



## AUKSTAITIJA REGION

Aukstaitija is the largest region in Lithuania and occupies the eastern and the north-eastern part of Lithuania. The nature of Aukstaitija itself has been dictating not only the main activities, entertainment of local citizens but also the diversity of dishes. Fosterers of the culinary heritage say that people of Aukstaitija used to eat at all times what they gathered in forests or fished in the lakes of the surrounding area.

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Hospitable highlanders used to treat to pancakes, cut off homemade bread and white cheese with cowberry jam, treat to mead, and then offered a calm relaxation in a secluded hut surrounded by forests. The peasant family ate in the same room where the food was made – in the hut. It formed the back room of the dwelling house, the table stood in parallel with the rear wall. In summer, the table was often taken to the yard or garden.

Aukstaitija kitchen is also famous for its simplicity. People of this land can surprise all foreigners with flourish dishes, especially dumplings with meat, poultry, fish, curd, *svilpikai* and berries, *saltanosisiai* with blueberries.

The highlanders bake pancakes for breakfast which they eat with dressing, for lunch – beetroot or cabbage soup, grouts soup, meat with bread and sauerkraut, and for dinner – soup or boiled potatoes with sweet milk. The most commonly used meat was pork – fresh, salted or smoked. Lamb, beef, veal, venison, elk-meat, wild boar, hare-meat and poultry are also popular. Especially various smoked sausages are favoured.

On special occasions, women from Aukstaitija region serve a wide range of beer soups, dairy soup with vegetables, homemade egg dumplings (*zacirka*), highlander crayfish soup, beef stewed in cucumber brine, *zrazai* (beaten meat slices) with a filling of smoked bacon flitch and fermented cucumber.

In Aukstaitija there are dishes that are also suitable for the king's table. It would be decorated with a fried goose with apples or a cock stewed in sour cream in a manner of highlands. Pike-roll with pickled cucumbers and carp stuffed with peanuts is also favoured. The royal fish – vendace is smoked and matured in cannabis oil with tarragon. Highlanders can boast of *jsnauja* dish (seasoned and smoked pig fat, which can be used for soups, stews, porridges) – there is no such product anywhere in the world. A true decoration of the highlander's table – chicken pie, otherwise called *karvojus*.

The region of Aukstaitija is hardly conceivable without beer. The one from which one's head remains sober, but legs no longer listen... From the earliest times the town of Birzai and its surroundings have been and still are famous for their deep beer making traditions. It is interesting, whether the people of Aukstaitija first started singing or tasting beer?

If someone in Lithuania would ask where the river of wine flows, everyone will probably answer – in Anyksciai! People of Anyksciai make that wine, and they know how to make it, and they make it only from Lithuanian berries and fruits. Winemakers can offer a variety of delicious types of wine.

All the eaters will be amazed, while enjoying highlander's dumplings with a variety of stuffing, *skryliai*, *svilpikai*, *saltanosiai*. Only the highlanders could name dumplings with blueberries, bog bilberry or black currants 'the cold nosed' (Lith. *saltanosiai*). This is a ritual dish, usually made in autumn.

As for *virtiniai*, it was observed that people in the Eastern part of Aukstaitija region enjoy *virtiniai* with meat stuffing, people in the Western part of Aukstaitija – with chicken filling, and *ziemgaliai* prefer *virtiniai* with cottage cheese, smoked bacon, tarragon stuffing, residents of Panevezys city – with potatoes and cracklings, residents of Zarasai town – with fish, and residents of Ignalina – with forest mushrooms. And what is the way of cooking *virtiniai*? Here, any woman in Aukstaitija region will say that water must be salted, with a little bit of oil, and the flavour of the water depends on the filling. The residents of Aukstaitija region will never mix *virtinis* with *svilpikas*, which is stuffed with berries or fruits, and while they are eaten, they whistle.

There is confusion between dumplings and *virtiniai*... So what is the difference between dumplings and *virtiniai*? Firstly, it is the size – dumpling is as big as a big palm. Therefore, it becomes clear why the voracious man was able to eat no more than 4 to 5 dumplings. Special dough is thin but remains strong enough while boiling and is easily rolled out, so that dumplings would not be gummy or shrunk while forming. So it was made of whole wheat flour with egg yolks and scalded with nettle oil. Dumpling stuffing – it was dried boletus stewed in onion bouillon.

It is time for dessert! Aukstaitija region is known for various pancakes. Here every guest can admire pancakes with sauce, or even with more various stuffing and sauces – these pancakes are so delicious. Housewives of Aukstaitija region cook delicious doughnuts and deep fried pastry strips (*zagareliai*).

Rye bread is one of the oldest and main food products in Aukstaitija region, eaten daily for breakfast, lunch and dinner. There are two traditional types of bread – simple fermented and blanched. Fermented bread is baked from the oldest times, and the blanched bread is baked only from 20th century.

Potatoes are considered the second bread and eaten the whole year. The most popular potato dishes are stuffed potato, potato sausage and potato pancakes.

Speaking about dairy products, it should be mentioned that Aukstaitija region is mostly famous for white cheese, fresh or dried, sour, sweet or seasoned with caraway seeds.

The exceptional attribute of rural kitchen of Aukstaitija region is its variety. However, the place where to taste the dishes is not important – they are especially delicious and filling everywhere in this region. The residents of Aukstaitija region always liked and still like to eat well, delicious dishes, and the most important thing – to get full.

*In order to increase the awareness and popularity of Lithuanian culinary heritage, the Lithuanian Countryside Tourism Association is implementing the project "Traditional Lithuanian Food Guide". The aim of this project is to raise awareness among the public, especially the younger generation, about the interesting and diverse food culture in our country, and to express our respect for the people who follow the culinary traditions of our grandparents and parents, and cook according to old recipes and technologies.*

Project promoter

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