

WRESTLING ON THE TABLE: THE CONTEMPORARY WEDDING MEAL IN LATVIA

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ABSTRACT

The object of this paper is to examine the contemporary wedding meal in Latvia, focusing on one particular social group of well situated young couples who choose fine dining restaurants or rented venues for their wedding celebrations because they considered restaurant weddings more elaborate and modern. The desire to embrace a modern lifestyle is the way in which to obtain a new identity in a rapidly changing post-socialist world.

The aim of present research is to reveal how different traditions intertwine in the wedding meal – new or borrowed, with ancient and national or Soviet traditions. While followers of a modern lifestyle are emphasising a challenge to traditions, it is nevertheless the wedding meal and symbolic practices connected with it that indicates a more or less intentional respect for tradition.

I argue that the wedding ceremony reveals the shift from rites of passage to social distinction. This argument is developed by analysing how social and family relationships, value systems and the ethos as a whole have changed recently in Latvia. The use of the symbolic capacity of wedding food, denoting fertility and prosperity, provides the stability of the structure of the wedding feast, which also affects the structure of the marriage ceremony as a whole.

KEYWORDS: wedding rituals • contemporary traditions • festive meal • food as symbol

INTRODUCTION

The metaphor of wrestling is applied here to the wedding meal to highlight some of its essential features. Using this metaphor I refer to Roland Barthes work *Mythologies* and his description of wrestling as “a spectacle where each participant signifies a different part of myth” (Barthes 2009: 3). The main argument for this comparison is the aspect of competition. The contemporary wedding meal in Latvia is a confluence of three distinct traditions, which might be compared with wrestlers, competing for their positions and having their supporters and fans.

I argue that three distinct traditions¹ or modes of thinking can be identified that constitute the wedding meal: national, Soviet and modern. Each of them is composed of conventions, beliefs, customs and routines and reflect the social and cultural values of distinct periods of time.

The Latvian national culinary tradition is formed at the beginning of twentieth century during the Second National Awakening in Latvia, when cultural heritage was systematically gathered, documented and interpreted to establish a sense of national iden-

tity. In this period, ideas about national costume, cuisine, customs, etc. were founded on ethnographic materials about peasant everyday life at the turn of the century. Economic welfare was increasing after the gradual abolition of serfdom in the second half of nineteenth century. Latvian cuisine consisted not only of local ingredients but was also enriched by the products, recipes and cooking techniques of Western Europe mainly introduced through German manor houses. At the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth the transition from a subsistence economy to a modern lifestyle marked the formation of Latvian national cuisine² (Stinkule 2007; Dumpe 2009).

The Soviet tradition refers to the period from 1944 to 1991 when Latvia was part of the Soviet Union. The characteristic features of this period are “homogenization and standardization, the ‘culture’ was invented at the centre (i.e. Moscow) and distributed outward” (Caldwell 2009: 4). National dishes of fifteen Soviet republics were disseminated across the territory of the USSR and adapted according to locally available resources. New cooking practices and appliances were introduced along with new products which gradually become integral parts of so-called Soviet cuisine³ (Pokhlebnik 2005). Due to migration inside the USSR, particular national dishes could reach very distant regions, for example the very popular dish in Latvia *shashlik* was introduced from Transcaucasia. The concept of Soviet cuisine helps us to understand the circulation of ideas and the formation of culinary habits and norms that still exist today.

The modern tradition developed in connection with the considerable lifestyle changes that followed the re-establishing of Latvia’s independence in 1991. Transition from a socialist to a capitalist economy, orientation to the West, globalisation and marketisation characterises the shift from the ‘traditional’ to the ‘modern’ in the post-socialist world (Caldwell 2009). The ambition of becoming a European country reduced interest in local and national peculiarities. The set of practices was adapted from European countries from 1991 and it might be called a modern tradition in the sense of being new and intending to be different from the traditional (Lankauskas 2002). Latvia’s accession to the European Union in 2004 opened a broad availability of information and migration possibilities, introducing new, unseen and unknown culinary experiences, which affected and changed the gastronomic scenery in Latvia. Thus Latvian modern cuisine tends to include borrowed dishes and cooking techniques from European nations with popular Eastern variations. This is combined with exploration of the national heritage and methods of use in the modern world. In general, the disposition towards the new experience, the denial of the old and the attempt to acquire European identity are the most characteristic features of the modern tradition:

The construction of modern and largely non-national selves through appropriating transnational goods and institutions constitutes a significant strategy for anchoring themselves in post-socialism’s bewildering milieu (ibid.: 321).

