There is no Ukraine without salo: An analysis of the cultural and social significance of salo in Ukraine
by Viktoria Popovych

Salo, or pork fat in Ukrainian, is a national delicacy and symbol of Ukrainian cuisine. The reason for its popularity is because of its ability to stay fresh for weeks, its taste, and the involved process of making it from scratch. Unfortunately, like many aspects of Ukrainian life, Russians and other oppressors have used the humble salo as a means to destroy and weaken Ukraine’s national character through the use of jokes. The paper will first analyze how pork fat has metamorphosed from its associations of poverty and peasantry to representations of folk traditions through a comparative analysis of the Italian lardo and salo. It will then examine how Ukrainians have twisted and repurposed Soviet jokes as a way to uplift their own ethnic identity while taunting their oppressors. Salo is more than just a piece of pork fat; it is an embodiment of Ukraine. As one might say, “There is no Ukraine without salo.”

Introduction

A group of men, some dressed in uniform and one man in an embroidered shirt, stand around an empty table. All of the men are grabbing guns, loading them up and preparing for a battle. The man in the embroidered shirt has the classic Ukrainian look. He has a long wispy moustache and the Cossack hairstyle, which is composed of a shaved head with a small piece of long hair on top. He is the leader of this group, and he is the one making plans to take back Crimea from the Russians. He looks at the other men and says to them, “Well boys, gather them together” (Гільдія 2017). The men look at each other, grab pounds of salo, and carefully place them on the table individually while a modern Ukrainian patriotic song plays in the background. Once it is gathered, it reveals a map of Ukraine. The leader places his hand on the piece of salo that represents the region of Crimea and strongly affirms that this is ours (Гільдія 2017: 0:39). This was a promotional video for a salo and moonshine festival in Ukraine in 2017, 3 years after the forceful annexation of Crimea to Russia.

Salo, or cured pork fat, is a delicacy that Ukrainian people enjoy. Many people who grew up in or visit Ukrainian villages know the importance of this dish. Salo is more than just a piece of pork fat. For Ukrainians, it is an important marker of their folk identity, a nostalgic reminder of salivating over the reward of salo at home after finishing a hard day at work. After all, the best salo is homemade and can never be mass produced.

Salo is so loved that it has dedicated festivals and proverbs. These festivals would be held in various villages, and salo makers would proudly put on display their thickest and tastiest pieces of salo. As a unit of measurement, locals will say that a good piece of salo needs to be at least 6 fingers thick (Kollegaeva 2012). Making salo is not as easy as some food bloggers may think. Many recipes online will say that you just need to grab a piece of pork fat, salt it, store it and let it salt (Kollegaeva 2012). However, good salo does

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1 Author’s Translation from Ukrainian.
not start with the piece of meat, but with the actual pig itself.

Indeed, there is a lot of care and consideration taken into account when raising a pig in the interest of salo. The pig needs to be taken good care of and well-fed with high quality ingredients. Many villages will raise their own pig just for the purpose of making salo. The pigs are sourced right outside in the yard, and the consumer knows how the pig has been raised.

Salo is Ukraine’s hidden pride. It is a representation of the traditional folk identity that the Russian state and other oppressors have tried so desperately to erase. Russia in particular has even attempted to use salo as a means of disparaging Ukraine’s character. However, Ukrainians have resisted these attempts at erasure and degradation. This paper will expand on the themes and topics of salo being used as a marker of folk identity and as a way to reject oppressive attempts to destroy Ukraine’s character and wit.

**Pork Fat as a Marker of Folk Traditions and Cultural Heritage**

As Katrina Kollegaeva (2012) explains, salo has been traced back to Italy and is a variation of lardo, which is also salted and cured pork fat. However, it is important to point out that salo and lardo are not the same thing. Lardo is much softer than salo, while salo is thicker and sliceable. Salo can be cut into pieces and placed on bread, like pieces of thick ham or thick cheese, while lardo is significantly softer and folds in on itself. Despite the physical characteristics of the cure pork fat being different, they share similar politics when it comes to consumption and production. Like Ukraine, Italy has its own version of a salo festival called the lardo di Colonnata. Colonnata is a small village in Italy that is famously known for its cured pork fat and is a very popular food attraction for tourists. Italian food is one of the most popular cuisines in the world, and when tourists come to visit Italy, they want to find the most “authentic” Italian food, perceived as frozen in time, untouched by mass production and capitalism (Parasecoli 2014). This interest increased after World War II. Then, the food festival’s popularity started to skyrocket, and the production of lardo continued.

