

Christmas (Rizdvo Khrystove)

Ukrainians are unrepentant bakers. The cold weather stimulates the invention or adaptation of yet another roll (knysh) or honey bread (medianyk). No celebration of Christmas is complete without specific cakes and cookies. During this season, baked goods of all types are featured. This chapter includes several “must” items: a spiced honey loaf (mediivnyk or medianyk), which may be a bread or cake; honey cookies (medianyky); thin wafers (oblaten) spread with a honey, nut, and egg white filling (nugat);¹ small turnovers of short dough (pyrizhky) with nut or poppy seed filling, glazed and sugared on top; a roll of sweet yeast dough with poppy filling (makivnyk, sometimes called a makovyi perih or makovyi knysh).

The above list for Christmas baking is by no means inflexible. Families expand on it by adding crescents, pinwheels, and other favorites. Those listed above are practical as well as traditional, since all except the *makovyi* torte may be baked ahead, even frozen, ready for guests at any time during the holidays.

Traditional Honey Bread (*Medivnyk*)

This honey bread is redolent with flavor. For a strong honey taste and rich dark color, use buckwheat honey. This recipe makes a solid, dense loaf. It slices well and, refrigerated, keeps for weeks.

8 eggs
6 tablespoons butter
14 ounces honey
2 cups sugar
6 cups flour
2 teaspoons baking powder
2 teaspoons baking soda
2 teaspoons cinnamon
zest and juice of 1 orange
1 cup strong coffee
1 cup sour cream
1 cup chopped filberts or
walnuts (optional)

Heat honey to boiling and allow to cool. Separate eggs, reserving the whites. Beat room-temperature yolks with butter until fluffy. Add cooled honey and beat. Add sugar and mix well.

Sift together flour, baking powder, baking soda, and cinnamon. Sift again. Add to honey mixture. Add orange zest, juice, coffee, and sour cream. Mix until no dry flour shows. Whip egg whites until stiff. Fold in a little to the flour mixture, stir well, then add the rest. Stir in chopped nuts.

Pour into buttered and floured loaf pans, rapping them to even the batter. Bake in preheated 325° oven about 1 hour. Do not open door during the first 30 minutes. Cool on racks. Wrap well in heavy-duty foil and store in refrigerator or freezer.

Honey Cake (*Medianykyk*)

This cake has evolved from a light bread into a layered, filled cake. It is excellent with a nut filling (see following recipe) and topped with chocolate glaze. Or, more simply, it may be covered lightly with raspberry jam and sprinkled with chocolate shavings.

4 ounces butter
4 eggs
14 ounces honey
3 cups (14 ounces) flour
½ teaspoon ginger
½ teaspoon nutmeg
½ teaspoon cloves
1 teaspoon cinnamon
2 teaspoons baking powder

Cream butter and separate eggs. Add room-temperature yolks one at a time to the butter and beat well. Mix in honey. Sift together flour, baking powder, and spices twice and add to butter mixture.

Whip egg whites until stiff. Fold a little into the mixture, then fold in the rest. Pour batter into a buttered and floured loaf pan. Bake in preheated 350° oven until firm on top and a toothpick comes out clean, about 1 hour. Cool on rack.

Filbert Filling (*Masa z liskovykh orikhiv*)

This makes a good filling for honey cake (see previous recipe).

6 ounces filberts or walnuts
½ cup sugar
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
3–4 teaspoons sour cream
seedless berry or grape jam

Roast nuts in a heavy skillet, rub lightly to remove some of the skin, and grate fine in a processor or a nut grinder. Mix in sugar, vanilla, and enough sour cream to bind. Split cake into two layers and spread one cut surface with jam, then the nut filling. Cover with the other layer and press lightly. Wrap in foil and refrigerate overnight. Glaze with chocolate icing or cover lightly with the same type of jam as used inside, and sprinkle with chocolate shavings.

Mother's Nougat (*Mamy nugat*)

This delicious, wholesome confection, containing honey, egg whites, and nuts, has been the favorite of many children. Tightly wrapped in plastic and refrigerated, it keeps for weeks. Tortenboden wafers are available in specialty stores.

**6 square 14 inch wafers, or
Tortenboden**
½ cup water
1 cup sugar
1 cup honey
6 egg whites
1 teaspoon cream of tartar
2 tablespoons powdered sugar
1 pound shelled walnuts
1 tablespoon vanilla extract

Cook water and sugar in a heavy-bottomed 2 quart saucepan until syrup moves away from the bottom. Add honey and cook down by a third. Whip egg whites and add cream of tartar. Gradually add powdered sugar. Beat until the whites form peaks, then add by spoonfuls to the honey mixture. Cook in a double boiler, stirring constantly, for 15 to 20 minutes, until it cooks down a bit. Beat until the mixture thickens and appears “dry.” Stir in chopped nuts and cool.

