

## CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN BORDER AREAS – THE EXAMPLE OF REGIONAL CUISINES

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**Abstract:** Eating behaviours are significant components of culture. The paper discusses cultural differentiation in the border areas of Silesia (Śląsk), Podlasie and the Tatras on the basis of regional cuisine. The compared areas were selected owing to their similar geographical, social and economic conditions. The study was based on the staple regional foods which can be found on both sides of the border. The author emphasized the renaissance of regional cuisine as a tourist attraction and a response to the globalisation of eating behaviours.

**Key words:** eating behaviours, regional cuisine, Silesian cuisine, highland cuisine, Podlasie cuisine, culinary tourism.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The notion of culture is one of those terms which are most broadly interpreted. For some, it is closely related to theatre, cinema or literature, to others – it brings associations with refinement or sophistication. According to the definition used by sociologists, culture in the broadest meaning of the term includes all products of collective human activity. The PWN Encyclopaedia defines culture as encompassing all that is learnt in human behaviour, as opposed to all that is biologically inherited. On the other hand, Czarnowski (1958) expressed the opinion that we can speak of culture when the object of culture is preserved when transmitted from generation to generation, when it becomes a permanent asset of humankind, and not a custom or judgement developed by individuals.

Habits and abilities related to eating belong to the most interesting manifestations of culture. The eating culture, passed from one generation to another, involves recipes, cooking instructions, ways of preparing and eating food. Many of contemporary cookery books begin with the author's recollections of dishes made by their grandmothers, of their flavour and taste.

Culture as a sum of products of collective activity can be divided into material and non-material. Material culture includes all artefacts and objects used and admired throughout the ages, while non-material culture covers customs, skills, knowledge, beliefs and habits of a given group or community. The food-related sphere can hardly be classified as belonging to one of these two categories only. The dishes themselves are sums of competences and customs, and therefore preparing food belongs to an area where material and non-material culture meet.

## 2. METHODOLOGICAL NOTES

Eating habits are related to the ways in which hunger is satisfied, and include selection of the food product, manner of its preservation and preparation for eating, as well as the process of eating itself. In this perspective, the meal times and frequency of meals are also important. Eating behaviours depend on many factors, notably geographical, religious, economic and social.

The climate, topographic features, water resources and soils all create the conditions for the occurrence of specific kinds of flora and fauna. Both the diversity of food and its quantity increase as agriculture and trade develop. Nevertheless, the locally produced foods usually constitute the basis of the diet (Narojek, 1993)

"China, whose cuisine is considered to be the most diverse in the world, can serve as a good example. One of Chinese sayings thus defines the differences between the individual regions: Southern China is symbolized by sweet taste, Northern – by salty taste, Western China – by sour taste, and Eastern China – by hot taste" (Kowalczyk, 2005). Similarly, in Europe the cuisine of the Nordic countries is different from Mediterranean cooking.

Religion also considerably affects eating habits. All of the five major world's religions (Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism) forbid eating specific products completely or on certain days. Interestingly, fasting invariably means abstention from the consumption of products of animal origin. Some religions prohibit killing animals as a sign of respect to living creatures (Hinduism and Buddhism), while the Talmud and the Koran divide animals into "pure" – which can be eaten, and "impure" – which cannot be. The Bible specifies which animals can be eaten and forbids to eat meat on Fridays.

The economic and social factors affecting eating behaviours have always divided the world's cuisines into rich and poor. In the developing countries, cereals and root plants account for 80 per cent of the consumed foods, unlike highly developed countries where everyday diet is largely based on products of animal origin [<http://food.oregonstate.edu/kelsey/>]. Other kinds of divisions can be observed in highland cuisine, in which two traditions are distinguished: 'highlanders' (associated with home and traditionality) and 'gentlemanly' (resonant of urban character, contemporaneity, modernity) (Jakimowicz-Klein, 2003a).

Eating, no less (and maybe even more) than language and religion, is like a litmus test for culture: it identifies and by this token also differentiates. Members of a given cultural community can be recognized by the food they eat. The culture of eating is a conservative phenomenon; it is also deeply rooted in the individual psyche (Fernandez-Armesto, 2003, Toussaint-Samat, 2002).