Interviewing several young couples, I observed the desire to embrace a modern, European identity in their wedding ceremonies. The urban background, financial ability to obtain a modern lifestyle and a more concrete criterion – the wedding celebration in a fine dining restaurant or rented venue of the same class – helped to select the social group whose wedding meal traditions I am examining here.⁴

As far as the wedding meal is concerned, all three of the mentioned traditions – national, Soviet, and modern – are not mutually exclusive and interact with each other. Notwithstanding, there is also a competition – adhering to a particular tradition dem-

onstrates preference for particular values (global or national) and orientation (to past or present). Discussions of this matter in the family reflect the relations between generations: the new generation yearn for a modern, novel wedding to experience as an adventure, while their parents have customs and habits as the main argument. However these traditions not only characterises the spirit of each particular time, provoking generational conflicts, but also reveal the continuity and consistency of customs and rituals.

Changes as well as continuity in wedding traditions are revealed through the festive meal. Communal consumption of food and drink defines every feast. Food is connected with almost every ritual or custom in the marriage ceremony, and apart from the practical function, conveys symbolic meaning. Symbolic manifestations, ritual practices and even particular language are the ways through which the wedding meal encapsulates collective memory. Food and eating can index the “different temporalities that make up the present and food memory helps us to understand some of the enduring aspects of ritual” (Sutton 2001: 159).

Nevertheless, rituals and customs are not invariant over the course of time. Different transformations occur, some culinary practices and dishes are eliminated, some, on the contrary, survive even with changed names, functions and meanings. There are different temporalities intertwined in the contemporary Latvian wedding meal highlighting particular traditional foods or habits and excluding others at the same time. Hence tradition in this sense consists of remembering and forgetting.

As an experienced wedding coordinator expresses in an interview: “Unlike in the previous times when everybody had the same idea about the wedding ceremony, what traditions and rituals should be performed, today new couples are trying to embrace original ideas, to distinguish themselves” (Kralliša 2006). Furthermore, in the wedding celebration the form and content of tradition is variable but the necessity for the tradition as such remains, implying that “the modern tradition is refusal to follow traditions” (Bela-Krūmiņa 2005).

Does this mean that rituals and traditional practices are disappearing from the contemporary wedding? Examining the structure of the wedding ceremony, I observed that traditional practices are often applied without awareness. A few of my interlocutors explained to me that they do not want to follow any traditions at all in their wedding ceremony, although in further interview, describing the planned occasion, mentioning a range of customs and beliefs which would be incorporated without being aware of their origin or meaning. To modernise the whole event, old rituals have sometimes been provided with new symbolic meanings, new objects are used in place of customary, or new ritual practices have been invented.

The borrowing or invention of new rituals often occurs in connection with the necessity to build a completely new identity, for this reason both the Soviet period and the beginning of twenty-first century was particularly fecund in producing new traditions. The precondition of the emergence of a new tradition “is the contrast between the constant change and innovation of the modern world and the attempt to structure at least some parts of social life within it as unchanging and invariant” (Hobsbawm 2004: 2). After the demise of the Soviet Union it was important to dissociate oneself from the identity of the past in order to understand the present. Transition to the West encouraged the decline of the previous traditions and the necessity to acquire everything new and modern. In times of scarcity, which were experienced in Latvia in the Soviet as well

as pre-war period, the most important feature of the festive meal was the quantity not the quality of the food: often meals were not especially elaborate and sophisticated. To modernise the contemporary meal, different practices and customs were borrowed from European and American culture as a melting pot of culinary traditions.

The changes occurring over the last two decades, created the necessity to obtain new identity. Therefore, before focusing on particular food related practices which reveal the changing and continuous aspects of wedding meal, below I offer a brief description of the principal transitions in the social and cultural background, which significantly affected the contemporary wedding ceremony.

