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***Potica***

(Pronounced po-TEET-za, po-teet-sa, po-tee-zah, po-tee-sa, poh-teet-sah, po-teets-sah, paw-tee’-tzah, pat-tee-tsa, puh-teet’-za, potteezza, pəʊˈtiːtsə, pō-tēē-tsă)

"What do you feed him?” Pope Francis asked Melania Trump about her husband when they met at the Vatican in Rome on 24 May 2017.

“*Potica*?"

“*Potica*, ah yes,” confirmed the Slovenian-born First Lady, about her country’s rich highly nutritious sweet strudel-like ground-nut bread favorite of Pope Francis which remains an important part of Slovenian cultural identity in both Slovenia and in the Americas.

Slovenia—not to be confused with the Central European *country* of Slovakia located north of Hungary, nor the eastern *historical* *region* of Slavonia in the neighboring nation of Croatia to the south/southeast—is a small, largely Catholic, highly literate republic of about two million people tucked in between the Alps and the Adriatic Sea, with Italy to the west, Austria to the north, and Hungary to the east. Slovenia became independent from the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918, merged with Croats and Serbs in that same year, and became recognized as Yugoslavia in 1922 (renamed “Kingdom of Yugoslavia” in 1929). Slovenia split from Yugoslavia in 1991, and after a short ten-day war established its largest city, Ljubljana, as its capital. Slovenia became a member of The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU) in 2004. In 2007 Slovenia joined both the Eurozone monetary union (EZ) and the Schengen Area countries, arrangements aimed at promoting “free and unrestricted movement of people, goods, services, and capital” across member-state boarders. Strategically located, Slovenia controls some of Europe's major transit routes.

The name of the country—“Slovenia”—denotes “people who understand each other” or “people who speak the same language” (*World Factbook* 2017). Slovene—the first language of its two-million-plus inhabitants—is the country’s official language, spoken by more than 90% of the population. Slovenia’s iconic *potica* (also *Povtíca* and *Povitica* in early mention from 1575)takes its name from the Slovenian word poviti, referring to “rolling up,” as in the rolling up of a piece of dough or a rolled pastry or simply a roll (Bogataj 2007; Rolek 2016).

While there are over forty—some say as many as eighty—different fillings that can be rolled up in *potica,* its sweet see-through-it thin yeast dough is most commonly spread with exquisite high-quality ingredients such as eggs, honey or sugar, butter, and cream, along with finely ground walnuts or hazelnuts, poppy seeds, raisins, pork cracklings, leeks, dried fruit, or tarragon. *Potica* with tarragon remains the most distinctly Slovenian food specialty as Slovenia is one of the few places in the world where tarragon is used in sweet pastry dishes (Prešeren 2017). The most “obscure” of all *poticas* is *made* with greaves—crisp pieces of residue left after hog fat has been rendered during a fall family pig slaughter (*koline*)—that rural folks sometimes use instead of raisins. Children in cities did not often get *potica* made with greaves, “but children from small rural cities and villages like Melania’s home town Sevnica loved it” (Potica—what is the Slovenian pastry 2017). One of the oldest *potica* fillings is honey, long provided by Slovenia’s rich beekeeping traditions (Bogataj 2007).



Kim Smyth Roufs Slathering Walnut Filling on Potica.

In hard times, when butter, eggs, nuts, sugar, and honey were scarce, Slovenians in the Dolenjska and other economically poor regions, crafted a marbled mixed-grain bread known as *revna potica* (“poor man’s *potica*”), or *pisani kruh* (“colorful bread”), in an attempt to create or imitate “an atmosphere of festive abundance” from simple ingredients. The faux *potica* often consisted of a layer of wheat dough topped with a layer of buckwheat dough, rolled up like a true *potica*. (Kilpatrick 2016; Prešeren 2017). Historically, as every family prepared *potica* for festive occasions, the filling of the sweet treat was a symbol of the family’s social status: “The wealthier families used expensive fillings such as walnuts and cream, and the poor could only afford to fill it with herbs or . . . hard bits of fat. Today the filling is not an indicator of a family’s class anymore, but *Potica* continues to be a tradition in Slovenian families” (Posedel 2017). Nowadays *poticas* include other sweet fillings like vanilla, chocolate, coconut with orange, and a host of others, including fillings like cottage cheese, cracklings, prosciutto, and chives, which are used in savory *poticas*.

