local and brought from abroad. One of the most universal ones is probably pepper without which it is not possible to imagine a proper sauce or soup, let alone potato pancakes. Another widely used spices are marjoram, which is the main contributor to deliciousness of potato pancakes, paprika which is used in many soups and sauces and, of course, goulash. Many traditional Czech meals are also spiced with a fair amount of garlic, either ground or in a form of garlic powder. A very good friend of sweet pastry then is cinnamon, and combined with aniseed it helps to make delicious mulled wine. Because Czechs are also big fans of various pickled vegetable, mustard seed cannot be missing in any of the Czech households. Needles to add that mustard as such goes very well with popular Czech smoked meat products, such as many kinds of sausages and salami.



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## Cuisine of the Wallachian Kingdom

**Wallachian Kingdom** is a soubriquet for the Wallachian region in the **eastern part of Moravia**. This region is known for its beautiful hilly landscape, its folk architecture and mainly for its famous fruit cakes.

# Welcome to the plumdom

If there is an ingredient which could be considered universal for this region, it would most definitely be **the plum**. If you provide a local with sufficient amount of plums, he will prepare any meal from starters to desserts. And after he is finished, he would probably **distil some slivovitz** (*slivovice*).



Plums are the most plentiful fruit of the Wallachian region. It is no wonder then that our forefathers learned to make the best of it. Apart from the famous **plum frgáls**, which became a cultural heritage protected by the European Union quite recently, you can taste various plum sauces, plum butter, delicious dumplings with plum filling, baked plums in bacon and so on, but also, of course, the **traditional Moravian spirit** called slivovice (slíva is one of the Czech words for a plum).

Another typical representative of local cuisine is the traditional **Wallachian cabbage soup** called *kyselica*. The name is derived from the word *kyselý* which is the Czech for sour. **Cabbage** can be found across the whole area of Czech Republic and is one of the most important ingredients which, together with potatoes, is also a necessary ingredient for preparing really good *kyselica*.

This soup is so popular among housewives and cooks that there are competitions for the best *kyselica* in the region and it has been awarded as the best traditional dish of all Wallachia. The winner made this soup with rabbit meat and used a recipe she found in her grandmother's closet. Traditionally,

this soup is made with sauerkraut, potatoes, caraway and sour cream. The taste is then enriched by a Wallachian sausage or smoked meat and spiced with garlic and marjoram.

## Sweet treasure



The famous **Wallachian cake** called *Frgál* is a type of sweet bread with rich fruit topping and streusel. The fruit used for frgáls comes, of course, from the local resources and these cake-like breads are usually made with plums, pears, blueberries or apples. As a variant to fruit we can have also walnut, poppy seed or curd cheese. If you cannot decide which one to choose, you can have variations of two or four different toppings on one large cake. It surely no surprise that frgál goes so well with coffee.

The region is also known for its **cheese production** by small farmers who make their products the old way in their own households, and for slivovice which has served as a universal cure and spirits raiser for generations. Local cuisine consists of food from people's own resources and the range of fresh goods is quite diverse. Spending time in this region is not only delightful but, thanks to its landscape, vast forests, clean environment and tasty cuisine, also quite healthy.

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# The Magic of Silesian Cuisine

The **Silesian cuisine** is quite rich regional cuisine of the **northern part of Moravia** and the area of southern Poland near the borders with Czech Republic. Local cuisine is influenced heavily by **Polish and German cookery** but also by Pomeranian and East-Prussian regional cuisine. Some of the specialities which have origin in the **Silesian region** are now cooked predominantly in Germany. Regional dishes are quite simple yet very tasty. Their preparation is based on local ingredients and culinary skills which are passed on from generation to generation.

## Potatoes everywhere



One of the traditional ingredients in **Silesian cuisine is potatoes**. These serve as a **side dish, for potato soup**, or as the main course in form of **potato pancakes**. Other ways of preparing potatoes include various mashes, dumplings or small gnocchi-like potato bits. Potatoes are cooked both peeled and unpeeled – in dependence on the recipe. They could be boiled in water, baked or fried. People usually drank fermented milk, buttermilk or usual fresh milk. Potato pancakes were made with raw potatoes, usually grated, and milk, eggs, flour, and to taste people usually add lots of garlic and marjoram which give these pancakes its unique flavour. The basic ingredients could be enriched by some kind of smoked meat like sausages or even bacon.

Various kinds of potato gnocchi and dumplings also have a long tradition not only in Silesia and the Czech Republic but also in Slovakia. Potatoes are used in dough which is then rolled up and boiled in a form of small cylinder and then it is

sliced and served with meat and cabbage. Another way is to prepare the dough and by tearing it off with your fingers making small bits which are thrown into boiling water. When cooked, these small pieces of boiled potato dough are served with sheep cheese called bryndza or with cabbage, fried onion and bacon.

