
Stories of a Dollhouse

Exploring our Family
Memory and Traditions

Pickles Season 1915



Pickles Season



Our Książyk Grandfather was 16 when he came in France in May 1926, just after "the events" in Warsaw. This safety trip was planned for a few weeks but at the end of the Summer, the family established in France definitively.

As a Pole, our Grandfather was surprized by the small size and distinctive taste of pickles in France. From a French perspective, "smaller is better" and *cornichons fins* (mini pickles) are enjoyed for their top quality. Some top-end brands sell pickles no larger than a pencil.

Our Dollhouse story pictures the kitchen in the Książyk house during Summer 1915 in Poland. At this time, our Grandfather was 5. All his life, he would keep the fond memory of the "pickles season" with his Grandmother.



Pickles Season

Kitchen Stars

Pickles are small cucumbers harvested before full maturity. However, gherkin are a specific variety of small cucurbits (cucurbitaceae) that perfectionists consider to be the real pickles. Whatever their names, there are more than 100 different varieties of cucumbers, big and small.

The size of Polish pickles is impressive. Some of them are so big that you cannot even close your fingers around. The usual word for pickles is *ogórek* (pl. *ogórki*). *Korniszon*, from the French word “cornichons” is also used for small *ogórki*.

According to the Central Statistical Office, a Pole eats more than 6 kg pickles every year. The average consumption per person and per year is 400g in France and 3.6 kg (8,5 lbs) in the US.

Pickles are very important in Polish gastronomy. They are the best friends of vodka and a popular saying can translates into ‘one *pickle jar a day keeps the hangover away*’. There is no *kielbasa* (sausage) without pickles and the smelling of this couple is a common in trains or buses. Pickles are also necessary to survive a *smalec* experience (pork fat spread on bread).



Pickles Season



Polish stores propose pickles in jars of all sizes. The choice of brands, varieties and tastes is absolutely incredible. Even village groceries have an impressive selection of *ogórki kwaszone* and *kiszone*.

Homemade *ogórki* are sold by weight in plastic buckets. Sometimes, these buckets are larger than a barrel. For non-Polish eyes and noses, *ogórki* in a bucket of salted brine are not very inviting. Pickles are bathing in a thick, opaque and viscous liquid. The smell is close to an old onion lost under a kitchen cupboard.



Pickles Season



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Pickles Season

Magic Potion

Every Polish family has a secret to prepare pickles and there are many recipes. All basic preparations organize a natural fermentation in a salted water brine that gives a sour taste to the vegetable. Adding vinegar to the brine makes the conservation time longer.

The pickling process is a breakdown of sugars (contained in the vegetables) into a liquid environment of low lactic acid, bacteria and yeast. To avoid decomposition, pickles should be entirely covered by this liquid.

The Poles use the words *kiszone* and *kwaszone* to designate any marinated pickles.

- *ogórki kwaszone* or *kiszone* are marinated pickles in a flavoured brine. The taste can be sweet, tangy or half-sour.

- *ogórek małosolny* are marinated pickles in high-salted brine for longer conservation. The taste ranges from sour to very acid.

Usual components to flavour the brine are garlic, black peppercorns, dill, fennel, tarragon, mustard seeds, bay leaves, cloves, carrots and horseradish. Optional ingredients can be as unexpected as honey, marjoram, black currant, cherry or oak leaves.



For non-Polish palates, the taste of *ogórki* is always surprising. You may have some difficulties to identify the seasoning of the marinade. Still, with small bites and much concentration, you can get the subtle flavours of basic ingredients.

Do not expect a crunchy experience. Usually, homemade *ogórki* are rather soft. The longer in the jar, the softer they are. Some can even turn spongy. Smile, take a deep breathe and share your delight.

Pickles Season



► Preparing *ogórki* preserves turned the kitchen into some kind of witch den. All the decor was there: huge boiling cauldrons, hellfire in the stove, mysterious pots filled with weird herbs. Sometimes, an old book with hand-written notes gave instructions.