Cultural identification and differentiation takes place at the regional level. For this reason, the existence of regional cuisines is wholly justified.

Traditional cooking can always be defined using several basic ingredients and spices which are easily attainable locally. Their taste properties shape collective preferences, which are usually expressed as a neutral or intolerant attitude towards other tastes. Cooking methods can also become characteristic traits of a given culture or epitomes of identity within a region where similarly prepared foods are available.

Regional cuisine is not easy to define. It can be described as the cooking of a given region in which regional dishes are served. This however invites the question on how regional dishes should be treated and what criteria should be used. Undoubtedly, the main criterion is the location itself. Regional dishes are those which are eaten in a given place, prepared in a given place or which originate from a given place. The factor of time is also important, that is, since when a given dish has been known. From the legal perspective, regional dishes are those which have been entered in the EU register and are protected by law. Another criterion is that of the name, for example *kotlet pińczowski* (Pinczów cutlet) or *placek węgierski* (Hungarian potato pancake).

It can be quite difficult to distinguish regional from national cuisine. Most frequently, national cuisines, that is dishes which are regarded as popular or common by a given nation, are inspired or sometimes even directly originate from regional cuisines. Minced cutlets [*kotlety mielone*], very popular throughout Poland, originate from the traditional Silesian *karbinadel*.

Another threat is the uniformization of eating habits brought about by fast food eateries, ready-made frozen dishes and lack of time to prepare meals at home. In Poland, McDonald's and KFC fast food chains are dynamically expanding. McDonald's is particularly active, with its aggressive advertising campaigns targeted at children and young people, in an attempt to shape the tastes of the youngest generation.

### **3. CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN SELECTED POLISH BORDER AREAS**

For geographers, the regional differentiation of eating habits and its reasons are of greatest interest. The areas selected for this particular study share many physiogeographic, social, cultural and historical features, although they are all divided by the state border (Figure 1).

The Upper Silesian cuisine was compared with the cuisine of the Ostrava region. Both these areas share a common, industrial past, related mainly to coal mining and metallurgical industries. Their cuisine could be generally called Silesian. Another research area includes the Tatra Mountains, with two varieties of highland cuisine on both sides of the border. The cooking of this area should have many similarities owing to a strong geographical determinism. Finally, the cuisine of Polish Podlasie and that of Belarusian Polesie are compared.

One of the most serious difficulties encountered while exploring this topic was finding relevant sources of relatively similar data. Due to the fact that our observations relate to regional cuisines of different countries, the sources of information are quite varied. Another difficulty was to compare and verify the information obtained. The study

of the cooking of the area near Ostrava and High Tatras Town<sup>1</sup> was based on recent menus in inns, taverns and restaurants having regional or regional-sounding names. All the information could be found on Internet websites: [www.find-restaurant.com](http://www.find-restaurant.com), [www.staramama.sk](http://www.staramama.sk), [www.travelguide.sk](http://www.travelguide.sk)