## **Bigos and Silesian Heaven**

A **traditional Polish appetizer** prepared also in the border areas among Poland, Czech Republic and Germany is **Bigos**. This speciality is also known as the hunters stew and is made with cabbage and meat. Typical ingredients are cabbage or sauerkraut, whole or puréed tomatoes, honey, mushrooms and various cuts of meat and sausages. The meat used in bigos can be pork, ham, bacon, sausage, veal, beef and, since it is considered a *hunter's* stew, it may include venison, rabbit or other game. Leftover cuts find their way into the pot as well. It may be seasoned with pepper, caraway, juniper berries, bay leaf, marjoram, paprika, dried or smoked plums, and other ingredients. Bigos is usually served with mashed potatoes or rye bread. As many other stews, this meal can be kept in a cool place and later reheated.

A very original meal, called **Silesian heaven**, is prepared with smoked bacon and dried fruit, cinnamon and lemon peel boiled in water. Then roux is prepared and made into a sweet sauce served with slices of bacon and the dried fruit. Silesian heaven goes well with potato dumplings.



**Various soups** are an inseparable part of each meal in this regional cuisine. They are made with pretty much everything you find in a Silesian garden, but the most favourite ones are **garlic soup, potato soup and cabbage soup**. Cabbage, by the way, is also very popular and served as a side dish to various meals. As a dessert you can have local **Ears of Štramberk** (Štramberké uši), which is a kind of gingerbread pastry rolled into a shape resembling ears and, as the name suggests, it comes from nearby Štramberk. Silesian cuisine is undoubtedly very rich and has had great influence on the surrounding regions of Germany, Czech Republic and Poland and some of the meals from this region have become traditional parts of national cuisines of these countries.




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## Magdalena Dobromiła Rettigová and her legacy

Every country has its **culinary tradition** and typical cuisine. Family and national recipes are passed on from generation to generation similarly as folklore stories. These recipes contribute largely to the national identity and are treasured accordingly. As well as folklore tales have their collectors, so do **traditional recipes**; and as well as collectors of tales, the gatherers of traditional recipes also publish their work from time to time.

# Woman of many sides

**Magdalena Dobromila Rettigová** lived between 1785 and 1845.  She was a Czech revivalist and **author of cookbooks**, poems, plays and short prose. Magdalena, by maiden name Artmannová, married a Czech lawyer, patriot and writer J. A. Rettig. She was brought up in German environment and her first writings were also in German. Under the influence of her husband and Czech writing society, she started to write in Czech and her “silly verses and weepy stories” were gaining in popularity.

Rettigová was historically the first woman to show **great interested in women**, in regards to their position in society. However, she did not struggle for equality of women but endorsed their feminine qualities. She started to teach young women **how to cook or sew** and she showed them the manners and rules of dining and conduct. Her activities resulted in publishing the first literature on cookery. The most significant book Rettigová wrote is undoubtedly her **Home Cookbook** from 1826. This was not only a collection of traditional recipes for meals prepared with local crops and meat from locally bred domestic animals such as pork and beef. It contained also a code telling women how to be good housewives to deserve respect for their femininity.

The focus of this enlightened woman was put also on sharing her knowledge with others. She was trying to propagate education and patriotic sentiment among other women. She was lending books to these women and then openly discussed their content and the women’s opinions.

## Unhealthy yet tasty tradition

“A Household Cookery Book or A Treatise on Meat and Fasting Dishes for Bohemian and Moravian Lasses” by the first Czech propagator of cookery became a **true bestseller in the 19<sup>th</sup> century** and was published in many editions. The latest

editions come from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although the meals prepared by the recipes in this book are often quite unhealthy and expensive – mainly when you really want to make them properly using quality ingredients, there are many salads and around fifty other vegetable recipes. The book could serve to anyone, it contains meaty meals which can be really quite expensive and not exactly healthy – her family could afford various ingredients, but also meals affordable for the less wealthy and the poor, because the land had gone through an after-war crisis and not everywhere were many types of food affordable or at hand.

Healthy or not healthy, **Czech cuisine** is definitely tasty and rich. M. D. Rettigová managed to collect the best and most **traditional recipes**. She put together the most practical and useful advice not only on how to prepare each of the meals properly and dutifully, she also provided countless practical **advices for women** on how to take care of their kitchen and, more importantly, of themselves.

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## Traditional Czech Bread

If you ask the Czech expats, students or simply people who spend a lot of time outside the Czech Republic, what they miss the most, many of them will tell that it is the **traditional Czech bread**. It really is the cornerstone of Czech culinary tradition and cannot be found anywhere else. What makes the **Czech bread** so special? Is it the shape, colour of the crust or its typical sourness? Or is it the caraway which is **traditionally used in Czech bread**? It is all of the above and something more.