On a work surface covered with waxed paper, spread a wafer with a fourth of the honey mixture, about $\frac{3}{4}$ inch thick. Cover with a second wafer and press down evenly. Spread with another fourth of the mixture, then cover with a third wafer. Repeat to make a second nougat. Wrap tightly in heavy foil and refrigerate.

Trim off edges, and cut into $\frac{3}{4}$ inch strips, then cut each strip diagonally into $2\frac{1}{2}$ inch pieces. Serve with tea.

Honey Cookies (Medianyky)

These Christmas cookies are a perennial favorite. They may be rolled out and cut into rounds, stars, or crescents. Often they are hung on the lower branches of the Christmas tree as treats for the younger children.

4 cups flour
1 teaspoon cinnamon
½ teaspoon cloves
½ teaspoon ginger
½ teaspoon nutmeg
1 cup powdered sugar
2 teaspoons baking powder
2 extra large eggs
1 cup honey
2 tablespoons chopped orange peel
1 egg beaten with a little water for glaze
20 blanched almonds
coarse sugar crystals

Sift together flour, spices, sugar, and baking powder. Add eggs, honey, and orange peel to make a stiff dough. On a floured work surface, roll out dough about ½ inch thick. Cut shapes with cookie cutters, place on nonstick baking sheet, and brush with glaze. Place ½ almond in the middle of each, sprinkle with coarse sugar, and bake in preheated 350° oven until done, about 15 minutes. Cool on racks. Store in tightly covered tins.

Baked Turnovers (*Pyrizhky*)

These short dough turnovers may be filled with myriad stuffings, sweet or savory. At Christmastime, nut, poppy seed, or fruit fillings make a sweet treat. Walnut filling is favored, but other nuts may be used. Savory dainties can also be filled with a mushroom or cabbage mixture and served as accompaniments to clear borsch, beef consomme, or other soups.

2½ cups flour
¼ pound butter
½ cup sour cream
3 egg yolks
½ teaspoon salt
1 egg white beaten with a little water for glaze
½ cup coarse sugar crystals (optional)

Combine flour and cold butter in a processor, or cut in butter with a pastry cutter into coarse crumbs. Add egg yolks, salt, and cream, and process or knead lightly until dough forms a ball. Cut in half, wrap in plastic wrap, and refrigerate for at least 2 hours or overnight.

Roll out half of the dough on a lightly floured surface to about ¼ inch thickness. Cut rounds with a 3 inch cutter or wineglass. Place a spoonful of filling to one side of each round, then fold over other half. Seal edges with a little glaze, then press with a fork or pastry cutter for a fancy edge. Place on a nonstick baking sheet, brush with glaze, sprinkle with sugar, and bake in preheated 375° oven about 20 minutes. Cool on racks.

Walnut Filling (*Orikhova masa*)

This filling is a favorite for pyrizhky (see previous recipe).

¾ cup butter
¾ cup powdered sugar
¾ cup grated walnuts (or almonds)
1 tablespoon whipping cream or evaporated milk
4 egg whites
½ cup flour

Cream butter and sugar until fluffy. Add egg whites and beat well. Combine grated walnuts, cream, and flour, and mix well. If almonds are substituted, add a drop of almond extract.

Note: use only fresh nuts for baking. Nuts have a high oil content and deteriorate rapidly. To maintain freshness, store a large quantity of nuts in the freezer.

Poppy Seed Torte (*Makovyi tort*)

The queen of Christmas desserts combines the oldest ingredients found in Ukrainian cooking: honey, poppy seeds, and nuts. The rum butter cream and white icing (see following recipes) marry very well with the heavier poppy seed sponge. Decorating tortes is a specialty in itself. Some cooks lay out elaborate folkloric designs and motifs from Ukrainian embroidery or tapestry patterns, using jellied candies or even multicolored hard candy. The white icing serves as a fine background. The only limit to one's imagination is that decorations should be edible.

½ cup poppy seeds
½ cup honey
7 extra large eggs
½ cup blanched grated almonds
zest of 1 lemon

Pour boiling water over seeds, let stand for 5 minutes, pour off water and repeat. Drain well. Grind with steel blade in processor until seeds release milk and turn white. Butter a 9 inch springform pan and dust it with ground almonds. (This may be done in advance.)

Place poppy seeds and honey in a large bowl. Separate eggs. Add room-temperature yolks, one by one, to the mix, beating until thick. Stir in grated almonds and lemon zest. Beat egg whites until satiny but not dry. Fold a little into the mixture, then fold in the rest, until no white shows. Pour mixture into pan, rapping it gently to release air pockets, and smooth the top with a spatula. Bake on the middle rack of a preheated 350° oven for 50 to 60 minutes, or until a toothpick comes out clean from the center. Do not open oven door or disturb the cake while baking. Cool slowly, not in a draft. Run a sharp knife around the sides, then slowly release the spring. Run a knife under the bottom and cool on rack.