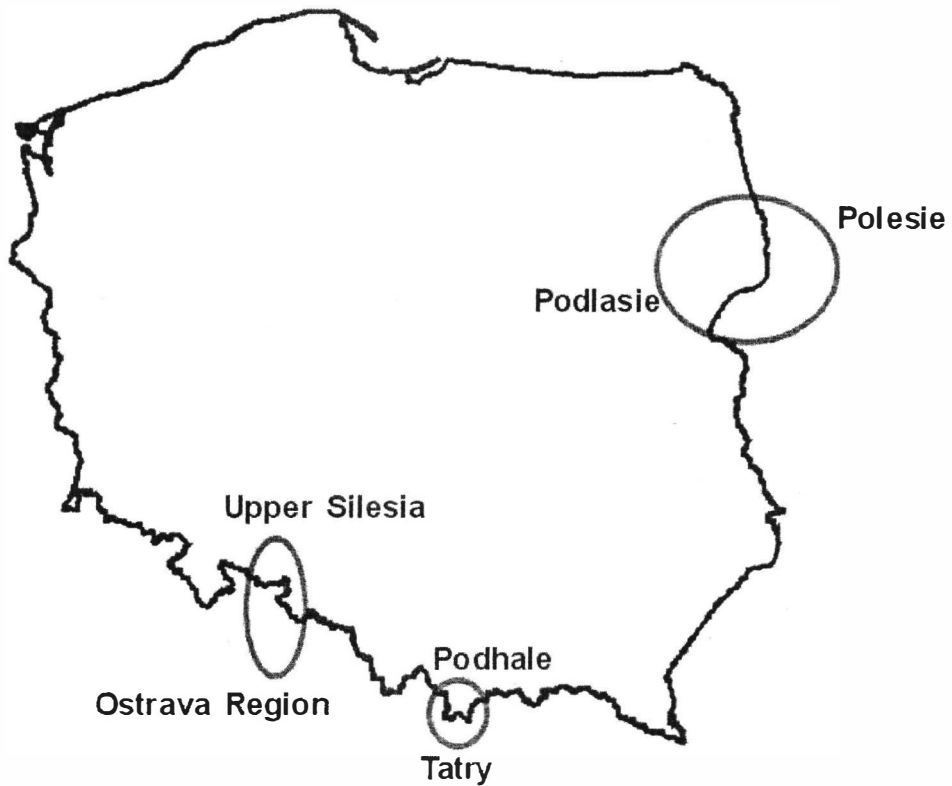


Figure 1 Place of research

Unfortunately, Polish websites do not provide as much information as Czech or Slovak ones, therefore some information concerning Silesian, highland and Podlasie cuisine was derived from books. As regards the cuisine of Polesie, no information, whether on the Internet or in book form, was found, and therefore interviews with Belarusians living in Poland were used as a source of relevant data.

Silesian cooking is one of the most interesting regional cuisines in Poland. It is a typical folk cuisine, characterised by simplicity, although it offers an abundance of good food. Silesia is the region where the cooking traditions of many cultures have met and mingled: Slavic, German, Austrian, Czech, Italian and even Turkish. They have all played an important role in the development of Silesian cuisine.

Most of Silesian dishes are high-calorie ones, which is due to the specific nature of miner's work and the miners' community. Traditional, everyday Silesian cuisine was not very attractive. Although it offered rather modest dishes, everybody could eat their fill.

<sup>1</sup> High Tatras Town includes Strbskie Pleso, Smokovec and Tatranska Lomnica

There were usually three meals a day, of which breakfast was the most important. Breakfast was based on soups, as a rule sour and satiating. Nowadays pork is the preferred food. Also, dishes with high fat content are popular, fried meat, sauces with added flour and cream. Potato dumplings (kluski śląskie) served with meat sauce and some cooked vegetables are popular, too. Potatoes are staple food in Silesian cuisine, while cakes include the famous ring-shaped cake (kołacz) with poppy seeds, cottage cheese, fruit or crumble topping. Layered cakes also have a long tradition. In many areas of Silesia it was believed that flour dishes were superior to potato dishes. Especially dumplings (kluski) were regarded as a filling and nutritious dish, the harder and heavier, the better (Jakimowicz-Klein, 2003b, Neuman, 2000)

On the basis of observations, a list of dishes which most frequently appeared in the restaurant menus in Poland and Czech was prepared (Table 1).

**Table 1** Differences in Silesian cooking

|                       | <b>Ostrava Region</b>                                   | <b>Upper Silesia</b>                                       |
|-----------------------|---|--|
| <b>Soup</b>           | česneková<br>kuřecí vývar s masem a<br>nudlemi          | rosół<br>žurek<br>grochowa<br>polewka piwna                |
| <b>Meat meals</b>     | grilované koleno<br>čínské nudle s maso<br>knedlík      | karbinadle<br>dishes prepared with bowels                  |
| <b>Meatless meals</b> | knedlík<br>smažený sýr<br>hermelín v bramboráku         | śląskie kluski<br>stryki<br>kugel                          |
| <b>Vegetables</b>     | There is no vegetables<br>prepared as traditional meals | boiled vegetables (modra<br>kapusta)<br>vegetables in soup |
| <b>Deserts</b>        | palačinky   | ciasta (cakes)   |

