

Bread of Serbian heroes and Hajduks ¹

The army marches on its stomach

Napoleon

The goal of this publication is to introduce the attentive reader to a singular culinary cultural heritage of the Serbs - bread with plums - in an interesting and exciting way.

Bread is the basic foodstuff of every household in Serbia. When one asks - "is there bread in the house", it actually means whether there is anything to eat. Bread is a symbol of food.

Daily bread on the table has always meant sustenance for the family and provided security from hunger. A house without bread is like a church without a roof, as the saying goes. Religious and ceremonial breads accompany our lives from birth to death, and even after death.

The importance of bread as a heritage of much of humanity has not yet been sufficiently explored. Meanwhile, traditional bread recipes are being forgotten or are in danger of being consigned to forgotten.

Many peoples have a favorite fruit. There is no dilemma for the Serbian people. The sacred tree and fruit is the plum. The plum was important both in times of peace and in times of war. Everything made from plums is part of the national cuisine - prunes, sweets, jam, compote, brandy.

A folk saying has been known since ancient times - *When there are plums, there is everything.*



¹ Resistance fighters against Ottoman rule



Plums are not grown only in Serbia, but only among Serbs is that fruit tree something that people are especially proud of. There is no Serbian household, that does not traditionally have a plum tree in the orchard. This is a tradition that has lasted for generations. There is even a famous verse by the poet Oskar Davič (1909-1989) ... "oh Serbia among the plums..."

There are few peoples in the world who have incorporated a fruit tree into their culture, literature, song, proverbs and sayings like the Serbs dedicated to the plum. Even the word plum (šljiva) is of Serbian origin.

It is quite normal that a Serbian peasant found a way to combine these two particularly nutritious specialties. Bread with fresh plums or prunes is a traditional part of the national cuisine and represents one of its foundations.



In the military and guerrilla (*hajdučkoj*) traditions of the Serbian people bread with prunes is a favorite sweet popularly called - *šljivko*. True, corn flour, and even less wheat flour,

was not always available in the homes of the peasants and other rural folk. Naturally resourceful, they could make anything out of nothing, and there were always prunes in the pockets of both the rich and the poor.

Today, we have enough, maybe too much, bread on our tables, there are also prunes, and so the recipe for *šljivka* (plum cake) has survived thanks to the housewives who have not forgotten this traditional Serbian delicacy dating back to Ottoman times.

Unfortunately, there is very little historical and documentary data on this specific topic. Basically, everything boils down to oral traditions and the experiences of housewives who still prepare these gourmet dishes. Some housewives make plum cake according to their grandmothers' recipe, while others have somewhat "updated" the dish, as well as the name - plum cake (*šljivani kolač*).



For the Serbian host, the lump of land is not just an economic category. The earth is the source of life force (as with the ancient Hellenes, Gea – mother earth), the foundation and guardian of cultural identity and the breadwinner of the family.

The history of plum growing in Serbia is long and spans centuries. Plums were grown in the early Middle Ages on monastic and feudal estates, and by the 13th century plums had spread to peasant plots. It was the emperor Dušan (1305-1355) who indirectly regulated the cultivation of fruit in the set of laws that regulated every aspect of his empire. Thus, in the territory under Dušan's authority, there was a sudden development of fruit growing.

Today Serbia still has the largest production of plums in relation to the number of inhabitants -- about 38 kilograms of plums per each resident of the country. There are almost no Serbs who do not celebrate family holidays (*slava*) and who do not love plums and everything made from them. We lived with her and we lived from her. We rejoice with her.

In the Serbian customary tradition, the plum occupies a place of honor, whether it is about customs and beliefs, superstition or everyday life. The plum as a tree as a whole or only its individual parts (bark, leaf, fruit, pit) has a great role in completely different customs.

Serbian hosts especially loved to eat and serve to their guests dried plums. Dried in the air or in the smoker, so sweet, meaty and full of vitamins and nutrients. It is a great specialty among Serbs since ancient times.



In fact, plums eventually became so ubiquitous that they were considered the food of poor. There were prunes for everyone. A verse of a folk song sings - "prunes and walnuts, we are very poor, but I love you very much, darling".

The method of drying has been well-known since medieval times. Plums, like other fruits, were usually dried in the sun and meant for personal use. The first written information about Serbian prunes was recorded by Turkish explorer and writer Evlija Celebi in the 17th century.

When we talk about bread, the first association is that it is not anything exceptional. Only when you say *plum bread*, then becomes something exceptional, original and delicious.

During the Great War, only the Serbian army made bread with prunes. At the beginning of World War I, soldiers received bread with prunes in their regular two-day rations. Considering the great military successes and sacrifices made by the Serbian soldier - it was the bread of heroes.

For centuries, the favorite food and culinary specialty of Serbia was "bread cake" - known as "šljivko" from the word *šljiva*, or plum. It is not known when it started to be made. It was certainly not known at the tables of our medieval lords, including emperor Dušan.

It first appeared during the 18th century, certainly during the late Ottoman period. At the time, there were no sweets because sugar was imported from distant lands and was very expensive. Since *šljivko* was very sweet and filling, it became a dessert dish.



It became a favorite of the *hajduks* - resistance fighters against Ottoman rule - and of Serbian soldiers during the 1912-1913 Balkan Wars and during World War I. Extremely nutritious and filling and with unique aroma, it was particularly popular in winter when fresh fruit was not available.

Throughout modern history occupiers came and went, regimes and styles changed, but the popularity of plum bread remained constant. The secret of military bread with prunes and *šljivko* lay in their true gastronomical and cultural originality and uniqueness.

This heritage is not forgotten today, specially in the region of *Šumadija* in central Serbia. These delicacies should feature prominently in bakeries, on restaurant menus and traditional sweets shops.

Furthermore, these products should feature prominently on the national list of Intangible Cultural Heritage. This book focuses on the subject of cultural heritage.

