

18th-century feasts at Polish noble courts

Delights of the Table



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In 18th-century Poland, splendid feasts and banquets served to stress the significance and magnificence of noble courts

It is difficult today to capture in words the grandeur of the sumptuous feasts held in the 18th century. Let us start by citing an account of a nameday fete thrown for Elżbieta Branicka, found in a letter written in Białystok in 1760 by an anonymous participant and keen observer: "The table in the gallery was set for 200 people; alongside it ran a channel filled with Tokay wine, reminiscent of the sea; there were 24 intricately decorated little ships carrying pistachios, candies, preserves and various sweetmeats. The little ships moored by the ladies sat at the table, who picked their favorite delicacies from the selection. After the delivery of toasts, a huge goblet was brought in, once belonging to Czarniecki, and the guests used it to scoop the Tokay sea, to drain it all within half an hour."

Decoration over flavor

The description above shows that in the 18th century, pleasure derived from feasting went hand in hand with the art of preparing, decorating and serving dishes in a special, frequently symbolic way to show off the splendor and magnificence of noble courts. Although the rituals and ceremonies changed with passing time, they were always closely tied with the pleasure stemming from savoring dishes and the entire

broad arrangement of the banquet event, including entertainment, theatre performances, toasts, and fireworks to celebrate special events and flaunt the brilliant and majestic setting of the noble court.

As such, 18th-century accounts of feasts rarely contain descriptions of the delights of eating, focusing instead on the pleasure of receiving guests and preparing feasts, as well as enjoying arts such as singing, dancing, and acting.

It seems that the splendor of noble tables was expressed through their diversity and abundance, with the quality and taste of food regarded as secondary. This applied equally to wedding parties and ceremonies tied to religious festivals. The description and painting of an Easter feast held by Voivode Sapieha in Dereczyn, hosting scores of lords from Poland and Lithuania, was as breathtaking now as it was then. "At the centre stood a lamb symbolizing Agnus Dei, bearing a flag, all studded with pistachios, which delicacy was only served to ladies, senators, dignitaries and clergymen. The table carried four enormous boars, one for each season. Each boar was stuffed with pork including



Photo: Jamski

Tankard, ivory and silver,
2nd half 17th century,
The Netherlands. Privately
owned



Glass items bearing the Nałęcz coat of arms: goblet, bottle, pair of flutes, pair of glasses, three carafes, Poland, 1720s and 1730s

hams, sausages, suckling pigs, and so on. The chef displayed his mastery by roasting the beasts whole. A dozen deer stood also roasted whole, with golden antlers, all there to be admired, stuffed with other game: hares, grouse, bustards, ptarmigans. The deer symbolized the 12 months of the year. They were surrounded by 52 massive cakes, one for every week of the year: whole flans, tarts, pies, all studded with dried fruit and nuts. Behind them, 365 pastries stood - as many as there are days in the year - and next to those, 8750 painted eggs, as many as hours in the year. Each was adorned with inscriptions, flourishes, making many more interesting in reading than eating [...].

Luxurious banqueting

The quote shows the importance of table decoration and its symbolism, bestowing noble families with further import. This was especially obvious during wedding feasts. For example, the marriage of Magdalena and Józef Lubomirski in Połonne brought renown to “candies” arranged on the table in the shape of Śreniawa: “Inside, the hall was superbly arranged and decorated around the windows and ornaments, while in the centre, on a pedestal, stood two joined hearts, beautifully structured, whence artificial green fire periodically spouted throughout dinner.”

Polish diarists rarely discussed the flavors of such dishes, so overwhelmed they were by the grandeur of the banquet. As such, Krzysztof Zawisza - Voivode of Mińsk - enjoyed “treating” or “being treated” during stately feasts in a “very noble,” solemn

fashion and “with great ostentation,” lavishly hosted and “gifted.” However, he described drinks (Hungarian and Italian wines, meads, spirits, vodkas) and the pleasure of “tasting Bacchus’s merriment,” or even the consequences of excessive drinking, more often than the flavor of food. Still, he always noted whether the banquet was organized well, very well, or “infamously well,” and the company partaking in the games, dances or carousals. Alongside the singing, dancing and theatre performances during feasts, he particularly valued wordplay, describing it as a “new form of enjoyment.”

