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# **As always, the kapusta will be served**

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*Reader's comments: "Please run your kapusta story and recipe." Marilyn Soules, Midland.*

In the laundry room of our Detroit apartment building last week, I talked with an elderly Polish woman named Fran who used to cook Easter dinner for a family of almost 200.

"I've got no big house anymore," she told me. "A third of my family is scattered across the world now." She'll enjoy dinner today at the home of one of her children. But it's not the same.

"I don't know why," she said, "but I kind of miss the hysteria of cooking for a week before Easter."

I nodded, but didn't reveal that I'd never cooked a holiday meal for more than 20 people. I didn't tell her that this week I was preparing only two dishes for Easter dinner at my dad's house: a green salad and the kapusta that's been on my Polish family's holiday table for generations.

I remember Gramma's kapusta (kuh-POO-stuh), a dolled-up sauerkraut. I remember Mom's. She taught me the recipe 30 years ago. Now, since she's gone, it's my kapusta. Nor did I share with Fran that I indulged this week, amidst bleak news about Iraq and terrorism, in a serious study of kapusta recipes. I wondered if my mother's recipe was the recipe, if our kapusta was authentic.

How silly of me.

## **A little tinkering here and there**

The Polish cookbooks I checked at first confused me.

Their kapustas started with raw cabbage, boiled down, to which was added things like raisins, prunes, cranberries, tomatoes, sour cream, dill and flour. I soon realized that "kapusta" translates to "cabbage," and what my grandma and mother made more correctly would be called "kapusta kiszona" -- soured cabbage, or sauerkraut.

Still, the recipes for kapusta kiszona weren't like ours, either. Flour? Caraway seeds? Yuck. None included apples. Some had onions but no bacon. Or bacon but no mushrooms.

But don't I vaguely remember caraway seeds in Grandma's kapusta? Did my mother dare to tinker with her own mother's recipe?

Yes, I can imagine Mom leaving out the caraway seeds because Dad didn't like them. I can imagine her leaving out the flour because it added calories without taste. And I can imagine her including onions, mushrooms, bacon and apples, because why leave any good thing out? Someday I might change Mom's recipe. But here's how I made it this week:

### **My kapusta recipe**

Rinse sauerkraut. Because Polish cooking requires more than enough, I use two 2-pound bags for 8 people. If it's really sour, boil it in lots of water for 10 minutes, then drain. Meanwhile, fry up 8 slices of bacon. Remove, crumble and set aside.

Pour off most of the fat. In what remains, saute 2 chopped onions and a pound of sliced mushrooms. Add the sauerkraut, a little water, two apples (peeled and chopped), a tablespoon of brown sugar and some pepper. (It's plenty salty already.)

Cover and simmer on low, adding water when necessary to prevent sticking.

Cook for at least 2 hours -- the longer, the better -- until it's all soft and more sweet than sour. Return the bacon for the last few minutes, and add chunks of cooked kielbasa, too, if you like.

Easy. The good news is that my father's new housemate, Sally, has asked me for my mother's kapusta recipe. Of German heritage, Sally will step into a river of tradition that began centuries ago when Polish peasants made kapusta with ingredients from their own fields.

As does any cook, Sally will make the recipe her own. And who knows but that Dad, in his new life, might suggest caraway to improve it.