THE PROFILE OF THE CONTEMPORARY WEDDING

A rapidly changing political and economic setting has an effect on the perception of marriage as an institution. Traditionally, marriage is regarded as a rite of passage, a ritual event that marks a transition from one status to another. One of the principal transitions is a passage to adulthood when socially immature individuals are transformed into wholesome members of society, capable of creating a family of their own. In this transformation a significant role is attributed to the new couple's parents, who typically provide money and hence plan and organise the wedding ceremony symbolically preparing the newlyweds for their passage. This role of parents and relatives is decreasing significantly today, according to the increase of the average age of newlyweds.⁵ Today a wedding is mainly financed, planned and realised by two adults who are already socially active and independent. This change affects the customs as well, especially those connected with gratefulness, namely, performances of giving gifts to parents and relatives. Today the vast majority of guests at weddings are the couple's friends. Many of my younger informants commented that inviting relatives to the wedding is mainly to please their parents.

Marriage as a rite of passage was previously followed by alterations in lifestyle. Commonly, after the wedding the couple started living together in the husband's or wife's parents' household or in a household of their own. The modern lifestyle involves cohabitation before marriage. This implies that the couple's common household and common social relations are already established. This also might affect wedding customs – there are some rituals invented to make acquaintances between two kin, typically connected with alcohol consumption or partition of the food, especially the cake. In the contemporary wedding very often the guests are already acquainted and the ritual of introduction becomes unnecessary.

Social acceptance of premarital cohabitation is connected with common acceptance of sexual premarital relationships. Even some decades ago there was a tendency to get married at least before the birth of a child; today, on the other hand, the official affirmation of founding a family seems to have no importance at all and children might participate in their parents wedding ceremony.

This affects and often makes meaningless several rituals, the most significant among them is the coifing (*mičošana*) – a ceremony where the older kin women take away bride's crown or veil and gives her the coif, accompanied with ritual singing. This means the passage from the status of bride to the status of wife, who are traditionally no longer allowed to wear the crown and must wear the coif instead. Today the coif-

ing ceremony could be performed by folksingers and the symbolic change of headgear might be accompanied with other activities to make the ritual more attractive: the bride may also have been given an apron and a ladle to be prepared for the role of wife, etc. However, it might be called an empty ritual since it has lost its initial social significance.

Ongoing social transformations made marriage into a legalisation of existing relationships and the celebration of it becomes an elegant party, mainly for friends. This new approach to marriage affects the essential sense of the ceremony and the function of it as a rite of passage is diminished. However, it is still one of the most significant lifecycle celebrations and, unlike baptism or funeral, one that could be organised and remembered by the protagonists themselves. As the usually biggest and most significant familial and social gathering the wedding feast gives the possibility of demonstrating social distinction and displaying the achieved modern identity. To sum up, the meaning of the wedding ceremony has experienced a shift of emphasis from being a rite of passage to a demonstration of status and power.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century this shift is characteristic not only to Latvian society; similar situations are discussed in several studies (Argyrou 2005; Haukanes, Pine 2005) of wedding ceremonies in different parts of the world with similar social backgrounds – the recent turn from local traditions to global culture where embracing the modern ways of the West is “the only way to move forward and upwards in the world” (Debevec 2007). This transformation also affects the meaning and use of food in the festive meal. In addition to the main function of the meal – feeding the guests – it is also important to surprise and to impress the guests with exotic and extraordinary products and techniques, demonstrating elaborate and modern style. In the wedding meal food functions as a symbol signifying fertility as well as prestige.

For many middle class couples the possibility to celebrate the wedding not in a traditional way – at home or in country house owned by family or relatives – but to rent a restaurant or open-air complex with hotel and restaurant included is a way to demonstrate social distinction. In Latvia an elaborate wedding meal in a restaurant might not only be a social but also a generational distinction. Newlyweds often refer to their food choice as a compromise between their taste for sophisticated European food and the traditional meals preferred by their relatives. The possibility to hire catering professionals and not to use the help of parents and relatives in providing the meal, makes the distance from the family even greater.

In a rented venue the structure of the wedding ceremony is constituted of several distinct meals. All the rituals and entertainment activities are connected with the sequence of these meals. Hence the wedding feast structure interacts with the structure of the marriage ceremony.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE WEDDING FEAST

Although the wedding feast might last from one to three days, I will describe here a typical two-day feast. This is not the study of one particular case but more like an attempt to create an ideal version that also includes related historical and regional variations of some of the feast meals to give a comprehensive overview.