Lithuania was famed for its splendid banquets and excellent treatment of guests, with the Radziwiłł family receiving the greatest praise for tirelessly maintaining ancient traditions of banquets and “infamous” feasts.

The author Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz wrote in his diaries that, during the long preamble to the wedding in Biała in 1780 between Józefa Radziwiłłówna and Ksawery Massalski, for the groom’s uncle, bishop Józef Massalski, and Karol Radziwiłł, the bride’s half-brother, “there was no end to banquets and feasts: in the mornings, whether you came visiting the marshal, the residence or the manor official, you found a breakfast of sausages, chops, stews, beers, meads and wines; all ate to their heart’s content. This did not interfere with lunch, with mighty tables weighed down with fare, and even less so with the huge goblets overflowing with drink. There were often concerts in the evenings.”

It’s also worth mentioning King Stanisław August Poniatowski’s visits to noble homes

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Grand 18th century dinner service created by the French goldsmith Martin-Guillaume Biennais

Włocławek Pałac Museum / Zbigniew Reszka



during his travels; he stopped off at the Grodno Sejm in 1784, with Adam Stanisław Naruszewicz writing about the event. The diarist stresses the sumptuous dinner settings at Radziwiłł residences, during which the king's health was toasted with champagne to the accompaniment of cannon fire, as well as describing the fanciful decorations, illuminations and fireworks, dances, games, arts, and even post-dinner hunts. In Nieśwież on 18 September 1784, "Lunch was the usual splendid affair with grand tables (as it was each next day), with the sound of cannon fire while we raised our glasses to the monarch's health. After coffee, there was a concert in the great hall, and at five o'clock there was hunting for wolves, with His Majesty himself slaying more than a dozen."

Poland's tables seen by foreign eyes

The pleasures of sampling various dishes are generally described by foreigners, less keen on the heavy abundance, instead preferring more refined courses. And so Ernst von Lehndorff, frequently praising feasts in noble homes and the bishop's residence in Warmia, describing lunches and dinners as "exquisite" and "refined," thus recounts the tables of duchess Barbara Sanguszkowa nee Dunin at her residence near Nieborów, where he attended a "grand dinner" in a "sumptuous interiors arranged with great taste": "Duchess Sanguszkowa is a majestic elderly lady, very wealthy, keeping a grand court. Yet in spite of the ever-present elegance, old Polish customs are tangible. This is particularly noticeable with the cuisine: thirty dishes, each as bad as the previous."

Old and new

It's clear that the second half of the century saw the advent of new fashions, both in terms of dishes and table decoration. Even Jędrzej Kitowicz divided 18th-century dishes into antiquated and progressive. According to this diarist and scholar of customs, the antiquated dishes were unrefined. They included chicken broth, borsch, roast meats, and bigos (hunters' stew with meat, sausage and crackling). Other notable dishes included "black goose," roasted in straw with pepper and ginger, and stewed goose with soured cream, dried mushrooms and groats. There was also tripe with saffron, veal with saffron or in white sauce, veal in grey sauce, mutton with garlic, suckling pigs, cold beef legs in aspic, and smoked beef. As Kitowicz notes, the main course consisted of roast meats: huge lumps of beef, quarters of veal, mutton, turkeys, capons, chickens, grouse, snipe and small game birds, all arranged in pyramids on huge serving trays. There were cakes and pastries among the towers of meat, but he stresses that even they were heavy and stout. The last course included garden fruit and various sweetmeats.