# Rye flour makes the difference

The basic ingredients used for the **Czech bread** are **rye and wheat flours**. Depending on the proportion of the two we then call the bread either **rye-wheat bread** (more rye flour than wheat flour) or **wheat-rye bread**. The proportion of these two flours in the typical Czech bread varies and depends to a large extent on local customs. The most balanced option is a 1:1 ratio with slight predominance of wheat flour. The difference, when compared to standard white, purely wheat bread is really obvious.



Rye has a long tradition as crop in Central Europe – it dates back to the Middle Ages. Rye has quite different characteristics than wheat. It contains much less gluten which affects the stickiness, firmness and taste. In order to achieve the desired results we need to help the dough a bit and add leaven – preferably homemade. The leaven consists of pre-yeasted flour and water.

## Leaven is the secret

The need to prepare bread this way due to the addition of rye flour gave birth to a new tradition. The leaven is in fact a living organism producing CO<sub>2</sub> and making the dough all fluffy which is the reason for its bubbled structure. The **original Czech leaven** which has been a part of the **Czech culinary tradition** for generations is considered a little miracle. It has all you need to make good bread. This, water and more flour depending on the amount of bread you wish to bake. It has the yeast necessary for the dough to rise nicely and lactic acid bacteria giving the classic sour taste. What is more, it is completely natural which contributes to its

wonderful typical smell and long lasting freshness.



The credit for this process goes to enzymes, bacteria spores and yeast cells which are naturally contained in flour. The enzymes then simply begin degrading the flour starch into lower sugars. This provides a perfect culture medium for bacteria and yeast cells which start to

reproduce themselves uncontrolledly.

The last thing necessary when preparing this type of bread is to carefully balance the ingredients. Although too much yeast can help the rising, the bread may not be so tasty. The **ratio of rye flour and wheat flour** has also influence on the whole process.

Various ways of preparing the leaven have been developed, because each baker tended to accommodate his own needs and tastes. But proper preparation of good leaven takes some time and since time is money, many baking companies developed quicker but more artificial ways of making the dough rise. This, of course, affects the quality of bread in supermarkets and it is getting still more difficult to find proper bread made in the traditional way. Luckily enough, the number of people baking their own bread is still on the increase, so let's hope that the tradition never dies.

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## **Confectionery and Czech Tradition**



Although the Czech lands do not have very rich **tradition in confectionery**, not as much as in bakery, it provides a range variety of adopted and modified delicacies which will satisfy everyone who loves sweets.

## Origins of Czech confectionery

One of the first Czech mentions of sweets manufacture and mongering is speaking about producers of **gingerbread and sweets** for which they used honey, sugar and flour and then they sold their confectionery, a contemporary parallel to hard candy, in the streets. A similar range of sweets was also sold in apothecaries. The first confectioner mentioned in writing is most likely Mates who was the first street seller in 16th century in Prague. Making of confectionery was very popular in the times of Rudolf II (1576 – 1611) when, following the French trends, people made pastry creations such as peacocks, flowers baskets and other decorative candy. It was not earlier than in the 17th century when cakes, biscuits and other pastry were introduced to the Czech lands. It's also the first time people tasted small candies and sweet jellies.

## Development of Czech confectionery to the present

The gingerbread gained large popularity across the country. The Czech word for the Czech version of **gingerbread is 'Perník'** which came from the word 'peprník' which is derived from the Czech word for pepper. Ginger, along with other ingredients like milk, egg, cinnamon, clove, cardamom or mace were added to the recipe later. Another quite **favourite dainty** is marzipan. This sweet candy was spread across Europe from

the oriental countries and can have many forms, decorations, shapes and colours. Marzipan figures are present in every Czech sweet shop. The Czechs also like custards and crèmes. In combination with various icings you can find it in cream rolls, cream puffs, walnut rolls with chocolate cream and many other combinations. Fruit in jelly is also quite a common filling in various butter cupcakes with whipped cream.

The best time for **confectionery then comes with Christmas**.

The Christmas family top would certainly include the vanilla rolls with butter and walnut, a nice small brittle which almost melts in the mouth. Another kind of sweet you would typically find on the Christmas table **is**



**small gingerbread decorated with lemon icing**. These small crunchy sweets take shape of animals and fairy tale characters, or little cottages, Christmas trees, angels and other related motives. The top third is completed by Linzer cookies, which are among many types adopted from the surrounding countries, yet are considered as traditional as most of the others.

Last but not least, it is certainly worth pointing out that Czech have learned, from countries like Austria and France, to perform art in form of cakes which come really in as many forms as there are. The ingredients are rich and decorations beautiful. In each good café you can get cake as good as in any country with tradition in bakery and confectionery.

So although there is a great share of foreign influence, each sweet tooth will meet its needs in the plentiful range offered in good Czech confectioneries, renowned cafés and restaurants.