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# Pierogis 101

## and Then Some

Think you know your pierogis? You might be surprised at where some cooks are taking the traditional Cleveland comfort-food dish.

by Karen Kuklinski

It's a pie you eat for dinner, offered in a variety of flavors. You can buy it takeout (though homemade is best) and kids love it. Sounds like pizza, right? Maybe not. After all, this is Cleveland. How about ... pierogis?

After all, Cleveland's large Polish-American population has made the pierogi one of the comfort foods most closely identified with the city. And a new generation of chefs is adding gourmet fillings to this Slavic staple.

The word pierogi — which means, literally, “little pie” — derives from *pirog*, the Russian word for pie (though Russians refer to their own pierogi-like dish as *pilmeni*). The *ogi* ending was added to signify small (plural) and “pierogi” were born. *Pirojok* is technically the correct singular tense. But who ever eats just one?

The origins of the pierogi itself are harder to pin down. Some claim the dumpling traveled to Italy from the Orient with explorer Marco Polo, then reached Poland when the Italian princess Bona Sforza married Polish king Zygmunt I in the 16th century.

But antecedents aren't nearly as important as flavor.

Pierogis are made from a noodle-style dough that is wrapped around a filling, sealed in a half-moon shape and then boiled. These dough pockets can be eaten immediately, put into soups or, most commonly, browned up briefly in butter before serving.

In Poland, traditional pierogis were stuffed with potatoes, sauerkraut, mush-

rooms and/or minced meat such as pork — the ingredients most commonly available. Those classic original flavors continue to be the most popular today.

“People want to eat the food that their moms and grandmas made. It brings people back to their roots,” says Mike Sokolowski, co-owner of Sokolowski's University Inn in Tremont.

Sokolowski's pierogis are crafted from a recipe that has been in the family since the restaurant opened 80 years ago. Made on premises, the inn's famous potato-cheese pierogis with a generous helping of warm butter and onions are served every day. And since customers can order pierogis either as an entree or as a side dish in the cafeteria-style restaurant, Sokolowski says pierogis are scooped onto almost every plate.

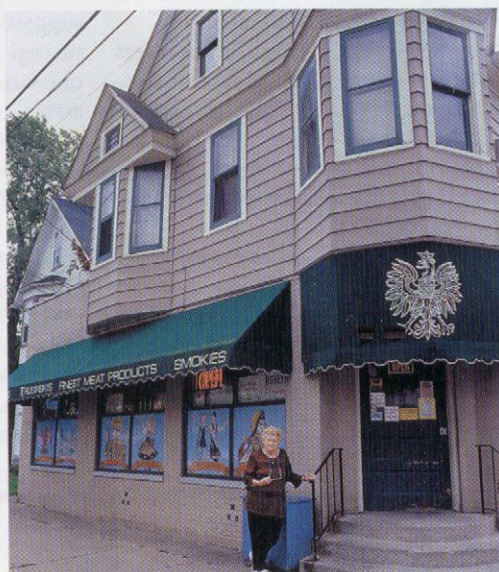
At Krusinski's in Slavic Village, the Janka-brand pierogi recipe also came directly from the old country, owner John “Janka” Krusinski bringing it with him when he moved to Cleveland from

Poland more than 55 years ago. A few years after arriving here, he opened Krusinski Finest Meat Products to support his brothers and sisters. Over time, he built a successful business cooking and delivering Polish foods all over the city.

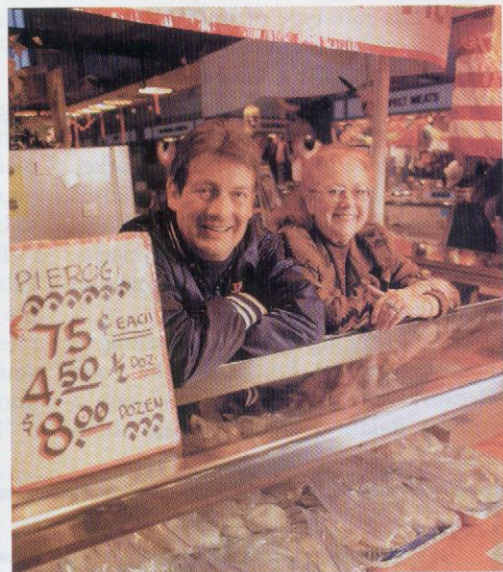
“Our original Janka pierogis are still sold refrigerated at Giant Eagle and Tops, or here at our store,” says Krusinski's wife, Helen. “We make seven traditional flavors: cheese, kraut, potato, potato-cheese, prune, apple and apricot. And they are all made right here. We have a staff of Polish ladies in the back pinching them closed right now.”