*Potica* was and continues to be Slovenia's most festive dish, ever-present at holidays, weddings, birthdays, christenings, funerals, anniversaries, and all other important occasions and celebrations. Traditionally, tarragon *potica* was a homemade Easter treat, and walnut *potica* was baked at home mostly at Christmas. “*Potica* could not be bought in shops in the old days in Slovenia. It was a family prepared pastry, normally in festive times. Normally grandmothers would be in charge for their preparation. And every one had her own secret recipe. It is without big doubt to say that Melania remembers her grandmother by how she had eaten her *potica*. . . . Being religious or not in her youth . . . *potica* was one of the rare desserts children had eaten. When she was growing up in Slovenia . . . a socialist country that did not engage in Western culinary trends like McDonald’s [or] sweet chocolate snacks like Mars and others . . . the children [first] got a cake that their mothers baked for birthdays. And *potica* was their number two dessert. On third place there was ice cream” (Potica—what is the Slovenian pastry 2017). On their first day of a new school year children are often given a slice of poppy seed *potica* in the hopes of making them smarter in the upcoming year (Bogataj 2014, p. 112).

Slovenians of all ages fondly remember the *potica* and *potica* making of their youth. Mary Lou Voelk, President of the Slovenian Union of America, for example, fondly recalls *potica*-making from her childhood in Ely, Minnesota: “Once they cleaned out the [*potica* filling] pan, I got to sit behind the wood stove where it was toasty warm, and with my finger, trace the walls of the pan, licking up the walnut filling. Never will I forget this wonderful time.” Nataša Smid of central Slovenia warmly recollects that the best part of *potica making* was “licking with fingers what was left when *Babica* was done with the filling. I helped her spreading the dough with my fingers. When she was lifting the linen to roll it I was making sure with my hands that no air was left in. My grandma always ‘hid away’ a piece of *potica* for the next day—because it really IS better next day, but if not hidden nothing was left.” *Potica*, in short, “symbolizes a festive time when the whole family gathers at home. It brings out happy memories and hopes for a good future” (Posedel 2017).

“When speaking about *Potica* it is almost impossible not to mention family . . .” suggests freelance writer Andreja Posedel. “. . . . Many cookbooks offer recipes on how to prepare traditional *Potica*, but most households still make this traditional dish with the recipe that has been passed down in their family from generation to generation” (2017). Recipes differ not only from family to family, but they also vary from one of the twenty-four Slovenian gastronomic regions to another (Bogataj 2007, pp. 436-439; Lebe 2006): “. . . the country is divided into small regions that are [not] comparable between themselves. And so different are also recipes for *potica*. The pastry itself has a common dough basis, but what differentiates many kinds of *potica* are the [filling] ingredients [nuts, herbs, white sugar, brown sugar, honey, and the mixtures and proportions]. There are people that will only eat one kind of *potica* and they will hate eating another kind of *potica* in the meanwhile. Also parents are very surprised in Slovenia when they discover their child will not eat the kind of *potica* they admire, but will love a totally different kind of taste” (Potica—what is the Slovenian pastry 2017). Every family has its favorite, often secret, recipe, and because cooks use different methods, even the popular walnut *potica*, can often vary from one household to the next (Rolek 2017). The consensus is, however, that *homemade* *potica* of whatever nature is the best, especially *potica* made by *Babica*, one’s grandmother.

