

**The Heritage of Food**  
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Heritage is something handed on to a person from their ancestors – inheritance is something that a person has as a result of having been born in a certain time, place or condition.

Heritage is a gift – it is not something we choose.

Since we all need food to live, every culture has a special association with the food grown, prepared and shared in their society. Every food culture is unique. It is interesting how food can either unite or divide a people and how it can be used to reinforce a class system.

For us, in this church, we share a food heritage from various parts of the globe.

Many of us are Mennonite of European descent and share a common menu of foods. I'll present a short overview of how we acquired some of these foods and how they tie us into a church and community.

Mennonites or Anabaptists began in the Netherlands in the 1500's. Heavily persecuted and killed for their beliefs, the Mennonites migrated en masse to new locations where for a time they could live in peace, practice their religion and where they often prospered. Mennonites developed a strong ethnicity because of these en masse migrations, moving in communities.

Each migration saw changes and additions to our food menu. We added new foods, new ways of preparing and preserving food and adapted them to our established kitchen patterns.

In the Netherlands, Mennonites planted gardens and a variety of vegetables were an important part of their diet. In fact, the Dutch and Flemish were the biggest consumers of vegetables in all of Europe at that time. Fresh and dried fruit was also available through import and used in cooking. Dairy farming provided plentiful milk, butter and cheese.

Foods that remain in our heritage with Dutch roots are zwieback or buns, New Year's fritters or porzelky, peppernuts, spreading bread with butter and various toppings, combining meat and cabbage with prunes or raisins and adding sugar or honey and cinnamon to cereal deserts like rice or barley.

In the late 1500's, the Mennonites left Holland and migrated to the Vistula Delta (present day Poland). They brought with them their food patterns, but also added several others. One distinct addition was the increased use of pork. Sausage, ham, pork chops and pork roasts were added to the menu.

In the Vistula Delta, the great variety of vegetables faded from their diet leaving mainly root vegetables. Beer was the main beverage and was not forbidden by the church. Water was not safe to drink.

In the Delta, Mennonites continued to dairy and constantly improved their herds. The women developed special earthenware milk containers which readily allowed cream to rise to the top and they also developed butter churns.

The Mennonite cheeses, (also called Tilsit) which were marketed throughout Germany and are still available today, were first produced commercially by these Mennonite women. Other foods from the Delta were all the milk and water based soups, moos or fruit soup, kuchen, plautz and kringel.

When Mennonites were again under increased Government scrutiny, they looked for a new land, a country that would accept them. Catherine the Great of Russia invited the Mennonites to come farm the Steppes of South Russia. Here, grain was the main part of the diet – rye bread was a staple food. Potatoes were unknown in South Russian until the Mennonites introduced them. Potatoes were a staple food for the Mennonites.

When the Mennonites firsts began their farming settlements in South Russia (now Ukraine), they did not interact with the local neighbours, but with time, they learned of Ukrainian cooking through their hired help, especially the girls helping in the kitchens. Here they learned about borscht, varenyky (perogies) and brined/pickled cucumbers and cabbage.

Paska, an egg rich bread baked for Easter was a favourite. Mennonite girls went to private cooking lessons with Ukrainian women to learn the proper way to make perfect paska. In Russia, the Mennonites learned to drink glasses of tea from a samovar. Coffee was available and drunk in the afternoon. Sunflower seeds were a favourite snack.

Mennonites adopted a long list of foods and food preparations and preservings from the Russian/Ukrainian connection. Some of these foods are periski, honey cakes, roll kuchen, blintze (thin pancakes layered with summer fruit

and served with sour cream), various cream gravies and noodles. It was also here where they learned to like beef and incorporate this into their diet.

The golden era before the Russia revolution saw Mennonites prosper and integrate more into Russian society. They also developed schools, universities, hospitals, orphanages, old folks homes and many businesses.

There was a migration to Canada and the U.S. by Mennonites in the 1870's, when they felt their private schools and freedom from military service was threatened.

After World War I, after the October revolution and during the severe drought and famine of 1921-23, everything changed dramatically for the Mennonites in South Russia. During this time of upheaval and terror, many Mennonites left South Russia to migrate to Canada. Many died or were forced into exile. Others came to North America to begin a new life in another new land. After World War II, another wave of Mennonites came to Canada – many of these were women and children.

In Canada, the Mennonites have been assimilated. Rapid change in the last 80 – 100 years has seen an amazing change in our kitchens. Food preservation is not the same necessity it once was. We have an amazing array of foods available. There are many trends in our modern food world – only a small amount of our disposable budgets go to food purchase. Corporate farming has become our primary food producer. Fast, convenient food is often desired and time is money. The subtle outcome of these trends has been a diminishing respect for food among people with the greatest access to it. By reducing food to good, bad, fast, affordable, people lose sight of the fact that food is first of all sacred – a precious gift of the earth to be enjoyed with others and shared by all.

During the last 50+ years, a number of Mennonite women have made attempts to preserve the Mennonite food history through writing cookbooks. Researching old recipes and collecting the stories behind them has become a valuable resource. This collection of cookbooks also gives us the view of women who have spent lifetimes making food, for sustenance and for celebration. Some of these recipes remind us that food preparation can be very time consuming and for a large sector of women in the world, food preparation is still their main activity.

The tradition of a family sitting down together to a meal to share thanksgiving, sustenance and conversation was the heart of the Mennonite family. Psychological feelings released when we share comfort/traditional foods fills us with nostalgia, and perfection would be the very way your mom cooked it!

People from many parts of the world with various food traditions have joined the Anabaptists. Their contributions and sharings continue to enrich our ever changing Mennonite food landscape.

I'll end with a quote from the cookbook "Extending the Table": "Our respect for what nourishes us can deepen as we occasionally devote extra time to preparing food, thinking about where it has come from and those who have produced it and then enjoying it in the company of others."

I want to share about the visual on our table. Bread is symbolic of so many things in life. Volumes have been written about break and twobake or buns. These buns I brought are called "Jweuashte Tveiback" or roasted buns – they are an amazing food stuff that does not mold or spoil, provide nutrition, are light weight and gentle to an irritated stomach. They were used in this format as a valuable travel food. Roasted buns were prepared by Mennonite women in South Russia for the very long arduous trip to America. They were stored in large cloth sacks and rationed during the often rough sea passage over the Atlantic.

The wicker trunk is a remnant of a journey to this new land. It belonged to my father-in-law Bernhardt Buhler. He carried his belongings in it from Gregarzikfa to Moscow and Rotterdam by train; then by ship past Spain, and Cuba. Between Cuba and Mexico they encountered a terrifying hurricane. They landed in Mexico and stayed with relatives for 3 months. They then took the train to Manitoba and eventually to Osler, Saskatchewan.