

Easter Symbols and Food

Among the popular Easter symbols, the lamb is by far the most significant of this great feast. The **Easter lamb**, representing Christ, with the flag of victory, may be seen in pictures and images in the homes of every central and eastern European family.



The oldest prayer for the blessing of lambs can be found in the seventh-century sacramentary (ritual book) of the Benedictine monastery, Bobbio in Italy. Two hundred years later Rome had adopted it, and thereafter the main feature of the Pope's Easter dinner for many centuries was roast lamb. After the tenth century, in place of the whole lamb, smaller pieces of meat were used. In some Benedictine monasteries, however, even today whole lambs are still blessed with the ancient prayers.

The ancient tradition of the Pasch lamb also inspired among the Christians the use of lamb meat as a popular food at Easter time, and at the present time it is eaten as the main meal on Easter Sunday in many parts of eastern Europe. Frequently, however, little figures of a lamb made of butter, pastry, or sugar have been substituted for the meat, forming Easter table centerpieces.

In past centuries it was considered a lucky omen to meet a lamb, especially at Easter time. It was a popular superstition that the devil, who could take the form of all other animals, was never allowed to appear in the shape of a lamb because of its religious symbolism.

The origin of the **Easter egg** is based on the fertility lore of the Indo-European races. To our pre-Christian ancestors it was a most startling event to see a new and live creature emerge from a seemingly dead object. The egg to them became a symbol of spring. Long ago in Persia people used to present each other with eggs at the spring equinox, which for them also marked the beginning of a new year.[58]

In Christian times the egg had bestowed upon it a religious interpretation, becoming a symbol of the rock tomb out of which Christ emerged to the new life of His Resurrection. There was in addition a very practical reason for making the egg a special sign of Easter joy since it used to be one of the foods that was forbidden in Lent. The faithful from early times painted Easter eggs in gay colors, had them blessed, ate them, and gave them to friends as Easter gifts.



The custom of using Easter eggs developed among the nations of northern Europe and Christian Asia soon after their conversion to Christianity. In countries of southern Europe, and consequently in South America, however, the tradition of Easter eggs never became popular.

The Roman ritual has a special blessing for Easter eggs: "We beseech thee, O Lord, to bestow thy benign blessing upon these eggs, to make them a wholesome food for thy faithful, who gratefully partake of them in honor of the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ."

In medieval times eggs were traditionally given at Easter to all servants. It is reported that King Edward I of England (1307) had 450 eggs boiled before Easter, dyed or covered with gold leaf, which he distributed to the members of the royal household on Easter Day.

The eggs were usually given to children as Easter presents along with other gifts. This practice was so firmly rooted in Germany that the eggs were called "Dingeier" (eggs that are "owed"). The children were not slow in demanding what was "owed" to them, and thus developed the many rhymes in

France, Germany, Austria, and England, wherein youngsters even today request Easter eggs for presents. In England this custom is called "pace-egging," the word "pace" being a corrupted form of Pasch. Here is a little Austrian song of this kind:



We sing, we sing the Easter song:
God keep you healthy, sane and strong.
Sickness and storms and all other harm
Be far from folks and beast and farm.
Now give us eggs, green, blue and red;
If not, your chicks will all drop dead.



In some parts of Ireland children collect goose and duck eggs during Holy Week, offering them as presents on Easter Sunday. Two weeks previous, on Palm Sunday, they make little nests of stones, and during Holy Week collect as many eggs as possible, storing them away in these hidden nests. On Easter Sunday, they eat them all, sharing with those who are too small to have their own collection.

The grownups, too, give eggs as presents in Ireland. The number of eggs to be given away is regulated by this ancient saying among Irish country folk: "One egg for the true gentleman; two eggs for the gentleman; three eggs for the churl [have-not]; four eggs for the lowest churl [tramp]."

In most countries the eggs are stained in plain vegetable dye colors. Among the Chaldeans, Syrians, and Greeks, the faithful present each other with crimson eggs in honor of the blood of Christ. In parts of Germany and Austria, green eggs alone are used on Maundy Thursday, but various colors are the vogue at Easter. Some Slavic peoples make special patterns of gold and silver.