Slovenian grandmothers and their daughters have been preparing *potica* for centuries. The original mention of *potica* goes back to the very first books printed in the Slovenian language in the 16th century, the *Abecedarium* (*The Alphabet Book*) and *Katechismus* (*Catechism*), published by the Lutheran Protestant reformer Primož Trubar in 1550. Trubar’s works, along with other 16th century books, “became the foundation of the establishment of the national identity of Slovenians” (Drake 2003). Almost two-hundred-and-fifty years later the Franciscan priest, poet, and author Father Valentin Vodnik featured *potica* in the first published Slovene-language cookbook, *Kuharske bukve* (Ljubljana: Kleinmajer 1799).

One of the earliest Slovenes in America, the Roman Catholic diocesan missionary the Venerable Father Frederic Baraga, was two years old when Father Vodnik published *Kuharske bukve*. Father Baraga was born in what is the modern-day village of Knežja Vas. He arrived in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1831, and twenty-two years later, in 1853, Father Baraga became the first bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Marquette, Michigan. Known as “the Snowshoe Priest,” he worked among the *Anishinabe* and Ottawa peoples of Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, the Canadian shores of Lake Superior, and the area around the Canadian Sault Ste. Marie. A prolific multilingual writer (he spoke eight languages fluently), Father Baraga’s writings became well-known throughout Europe, informing his fellow Slovenes and others, lay and religious alike, about native and immigrant cultures and lands of the Upper Midwest, thereby inspiring thousands of Slovenes to leave their homeland in the 19th century for the United States (Keweenaw Ethnic Groups 2017).

Slovenes migrated to the United States and parts of Canada, settling in Slovene communities principally in Cleveland and other areas of Ohio, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and the “Copper Country” of the northwestern region of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan (the UP). The early settlers who followed Father Francis Xavier Pierz, "The Father of Central Minnesota," to the rich farming region of St. Cloud, Minnesota, established what “is recognized as the oldest Slovenian Settlement in America” (St. Stephen Lodge 197 2017). By 1871 Slovenian Catholics built St. Stephen Catholic Church, one of the earliest parishes in the Diocese of Saint Cloud. Descendants of the original settlers continue to value their Slovenian culture to this day, including, of course, their *potica*.

Later Slovenian settlers searching for non-farm work were attracted to the Copper Country of the Upper Peninsula in Michigan, which boomed from 1845 until 1887. “Calumet [in the UP] was one of their chosen destinations and is considered one the oldest Slovene communities in America” (Keweenaw Ethnic Groups 2017). Beginning in 1884, when the first iron ore was shipped from the Vermilion Range in Minnesota, Slovenian mine workers headed to the developing Minnesota Iron Range country, bringing with them their prized *potica*. After iron ore production began on the Iron Range Father Joseph Francis Buh, a young Slovenian priest who had been recruited by Father Pierz in 1864 to serve as a “traveling missionary” to American Indian populations, was reassigned to the Iron Range in 1888, and served the area as missionary and pastor of St. Martin's Church in Tower, MN. As part of his pastoral work on the Iron Range, Father Buh founded the Slovene paper *Ameriški Slovenec* (*The American Slovene*). His fellow Slovenians subsequently “poured into the area.” Today, The Reverend Monsignor Joseph Buh is considered the patriarch of the Diocese of Duluth, although he might well also be considered the patriarch of *potica* in Northern Minnesota. Throughout the Slovenian areas of the Upper Midwest, large numbers of immigrants arrived between 1880 and WWI, and especially between 1905 and 1913.

The immigrants to Michigan’s Copper Country and Minnesota’s Iron Range, as elsewhere, brought with them the foods with which they grew up. “If there’s one thing Slovenian emigrants take with them when leaving the homeland, it’s a recipe for potica, a simple walnut dessert, known today as Slovenia’s sweetest ambassador” (Žoldoš 2017). And an effective “ambassador” it is. Business correspondent Gene Rebeck reports that U.S. Senator Amy Klobuchar, whose family is of Minnesota Iron Range Slovenian origin, has served *potica* to politicos in Washington, D.C., where it has reportedly won fans on both sides of the aisle—a remarkable feat in the early 21st century U.S. political milieu (2014).

