

Chesnitsa – a family treasure

BY VESNA VUYNOVICH KOVACH

Like living language, living customs evolve. Over generations, my own family's version of chesnitsa, a simple Serbian Christmas bread, became Austrianized, then Americanized, into an elegant, lightly sweet pastry that resembles baklava and is filled with cream cheese, raisins, and pecans. To me, it's a family treasure. I invite you to try it this holiday season. Working with the delicate, papery leaves of phyllo dough is a fun challenge, and the result is unusual, impressive and delicious.

Chesnitsa traditionally is a disk-shaped yeasted bread. Before Christmas dinner, it's passed around the table. Each person breaks off a piece – find the coin baked inside to prosper in the year ahead! This chesnitsa recipe is as different as can be, but it's authentic nonetheless: coin, holiday, heritage and all.



The credit for this recipe belongs to my mother's mother, Lyoubitsa, who was born in 1888, decades before the nation named Yugoslavia was formed. She lived in the Austrian-

controlled Serbian region north and east of the Danube River, the Austro-Hungarian empire's border with the independent kingdom of Serbia.

Austria-Hungary sprawled over the lands of a dozen diverse ethnicities – Italian, Romanian, Polish and more. Its culinary innovations, which included sophisticated desserts, influenced cultural foodways all throughout the realm. Thus the Serbs within Austria-Hungary developed new, complex versions of many traditional dishes, even transforming chesnitsa into a pastry.

After coming to America, my grandmother further adapted her family's chesnitsa. There had been no cream cheese in her corner of Europe. Nor pecans – they're native to America. Nor store-bought phyllo. But I do wish I'd



seen her make it herself as she did in the old country: rolling a handful of stretchy dough until it draped below the edges of the table, all along the huge white tablecloth reserved for making those vast sheets of thinner-than-paper pastry.

CHESNITSA

- 1 pound phyllo* (try Fraboni's if it's not in your supermarket's freezer)
- 1/2 pound butter, melted in a saucepan (have more on hand just in case)
- A pretty or special coin, boiled and, if you like, wrapped in foil
- Honey, about 1/2 cup
- A deep rectangular baking pan, around 13" x 9" x 2"
- Pastry brush, preferably a wide one**

FILLING

- Stir together the following:
- 8 ounces cream cheese (not whipped), at room temperature
- 1 egg
- 4 tablespoons sugar
- 2 tablespoons finely ground pecans or walnuts
- 1/4 cup raisins, chopped fine

*Phyllo is very delicate. It can tear, dry out, or stick together. Read all the handling instructions on the package before you begin. If your phyllo is much larger than your pan, just cut the whole stack in half with scissors.

**I strongly recommend a 4" wide pastry brush. A narrow brush is such a hassle that I tried vegetable oil spray. But that made the pastry tough and didn't taste as good. Then I bought a wide brush (about \$12 at Kessenich's). What a difference! It made the job easy, quick and neat.

Butter the pan. Lay down a leaf of phyllo. Brush with melted butter, making sure to get all corners and edges. Lay down a second leaf. Brush with butter. Using only 1-2 tablespoons of filling, make several small dots. Lay down another 2-3 leaves of phyllo, buttering each one. Dot with more filling. Put the coin in. Repeat until filling is used up.

Continue laying down phyllo, brushing each leaf, until you've used them all. As you work, set aside the prettiest sheets you find for the top few layers – cover with a towel so they don't dry out. Make sure to butter the top leaf well!

Baked phyllo shatters when you cut it, so I like to cut the chesnitsa into small squares before baking.

Bake at 400° F for 10 minutes. Lower oven temperature to 350° F and bake 15-25 minutes more, or until golden brown.

As soon as the chesnitsa comes out of the oven, drizzle honey over it.

Before you let folks bite in – tell them about the coin!

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