Traditional pierogis are genuine comfort food, satisfying both in great taste and in the wonderful family memories they evoke. In fact, they're so satisfying that more and more people want to take the pierogi further, using a contemporary flavor palette to dash out nouveau variations on the Old World dish.

“The secret,” explains Michael Symon,



Left: Helen Krusinski in front of the home of Janka-brand pierogis;



right: David Blaha and Rhona Raidl man their Pierogi Palace stand at the West Side Market.



owner of Lola Bistro in Tremont, "is to pair something unusual with something familiar. And in Cleveland, almost everyone is familiar with pierogis."

Symon used this notion to create one of his most popular and talked-about appetizers, the seafood pierogi. His pierogi is stuffed with fresh lump crabmeat, potatoes and chives, then topped with caramelized onions and crème fraîche.

Symon also rotates in other pierogis as specials, giving his customers the chance to try more exotic flavors, all in the safety of a pierogi. "Truffles is a perfect example," he says. "Folks may be hesitant to try this rare type of mushroom, but when served in a pierogi, diners get the chance to be daring and comfortable at the same time."

Nowhere is this more evident than at Pierogi Palace in the West Side Market. David Blaha and his mom, Rhonda Raidl, opened their stand eight years ago, starting with just a handful of varieties. They have since expanded their menu to more than 150 types of pierogi.

"I get my filling ideas from listening to people, watching Emeril on the Food Network and from the angels," says a smiling Raidl. "I am passionate about

what I do. I love combining flavors. For my football tailgaters, I'm working on a bratwurst-sauerkraut-and-beer variety. For my mushroom fans, I'm working on a shiitake mushroom with white wine and herbs. No special request is too small. Our minimum order is two pierogis!"

Although first-time customers often stick with familiar flavors such as three-cheese potato or bacon-potato-cheddar, they usually become more adventurous with time. "Every variety has a loyal fan," notes Blaha. "Varieties that we sell a lot of are Reuben, pizza and Philly cheesesteak. It's best to call ahead on these to make sure we have plenty."

For veggie lovers, Pierogi Palace offers 20 potato varieties, spinach, sweet cabbage, smoked eggplant, black bean, spicy corn/jalapeño and other fillings. Chicken pierogis run the gamut from chicken paprikash to spicy sesame, from teriyaki to bourbon chicken.

To make trying new types easy, Pierogi Palace sells its pierogis individually or by the dozen. Each variety is wrapped separately with a label, so you can keep all of your purchases straight when you get home.

"Pierogi Parties are where it's at!"

exclaims Jonathan Stahl, a longtime Pierogi Palace customer. A Cleveland native who now lives in Columbus, Stahl never returns to his hometown without making a trip to Pierogi Palace to stock up the big coolers in his trunk.

"Oh, I buy all different kinds for our parties," he laughs. "We put 50 to 60 of them in crockpots with onions and butter. And no one knows what kind they got until they have it on their plate. It is a lot of fun. Occasionally, I'll have to scold someone who is poking through them to see which kind is which."

Pierogi Palace manager Laurel Lipp suggests adding a salad to your own pierogi party. "Ask each person to bring one salad ingredient. When all your guests arrive, toss the ingredients together in a giant bowl and — voilà! — salad and pierogis, a perfect meal and everyone helped."

Families are also creating their own pierogi nights. "It is just one of those foods that kids love," says Wesley Ostrowski, co-owner of Ewa's Family Restaurant on East 71st Street. "At our Slavic Village Festivals, you can always see the kids walking along, munching on pierogis. They fit their hands."

"My son Cody is only 1 1/2 years old

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and he has already eaten pierogis," says Scott Roth, a native Clevelander now living in Cincinnati. "He's a pierogi lover just like his dad. When I take him to Cleveland, we go buy pierogis together."

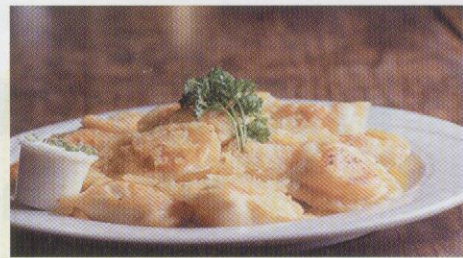
Children enjoy pierogis because they're fun and delicious, while parents appreciate that they're quick and affordable. "I don't make them," Roth explains, "but you don't have to. You can buy them and throw them in the freezer. They are ready when you are."

