“AS IN HEAVEN AND IN WARMIA”

Gänseschwarzsauer – a dish to remember the East Prussian and Pomeranian region

by Heidi Hein-Kircher

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Photo credit: Lakeshore near Bartschin with fishing boats and geese. Ernst Stewner / Herder-Institut, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0

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The period in the run-up to Christmas is full of customs, traditions, and special foods. Gänseschwarzsauer is a soup made with goose (“Gänse” in German) blood and dried fruit. Its name derives from the fact that the blood is very dark red in colour (hence “schwarz” or black in English) and vinegar is added to prevent the blood from clotting (hence “sauer” or sour). The dish was brought to West Germany by refugees and displaced people from East Prussia and Pomerania, but it never caught on.

Goose is a meat associated with the pre-Christmas period – geese only become ready for slaughter in the colder months and provide a lot of fat, which is important for the winter diet. For many refugees and displaced persons who were forced to leave East Prussia and Pomerania following Germany’s defeat in the Second World War, the festive period still evokes memories of goose and duck blood soup to this day.

Agnes Miegel – a poet from Königsberg (the German and Prussian name for Kaliningrad, a city in modern-day Russia) – noted the importance of food for a person’s well-being by saying that the soul lies in the stomach.[1] Research has shown that food stimulates all five senses and triggers deep feelings of well-being, memories, a range of emotions and, above all, nostalgia.[2] The period around Christmas evokes memories of childhood and growing up, as well as memories of the lost homeland. This leads to a harking back to familiar, regional traditions. The key festivals throughout the year are associated with lots of regional traditions and customs, and especially with particular foods. As such, food also serves as a reminder of home: customs and traditional recipes are easy to transport when people flee their homes, migrate or are displaced, and they are always brought with them. As a result, traditional dishes shape the identity of these groups of people and they also shape their respective culture of remembrance – the dishes bring their homeland back to life when there is often a lack of physical reminders of home. Thus, food contributes to the forming of an identity and serves to unify people.

Goose or duck blood soup remains a popular dish to cook at Christmas, particularly by the generation of refugees and displaced persons from East Prussia and Pomerania. The dish is associated with East Prussian and Pomeranian cuisine more than any other food, even though modern cookbooks barely mention it. Gänseschwarzsauer – a blood soup made with goose blood – can be described as a German speciality, while Czernina, which is made using duck blood, represents the Polish variety.

Theodor Fontane, who spent part of his childhood in the Pomeranian city of Swinemünde – the modern-day Świnoujście in Poland – described goose blood soup in his recollections of his

childhood and, in doing so, emphasized the significance of this dish during the period between Martinmas and Christmas. "Diese Schlachtzeit war nämlich zugleich auch die Zeit, wo das aus Gänseblut zubereitete "Schwarzsauer" tagtäglich auf unseren Tisch kam, ein Gericht, das, nach pommerscher Anschauung, alles andere aus dem Felde schlägt." ["This period of slaughter was also the time when "Schwarzsauer", which is prepared from goose blood, was served each day; a dish that Pomeranians believe beats everything else out of the park."][3] Fontane also describes how his father was especially fond of the solid pieces in the soup: "But, just like us, he used to pick out the dried fruit and almond dumplings and leave the broth to the servants outside." Fontane's description is a little different from the recollection of a fan of Gänseschwarzsauer, which was recorded during an interview with the author in 2022: He explains that his family had a small farm in East Prussia with two cows, two pigs, three sheep, around 15 geese and 15 ducks, and some chickens. Whenever animals were slaughtered, the blood was collected and mixed with vinegar to prevent it from clotting. He went on to explain that pig's blood wasn't used for the Schwarzsauer soup; instead it was used to make black pudding ("Blutwurst") and Kaszanka ("Grützwurst"). In autumn, the first geese and ducks were slaughtered by his father because no one else on the farm dared to do it. Later, a strong broth was cooked and then mixed with the blood. The soup was served with potatoes, pasta or dumplings, but no meat was added. The Preußische Allgemeine newspaper stated: Geese – a flock of geese belonged on every farm"[4]. The article goes on to provide further detail.

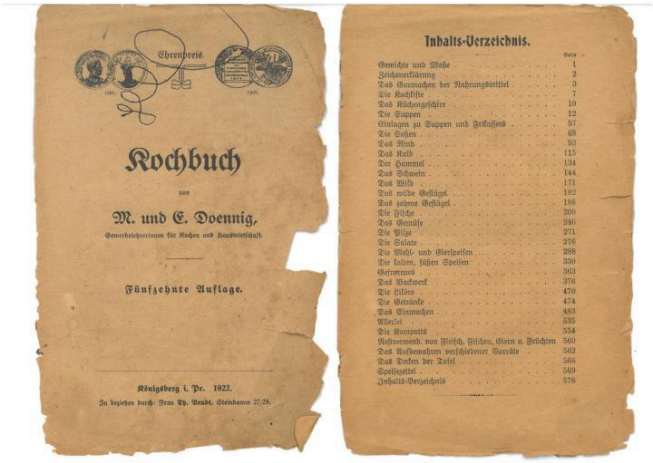
> *Every part of the goose was used: roast goose, goose giblets, smoked breast, goose flare fat, the feathers – the blood was used to make Schwarzsauer, the head was split and the brain – a real delicacy – wrapped goose feet (cleaned intestines were wrapped around the cleaned and boiled feet).*

As with other typical regional dishes, each family has their own recipe for the soup. These recipes are still used to this day by Schwarzsauer fans who purchase goose blood during the Advent season: "We don't cook the intestines but we do use the feet and head, as well as the innards like the stomach, liver and heart." Besides the "blood and guts", vegetables and ingredients such as raisins are added to the broth. The soup is then thickened with rye flour

and then finished off with goose blood. The soup is seasoned with salt, wine vinegar and sugar, and sometimes with caraway seeds. A woman from East Prussia remembers how delicious it tasted: “… the sweet and sour flavour with lots of plump raisins and, of course, with a roux of diced smoked bacon and fried onions.”[5] Dishes made with blood are familiar in almost all cultures and originate from a time when as much of the slaughtered animals was used as possible, particularly by less well-off families. In the case of Gänseschwarzsauer, the need to use vinegar means that the dish has the sour taste typical of East Prussian and Lithuanian cuisine.

