Ukraine: Culture and General History

The world contains over one hundred unique countries each with their own culture and history. Each country has its own unique aspects to it, but there are also similarities between a multitude of countries. The focus of this paper will be on a single country, Ukraine. Ukraine is a European country with a diverse culture, one that borrows from other countries while also having its own unique aspects as well. In this paper the history and culture of Ukraine will be discussed along with meal patterns, nutrition, and health information of the country.

History and Economics of the Culture

Ukraine is in Eastern Europe and the capital is Kyiv. Neighboring countries include Poland, Romania, Moldova, and Russia. Surrounded by these countries resulted in many aspects of its neighbors' cultures influencing their own such as foods like sauerkraut and kovbasa. According to the Central Intelligence Agency, Ukraine has an estimated population of 43,952,299 as of July 2018 ("The World Factbook: Ukraine", 2018). Ukraine obtained independence from the Soviet Union on August 24, 1991 and has a legal system is a civil law system with the Prime Minister currently being Volodymyr Hroysman ("The World Factbook: Ukraine", 2018). The main economic activities that Ukraine has involves agriculture, mining raw materials, and industrial production of machine parts such as diameter pipes and vertical drilling apparatuses ("The World Factbook: Ukraine", 2018). The estimated GDP (PPP) of Ukraine as of 2017 was $369.6 billion and the estimated GDP (OER) as of 2017 was $112.1 billion ("The World Factbook: Ukraine", 2018).

The uniqueness of the Culture

One of the most prominent art styles to grow to popularity in Ukraine was the style of the avant-garde. Although Avant-Garde did not originate in Ukraine, the country produced many artists who were influential to the art movement. "The artistic ferment during the revolutionary years and the twenties was supported by the Ukrainian government, which created the Ukrainian Academy of Arts in 1917-18, bringing together talented professors, sch as Vasyl Krychevsky, Yuri Narbut, Abram Amanevych, and Mykhailo Boichuk and many gifted students" (Onyshkevych & Rewakowicz, 2009, p.418). The amount of government aid in art related to the avant-garde art movement showed how much the country wanted to impart some of its culture on the movement. At this time the Ukrainian culture supported the innovation of art and attempted to fit in with western Europe at the time and even compete to be more prominent in the field of art. The culture of Ukraine showed to be an influence in Ukrainian artists, "the arrival of modernity, combined with the rediscovery of a rich and vibrant indigenous folk culture, seems to have provided the initial creative spark for the Kyiv avant-garde (Onyshkevych & Rewakowicz, 2009, p.418). The art style, although started in western Europe, showed to have been a huge part of Ukrainian culture and thus they left their own unique mark on the art movement.

The music that became quite prominent after World War II were music that came from the west. After the war the younger generation followed a sort of counterculture life style. Thus, they preferred music such as jazz, pop, and rock. Music is clearly an important aspect of culture and

thus evolves as the culture evolves. Older music tends to clearly show the uniqueness of a country's culture, music prior to the world wars tend to be quite unique to the country, but as the culture of a country evolves, so does the music. After World War II, "elements of a Lviv identity, if not a Ukrainian identity, surfaced in soccer games, and the counterculture of the hippies, and rock and pop music" (Risch, 2011, p.221). The youth at this time were angry about the war and therefore they turned to rock and pop music which caters to the angst they felt.

Major Religions of the Culture

Ukraine, like many countries, has many different religions being practiced by its citizens. According to Gregory Sousa (2018) from the World Atlas, the religions in Ukraine by population percentage is: Eastern Orthodox at 65.4%, unaffiliated at 16.3%, Other Christian at 7.1%, Eastern Greek Catholic at 6.5%, Protestant at 1.9%, Islam at 1.1%, Latin Catholic at 1.0%, Jewish at 0.2%, Hindu at 0.2%, and other religion at 0.2%. The largest religion being Eastern Orthodox is closely tied to when Vladimir the Great converted in 988 AD which led to most of the country converting as well. Eastern Orthodox religion uses food as symbol during holidays such as Easter. During this time of year painted eggs are an important symbol as they are usually painted red, representing the blood of Christ. Another food tradition done during Easter is that "all food and wine are sprinkled with holy water as a blessing for fortune, food health and prosperity" (Smith, 2011). The idea of using holy water is quite common in religions like Eastern Orthodox Christianity, holy water is used as a purifier which would ensure the sanctity of the event by purifying the foods consumed.

