



## DZUKIJA REGION

Specifics of culinary of Dzukija region is a lot of potatoes and dishes with mushroom which are abundantly found in forests. Inhabitants of the south-east Lithuania (dzukai), who live in the south-eastern region of Lithuania and have been growing buckwheat in their lands long time ago, make a lot of dishes from them, the most delicious cakes, known as regional ‘babka’ buns.

While living in the woodland, dzukai are unrivaled berry and mushroom pickers, and housewives of Dzukija region are the most thoughtful specialists for preparing mushroom and berry. People often make jokes that ‘if not mushrooms and berries, girls of Dzukija would be naked’. This is due to the fact that this land would be difficult to recognize without its loud songs, forests, mushrooms, berries and a beautiful landscape. The region is still called ‘the land of songs’.

The territory of Dzukija is sandy, soils are stony, so living here is not easy, and the farms are small. From ancient times, people have grown a lot from potatoes, buckwheat, rye and other cereals. Nutrition is more modest than in other areas of Lithuania. Due to the large number of forests and water bodies, it consumed a lot of mushrooms and fish, a lot of dairy products, vegetables, and less livestock products.

## COMPREHENSIVELY

Dishes of Dzukija region significantly differ from dishes of other regions. From ancient times Dzūkija is a forestland. Picking mushrooms and berries was the most important business. Residents of Dzukija region are a world-class forestry cookery champions who know how to use all the goodies of the forest for cooking.

On the table of each inhabitant of Dzukija there was a huge variety of mushroom dishes: fermented honey mushrooms with sour cream and onions, salted milk agaric, butter-fried saffron milk-caps, mushroom cheese, chanterelles stewed in sour cream, and other mushrooms stewed, fried, marinated, fermented, boiled in many different ways. Cakes, dumplings are stuffed with such kind of mushrooms.

The most popular crops in Dzukija region are buckwheat. They are used for baking a delicious cake called *babka*. It is a ceremonial bakery, usually baked for Easter. It is made, as women of Dzukija region say, without following any instructions. Only a few eggs, sour milk, butter and flour. Women of Dzukija region believe that the pie will not be tasty if the dough is mixed in different directions. It should be stirred only in one direction. When baking *babka* cake, it is good to keep an eye on the process, as the bakery rises, the crust sometimes breaks. Then the hostess says – it smiled.

The person that taste the pancakes of buckwheat, baked on melted butter, steamed in oven with sourcream and served with a dip of fried boletus, will be very surprised, and will become an admirer of the kitchen of Dzukija region. In the current region of Lazdijai, the favourite dish was the pancakes ‘avizanciai’. Housewives used to put a layer of rye flour dough on the pan, covered it

with scalded and crushed lentils, and on top of it put the rye flour dough once again. The flat cake was cut into pieces, moistened with fat, poured with cracklings on top and then kept in a hot oven.

You will not be indifferent to the fantastic taste of dried sausage and seasoned dried venison cut. Smoked boar sausage, heath-cock souse, fish soup or sauerkraut soup with smoked ribs and dried boletus, roach stewed in sour cream, dumplings with dried boletus, stewed rabbit with beets stewed in sour cream, quail marinated in home-made juniper alcohol and fried in fat with beefsteak mushroom sauce, cranberry pap, or thyme tea with heather honey, well-cooled home-made alcohol are valued.

People of Dzukija region ground rye crop for bread in millstones longer than in any other region of Lithuania. Although after the last war, most of the crops were already transported to the mills. The tanned bread was baked approximately every week, and scalded – even more rarely. People who were poorer saved the rye flour and added well-grinded boiled potatoes, or buckwheat, oatmeal flour, linseed chaff, buckwheat shells, carrots and peas into the mixing. Sometimes the bread was baked with venison, moss or nettle. Especially a lot of rolls, wheat breads, flat cakes, pies, cakes, pastries are baked with stuffing of cowberries, rosehips, dewberries, bird-cherries, blueberries, guelder-rose, barberries, cranberries, ashberries, and whortleberries.

Wheat spread in these lands relatively late and there never was enough. Sometimes the housekeepers, saving the wheat flour, did not add them into the bread itself, but only sprinkled them on the surface of the loaf of bread and clapped the surface with their palms. There made a white, deceptive bread.

If the barley beer remained as a ritual drink until the middle of the 20th century, the beetroot beer was made in Dzukija on a frequent occasion. White beet, but not sugar beet, was cut in pieces, boiled in a pot, the liquid strained off into a tub, added yeast, sugar, scalded hops, covered with cloth and lid. The tub had a mounted tap to pour out the beer.

In the surroundings of Varėna region, beer was made from beetroot and dried bread, dried in a furnace. Beer from sugar beet spread throughout Lithuania after the last war. The people of southern Lithuania refreshed themselves not only with beer, but also with '*salde*' (rye flour and sugar added to boiled water), birch sap, flavoured with sugar and dried apples, with '*miescikis*' made from bread, honey and water. Thyme or caraway seeds tea, so called '*kmynine*', which was tanned for 4–5 days, was also popular.

Butter had almost value of gold for inhabitants of Dzukija region. Most often it was given only to a guest or a patient. To this day, the saying exists: 'It must be a very important person if for him an egg is baked on butter'. And the curd was not every day meal in every family. It was saved for holidays.

People of Dzukija region did not have the variety of cheeses. In the first half of the 20th century, the most common was sour cheese. If it was necessary for the milk to ferment faster, a chunk of rye bread was added into it or a spoonful of sour cream. Additives to cheeses were rarely used, except for caraway seeds. The fermented milk was stuffed into a cheese-bag, hanged to drain the whey, and pressed. The finished cheese was sprinkled with salt.

Meanwhile, housewives learned how to make sweet dairy cheeses from inhabitants of Suvalkija region. People of Dzukija region that lived in Uznemune were the first who started to make cheese with eggs and butter. They dried some cheeses on a window sill in front of the sun, put into the opening on the side wall of the bread furnace or outside, on the fence column. The slightly dried

cheese was put into a cooled oven to avoid cracking. Perhaps, because cheese was not a daily meal, people of Dzukija region valued it very much and the fineness of dishes was often described by the amount and taste of cheeses.

Fritch, their thickness and fatness are very important to the people of Dzukija region – for them it indicated the quality of life. Fritch, like meat, was salted, i.e. rubbed, sprinkled with salt and kept in beds, and even more often in tubs. Peppers, bay leaves, and soil weed field pennycress were used to flavour the meat. They did not smoke stuffed stomach *kindziai (skilandis)*, sausages, hams and tenderloins, but hanged them near the furnace, dried them up and hanged on barns or attics on special vaulting poles. In summer, they covered salted meat with cloth, nettle, wormwood, tansy to protect it from flies and kept for guests or for busy season.

*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



Financed by the European Regional Development Fund.



2014-2020 Operational Programme for the European Union Funds Investments in Lithuania