

Building a Traditional Pascha Basket



Those who have been Orthodox their entire lives have their own family customs for one of the most beautiful ways our Paschal joy is made incarnate in our lives: what goes into their Pascha Basket. However, some of our parishioners – especially our converts – are unfamiliar with what traditionally goes into one’s Pascha Basket, and some of us might find interesting why we include these traditional items (other than because they are simply the things we have given up during Lent, and desire to share these wonderful foods with our brothers and sisters in Christ). *In order of importance*, they are:

- **Easter Bread:** A sweet bread is always included in the basket, leavened with yeast. This is a symbol of the New Covenant; the Israelites of old ate unleavened bread, and we, the Children of the New Covenant, make leavened bread in remembrance of the risen Christ, who shared risen bread with His disciples at the Mystical Supper. The bread is made rich with lots of eggs, butter, sugar, and fruit because of the sweet joy of the Resurrection. This bread takes numerous forms and names in different Christian Cultures: the Carpatho-Russian, Ukrainian, Byelorussian, Slovak, and Georgian *páska*, baked as a round loaf with a golden crust decorated with some symbol indicative of Christ, such as a braided cross; the Russian *kulich*, baked as a tall, cylindrical loaf, with white frosting and sprinkles; the braided Greek *tsouréki*; the Serbian *kólač*; the Romanian *páscă*; the Bulgarian and Macedonian *kozunák*; the Croatian and Montenegrin *pínca*; the Polish *bábka*; the Czech *mázanec* and *houska*; the English *hot cross bun*; the Italian *pizza di Pásqua*; and so many others! If you don’t have a traditional family recipe, consider purchasing a *paska* from our Lady’s Altar Society or look online and bake the one which sounds best to you. Also, Giant Eagle usually sells *hot cross buns* at this time of year.

- **Flesh-Meat:** Roasted meat is included in remembrance of the sacrifice of the Old Testament Passover, which has been replaced by Christ, the New Passover and Lamb of God. *Ham* is the flesh-meat popular among Slavs as the main dish because: a) the richness of ham symbolizes the great joy and abundance of Pascha, and the joy in Christ which we ought to have in our celebrations, and b) it makes manifest the freedom from the dietary restrictions of the Old Law, now that all things have been made clean in Christ (as indicated to the apostle St. Peter in the dream on the rooftop at Joppa [Acts 10:9-16]). The Holy Spirit being poured out on all flesh, all things are now permissible to eat – and ham, the most forbidden of all the “unclean” foods – is now symbolic of our total redemption in Christ. Greeks, Arabs, and others traditionally bring *lamb* in their basket, following Israel’s celebration of the Passover of old. Many choose to include roasted meats which can be prepared ahead of time and eaten cold, so as not to distract our time and attention away from the services of Holy Saturday and Pascha: not exhausting ourselves before the Midnight Paschal Service, and allowing us to more fully enter the Feasts of Our Lord’s liberating descent into hell and life-giving Resurrection from the dead.
- **Bitter Herbs:** Fulfilling the commandment that the Paschal (Passover) meal is to be eaten “with bitter herbs” [Exodus 12:8; Numbers 9:11], the Slavs – like the Jews of Northern/Eastern Europe – eat *horseradish* with the meat of the Passover meal. However, unlike the Ashkenazi, Slavic Christians usually mix the horseradish with beets and sweeten the mixture with sugar. This dish is called *khřěn* by the Slavs. The bitter herb is to remind us of the bitter sufferings which Christ endured for our sake, while the red beets remind us that we are redeemed from the suffering of sin and death by the Blood of Christ, and the sugar reminds us of the sweetness brought to us in the midst of suffering by Christ’s victory over sin and death. Other ethnic groups usually bring *garlic*, as the Slavs do at Christmas Eve Holy Supper.
- **Eggs:** Hard-boiled eggs – traditionally dyed red by being boiled with red onion peels – which we crack together with our brothers and sisters, are likened to the tomb from which Christ arose, coming forth from the tomb as a chick breaks forth from its shell. We crack them in remembrance of Christ having shattered the bonds of sin and death, breaking asunder the gates of hell. Church tradition holds that we dye them red because of a miracle worked through St. Mary Magdalene, who after Christ’s Ascension went to Rome to preach the Gospel. Boldly going before the Emperor Tiberias, she proclaimed Christ’s Resurrection to him; however, she would not go to the Emperor empty-handed, and so brought eggs with her as a gift. He scoffed at her, saying that a man could no more rise from the dead than the egg in her hand could turn red. Immediately, the egg turned red, which she then used to preach Christ’s Resurrection to him, saying that we are redeemed from the vanity of life not with perishable silver or gold, but rather by the precious Blood of Christ, which brings new life as the egg brings forth a new life into the world. This is why icons of St. Mary Magdalene usually depict a red egg in her hand. In addition to edible red eggs, Slavs traditionally have ornately decorated egg shells and wooden eggs, called *pysanky*. In America, we also often find eggs dyed in the pastel colours associated with Easter in American society.
- **Salt:** Usually brought in a shaker from which we can bless our food throughout the year, salt purifies and brings out the flavour of foods, thus reminding the Christian of his duty to others: As salt preserves and brings out the goodness of food, we are called to be salt of the earth, purifying and bringing out the goodness of the world.