Rhonda Raidl confirms that pierogis freeze well for up to three months. "Every family has their favorites that they stock up on," she adds. "The kids especially like flavors that they know, like pizza. It makes dinner a fun adventure."

At the end of the meal, it's time to trot out — what else? Dessert pierogis! While many people still enjoy traditional flavors of prune, apple and cottage cheese, newer variations include Southern apricot (apricots, brandy and pecans), blueberry rum cheesecake and fresh strawberry.

"The dessert pierogis are delicious sautéed in butter, then sprinkled with powdered sugar, perhaps some cinnamon," she says, eyes sparkling. "Of course, with pierogis, anything goes." ■

## Pierogi Parties Made Easy



### Where to buy them:

**Krusinski Finest Meat Products**  
(Janka brand)  
6300 Heisley Ave., Cleveland  
(216) 441-0100  
(also sold at Tops and Giant Eagle)

**Pierogi Palace**  
West Side Market, Stand E5  
West 25th Street, Cleveland  
(216) 861-9800

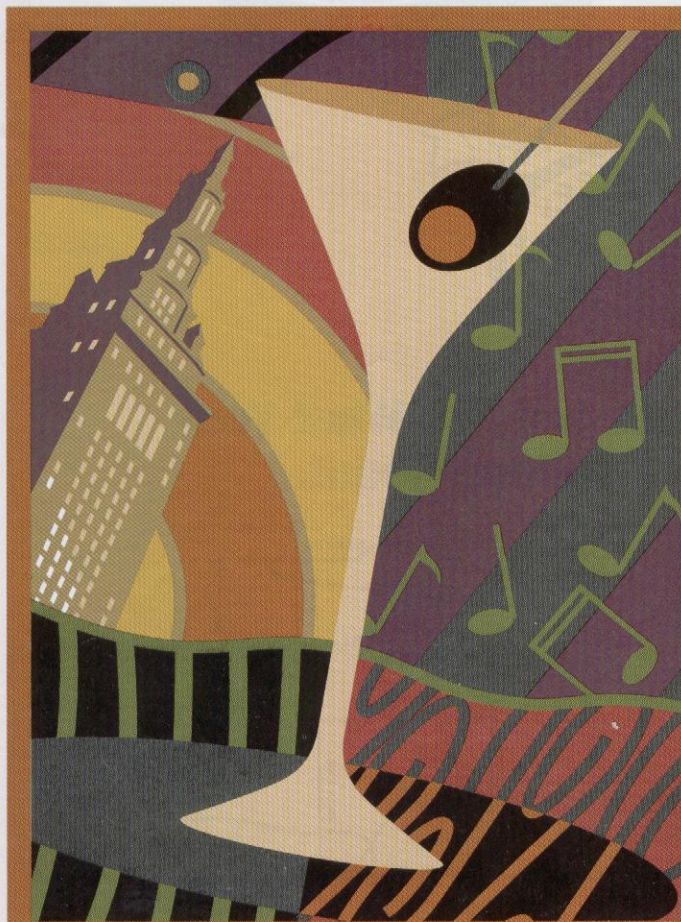
### How to make them:

**Classic:** E-mail Rhonda Raidl of Pierogi Palace at rraidl@aol.com for a copy of her classic dough and potato-filling recipe.

**Using frozen dough:** Buy frozen dinner rolls, then thaw for two hours until the dough is pliable but not risen. Take one roll and slightly flatten it with your palm. Add a scoop of mashed potatoes (or other filling), pinch the top closed like a drawstring purse. Bake seam side down on a nonstick pan at 350 degrees for 15 minutes or until brown. Serve with onions sautéed in butter.

**Using spring-roll wrappers** (recipe suggestion by Michael Symon of Lola Bistro): Spread a spring-roll wrapper on a work surface (keep the remaining wrappers under a damp cloth while you work). Cut each wrapper into a circle. Add a scoop of mashed potatoes (or other filling). Brush the edge of the wrapper lightly with water to help seal. Fold in half; press the edges to seal. Boil for two to three minutes, removing from water with a slotted spoon. Let cool. Brown in butter and onions to serve.

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