In Austria artists design striking patterns by fastening ferns and tiny plants around the eggs, which show a white pattern after the eggs are boiled. The Poles and Ukrainians decorate eggs with plain colors or simple designs and call them krasanki. Also a number of their eggs are made every year in a most distinctive manner with unusual

ornamentation. These eggs are called pysanki (from pysac: to write, to design); each is a masterpiece of patient labor, native skill, and exquisite workmanship.

Melted beeswax is applied with a stylus to the fresh white eggs, which are then dipped in successive baths of dye. After each dipping, wax is painted over the area where the preceding color is to remain. Gradually the whole complex pattern of lines and colors emerges into something fit for a jeweler's window. No two pysanki are identical. Although the same symbols are repeated, each egg is designed with great originality. The symbols used most are the sun (good fortune), rooster or hen (fulfillment of wishes), stag or deer (good health), flowers (love and charity). As decorative patterns the artists use rhombic and square checkerboards, dots, wave lines, and intersecting ribbons. The pysanki are mainly made by girls and women in painstaking work during the long evenings of Lent.

At Easter they are first blessed by the priest and then distributed among relatives, friends, and benefactors. These special eggs are saved from year to year like symbolic heirlooms, and can be seen seasonally in Ukrainian settlements and shops in this country.

In Germany and other countries of central Europe eggs for cooking Easter foods are not broken but pierced with a needle on both ends, and the contents

to be used are blown into a bowl. The empty eggshells are given to the children for various Easter games. In parts of Germany such hollow eggs are suspended from shrubs and trees during Easter Week much like a Christmas tree.

The Armenians decorate empty eggs with pictures of the Risen Christ, the Blessed Virgin, and other religious designs, to give to children as Easter presents.

Easter is the season for **games with eggs** all over Europe. The sport of egg-pecking is practiced in many forms, in Syria, Iraq, and Iran, as well. In Norway it is called *knekke* (knock). In Germany, Austria, and France, hard-boiled eggs are rolled against each other on the lawn or down a hill; the egg that remains uncracked to the end is called the "victory egg." This game has attained national fame in America through the annual egg-rolling party on the lawn of the White House in Washington.

Here is a description by a visitor to Washington of such a contest several generations ago, when this Easter sport took place on the terraces below the Capitol, and not as in later years on the White House lawn:

"At first the children sit sedately in long rows; each has brought a basket of gay-colored, hard-boiled eggs, and those on the upper terraces send them rolling to the line on the next below, and these pass on the ribbon-like-streams to other hundreds at the foot, who scramble for the hopping eggs and hurry panting to the top to start them down again. And, as the sport warms, those on the top who have rolled all the eggs they brought finally roll themselves, shrieking with laughter. Now comes a swirl of curls and ribbons and furbelows, somebody's dainty maid indifferent to bumps and grass-stains. Over yonder a queer eight-limbed creature, yelling, gasping, laughing, all at once shakes itself apart into two slender boys racing toward the top to come down again. Another set of boys who started in a line of six with joined hands are trying to come down in somersaults without breaking the chain. On all sides the older folk stand by to watch the games of this



infant Carnival which comes to an end only when the children are forced away by fatigue to the point of exhaustion, or by parental order. No one seems to know how the custom began. The observation is also made that "when the games proved too hard a test for the grass on the Capitol terraces, Congress stopped the practice, and the President opened the slope back of the White House." [60] In recent years, it

might be added, the grass there has received the same sort of treatment as the Capitol terraces a few generations ago. The custom of egg-rolling in Washington is traced back to Sunday School picnics and parades at Easter in the years before the Civil War. At these picnics the children amused themselves with various games, and egg-rolling was one of them.

Another universal custom among children is the egg hunting in house and garden on Easter Sunday morning. In France children are told that the Easter eggs are dropped by the church bells on their return from Rome. In Germany and Austria little nests containing eggs, pastry, and candy are placed in hidden spots, and the children believe that the Easter bunny so popular in this country, too, has laid the eggs and brought the candy.

In Russia and among the Ukrainians and Poles people start their joyful Easter meals after the long Lenten fast with a blessed egg on Easter Sunday. Before sitting down to breakfast, the father solemnly distributes small pieces cut from an Easter egg to members of the family and guests, wishing them one and all a holy and happy feast. Not until they have eaten this morsel in silence, do they sit down to the first meal of the Easter season.