Oftentimes, the foods that tourists are in love with are foods that are not so favourably viewed by the locals. This is the case with lardo. As Leitch (2000) describes in her visit to Colonnata, lardo is rarely eaten in Italian households because of its association with poverty and hunger. Indeed, it is interesting to note that during Leitch’s visit, she was never once offered lardo despite this village being her main fieldwork for a couple of years (Leitch 2000: 108). In the Second World War, however, when the villages in Italy were struggling to sustain themselves, lardo saved them from starvation. Lardo is thus a painful physical reminder of the food scarcity and poverty that once plagued Colonnata.

Like salo, lardo is known to be a “hunger killer” because of its high fat and protein content (Mintz 1979). Lardo and salo are therefore very handy foods to have because they preserve very well and last for a long time. For Ukrainians, salo was eaten and carried by Cossacks, who were Ukrainian warriors. These warriors would go on long and dangerous journeys to protect their homeland and would sometimes go days without any food. So, salo was the perfect food to bring since there is no required preparation to eat it. Like salo, lardo was used as medicine and was known to cure illnesses.

Salo also shares many of the same social characteristics as lardo, such as being associated with poverty, peasantry, and hunger. Ukrainian villages also have salo festivals that tourists will sometimes visit.
Yet the perceptions of salo by the Ukrainian locals are completely different from those of the locals in Colonnata. There seems to be hidden shame among the residents of Colonnata over their association with lardo. Tourism is a major economic industry and helps to sustain the town, so they continue to make it, even if the villagers do not seem to consume their own lardo as much. However, with Ukrainians, salo is their lifeline. There are many proverbs that highlight people’s love for salo, such as, “If I were a rich man, I would eat salo with salo” (Tiazhka 2022). This proverb references back to a time when most Ukrainians were agricultural labourers for lords that owned their lands. This is an interesting proverb because typically, if one wishes to be rich, then they would wish for luxury goods or money. However, for Ukrainians, salo is luxury. As I was once told by an individual who lived in the mountain region of Ukraine, when they moved to Canada, there were three important things that needed to be obtained once they arrived: a warm place to stay, clean water, and salo.

What I want to highlight is the differences in attitudes between the Ukrainian and Italian locals. Italian locals of Colonnata seem to be almost ashamed of their own pork fat. Of course, this is not to say that they hate lardo, but more so that they do not want to be perceived as poor or peasant-like by other locals. Ukrainians in the villages, on the other hand, are not ashamed whatsoever. The Ukrainian festivals would often be competitions for the best quality of salo, as mentioned earlier. Enthusiastic salo makers would come to these festivals to sell and show off their best salo. The festivals are not put on in the interest of attracting tourists who are interested in trying pork fat. They are put on by salo-lovers for salo-lovers. In contrast to Leitch’s (2000) visit to Colonnata, when Kollegaeva (2012) visited villages in Western Ukraine, she was almost immediately offered salo. For people who live in the villages, salo is Ukraine, and if there is no salo, then there is no Ukraine. Salo is seen as the physical embodiment of Ukraine and Ukrainian identity. Food is part of tangible cultural heritage that can be touched, tasted, and eaten; as Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin (2008) once said, “Tell me what you eat and I will tell you who you are” (12). However, how is food determined to serve accurate portrayals of cultural heritage? How are they determined to be authentic? What does it mean to make and eat them?

**Salo as Preservation of Folk and Cultural Heritage**

Many locals will say that if you want the best piece of salo, then you have to go to the village. Salo in grocery stores and butcher shops will not even come close to the taste and experience of eating salo that is homemade. As highlighted earlier on in this paper, salo does not start with a piece of pork fat, but with the pig.

The use of preservatives and the mass production of food have been a very hot topic for many years now, especially among the older generation. Many older people will say that the use of preservatives in food is not good for you and that it alters the food that you eat (Kollegaeva 2017). It also taints the image of authenticity. Leitch (2000) more specifically discusses “the politics of risk discourse,” which can include concerns of food becoming modified or poisoned by the addition of preservatives and additives (105). Systems of mass food production must adhere to health and hygiene regulations, but they often use preservatives to make the food last longer and to save money. Mass production of food also leads to the commodification and objectification of food. It no longer has a
connection to its makers, and it diminishes the effort and time that it takes to make the food.

