

A Taste of Christmas * Sauerkraut-Mushroom Soup

By Cheryl Onchuck

My boyfriend had asked me to join him and his family for their Christmas Eve dinner, and I was excited, to say the least. I was 16 years old, and we had been 'going together' for nearly two years. I didn't ask what was for dinner, and I really didn't care. All I did care about was that I would be spending Christmas Eve with him. Little did I know that their traditional Christmas Eve meal did **not** consist of turkey or ham, sweet potatoes and the usual vegetables and desserts.

I don't remember when I learned about the menu; it was probably on Christmas Eve, but at the time, it didn't matter. After we sat down at the farm table, and said grace, I glanced around to see some unusual dishes. We began with sauerkraut-mushroom soup served over mashed potatoes, and then moved on to pea soup, poppy seed noodles, smoked sausage, stewed fruit, smoked chubs and farina swimming in cinnamon and an inch of melted butter. Dinner ended with poppy seed roll, nut roll and a million Christmas cookies.

I couldn't imagine eating sauerkraut mushroom soup. It didn't even sound right. But I ladled the tiniest scoop onto a mound of mashed potatoes and took a deep breath. The first spoonful wasn't bad, so I took another, combining it with some mashed potatoes and a piece of smoked sausage. I thought: 'Hey! This is really good!' I'm sure that everyone at the table was watching me. After two helpings of the soup, I moved on to the rest of the meal. I did discover that poppy seeds weren't my favorite.

The year was 1966, and I would go on to spend many more Christmas Eve dinners with the Onchuck family. Seven years later, I married that boyfriend, and before my mother-in-law passed away, I learned to cook those traditional Bohemian dishes. I took over preparing the Christmas meal for the family, which was then moved to Christmas day to accommodate our two young children, aunts and uncles, seven nieces and nephews, and a few neighbors who would otherwise spend Christmas by themselves. The kids grew up with these Christmas dishes and have shared stories of their memories around the table at Christmas time. The menu has changed slightly over the years, but not the sauerkraut-mushroom soup. That is my favorite and I crave it come Christmas time. My 'boyfriend' and I have been married for 47 years. Family and friends around our table at Christmas don't number as many as they once did, but the meal has remained pretty much the same. Maybe someday the youngsters will express an interest in looking for honey mushrooms in the fall so they can share sauerkraut mushroom soup with their children. I hope so.

Sauerkraut/Mushroom Soup

Margaret Onchuck

Clean, trim and rinse honey mushrooms*, cover with water and cook for 1-½ hours. Add 1 quart sauerkraut and cook for 1 hour more. Cool. Add 1 large can evaporated milk and water from cooked sausage for flavor. Serve warm, but do not boil.

*We find honey mushrooms in the fall around pine stumps and damp soil. My husband does all of the mushroom picking. I don't trust myself.

My mother-in-law, Margaret Onchuck, was very special. She worked the family farm with her husband, Bill, milking cows, making hay, driving tractor and piling lumber. She raised four children, had a huge garden, was an immaculate housekeeper and a seamstress extraordinaire, and the best cook I know. Most of all, she was a terrific mother-in-law.