The **Easter bunny** had its origin in pre-Christian fertility lore. Hare and rabbit were the most fertile animals our forefathers knew, serving as symbols of abundant new life in the spring season. The Easter bunny has never had a religious symbolism bestowed on its festive suggest purity and innocence. The Church hares, and neither in the liturgy nor in spiritual meanings of the sacred season. in the celebration of Easter as the many countries.



What seems to be the first mention of the in a German book of 1572: "Do not worry eggs, then we shall cook the nest." In a German book of the seventeenth century the story that the Easter bunny lays eggs and hides them in the garden, is called "an old fable."

In many sections of Germany the Easter bunny was believed to lay red eggs on Maundy Thursday and eggs of other colors the night before Easter Sunday. The first Easter bunnies made of pastry and sugar were popular in southern Germany at the beginning of the last century. They are now a favorite delicacy for children in many lands.

Let us not forget the **Easter pig**, which offers its meat as a traditional Easter dish. This animal has always been a symbol of good luck and prosperity among the Indo-Europeans. Many traces of this ancient symbolism are still alive in our time. In some German popular expressions the word "pig" is synonymous with "good luck" (Schwein haben). In Hungary the highest card (ace) in card games is called "pig" (diszno). Not too long ago it was fashionable for men to wear little figures of pigs as good luck charms on their watch chains. More recently charm bracelets for teen-agers contained dangling pigs. Savings boxes for children in the figure of a pig (piggy banks)



carry out the ancient symbolism of good luck and prosperity.

It is an age-old custom, handed down from pre-Christian times, to eat the meat of this animal on festive occasions. Thus the English and Scandinavians ate boar meat and the Germans and Slavs roast pork on Christmas Day. Also, in many parts of Europe roast pork is still the traditional main dish at weddings and on major feast days. At Easter, smoked or cooked ham, as well as lamb, has been eaten by most European nations from ancient times, and is the traditional Easter dish from coast to coast in this country. Roast pork is another traditional main dish in some countries.

The nations of central and eastern Europe have other traditional Easter foods, prepared on the last days of Holy Week, blessed by the priest on Holy Saturday or Easter Sunday, and solemnly displayed on a festive table for Easter Week meals. This blessed Easter fare is called *Weihessen* (blessed food) in Germany and Austria, *Swiecone* or *Swieconka* (sanctified) among the Ukrainians and Poles. The figure of the **Easter lamb**, which rests on a bedding of evergreen twigs, is surrounded by colored Easter eggs. Around this centerpiece are arranged other foods in great variety and large amounts: Easter breads, meats, sausages, salads, cheese, pastry, spices, and fruit. The whole table and every dish on it are decorated with garlands and clusters of leaves, herbs, and flowers.



It would be impossible to include in one small book the traditional Easter fare of every nationality. Here are a few of the better-known dishes:



The Russian **Easter bread** (paska) is made of flour, cottage cheese, sugar, raisins, eggs, and milk. It is put in a mold and shaped in firm, square pieces, about eight inches high, with a cross on each side, and the letters J. C. (Jesus Christ) imprinted in relief. In Germany and Austria the Easter bread is made with milk, eggs, and raisins, and baked in oblong loaves of twisted or braided strands (Osterstollen). Another kind of Austrian Easter bread is the Osterlaib (Easter loaf), a large, flat round loaf marked

with the cross or an image of the lamb. In some parts of Ireland people eat on Easter Sunday "Golden bread" which is very similar to our French toast.



A favorite **Easter pastry** in Poland are the mazurki, originating in the province of Mazuria, which are very sweet cakes made with honey and filled with nuts and fruit. The most popular of the coffee cakes in Poland and other countries, too, is called baba, a provincialism for woman. The cake is always baked in a fluted pan. It resembles the skirt of a woman. Babka, a word commonly used for grandmother, is the same cake but in a smaller size. Babecska is the diminution of the word. Small rolls or cupcakes are called babeczki. Here is a good recipe for Easter baba (Baba Wielkanocna):

1 cup milk
1 tsp. vanilla
3 cups flour
1/4 tsp. almond flavoring
1 /4 cup lukewarm milk
1 cup chopped almonds
2 yeast cakes 1 c chopped orange citron