- **Cheese:** There are different types of cheese which are traditional, depending on the ethnic group. Among the Slavs, three forms predominate: 1) *sirnaya paskha* (meaning *cheese pascha*) a rich, sweet cream cheese which is usually formed in a pyramid-shaped mold, making a spectacular appearance when unmolded on Pascha night. This cheese is eaten alone, with fruit, or is spread on slices of the our Pascha bread. 2) *hrutka*, an egg custard-type cheese shaped into a ball which has a rather bland but sweet taste, and is intended to indicate that Christians should be moderate in all things. 3) *cream cheese*, placed in a small dish and decorated with Paschal symbols by placing peppercorns or cloves in appropriate patterns. Other ethnic groups have numerous forms of cheese which are traditionally included, while many Americans simply place a block of their favourite deli cheese in their basket instead of – or in addition to – one of the traditional forms of Pascha cheese.
- **Wine:** A bottle of wine is also included – and among many cultures a bottle of spirits, such as vodka, rakija, or whiskey – for “wine maketh glad the heart of man” (Psalm 103) and because wine was part of the Passover meal of the Old Covenant. If consumed in moderation, partaking of wine and/or spirits will help to add to the joy of Christ’s Passover. If consumed to drunkenness, however, we make ourselves a plaything of the devil, who will use our lack of self-control – which we were hopefully practicing during Lent! – to make a mockery of the joy of Pascha.
- **Butter:** In the Slavic tradition, it is usually molded into the shape of a lamb or three-bar Cross, and often richly decorated. This is to represent Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world by being offered on the altar of the Cross for the life of the world. Others simply include a stick of butter. *Together with the cheese and wine*, butter reminds us of all the good things of life, and of all the earthly gifts that come from God, which prefigure the never-ending goodness and joy which come to us through Christ’s death and resurrection.
- **Sausage & Bacon:** In addition to the main dish of roasted meat, we traditionally include rich sausage, such as the Slavic garlic-flavoured *kielbasa/kolbassa* and the pork-fat rich *kabanos* (hunter’s sausage). Slavs also include a *slab of bacon*, usually smoked. The lavishness of these meats is to remind us of the overabundance of God’s mercy, favour, and generosity toward us sinners, to whom he bestows such rich foods. Every traditionally Christian ethnic group has their beloved sausages for Pascha, so bring what you love, or help support our men’s club by purchasing some of their kolbassa. Many Americans also include their favourite sausages and deli meats, or even beef jerky or pepperoni sticks to munch on.
- **Nut Roll:** Many Slavs, in addition to the main Easter bread, also include a pastry consisting of a sweet, dairy-rich, yeast dough spread with a paste made of walnut, poppy seed, apricot, et al., then rolled up into a log shape. The walnut roll is most popular; it goes by many names, but is called *povítica* in most Slavic languages. Consider buying one from our Lady’s Altar Society if you’d like to try this tradition!
- **Special Items:** Every person and each family have items which they enjoy and include in their Pascha Basket, even if it isn’t a general practice: *chocolate, candy*, and *other beloved foods* help us to make our Paschal joy all the more full. *If it will help you to rejoice on Pascha night, do not hesitate to include it!* Fr. John always includes a yoghurt to have to aid in digesting all the rich foods we have been fasting from, and others include papaya, rich in digestive enzymes, for the same reason. Fr. John has seen a pack of ribeyes, sausage bread, Korean BBQ, fried chicken, and so many other fun items. *It may not be traditional, but it is about rejoicing in Christ!*

- **Candle:** Last, but not least, a candle is included in the basket – usually placed in the Easter bread – as a reminder of the Paschal light which is brought to us by this glorious feast, so that we Christians can be little lights in the world. These are placed and lit just before the baskets are blessed. Some use highly-decorated candles, while others use a simple beeswax taper. Both can be purchased at the candle desk.

All of these wonderful items are placed in a wicker basket, often with a ribbon or bow tied to the handle, and then covered with a linen cloth, often decorated for Pascha with the words “Christ is Risen!” or other Paschal symbols. If you don’t have one, the O Club has covers for sale for \$15-20. At the time of the basket blessing, the decorative cover is removed – as well as any lids – and the candle is placed in the loaf of sweet bread and then lit. We then partake of the Agape Meal with our brothers and sisters in Christ, sharing the foods we love in order to grow in love for one another. Finally, we bring our baskets back to church with us for Agape Vespers, where we continue this joyous feast of love with our brothers and sisters in Christ. Fr. John suggests leaving your baskets in your car for the short 30 minutes of Agape Vespers, and then bringing them over to the back yard of the rectory for our Paschal picnic and barbecue.

Ultimately, all of this is meant to aid in our celebration of Christ’s Resurrection, rather than distract from it. If we are missing services to prepare our baskets, we’re missing point. As we learn from the prayer when the baskets are blessed, the flesh-meats and all these rich foods ultimately symbolize the fattened calf prepared for the Prodigal Son on his return to his Heavenly Father. Thus, at Pascha, we celebrate our return to God and our joyous participation in the life of our Saviour, who blesses us and has promised to be our “true food.” We must therefore remember that we are not celebrating the food of this world which perishes, but by these foods we are celebrating Christ’s Resurrection, by which we truly live and by which we are welcomed into the Kingdom of Heaven.

