How Ukraine Tastes

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My poor Ukraine, patched, torn, with a broken heart. I miss you so much… And sometimes when I taste some dish here, abroad, your taste comes back to me. Colorful pictures buzz in my head like a swarm.

Ukraine smells like childhood. Like mom's most delicious borscht. I close my eyes, and memories, like pearls, roll one by one along the thread of my soul. There I am, a little curious girl, peeking into the kitchen after kindergarten.

- Mom, what's there to eat?

- Borscht, my dear. Come quickly, or it will get cold.

- I don't want it. I won't eat it! I want ice cream!

Flashback.

As a student, studying in another city, I come home for the weekend.

- Mom, you've set up a whole table and are feeding me borscht... The green one smells of coziness to me, and the red one of calmness and warmth. And of mom’s kitchen.

- Come, my dear, let me hug you, my bird. You must be tired from the journey. Here's borscht, with fresh salted pork fat and garlic. Come, my sunshine. Eat...

I remember, and goosebumps run down my skin...

Do you remember how our grandmothers and mothers baked pies, charlottes, and cakes? The aroma of fresh pastries and cinnamon with apples would spread in a long trail across the whole house. You slowly open the oven. The fragrance gently flirts with the nostrils. You inhale deeply. Hot pies entice you—taste them. Burning your tongue and swallowing your saliva, you take the first "bite."

- My dear, why are you eating it while it's hot? Wait, let them cool down!

Pies may cool down, but not my burning heart.

Take those lovely Easter breads (pasky). Mom or grandma would start baking them early on Holy Thursday. No loud music was allowed at home, no quarrels. And God forbid, no shouting. Otherwise, the dough wouldn't rise. The starter is as temperamental as a capricious woman. It has its own spirit. When those fragrant pasky succeeded, and on Easter, you could finally taste them... I remember such scenes from life. Five in the morning, we return from church, the priest abundantly sprinkles our happy faces. Everyone says to each other, "Christ is risen" and "Indeed, He is risen," girls boast about new dresses in the dark, children try not to fall asleep. The smell of sausages, eggs, and Paska swirls in the air. Long rows of people at the church wanting to share the joy of Christ's resurrection. Candles lit, prayers read. And there it is, five in the morning, more than 12 dishes lay on the table. And Her Majesty, the Paska, reigning. The first piece simply melts in the mouth. The second one, you finish barely even though it's delicious. The stomach is full "to the brim," yet the hand still reaches for that fragrant, tasty, fluffy, golden Paska—and I see the caring hands of my mother before me… No sleep, no rest, only cooking, washing, cleaning…

And then, there are memories of fried potatoes. Dad always cooks them with cutlets. The aroma is simply incredible. Since childhood, this dish associated with me as food of the Gods. With onion or garlic, in oil or butter. And a happy face of a person content with life. Those same potatoes, which at 10 PM, after coming from classes and concerts, you fry. Eating quite a bit in the process because you’re hungry. And to gnaw the granite of science without gnawing on delicious potatoes somehow… It's not the same.

Flashback.

On the stove, syrniki are browning. My son just helped me shape them. Carefully sprinkling semolina and breaking an egg. Syrniki are also a family tradition. I often make them with vanilla extract. I serve them with sour cream and fruits. Most often, I serve syrniki with blueberries and raspberries. My son very carefully blows on the freshly fried, golden syrniki. And "dresses" each little finger with a raspberry. It tastes better this way...

I remember… My grandmother lived in the district center with my aunt. When my parents sent me to grandma and aunty for summer holidays, they knew well: I would be under wonderful care. In the morning, I could lounge in bed for hours, sleep until 1 PM, then eat a delicious breakfast of three homemade eggs, freshly dug potatoes. And that salad of tomatoes and cucumbers… Mmm, the smell still lingers through the years in my memory, enticing. It seems there’s a special pocket in the heart for grandma’s homemade food.

And on Sunday... Grandma would take me to her friend's house. We'd sit on the porch, talking about everything in the world, and her friend (God rest her soul and may the earth be soft for my dear grandma) would pinch my well-fed cheeks (usually three extra kilos were gained over the summer).

Then we'd go to the yard, and that's where the fun began. The homemade, crimson-red cherries beckoned with their gentle eyes: taste... And I would yield. Little, delicate, but very bright and ambitious girl Anna. How did she garnish them? Right, with fragrant, warm, freshly baked bread… And it was so delicious! Those present cakes and delicacies can hardly compete… At seven, listening to adult conversations, soaking in the aroma of summer, and eating those fragrant cherries… And the World is vast and friendly, and the World is like a ripe cherry… Yours. Just take it...