1/2 cup plus 1 tabl. sugar
& lemon peel
2 tsp. salt
1/2 cup melted butter
15 egg yolks
bread crumbs

Scald the milk. Slowly add three-quarters cup flour to hot milk and beat thoroughly. Cool. Dissolve yeast in quarter cup of milk and a tablespoon of sugar and add to cooled mixture. Beat well. Let rise until double in bulk. Add salt to eggs and beat until thick and lemon-colored. Add sugar and continue to beat. Add to sponge with flavoring and remaining flour. Knead for ten minutes. Add butter and continue kneading for ten more minutes or until dough leaves the fingers. Add almonds and citron peels and mix well. Let rise until double in bulk. Punch down and let rise again. Punch down and put into fluted tube pan. Butter the pan, press blanched almonds around the sides and bottom. Sprinkle with fine bread crumbs. Fill with dough to cover one-third of the pan and let rise one hour. Bake 50 minutes at 350 degrees. Sprinkle with colored sugar or baker's confetti.

Another delightful Easter delicacy are the **Papal Wafers**, called Sucharki Papieskie:

2/3 cup butter
1 whole egg
7 egg yolks 2 cups flour
1/2 cup sugar
1 tsp. baking soda



Cream butter, add alternately one egg yolk and one tablespoon sugar and beat well. Add the whole egg. Add flour and baking soda. Mix well. Put on floured board, roll to 1/4 inch thickness and cut with round cookie cutter. Bake on well buttered baking sheet in 375 degrees oven for 12 to 15 minutes.

An **Austrian pastry** is the Weihkuchen (blessed cake) made of flour, oil, milk, butter, and honey. The people of Transylvania bake their ham in a cover of bread dough. The Hungarian Easter meat loaf is made of chopped pork, ham, eggs, bread, and spices.

About thirty years ago breweries in Norway started to make a special **Easter beer** (Paskelbrygg), a blend of the best beers made locally. It became very popular, and



today Paskelbrygg is a favorite addition to traditional Easter fare in Scandinavia.

<http://www.intermirifica.org/easter/eastsymbol.htm>

Easter Food Blessing, an Ancient Polish Custom The Easter Basket

Holy week customs that go back at least 1000 years are still being observed in the Delaware Valley. Many people of Polish or other Eastern European descent make a basket of Easter foods to be blessed on Holy Saturday and take it to their parish priest. This custom is a very important part of a Holy Week rich in traditions passed on from one generation to the next. This basket was called Swieconka and usually has food symbolic of the Easter holiday.



Here you can see the white bunny

Traditional Easter Basket with small Easter palm and bazie (pussy willow), eggs and sheep. You can read more about Easter palms and eggs. (<http://culture.polishsite.us/articles/art274fr.htm>)

A Paschal Lamb, representing the Lamb of God, in Polish: *baranek*, can be made from cake, bread or butter and is often centerpiece of the food brought to the church. Eggs, both decorated and plain are a symbol of new life or rebirth. Meat, usually ham or sausage (*kielbasa*), Horseradish, bitter herbs that signify the bitterness of the suffering of Christ, and salt a Polish sign of hospitality are all found in this basket. Greenery, usually in the form of boxwood or branches of pussy willow represents the awakening of the earth. Bread is always in the basket, both a symbol of communion, the bread of the last supper and the traditional sweet breads or Babe.

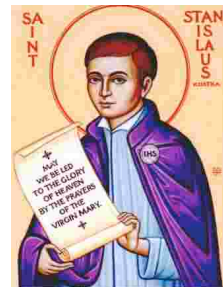
This basket is often taken to the local church on Holy Saturday around noon, but in old times the Parish priest often visited each home and thus blessed the food and the house. Today many local parishes still observe this custom, but probably the most traditional and well attended food blessing is at one of the oldest Polish parishes in the Delaware valley will be doing this blessing at on Holy Saturday. Often people will drive long distances to revisit the church of their grand parents and parents and keep the tradition. In some parishes the tradition begins a new when Polish families ask the priest to have a food blessing Holy Saturday.