Pickles Season

Witch Den

In 1915, during the pickles season, everybody was very busy. The process involved several steps and lasted several days.

First, vegetables were sorted by sizes and washed in hot water. Then, vegetables were put in big wooden jar with plenty of salt for a first maceration during one night. This maceration process involved a servant to "turn the pot" with a long wooden spoon.

The secret aromatic mixture was prepared. Some ingredients were grated and reduced with a pestle in a mortar. Then, they went through a sieve.

This process was repeated for some ingredients, until a powder was obtained. For my Grandfather, accessing the pestle and mortar was moving up the ranks.



The day after, a 50/50 mix of salted water and vinegar was broiled with aromatic herbs for a few minutes. Some of the ingredients mentioned above were put into preserve jars. Pickled were added and covered by the broth.

There was always a fierce debate about the broth. One servant wanted to pour a scalding broth. Another argued that the broth should be just warm. Discussions went on and on. At the end, the broth was cold anyway.

A long time ago in Poland, pickles were kept in terracotta jars or wooden barrels. With the raise of hygiene awareness, glass jars generalized at the start of the 20th century. In 1915, *ogórki* preserves were

stored in big glass jars closed with a simple cork. Pickles would remain in their containers several months, one year was a maximum.

Pickles Season



Pickles Season



► Sorting gherkins by sizes was an exclusive mission for serious kids. This task required much attention and the ability to sit silently while grownups discussed the quality of homemade vinegar. Being *cool as a cucumber* was a required qualification. By all extents, the pickle season was a maturity test to be definitely admitted in the kitchen.

Pickles Season

Busy time

The pickle season ranges from July to September. However, the first harvest can come early in June and be followed by another a few weeks later. In 1915, the terrible environment of WWI did not stop nature. Seasons ruled household activities whatever the circumstances.

Summer was the busy time of preserves making. To the delight of children, fruits and vegetables were overcrowding every available space in the pantry. But sneaking to snatch a peach or some cherries was impossible. *Babcia* kept the pantry closed and the key was clingling (with many others) to her chatelaine.

In the childhood memory of our Grandfather, this abundance created a jolly chaos in the house. So many pickles jars were prepared than the pantry was to small to store all the harvest. Consequently, pickles jars were dispatched in other available spaces, including underneath the stairs, along the corridors, sometimes even under the beds....

There is no doubt that the war added anxiety to the usual food precaution storage. Nobody could tell how long would last the conflict. One year later, Poland experienced the coldest winter of the war with temperatures dropping to minus twenty.





► Long ago in rural Poland, the kitchen was the *czarny pokój* (black room), as opposed to the *biały pokój* (white room) where the family was living. The black room metaphor refers to the walls coloured by the smoke of stove.

This image is rather ironic considering that many household whitewashed the walls of their kitchen with lime once and sometimes twice a year. This painting was usually associated with the festivities of Easter and Christmas.

Pickles Season



Major Producer

In 2019 with 9.9 tons, the *ogórki* production in Poland represented 53% of the total EU production. Still, this production hardly covers the local consumption. Poland exports a little but also imports processed *ogórki* from Germany and The Netherlands.

Poland entered the European Union in 2004 and pickles were an opportunity to mock the stupidity of Eurocrats in Brussels. At this time, an EU regulations specified the curvature angle of cucumbers. The EU also ruled that the maximum size of a bow for extra cucumber category should not exceed 10 mm for every 10 cm of length of vegetable.

The success of bio agriculture has made these rules obsolete. *Ogórki* are now sold whatever their size, shapes and colours.



Pickles in Polish Culture

- *Mizeria* is a very popular pickle salad in bar mleczny, cheap restaurants. But this delicious dish also a symbol of poverty.
- The "pickle season" (*sezon ogórkowy*) is the holiday recess when only few people are working in public services.
- Past generations used sliced pickles as cold compress to get rid of fever.
- "*Jeden woli ogórki, drugi ogrodnika corki*" - When one likes cucumbers, the other prefers the gardener's daughter.
- "*A jar of pickles a day keeps the hangover away*".

Pickles Season

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