The feast starts with cold appetisers or aperitifs served after the ceremony in church

or the registry office and before the main meal. In diachronic aspect this is an ancient tradition⁶ – bread and beer were offered to guests by the bride's parents after the marriage ceremony to celebrate the legal bonds. Various combinations of foods might be served for this purpose: bread or cake with salt or honey offered together with water, beer, wine or vodka. The savoury variation is connected with bread with salt (*sālsmaize*), the traditional house-warming food. These two foodstuffs are considered vital necessities and together are seen as the symbol of sufficiency. Alcohol, served with this – beer or vodka – signifies joy and the good life. A similar tradition is still very popular in Lithuania: in front of the venue the bride's mother congratulates the newlyweds and offers them a tray with bread, salt and vodka on it. According to tradition the couple breaks the bread in parts and eats it with pinch of salt and washes it down with vodka (Lankauskas 2002: 335).

Some of my informants remembered a specific Soviet tradition that is still practised in some regions of Latvia. Two glasses – one with vodka and one with water – are offered to newlyweds and the one who chooses vodka will become the drunkard of the family. A similar ritual is practised with savoury buns: one has a coin within and whoever gets the coin will be responsible for the family budget.

Bread is not only the most vital staple food in Latvian cuisine, but also a fertility symbol along with sweets. The sweet variety of this meal is bread with honey or cake or sweet pretzel served with wine. It might be regarded as wishing fertility and prosperity, since it is possible to interpret the dessert as a symbol of luxury.

Today this meal is usually maintained although explained rationally. The aperitif is served separately, often outside the venue or sometimes in a separate room while the guests are gathering and waiting for the newlyweds to arrive.⁷ This meal consists of champagne or sparkling wine and small cakes, canapés or bacon rolls.

Cold appetisers are followed by the wedding meal, the central part of the whole event and which has to be very sumptuous and satisfying. The main meal is rather long, due to the toasts, games and songs included. The end of the main meal indicates the beginning of the informalities and dancing.⁸ Traditionally the wedding meal was not divided into separate courses, the table was set at once with all kinds of food and during the meal empty plates were replaced with full ones. During the Soviet period cold dishes were usually on the table all the time and hot ones set at the beginning and then cleared away.

In contemporary weddings the meal is often served in portions and in courses: starter, main course and dessert. Sometimes only the starters and desserts are served in portions and the main course consists of various meats, fishes, salads, sauces and different side dishes served at once on common plates. This not only guarantees that guests can have the desirable set of products but also an extra helping. Serving food in portions and separate courses makes the meal more structured and sometimes shorter. Having a restaurant as the venue also affect the seating plan. In order to make the meal into a joint action with songs and different entertainments, the guests were usually seated at one long table with the newlyweds at the end of the table in front of everybody. The restaurant, on the contrary, usually provides many tables for the guests and a separate one for newlyweds, who sit in the narrow company of parents and ushers. This also emphasises the distance and formal disposition.

The next important meal is the dessert at midnight, which designates the affirmation

of marriage *de facto*. The national midnight tradition is the coifing. During the Soviet period, when the symbolic role of the coifing was gradually diminishing, it was frequently accompanied with the serving of cake and coffee. Today the whole ritual of coifing might be omitted while serving and cutting the cake becomes the special event and tradition in itself. The consumption of dessert, namely a cake at midnight, is a rather new, invented tradition, widely maintained and replicated but without any historical roots in national traditions. The set of practices connected with the wedding cake is borrowed and is one of the ways to recognise a modern wedding. The acceptance of this new tradition was probably possible due to the empty ritual of coifing, which could not be supplied with new meaning. Midnight is a very crucial time, especially suited for rituals, since it marks the passage from day to night and accordingly from one status to another. Therefore after the diminishing role of coifing, space for a new ritual was available. Valts, a young groom, speaking about the planned celebration of his wedding, was very strict about avoiding the coifing while admitting the necessity for some event at midnight, at least in order to mark the end of the official part of the ceremony. Cutting the cake in such cases is widely accepted although it could also be supplemented or substituted with fireworks.

Even at night the importance of food does not decrease. There is a special meal served, the so-called night table. The habit of starting again with the cold and savoury dishes after the hot dishes and dessert is typically Latvian. The term night table is rather new because it was separated from the main meal only recently. The ancient Latvian belief is that food and drink should never be taken off the table before the end of the feast. Symbolically it denotes fecundity and opulence. In the Soviet period the cold dishes were never cleared away from the table and were available even through the night. Some of my older informants said that *rasols*, cold meats, and different kinds of pickles were considered as the accompaniment to vodka (*zakuska*), so they had to be available as long as vodka was being drunk.