In the broader political world, in 1993 *potica* and its associated national heritage was promoted by the Slovenian government with the issuance of a postage stamp. A second stamp was issued in 2005 in the Europa—Gastronomy series, featuring three typical *poticas*: walnut, poppy seed, and tarragon, symbolizing three geographical regions of Slovenia: the Alps, the Pannonian plains, and the Mediterranean (POTICA, the traditional 2017). Currently, the Slovenian **Chamber of Agriculture and Forestry has asked the European Union (EU) to register *potica* as a national food, a Traditional Specialty Guaranteed (TSG) product,** with six types of filling—including the iconic varieties ˝*Slovenska potica—orehova*” [walnut], “*Slovenska potica*—*makovo* *seme*” [poppy seed], “*Slovenska potica—pehtranka*” [tarragon], and “*Slovenska potica—lešnikova*” [hazelnut]˝*—*thus **legally protecting** its recipe, production process, and ingredients (Bogataj/Voelk, personal communication; Slovenia seeks protected status 2017). In support of its EU Traditional Specialty Guaranteed request, the first Otočec Castle Slovenian Easter *Potica* Festival was held in 2017, with Slovenian Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Food, Dejan Židan, serving as its honorary sponsor.

Modern-day descendants of Slovenian immigrants devotedly carry on their *potica*-loving traditions, although, as in modern-day Slovenia itself, in recent years *potica* is increasingly being made by commercial bakeries, year-round, and nationwide. Mary Lou Voelk reflects: “A day was set aside for the *potica* making, a festivity never to be forgotten. Grinding the nuts, making sure the room temperature is just right, preparing the table with the linen sheet. Just watching the dough get thinner and thinner as it is stretched! Heaven forbid if there was a hole in the dough. My eyes were always big when the sheet was picked up and the *potica* began its trek down the table, growing in girth as it rolled along” (Rebeck 2014). Most seasoned *potica* makers note that the most important part of making *potica* is the preparation of the leavened dough, which is a delicate process that takes time, patience, and a lot of practice (Posedel 2017). “*Potica* experts—and there are many—recommend pulling the dough out on a table that you can access from all sides, especially if you have people to help with the stretching. Having two or even four sets of hands makes this step go faster while lessening the chance of tearing, and usually results in an even, thin sheet of dough. The professional *potica* makers say it must be ‘thin enough to read the newspaper through’" (Carpenter 2015, p. 36).

"If you have thick dough,” muses Iron Ranger Pat Roberts, a seasoned *potica* maker, “you might as well just make coffee cake!" Thin dough is essential for American-style potica, and it is best if stretched the full length of a large table, with "hands under the dough, palms down" so as not to poke holes in the dough; palms up and fingers poke holes.

The secret in making *potica* dough lies in using high-quality, fine-grained, dry, warmed, all-purpose wheat flour, and patiently preparing it in a hot kitchen by kneading it thoroughly for elasticity. Flour was customarily kept atop traditional bread ovens to keep it warm and dry. The fine art of dough stretching is skillfully demonstrated by Thomas Serrano in his YouTube video (2012, Part 3).

Once the *potica* dough has been suitably stretched bakers patiently slathered on the paste-like filling (*Cf*., Serrano 2012, Part 4). They then carefully roll up the entire dough jellyroll fashion (*Cf*., Serrano 2012, Part 5), and cut it into appropriate-sized loaves. The loaves are traditionally baked until golden brown in special round high-sided often colorful earthenware baking molds called *potičnicas. Potica* baking molds, grooved or smooth and with a circular cone-shaped protrusion in the middle,date from the end of 18th century, and today are considered a hallmark of authentically made *potica*. In “the very past periods of history” housewives baked *potica* without molds (Bogataj/Voelk, personal communication). The festive *poticas* made today were developed from earlier rolled-dough cakes. In those days housewives baked the cakes directly on oven floors rather than in earthenware baking dishes (SNPJ 2017).