Traditional highland cuisine is characterised by an archaic way of cooking and unsophisticated taste, even though highlanders have always been quite happy with it. What mattered most was the quantity, and not taste. Highlanders were as a rule simple people who – in their words – liked everything there was to eat when they came home (Szromba – Rysowa in: Jakimowicz-Klein 2003). The main aim of eating was to satisfy hunger and provide stamina for work. Dishes were usually based on meat, pig and geese fat because their digestion took longer. Highlanders' staple foods included potatoes, cabbage, milk (especially sour), batter noodles with milk (bryja), various kinds of noodles (sliced, hand-torn), barley millet. Milk was used as a drink as an addition to most dishes. Whey and buttermilk were used to prepare some soups. The selection of dishes and proportions between the ingredients mainly depended on the financial standing of a household (Jakimowicz-Klein, 2003a).

Highlanders' wives would cook twice a day: in the morning, they prepared a morning and midday meal, and cooked dinners in the evening. As a rule, dishes eaten on weekdays remained the same throughout the year. Special dishes were cooked on Sundays, church holidays and family celebrations.

A specification of most popular Polish and Slovak highland dishes is offered in the table below (Table 2).

**Table 2** Differences in highland cooking

|                | <b>Tatras Town</b>  | <b>Podhale</b>   |
|----------------|---|--|
| Soup           | fazuľová polievka<br>kapustnica<br>cibuľová polievka                | kwaśnica<br>żurek<br>barszcz                               |
| Meat meals     | býčie žľazy<br>dishes made from venison                             | Dishes made from mutton<br>meat<br>Dishes made from bowels |
| Meatless meals | bryndzove halušky so slaninou<br>strapačky s kapustou a<br>slaninou | Grits<br>Dishes made from potatoes                         |
| Vegetables     | Only as a supplement  | Cabbage<br>Mushrooms                                       |
| Deserts        | palacinky   | ciasta (cakes)   |

Podlasie cuisine is characterised by a great wealth of flour, groats and potato dishes. Bread and raised cake were baked from flour. The most popular was naturally leavened rye bread. Also, various kinds of groats would appear on the Podlasie tables, especially buckwheat and millet, as well as pearl and wheat barley, which were usually served sprinkled with pork scratchings. Alternatively, pork scratchings could be used in various kinds of fillings for dumplings, pierogi and roasted dishes. Potatoes were served with some lard on top or baked in tins or in pig intestines.

Many fruits of the forest are also used in Podlasie cuisine. Mushrooms are eaten as separate dishes, fried or stewed; they are also used as an addition to many dishes. Fruit picked in the forest include bilberries, wild strawberries and raspberries. In the past, also blackberries, lingonberries, cranberries, rowanberries, hawthorn berries and viburnum fruit were also ingredients of dishes.

It is clear from this short description that the Podlasie cuisine is rather modest and simple. This is confirmed by an overall small share of meat dishes.

Comparison of the Podlasie (Poland) and Polesie (Belarus) cuisines brought quite surprising results. On both sides of the border, the same dishes are eaten and they are prepared in a similar way; even the names of individual dishes are similar. This is due to common historical and economic factors. For centuries, this area belonged to one state. In addition to that, owing to its peripheral character, the region did not attract large industrial investments and did not encourage an inflow of population into cities, and for this reason the regional cuisine could retain its unspoilt character.

**Table 3** Differences in regional cooking

| <b>Ostrava Region</b>                                 | <b>Tatry</b>                      | <b>Polesie</b>           |
|---|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Fat<br>more diverse<br>without spices (only marjoram) | fat<br>basic to prepare<br>milky  | sour<br>poor<br>potatoes |
| <b>Upper Silesia</b>                                  | <b>Podhale</b>                    | <b>Podlasie</b>          |
| sour<br>very fat<br>potatoes<br>more complicated      | fat<br>basic to prepare<br>floury | sour<br>poor<br>potatoes |

Analysis showed that there existed relatively small differences between the compared areas, all having a similar geographical location and socio-economic conditions, with the exception of Podlasie and Polesie, as discussed above. The identified differences were mainly related to the major tastes and ingredients (Table 3).