In many ways, the making of food can be seen as a ritual. In the case of homemade salo, the ritual is one of folk and cultural heritage. This ritual of making salo starts with the pig. The pig needs to be fed high quality food that is devoid of preservatives and additives. The pig is also well cared for and not treated as a number. In systems of mass production, individualized care is not possible. In most Ukrainian villages, the farms are so small that they can only accommodate one or two pigs. Therefore, there is no room for error and a farmer needs to ensure that the pigs are well-fed and healthy by the time they butcher them.

Massive food production companies, in particular pig farms, do not have this risk of error. If a pig is not doing well, then it is simply killed and discarded because they have plenty of other pigs. Also, the environment of the pigs is not concerned with their welfare. There are many reports of companies that keep their livestock in horrific and dangerous conditions (Eurogroup for Animals 2020). That is the reality of mass production; companies are able to afford the risk of losing pigs, whereas within the ritual of crafting practices, the loss of risk means the loss of authenticity and the loss of a well-made product. Mass production loses the risk of error, and therefore, a minimum standard is meant. This minimum standard is defined by edibility rather than the quality, taste, and authenticity.

Additionally, there is a severed connection between the hand and the body once mass production is introduced (Cardoso 2019). This severing occurs through the introduction of a supply chain that disconnects the consumer from the experience of making salo. The pig needs to be sourced from different farms, and sometimes these farms are not even in the same country where salo is produced. Then the pig needs to be slaughtered and sent to butcher shops. The butcher shops cut the pieces of meat from the pig and treat it with preservatives so that it lasts longer. Lastly, it is sold to the consumer, who does not know where the pig came from, what it ate, or how it was raised. The process of getting meat from the butcher shop involves a collection of individuals who can only focus on a singular step of the production process, actively destroying any possibility of the food item’s authenticity.

Home-made salo has the whole supply chain and the production process right outside in the front yard. The salo-maker is able to feed the pig what it needs and take good care of it before butchering it. This work is a craft of ethnic identity.

Perceptions and Invisible Structure of Salo

Food is a marker of class, gender, and ethnicity (Leitch 2000). For some people, and in particular for Russians, salo is a marker of peasantry and the lower class. During the Soviet period of Ukraine, Russians would often disparage anything Ukrainian, including Ukrainian language, culture, and food. Anything and everything Ukrainian was perceived as underdeveloped, low-class, and primitive. These ideological perceptions were used as a way to lift everything Russian as high-class and prestigious, and to lower everything Ukrainian as low-class and common. For centuries, Russia has pushed the false narrative that Ukrainian is simply “Little Russia,” a country that depends on Russia and that is just a lesser variation of Russian culture, heritage, and language.

In the Soviet period, Russia forcefully carved an ideological line between the life of the villages and the cities. Major Ukrainian cities were forced to adopt the Russian language and culture. These
cities were cultural hubs that sustained Russian culture, while everything that was Ukrainian was banned, including language, literature, art, and music. Villages, however, were left relatively untouched, because the main goal for Russia was to push people out of the villages and into the cities where it would be easier to indoctrinate them through education.

One of the easiest ways to influence people is to shame them. Therefore, the use of anti-Ukrainian jokes and stereotypes was meant to force a rejection of Ukrainian culture and the adoption of Russian culture. One of the key items that was used to shame the Ukrainian people was their love of salo. There were many jokes that stereotyped Ukrainians as dumb peasants who were only obsessed with salo. Salo was further associated with peasantry because only villagers made it. Villagers were the ones who were able to keep pigs on their farms, and salo was used to sustain people if, as was unfortunately often the case, they did not have enough food to take care of themselves. These jokes framed Ukrainians as backwards and dumb-witted.

This ideological divide between villagers and city folk persists in the present day. Despite the enormous love for salo, some people refuse to associate themselves with it. Kollegaeva (2017) highlights this divide when she asked a taxi driver what they thought of the salo art museum in Lviv. The taxi driver simply shrugged and rolled his eyes at the idea of it and simply responded, “We all have to eat salo” (Kollegaeva 2017: 102). Which is an interesting juxtaposition because despite the physical reaction of annoyance, his response highlights that salo is still an integral part of Ukrainian identity. This also highlights that Russian influence still affects everyday Ukrainian life because of the driver's physical reaction of annoyance to the idea of salo being considered a piece of art. While salo was used as a comedic device in Russian jokes.

Despite Ukraine being independent for over 30 years, Ukraine was colonized by Russia for over 300 years. Colonization does not disappear overnight, and sometimes victims of colonization are the ones who unconsciously uphold it. The annoyed reaction to salo is a remnant of the Russian ideology left on the Ukrainian people. The Ukrainians in the cities want to identify with other Europeans and to be considered part of the European Union (Kollegaeva 2017). The association of salo with peasantry makes it difficult to present salo as a representative of Ukraine’s European identity. Therefore, city folk prefer to have other foods and markers of identity to be the representatives of Ukraine, such as borscht, Ukrainian dancing, sunflowers, and so on.