Cover work surface with double sheets of wax paper. With a sharp knife, make a small incision around the torte to mark where it should be cut in half. Make horizontal cuts at four equidistant points, then gently pull a long thread through the cake to cut it into two layers. Sprinkle bottom layer with 2 or 3 tablespoons of rum, and evenly spread rum butter filling (see

following recipe) about $\frac{3}{4}$ inch thick. Cover with top layer and press gently. Cover the sides with the rest of the filling. Refrigerate overnight wrapped in foil.

To ice cake, cover work surface or a lazy susan with wide double-strength foil. Apply a third of the icing (see recipe on p. 35) to sides with a spatula, pulling from the bottom up. Wipe spatula occasionally to avoid pulling crumbs, and dip in hot water to smooth out ridges. With the rest of the icing, smoothly cover the top. Refrigerate for at least 2 days. Run a sharp knife around bottom to release icing from paper. Slide the torte onto one hand, pull off the remaining paper and gently place torte on serving platter, taking care not to crack the icing.

To serve, center a 3 inch wineglass on the top of the torte and cut around it into the center. Then make $\frac{1}{2}$ inch radial cuts from the outer edge to the circle and remove with spatula. See fig. 21. Yields about 20 slices. Keeps well in refrigerator. Serve at room temperature.

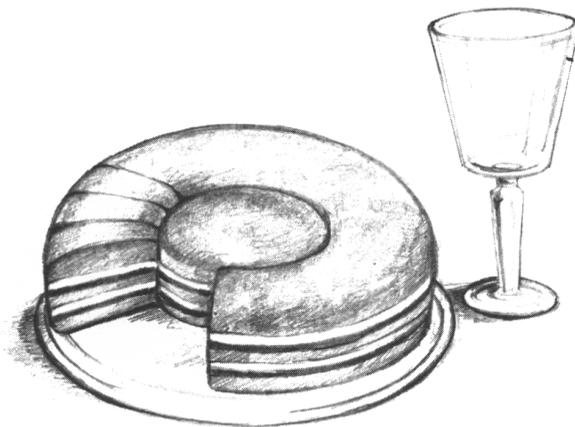


Fig. 21

Rum Butter Filling (*Rumova masa*)

This is an excellent cream, the base of which may be used with different flavors. Here, rum is used. It is used as a filling for the poppy seed torte described in the previous recipe. This filling can also be used as icing.

½ pound unsalted butter
2 cups powdered sugar
2 tablespoons rum or
¼ teaspoon rum extract
1–2 teaspoons heavy cream

Cream butter until light, add sugar a little at a time, rum, and cream. Beat until very fluffy.

White Icing (*Bila shklytsia*)

This hard icing dries quickly and forms a lovely cover for a torte. (See poppy seed torte, p. 33.) It cures hard, not fluffy.

4 cups powdered sugar
¼ cup heavy cream
½ teaspoon vanilla

Place 2 cups sugar in a bowl and add cream and vanilla. Mix well, gradually adding the rest of the sugar. Add a little more cream if too stiff.

Poppy Seed Roll (*Makovy knysh*)

This treat, a sweet yeast dough filled with the traditional poppy seeds and honey, is characteristic of how homemade pastries used to taste. The sweetness is marked, but not overwhelming or cloying; the poppy seed taste dominates.

1 envelope dry yeast
 ½ cup lukewarm water
 ⅓ cup lukewarm milk
 2¾ cups flour
 4 ounces butter
 2 tablespoons sugar
 1 egg beaten with a little water
 for glaze

1 cup poppy seeds
 milk to cover
 1 tablespoon sugar
 2 tablespoons honey
 1 teaspoon butter
 zest of 1 lemon
 zest of 1 orange
 2 egg whites

Dough for roll

Dissolve yeast in water and milk, add sugar, stir, and allow to rise. Combine flour, chopped butter, and yeast mixture and knead until dough forms a smooth ball. Or, in processor with machine running, add butter to flour, then add yeast mixture. Process until dough forms a ball, adding flour or milk as necessary. Let rest a few minutes, then process 1 minute more. Place in lightly oiled bowl, turn once, cover, and allow to rise until double in bulk.

Poppy seed filling

Pour boiling water over seeds, let stand for 5 minutes, pour off water and repeat. Drain well. Cover with milk in a saucepan, bring to a boil, and strain. Grind with steel blade in blender or processor until seeds release milk and turn white; add sugar, honey, and butter. Cook in a heavy skillet for 1 minute over high heat. Cool. Add egg whites and zest, and mix well.

On a lightly floured surface, roll dough into a long rectangle about 1 inch thick. Evenly spread poppy seed filling, stopping 1 inch from one long edge and roll up, making sure that the filling is sealed inside. Place on a nonstick baking sheet, seam side down, cover, and allow to rise double. Bake in preheated 350° oven for 35 to 40 minutes. Brush with egg glaze and cool on rack.

Note: the filling may also be used for *makovy perih* (poppy turnover) or *makivnyk* (poppy seed roll).