Just like other “peasant foods”, Gänseschwarzsauer is a regional delicacy that has become part of people’s identity. It is more heavily associated with identity than Gänseweißsauer or wrapped goose feet. These kinds of regional dishes – albeit refined versions – are seen as specialities and are often appreciated beyond the respective region from whence they came. But this is not the case for Gänseschwarzsauer; instead, this dish is only considered a delicacy by the displaced persons who used to live in East Prussia and Pomerania. As such, modern recipe books on East Prussian cuisine rarely include a recipe for Gänseschwarzsauer, presumably because goose blood is no longer collected on goose farms and because tastes and preferences have changed over time.

Just like other dishes, Gänseschwarzsauer can be characterized as an intangible cultural heritage that fosters a specific identity. As the recollections and reports quoted in this article demonstrate, the goose blood soup is an important trigger for memories of the lost East Prussian-Pomeranian homeland. As a result, the generation with the most experience of this former homeland likes to cook and eat Gänseschwarzsauer at Christmas, as a way to recall the cuisine and traditions of their homeland.


Ehrenpreis.

Kochbuch

von

M. und E. Doennig,

Gewerbeoberlehrerinnen für Kochen und Haushaltungskunde.

Fünfzehnte Auflage.

Königsberg i. Pr. 1922.

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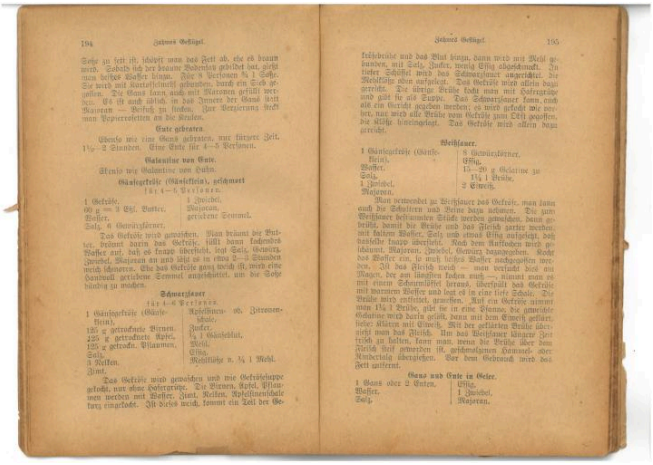
194 Zahmes Geflügel.

Gänseklein von Gute.

Gänsegekröse (Gänsefleisch), gekocht

Schwarzsauer

Zahmes Geflügel. 195

Weißsauer.

Recipe from Magarete and Elisabeth Doennig's cookbook for goose black sour (1922). Martin-Opitz-Bibliothek, CC0 1.0

Recipe

The classic recipe book on East Prussian cuisine, by Magarete and Elisabeth Doennig, Kochbuch, (15th edition) Königsberg in Prussia 1922 recommends the following method:

> *The innards of 1 goose (giblets), 125g dried pears, 125g dried apples, 125g dried plums, salt, 3 cloves, cinnamon, orange or lemon peel, sugar, ¼ l goose blood, flour, vinegar, flour dumplings made using ¼ l flour*
>
> *Wash the tripe and cook like tripe soup (flaki), but without adding any oats. Briefly cook the pears, apples and plums in water with cinnamon, cloves and orange peel. When soft, add a portion of the broth and the blood, then bind with flour and season with salt, sugar and a little vinegar. Serve the Schwarzsauer in a deep dish with the flour dumplings on top. The tripe is served separately. The remaining broth is cooked with oats and served as a soup. The blood soup can also be served as a dish. It is cooked as described above, but all of the broth is poured from the tripe to the fruit and the dumplings are added. The tripe is served separately.*

English translation: LEaF Translations ↗

Footnotes

1. cf. Agnes Miegel’s “Kinderheitserinnerungen”, quoted from Marianne Kopp: Beetenbarsch und Klunkermus. Ostpreußische Küche, Husum 2010, p. 11. ↥
2. Open Science – Lebenswissenschaften im Dialog: Kulinarische Erinnerungen – wie sie funktionieren und uns prägen. URL: https://www.openscience.or.at/hungryforscienceblog/kulinarische-erinnerungen-wie-sie-funktionieren-und-wie-sie-uns-praegen/. ↥
3. Theodor Fontane: Meine Kinderjahre. Autobiographischer Roman (1893), URL: https://www.projekt-gutenberg.org/fontane/kinderjr/kinde091.html. ↥

4. Uta Lüttich: Advents- und Weihnachtszeit zu Hause. Ein Rückblick auf heimatliche Traditionen – Eine Auswahl von Vorbereitungen auf das Fest im meist strengen Winter. In: Preußische Allgemeine, 17.12.2023, https://paz.de/artikel/advents-und-weihnachtszeit-zu-hause-a10174.html. ↥

5. Edith Steinort: Ein Hauch von Bauernschläue, in: Gudrun Schmidt (ed.): Heimat geht durch den Magen. Hörer erzählen von Gerichten mit Geschichten. Ein Rezept-Wettbewerb der WDR-Sendung “Alte und neue Heimat”, Cologne 1999, pp. 115-117. ↥

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