Give it a try, with or without the molds. Pauline Virant Rupar’s recipe (below) “made *potica* popular throughout the country." Mrs. Rupar, born in Slovenia, was an active member of the Slovene Women’s Union of America (SWU) as well as a number of Slovenian heritage groups in and around Sheboygan, Wisconsin. Her most popular activity and hobby included “good old-fashioned cooking and baking.” *Potica* was her "Specialty!" (Rupar 2016). Modern recipes such as Mrs. Rupar’s are detailed, generally giving precise measurements and directions. Early recipes for *potica*, such as that in Father Vodnik’s first cookbook, specified only the ingredients and rarely gave the quantities. In those days every housewife knew “it was a handful of this and a spoonful of that; a half glass of something”—baking instructions they learned from watching the adults make up a *potica*.

Making *potica* is a lot of work, but people have been loving it since the 16th century.

With practice, yours could be “just like *Babica* used to make!” Or at least almost as good as Mrs. Rupar’s.

Enjoy your *potica* heated, chilled, or at room temperature, with coffee, a dry white wine, or a cold Laško lager—the day *after* it is baked . . . if you can wait that long.

And if you are ever in Slovenia be sure to check out the annual four-day *Potica* Days festival on Bled Island in northwest Slovenia which attracts *potica* enthusiasts from far and wide.

**Recipe for Walnut *Potica* (*Orehova Potica*)**

For two traditional earthenware molds (or four 12" x 4", or five 9" x 5" loaves if using loaf pans).

**Position oven rack in the middle (use two racks with loaf pans), and preheat oven to 400 °F.**

**YEAST**

1 large cake compressed yeast (2 oz.), or 4-1/2 teaspoons dry yeast (2 packages)

1/2 cup lukewarm milk (105-110 **°F)**

1 tablespoon sugar

Dissolve yeast in milk; add sugar, and combine. Cover and let rise in warm place, about 10 minutes.

**DOUGH**

1-1/2 cups milk

3/4 cup butter (1-1/2 sticks; 6 oz.)

5 egg yolks

3/4 cup sugar

2 teaspoons salt

1 tablespoon pure vanilla extract

7 to 7-1/2 cups unbleached all-purpose flour

Scald milk; add butter. Cool to lukewarm.

In small electric mixer bowl, beat egg yolks, sugar, salt, and vanilla until lemon-colored.

Put 3 cups flour in large bowl, and add prepared mixture and proofed yeast. Mix until smooth. Add additional flour, about a half cup at a time, until mixture can be handled without sticking, and dough is elastic.

Place on floured board and knead for about 15 minutes for elasticity, adding flour as needed, to make a non-sticking dough.

Place dough in well-greased bowl; turn to grease top (see fourth note below). Cover and let rise in warm place for about 2 hours, until double in bulk. Do not punch down.

**WALNUT FILLING**

2 pounds walnuts, finely ground

1/2 cup butter (1stick; 4 oz.)

1-1/2 cups milk or half and half cream

2 cups sugar

1/2 cup light honey

1 tablespoon pure vanilla extract

Grated peel from 1 orange or 1 lemon

5 egg whites

Cinnamon

Grind walnuts in food chopper until fine.

Melt butter in large saucepan. Add milk, sugar and honey; cook to rolling boil, taking care not to let it boil over.

Pour hot mixture over walnuts and let rest for 10 minutes. (This takes out the bitter taste of walnuts.) Add vanilla and grated peel. Mix thoroughly and allow to cool (although some prefer using warm filling, which is easier to spread).

Beat the egg whites until stiff, and fold into the cooled nut mixture.

**ROLLING AND BAKING**

Grease well two traditional earthenware molds (or, alternately, four 12" x 4", or five 9" x 5" loaf pans).

