

# Macedonian “Pizza”

**P**astrmajlija is becoming the most famous pastry dish in the country. It is a special type of open pie made from dough and meat. It has an elongated oval shape, raised sides and small meat cubes in the middle.

Competing with the globally popular Italian pizza, the Macedonian pastrmajlija is becoming wide spread all over the country. It is served in both national restaurants and pizzerias. The brand has a big potential to spread even beyond the country's borders.

Part of its wide popularity lies in the fact that it is a traditional dish of at least four towns from the central and eastern regions: Veles, Sveti Nikole, Stip and Kratovo. They all hold their traditional pastrmajlija feasts called “Pastrmajlijada” (rhyming with *olimpijada*, or olympiad). These manifestations draw thousands of visitors who spend a few days eating pastrmajlija, drinking, and enjoying the nightlife enriched by local or international music stars. Different competitions and the setting of records are part of the festivity. People from these towns are very competitive and proud of their local pastrmajlija specialties, and known to argue for hours why Sveti Nikole variety is better than the one from Stip, etc.

If we go back in history, we will discover that it is not a mere coincidence that this dish emerged around the same time in several towns spread over such a large area. The name pastrmajlija comes from “*pastrma*” which is salted and dried lamb or mutton. It is connected with the large sheep breeding area stretching from Veles through Sveti Nikole to the slopes of Plackovica Mountain in Stip and the Osogovo Mountain in Kratovo. This was the



low-land area where sheep flocks spent the winter waiting for the summer when they returned to the green mountain pastures. Sheep breeders from such distant areas as Krusevo and Sar Mountain used to come to the central-eastern plain. On the other side Stip, Veles and Kratovo were the trading centres where sheep breeders exchanged their products and shared their traditional food and recipes. The dried meat laid on an easily prepared pie was an excellent winter dish for the nomadic shepherds as well as for travelling merchants who traded their products in the towns.

The dough is prepared in almost the same way in all four locations, save a few local variations in the proportions of water, salt, oil and sugar, and in the time needed for the dough to rise. The mastery is displayed in the forming of the pastry, the kneading and spreading. The pie should not be overstretched and it has to be flattened by hand. Another small secret is the preparation of meat: what spices are used and how long it is marinated before baking.

The pieces of meat should be carefully placed on the pie without overlapping. During baking it is important to butter the pie to make sure the ends are soft and not burnt. Some chefs leave the pie to “breathe”



pickled green chili peppers.

There are generally two types of pastirmajlija served in restaurants. One made with pork and the other with chicken. There are subtle differences in the spices and the preparation depending on the nature of the meat.

In Kratovo pastirmajlija instead of fresh pork or chicken different dried meats, but not pastrma, are still used. Only very few traditional restaurants use the original sheep pastrma, some just add sheep fat to enhance the taste. Stip pastirmajlija, unlike the three other varieties, does not have eggs baked over the meat.

Pastrma was well known in the Ottoman world, but some believe it dates back even to the Byzantine times. Several nations from the Middle East and the Caucasus have similar dishes called *pastrami* or *pastirma*. There seem to be endless combinations of the type of dough, pie shape, and different kinds of meat as well as spices and condiments that go with it. The Macedonian variant equals any of them in taste and is acquiring new supporters and getting a wider popularity.

after it is baked and then butter or oil it.

The chefs recommend that the pie be baked for seven to eight minutes at 280 degrees C. That is the ideal temperature that can only be achieved with professional ovens and low doors. The best pastirmajlija can therefore be eaten in a restaurant where it is traditionally served with crashed hot red chili pepper called *bukovec* and