The more modern dishes arriving at noble tables influenced by French chefs, were – according to Kitowicz, – even more sophisticated. He lists "golden soups, white soups, delicate broths, dishes skillfully composed of various meats, delicious pates." Honey was replaced by sugar, pistachios and pine nuts by capers and olives, or even by truffles and marinated oysters.

Meads were ousted by French wines, even used to cook fish – Burgundy was frequently used for poaching salmon – with fish dishes increasingly marinated with



Piotr Jamski

lemon and wine vinegar. Modern dishes included “stuffed hashes of beef suet, veal, capon, breadcrumbs, eggs, butter, nutmeg, pepper, ginger and other spices,” veal and mutton brisket, pork, and capons and chickens known as poulards.

Precious pleasure

Fryderyk Schulz describes feasts, name-day celebrations and parties during the Great Sejm in Warsaw in the wealthiest homes, stating that “the chimneys are always smoking,” while “parties were five, six or even eight hundred strong”. Schulz was hugely impressed with the extravagance and lavishness of the nobles: “Ensembles usually started after lunch, lasting until well after midnight. There were games, music, balls, snacks, supper, and conversation. The Polish penchant for luxury and abundance shone through; several rooms were filled with tables bending under the weight. There was an overwhelming amount of all types of foods. Hungarian, French, Spanish and German wines, elsewhere sampled and sipped slowly, overflowed here. Vodka was served in huge goblets. Lemonade and orangeade stood in vast vessels, more commonly used for beer. Coffee and chocolate poured endlessly from giant silver pots. Heaps and mountains of jams, fruit and croutons laid out on great platters circulated round the rooms. Scores of gluttons competed with one another to see whose digestive tract can best cope with these amalgams, and whose sense of taste is up to the challenge.”

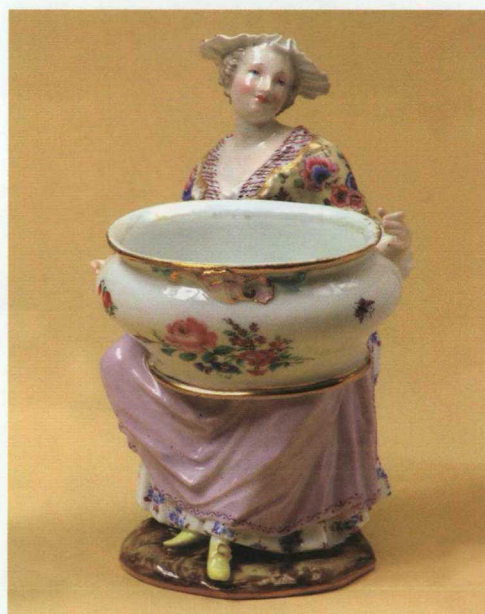
Schulz notes that each such evening could cost from five hundred to two thousand ducats. According to a foreigner

travelling around Poland, this is hardly a surprise, since even the most modest banquets in Warsaw were accompanied by only Burgundies and champagnes. Unfortunately we have no detailed accounts of the sheer pleasure of sampling feasts at noble houses, since the joy was mainly associated with the accompanying events of ballet, theatre, singing and dancing. ■

Further reading:

- Kostkiewiczowa T., Ročko A. (Eds.). (2005). *Dwory magnackie w XVIII wieku. Rola i znaczenie kulturowe* [18th-Century Noble Courts: Role and Cultural Significance]. Warsaw: DiG.
- Ročko A. (2001). *Obraz życia i obyczajów w pamiętniku Krzysztofa Zawiszy* [The Depiction of Life and Customs in the Memoirs of Krzysztof Zawisza]. In: Stasiewicz K., Achremczyk S. (eds.) *Między barokiem i oświeceniem. Obyczaje czasów saskich* [Between the Baroque and the Enlightenment: The Customs of Saxon Times]. Olsztyn 2001.

Decorative glass from the collections of the Museum of Ethnography and Industrial Art, Institute of Nation Studies, National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine in Lviv



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China salt cellar, Meissen, 19th century, copy of an 18th-century item. Privately owned