On a table or other flat surface that is at least 4 x 6 feet, spread a clean fabric or sheet so that the edges hang slightly over the sides; lightly flour the surface. (It is best to use a printed fabric material on the table as that lets you see the print through the dough, highlighting any thicknesses that need to be worked out.)

Roll out the dough to form about a 9 x 13-inch rectangle on covered table sprinkled well with flour. Place your hands under the dough with palms down. Lift the dough up several inches and begin pulling it toward you with your fingertips down. Carefully stretch it out, trying not to tear the dough, lifting and pulling until it is evenly thin and transparent (this amount of dough can be rolled to about 50" x 32"). (*Cf*., Serrano 2012, Part 3.)

Spread cooled (although some prefer warm) filling evenly over entire dough, sprinkling generously with cinnamon, leaving a 3/4-inch margin around all the sides. (If desired, raisins may be added at this point.) The thickness of dough and question of filling off course varies with personal taste. (*Cf*., Serrano 2012, Part 4.)

Start rolling up dough using the cloth to roll it (jelly-roll fashion) beginning from the wide side, stretching the dough slightly with each roll. Keep the side edges as even as possible. Prick roll every few turns with a thin knitting needle or cake tester to help eliminate air pockets. Continue rolling to opposite edge. Cut to desired lengths. Seal ends by gently pulling dough down to cover ends and tucking underneath when placing in pan. (*Cf*., Serrano 2012, Part 5.)

Make holes on top of dough several times with toothpick so the air can go out, then cover and let rise in warm place until double, about one hour.

Reduce preheated oven temperature to 350 **°F, and b**ake on middle rack (or middle of oven) for about 1/2 hour, or until color turns to light brown.

Reduce oven temperature to 320 **°F, and bake an additional 1/2-3/4 hour.** The length of baking is linked with personal taste of "well done" or just "slightly brown," but after the additional 1/2 hour make a test with a long "toothpick" or wooden skewer. If it is dry, it is done; if it is moist, bake 15 minutes more. The heat of the oven comes into play in making *potica*, so experiment a bit.

If a glossy top is desired, brush each loaf with 1 egg yolk beaten with 1 tablespoon milk 15 minutes before *potica* is done.

NOTES:

A word of caution: do not bake this bread on a convection setting if your oven has one; it will dry the outer crust too much.

Nataša Smid of Slovenia points out that the traditional earthenware mold is easier to fill because you can overlap the rolled dough a bit and it bakes just fine. And clay molds distribute heat differently than loaf pans. The mold will also ensure traditional shape. “Another trick,” Nataša adds, “is to make the dough from the recipe above, but make 2 different fillings. Spread the dough out once and then put the 2 fillings on separate ends, roll it, cut in in half, and place in 2 molds. My grandma made walnut and tarragon at the same time. Tarragon is what you should try next in in a clay mold. It is my favorite from the traditional fillings. That is why tarragon is grown in all Slovenian home gardens . . . even in mine.”

One can also make dough, weigh it, and divide it in half and let the two halves raise separately. This is much easier, especially at first, as dividing the dough gives you less dough to master when stretching it out and rolling it up.

Recipe adapted from Pauline Rupar’s “Walnut *Potica* (*Orehova potica*).“ *Pots & Pans, 4th Edition*. Sheboygan, WI: Slovene Women’s Union of America (SWU), 1992, pp. 18-19 (reprinted as “*Potica* Recipe,” in *Slovenska Narodna Podporna Jednota*—SNPJ (Slovenian National Benefit Society—SNPJ). Accessed 31 July 2017. <http://www.snpj.org/slovenian-culture/potica-recipe>.)

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[Watch for the English translation of this work, winner of the 2014 Gourmand International award for the best culinary book in Eastern Europe, by ethnologist Janez Bogataj, Professor Emeritus, Faculty of Arts of the University of Ljubljana.]

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