Ukrainians in the villages have a completely different approach and idea of what it means to be Ukrainian. Many of them stress the importance of maintaining and upholding the folk traditions that have been practiced for centuries, no matter what the perceptions of it are. To practice folk traditions is to challenge colonial assumptions and to challenge the oppressor. Analyzing the lardo case study once again, the people of the Colonnata village may not view lardo favourably, but they understand its importance for maintaining and practicing a folk identity. In fact, the village has joined an initiative called the “Slow Food Movement.” This movement focuses on preserving and encouraging various cultural food traditions across Europe. Despite the negative perceptions of lardo, Leitch (2000) writes that “At a deeper level of analysis the recuperation of these kinds of proletarian or peasant foods could be interpreted as part of a pervasive nostalgia in modern societies for the past” (104). The same can be applied to salo. Salo
gives a sense of nostalgia for “the good ol’ days.” As one informant of Kollegaeva (2017) said,

At midday you take out your sandwich, move the salo just off the edge of the slice of bread, then bite into the bread, sniffing the salo without eating it; then you move the salo a little more, still not eating it; and then once more; then you wrap the whole thing up and put it back in your pocket. Same thing again a few hours later. Only when all the work is done in the early evening do you finally allow yourself the pleasure of eating the fat with the remaining bread. (103)

This quotation highlights the nostalgic yearning of folk life. The rewards of life are not framed around money or luxury goods, but around salo. It shows the values of discipline during a hard workday. It is only when all of the work is done that you can enjoy a piece of salo.

**Ukrainian Humour and Salo**

In reflection of the horrors and tragedies of the war, Ukrainians have been using humour as a way to survive. As the famous proverb goes, humour is the best medicine. One of the ways that they have been using humour to heal themselves from the tragedies of war is to make fun of Russians (Litchtman and Romachenko 2023). In Ukrainian culture, politics is a popular joke genre. Ukrainian politics has heavily featured Russia because of their involvement in Ukraine over the past several decades. There have been a variety of political issues that involved Russia, but most notably and seriously are the annexation of Crimea, the Donbas War, and the current war.

In reflection of these politics, one of the strangest jokes that Ukrainians love to do is to dress up and act according to their stereotypes. This includes dressing up as a typical “Ukrainian peasant.” These types of jokes might seem counterintuitive, but it is actually a very clever way of showing one’s Ukrainian character while actively making fun of Russians. It shows that Russians don’t perceive Ukraine as a threat. For example, when Russia invaded Ukraine in early 2022, many Russian tanks were forced to take one road that led to the town of Brovary (Kramer 2022). To paint the picture, there was a massive line of tanks that had armed Russian soldiers inside who had guns and other weapons. With this image in mind, it would be dangerous to approach them or get near them. So, what did Ukrainians do? Did they hide and wait for military aid? Did they run away? What happened was that Ukrainian farmers would drive their tractors and hitch the tanks to their tractors and drive off with a cigarette in their mouth while a Russian soldier ran behind them to get the tank back (Brown 2022). This image perfectly illustrates how stereotypes can blind oppressors. The stereotype of Ukrainians being “dumb peasants” blinded the Russians from the fact that Ukrainians can defend themselves and fight back no matter what it takes.

Going back to the promotional video for a salo and moonshine festival, the video perfectly illustrates how Ukrainians can make fun of themselves while also uplifting their own Ukrainian identity. The man in the embroidered shirt and the Cossack hairstyle is dressed as a typical Ukrainian peasant. However, there are many layers to this video. The other men are dressed in military uniforms, and the leader of the group is not another man in a uniform, but the Ukrainian peasant. It is not to entertain Russians or other oppressors, but rather to challenge them. They use salo, something that was used as a comedic device in Russian jokes, as a tool to formulate a plan to get back at the Russians. This video shows how self-aware Ukrainians are and how they use harmful stereotypes to uplift
themselves, other Ukrainian people, and their hope for a better future. Salo is more than just a piece of pork fat but an embodiment of Ukraine and its people. It is not only a good thing to be identified with, but a delicious thing to eat. Salo sustains Ukrainians and is needed more than ever to fuel the fight against its Russian oppressors. As President Volodymyr Zelensky once said, “Ukraine is not dead yet while there is still salo” (Mirovalev 2020).

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