Common Foods Used by the Culture

According to the article "Ukraine," the Ukrainian staple grain is clearly rice and millet. The staple vegetables include potatoes, beets, cabbages, and mushrooms which is seen in dishes like borshch ("Ukraine," n.d.). Proteins that are often seen in Ukrainian cuisine involve chicken, beef, and pork as they are often in dishes such as kovbasa sausages, guliash, and chicken kiev ("Ukraine," n.d.). Dairy products that are considered staples in Ukrainian cuisine are milk and cottage cheese as they are usually used to make things like nalynsnyk which are ceese filled crepes and riazhanka which is a fermented and baked milk ("Ukraine," n.d.). Fruits often found in Ukrainian cuisine include berries and cherries which are often used in deserts ("Ukraine," n.d.). These staples all are used in conjunction to produce staple foods such as holubtsi, a stuffed cabbage roll which uses grains, cabbage, and protein. One of the main fats used in Ukrainian cuisine based on the recipes of traditional dishes is butter. Ukrainian spices do not seem to be too unique as most of the time it is simply salt and pepper. Side dishes are usually things like sauerkraut. Many of these foods were brought to Ukraine from neighboring countries as Ukraine is essentially a crossroad between Asian, European, and Arabic countries. For example, kovbasa sausages and sauerkraut came from Poland, varnyky and holubttsi came from Turkey ("Ukraine," n.d.).

During Christmas eve Ukrainians have a dinner menu that is usually with twelve meatless dishes ("Ukraine," n.d.). These dishes include kyuta, borshch, baked or fried fish, oseledsi, holubtsi, varenyky, cooked beans, kapusta and beas, beets with mushrooms, and stewed fruit. Borshch is a type of vegetable soup that has a distinct deep red color which is a result of the beets inside. This soup is usually mostly cabbage and beets as the main vegetables along with onions and tomatoes. The cooking liquid can be beef broth or simply water depending on the

person or occasion. Another holiday where a specific type of meal is made is Easter. Easter foods usually include a roast pork or ham, vegetable salads, cheesecake, tortes, kovbasa, boiled eggs, and other pastries (“Ukraine,” n.d.). Kovbasa is a sausage that has polish origins and can be made with a variety of meats. Easter breakfasts usually include kovbasa.

Meal Patterns and Etiquette

The typical Ukrainian meal pattern is like many other countries, three meals a day: breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Breakfast usually involves coffee or tea with bread and butter, cereal, a pastry, or some sort of steamed grain with milk (“Ukraine,” n.d.). Ukrainians consider lunch as the main meal eaten around mid-afternoon. This meal usually has a soup and a dish with meat (“Ukraine,” n.d.). The last meal, dinner, is eaten at six or seven pm like many other countries and is usually with the whole family (“Ukraine,” n.d.). The mealtime etiquette is quite similar to other European countries, it involves with a fork in the left hand and knife in the right hand (“Ukraine,” n.d.). One interesting part of a Ukrainian custom involves bread and salt. Hosts of the meal give bread with salt on top and the bread represents hospitality while the salt represents friendship (“Ukraine,” n.d.). This tradition is quite interesting because the bread can be interpreted as made from the hosts household, thus hospitality, and the salt can be interpreted as obtained from trade or barter and giving it away can be seen as an act of friendship. However, in Ukrainian culture, “bread and salt were once considered necessary ingredients for health” (“Ukraine,” n.d.).

Cultural Food Tasting Experience

The recipe I chose to make was varenyky or perogies. This is a dumpling dish that is usually filled with savory fillings. The recipe is as follows (refer to jpeg image for full recipe): two pounds of potatoes, half a pound of cheddar cheese, one and a half teaspoons of salt, four cups of flour, one egg, one cup of potato water, and diced bacon (Cylka, 2017). I had omitted the bacon as other recipes did not all have it. The process of making the dish was quite tedious as the wrappers were made from scratch. The potatoes were first peeled and then boiled until fork tender and about one cup of the water was reserved for the dough. The potatoes were then allowed to fully dry up in the pot before mashing and the cheese was added to melt. The dough was easy to make as it was just mixing the flour, egg, salt, and water together. However, rolling out the dough took a while in order to get the proper thickness. When the wrappers were rolled out, they were filled with the potato filling and then pinched at the ends to form the shape. The formed perogies were boiled until cooked all the way and then simply drained.

The colors of the dish were plain as it was simply a very pale yellow, the textures were like a Chinese dumpling, but because the filling was potatoes it was mushy. There were little aromas as the wrapping trapped it all in, but the flavors were very much a cheese potato with a pasta like taste from the wrapper. The dish reminded me of a fusion of European flavors with Asian dumpling textures. The whole process was very similar to making Asian dumplings as there are versions of this dish that use meat fillings or vegetable fillings such as cabbage.