More information of this and other customs may be found in *The Polish Traditions or country cookbooks* by Sophie Hordorowicz Knab and many of the recipes are also in the *Church of the Nativity cookbook*. Both can be found at [Triple Oaks Nursery and Herb Garden](http://www.tripleoaks.com/) in Franklinville, NJ (<http://www.tripleoaks.com/>)

Article written by Lorraine Grochowski Kiefer

St. Stanislaus

Stanislaus was born of noble [parents](#) on July 26th at Szczepanow near Cracow, Poland. He was educated at Qnesen and was ordained there. He was given a canonry by [Bishop](#) Lampert Zula of Cracow, who made him his preacher, and soon he became noted for his preaching. He became a much sought after spiritual adviser. He was successful in his reforming efforts, and in 1072 was named [Bishop](#) of Cracow. He incurred the enmity of King Boleslaus the Bold when he denounced the King's cruelties and injustices and especially his kidnapping of the beautiful wife of a nobleman. When Stanislaus excommunicated the King and stopped services at the [Cathedral](#) when Boleslaus entered, Boleslaus himself killed Stanislaus while the [Bishop](#) was saying [Mass](#) in a [chapel](#) outside the city on April 11. Stanislaus has long been the symbol of Polish nationhood. He was canonized by Pope [Innocent IV](#) in 1253 and is the principle patron of Cracow. His [feast day](#) is April 11th.



The Treasured Polish Custom of
“ŚWIECONKA”



The Polish people are very religious. Most of them are Roman Catholics. For centuries, during the 40 days before Easter - called Lent - the Polish people fasted. This means they ate no meat, butter, eggs, cheese or desserts. So a big part of the Easter celebration was being able to eat these foods again.

On the day before Easter - called Holy Saturday - women prepared baskets and filled them with a little bit of each of the foods they would eat on Easter morning. In the basket they placed Polish sausage, ham, bacon, and decorated eggs - called pisanki (pee-sawn-key). From butter,

they carved a lamb, which symbolized Jesus Christ, holding a banner with a cross on it. The basket also contained a round loaf of bread with a cross cut into the crust, some cheese, horseradish, salt and a candle.

The food basket was covered with a pretty cloth and the handle of the basket was decorated with colorful flowers, including pussy willows, which are a symbol of Easter in Poland. The basket was brought to the church where a priest prayed over the baskets and sprinkled them with holy water to bless the food. After the blessing, the basket was taken home and set aside until Easter morning.

On Easter morning the family attended church. When they get home, the head of the house took one of the blessed eggs, removed the shell and cut it into small pieces to share it among all the people in the family. The blessed egg is the symbol of life and eating it was believed to guarantee good health. Everyone exchanged wishes and they ate a big meal that included soup, all the blessed foods in, the basket plus other foods and desserts. Everyone had to eat at least a small piece of each of the blessed foods because this would bring them good luck.



Polish Easter Basket

Maslo (butter) This favorite dairy product is often shaped into a lamb (Baranek Wielkanocny) or a cross. This reminds us of the goodness of Christ that we should have toward all things.

Babka (Easter bread) - A round loaf topped with a cross or a fish, symbolic of Jesus, who is our true Bread of Life.

Chrzan (horseradish with grated red beets) - Symbolic of the Passion of Christ still in our minds but sweetened with some sugar because of the Resurrection.

Jajka (eggs) and **Pisanki** (decorated with the symbols of Easter, of life, of prosperity) – Indicate new life and Christ's resurrection from the tomb.

Kielbasa (sausage) - A spicy sausage of pork products, indicative of God's favor and generosity.

Szynka (ham) - Symbolic of great joy and abundance. Some prefer lamb or veal. The lamb also reminds Catholics that the Risen Christ is the 'Lamb of God.'

Slonina (smoked bacon) - A symbol of the over abundance of God's mercy and generosity.

Sol (salt) - So necessary an element in our physical life, that Jesus used its symbolism: "You are the salt of the earth."

Ser (cheese) - Shaped into a ball, it is the symbol of the moderation Christians should have at all times.

A candle is inserted into the basket to represent Christ, the Light of the World. A colorful ribbon and sometimes sprigs of greenery are attached. A linen cover is drawn over the top and it is ready for the priest's visit or for the trek to church where it is joined with the baskets of others to await the blessing that will render it fit for consumption on Easter Sunday.