### 3. CONCLUSION

There are several indications which might help to explain the reasons for the differences occurring in the area of one regional cuisine, divided by a state border. It is very likely that 60 years of separate statehood has left its distinctive mark, although such a period seems to be inefficient to produce any visible cultural change. On the other hand, it should be borne in mind that such changes are taking place at an increasingly faster pace. At the same time, we might look deeper to find the reasons for such differences. According to Hegel, the culture of nations is determined by the 'spirit of the times'. In the case of Czechia and Slovakia, this is the German spirit, inherited through the rule of Emperor Franz Josef, unlike Poland and Belarus, which have always been Slavic countries. Eating behaviours in the border areas where different cultures meet are prone to assimilating various influences and borrowings, while retaining a distinctive identity.

Regional cuisine is now experiencing a period of revival. Many restaurants are opened which hope to attract tourists with the very word 'regional'. Restaurant owners seek out old recipes and cooking instructions or offer dishes modelled on traditional ones. One of the reasons for the revival of regional cooking is the rapidly expanding culinary tourism. Visiting family-owned restaurants, vineyards or distilleries combined with wine or food tasting is more and more frequently the main reason for tourist trips, and food spending is becoming a growing share of tourist budgets (Kowalczyk, 2005). When we visit faraway countries or regions we become acquainted with their culture, traditions and history, also by eating local dishes and their exotic ingredients.

Another reason for a growing popularity of regional cuisines is the response to the globalization of eating behaviours. A flood of different bars, eateries or restaurants owned by multi-national corporations and promotion of global dishes available across the world is leading to a uniformization of eating behaviours, which represent a significant aspect of our culture. It can be said therefore that cultural diversity is of major importance for maintaining the identity of individual nations.

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## Zróżnicowanie kulturowe obszarów przygranicznych na podstawie kuchni regionalnych

### Resume

Jednym z istotnych elementów kultury są zachowania związane z jedzeniem. Artykuł przedstawia zróżnicowanie kulturowe obszarów przygranicznych Śląska, Tatr i Podlasia na podstawie kuchni regionalnych. Porównywane obszary zostały dobrane pod względem podobnych warunków geograficznych, społecznych i ekonomicznych. Badania oparto na najczęściej występujących potrawach regionalnych po obu stronach granicy.

Kuchnie regionalne (śląska, góralska i podlaska) są różne w regionach podzielonych granicą administracyjną. Różnice nie są bardzo duże, aczkolwiek wyraźnie widoczne. Przejawiają się najczęściej w głównych składnikach i akcentach smakowych. Wyjątkiem jest kuchnia podlaska, która nie różni się od kuchni białoruskiego Polesia.

Przyczyn zróżnicowania można doszukiwać się w kulturowej odrębności państw. Odwołując się do Hegla, kultura narodu, jest wynikiem jej duch historii. W przypadku Czech i Słowacji jest to duch germański odziedziczony za panowania Franciszka Józefa, w przeciwieństwie do Polski, i Białorusi będących od zawsze słowiańskie. Zachowania żywieniowe na terenach przygranicznych będących na styku różnych kultur ulegają wpływom i zapożyczeniom zachowując jednak pewną odrębność.

Kuchnia regionalna przeżywa obecnie renesans. Powstają liczne restauracje przyciągające klientów samą nazwą „regionalna”. Restauratorzy wyszukują starych przepisów i receptur lub tworzą dania stylizowane na tradycyjne. Jednym z powodów odrodzenia kuchni regionalnej jest coraz szybciej rozwijająca się turystyka kulinarna. Odwiedzanie rodzinnych restauracji, winnic i destylarni połączone z degustacją staje się coraz częstszym powodem wyjazdów turystycznych.

Innym powodem coraz większej popularności kuchni regionalnych jest reakcja na globalizację zachowań żywieniowych. Zalew różnego rodzaju barami serwującymi i promującymi różnego rodzaju potrawy globalne, dostępne na całym świecie, doprowadza do unifikacji zachowań żywieniowych. Należy jednak pamiętać, iż zróżnicowanie kulturowe jest istotne dla zachowania odrębności narodów.