Nutrition Guidance System

Ukraine does not have an official dietary guidance system and generally believe home cooked meals are healthy; however, Poland has a system they use called the Pyramid of healthy

nutrition. This system has six levels for six different food groups. The base are cereals, vegetables and tuber vegetables are at the second level, fruits are on the third level, the fourth level contain milk and dairy, the fifth level contain proteins like meat and beans, and the sixth level are oils (“Poland,” n.d.). Based on this dietary guidance system, Ukrainians, specifically children, do not meet dietary goals. The typical Ukrainian diet for school children showed to primarily eat sausages and pastries, thus overall showed that the children had excess body mass, deficiencies in essential vitamins and minerals, deficiencies in fiber, and poor digestion (Podrigalo, et al., 2017). Many of the Ukrainian foods tend to be high in carbohydrates and high in fats, for example kovbasa and varenyky. However, there are foods such as borshch which has large amounts of vegetables do tend to have fiber and vitamins needed for a healthy diet. Children tend to prefer unhealthy foods such as kovbasa and pastries which is much more appealing but tends to be less nutritional.

Health Beliefs

Ukraine has had economic hardships ever since they achieved independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. The economic strain affects different aspects of daily life in Ukraine and one of them is access to health care for chronic diseases. Ukraine is an example of a “country where out-of-pocket payments are especially high” (Murphy, et al., 2013). This on top of the already present economic burden of the country, many people with chronic diseases cannot afford to get treatment for them.

In almost every country there are folk medicines used to treat certain illnesses or to benefit health in general. Ukraine has many different foods and herbs that were considered such folk medicines. Two medicinal herbs used in Ukraine are elderberries and chamomile. Elderberries were made into tinctures and used as a remedy to coughs while chamomile was used as an infusion or tincture for stomach issues or burn treatments (Stryamets, et al., 2015). Chamomile is a remedy that is often found in many countries and is even still used today. Chamomile tea is seen in markets in America quite frequently and is used for a variety of symptoms ranging from stomach issues like in Ukraine to coughs or a flu.

History and Cultural Challenges in the United States

The United States of America is considered by many as a cultural melting pot where immigrants from all over gather. The presence of Ukrainians in America began in the late 1800s and “according to the 2000 U.S. Census, there were about 893,000 Americans of Ukrainian descent” (“Embassy of Ukraine in the United States of America,” n.d.). Due to the relatively long immigration history of Ukrainians in the U.S., their socioeconomic standing is not low since there are many notable figures in American media such as sports, film, music, and even in the military who are of Ukrainian descent. Potential challenges of Ukrainians in America can be credited to the tensions between Russia and the U.S. because of past conflicts between Ukrainians and Russians. However, it does not seem likely that there could be too big of a challenge as compared to many other cultural groups in America today, for example, illegal immigrant conflicts with Mexican descent due to political strife.

My culture comparison compared to Assigned Country

Two similarities between my culture and assigned country

Two differences Between my culture and assigned country

Geography/Environment

Both are near water, both have significant air pollution.

Hong Kong is closer to the equator, Hong Kong is much smaller.

Population (people, diversity, language(s) spoken…etc.)

Both primarily speaks a single language, both are ethnically diverse

Ukraine has larger population, Hong Kong is mostly Chinese descent while Ukraine is multiple ethnic backgrounds unified as a country.

Religion

Both have diverse number of religions, both practice a form of Christianity at one point.

Hong Kong has a larger percentage of a single style of religion, Hong Kong primarily celebrates Chinese New Year as it is a religions festival.

Staple Food Items

Eats dumplings, drinks tea.

Hong Kong does not eat potatoes as much, Ukraine does not eat barbeque meats.

Health Beliefs

Both has folk medicines, both do not have easy access to health care due to cost.

Hong Kong has spiritual health beliefs and nutritional beliefs from fold medicine, Ukraine believes home cooked meals are always healthier

Hong Kong and Ukraine are similar in some ways such as certain food staples like dumplings and tea, however there are many differences as well. Hong Kong is a much smaller country with a smaller population and mostly has citizens of Chinese descent while Ukraine has many ethnic groups. Both countries do suffer from air pollution as both are industrialized countries and both countries are near bodies of water. Hong Kong is closer to the equator than Ukraine, so the weather is quite different. Some food staples that Hong Kong has that Ukraine does not are barbequed meats such as pork and duck. Hong Kong did previously have a large Christian population due to involvement, but now the main religion are Chinese folk religions like Taoism and Confucianism (“Hong Kong Culture – Religion,” n.d.). The Chinese fold religions play a large role in the country’s nutrition and health as many health and nutrition beliefs come from the religions.

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