In a restaurant wedding, dealing with professional caterers, the night table was separated from the main meal to define more accurately the order and the calculation. The night table could also be set as a separate buffet table after the main meal.

Food surpluses from the night table and wedding meal compose breakfast on the second wedding day. Thus continuity of food provision is maintained to avoid the empty table, in this way, without awareness, following the belief. Today the characteristic feature of the wedding morning might be a common hangover, which inspires the content of the breakfast. In these cases so-called hangover soup is very popular, specifically *soļanka*, which is considered Soviet heritage. Other kinds of soups could also be used for this purpose. It is too early yet to consider the morning soup a traditional; despite this, it has superseded another custom, the "sweet morning", especially popular in the Latgale region. Sweets on the morning of the second wedding day are a reference to the preceding wedding night and a symbolic denotation of fertility. They were served in front of the new husband and wife and then distributed to the guests (Kursite 2008). This custom now might be considered extinct.

Another extinct custom is the cabbage dish, which marked the end of the feast. In the ancient customs showing the plug of the emptied beer barrel or cooked beef tail to the guests was the symbol of the ending, the emptiness and the sign that the feast is over. A newer practice with the same meaning is the making and serving to the guests

of the special cabbage or sauerkraut dish as a last meal. The guests then in various ways demonstrated disinclination to leave the wedding house and tried to delay the making of cabbage dish – by hiding the pots, blowing out the fire, etc. In the countryside this custom was followed even during the Soviet period. Today there is no evidence of it or any other practice with similar meaning. Probably the reason is simple: the end of the celebration is not dependent on newlyweds or their family, but from the expiring rental contract of the venue.

Although the structure of the wedding feast consists of a small number of elements, the sequence of them is strictly established and almost invariable. The characteristic features of every element designates its place in the system, therefore the whole structure is composed of binary oppositions between hot and cold, sweet and savoury, day and night, etc. For example, the wedding cake cannot be served at the beginning of the feast. Similarly, the wedding meal without hot dishes could not be regarded as proper. Hence the wedding feast is constructed of so-called gastronomic conventions which are widely accepted and considered normal.

The place of each element in this structure is not accidental; the food expresses certain a symbolic value though not fully realised by the participants. Further, I will explore some of the characteristic elements of the meal and try to capture their genesis with encapsulated symbolic meaning.

ELEMENTS OF THE WEDDING MEAL

Pīrāgi

Bacon rolls (Latvian *pīrāgi*) are an all-time favourite festive dish and genuinely could be named the national dish of Latvia. Typically these are small savoury rolls, made of yeast pastry with smoked bacon and onion filling. They are served as appetisers or snacks. *Pīrāgi* are one of the real examples of an ancient dish that has kept its form, content and name almost unaffected through the ages.

Bacon rolls have always been extremely popular on account of their practical suitability for every festive occasion – they are small, nice, satisfying and the perfect finger food. The suitability of bacon rolls for celebrations is also connected with their ingredients: meat and white bread are the most festive foods in Latvian cuisine. Since the bacon roll is traditionally made in the shape of a crescent it also adopts a symbolic meaning. In Latvian mythology, the crescent is the symbol of the moon and represents the passage from darkness to light and from death to life. (Celms 2007: 160) This characteristic makes *pīrāgi* very appropriate for festive meals, especially those connected with rites of passage.

Karbonāde

By old Latvian custom, marriage is celebrated in the autumn when it is time for the so-called pigs funeral – the pig slaughter. This time is the height of plenty, symbolically and practically, vital also for the wedding ceremony. Until the beginning of the

twentieth century meat was often scarce. Fresh meat (not salted or cured) in satisfying amounts was available only in the familial or seasonal feast, marking the distinction between everyday and celebratory meals. (Dumpe 2009: 156) In the Soviet period meat was an integral part of every meal, festive meals in particular.

In Latvia pork is the most popular kind of meat. Pork *karbonāde* is equally popular on the festive and everyday table. To find a suitable word in English it is important to clarify the two meanings of *karbonāde* in Latvian. On the one hand it means a cut of pork, namely rib chop or loin chop in English. On the other hand *karbonāde* also means a cooking technique and in this sense the most suitable word is schnitzel: pork or veal chop, thinned with a mallet, breaded or dipped in egg and flour and pan fried.

This dish is borrowed from German cuisine and remains very popular. Today it is served in nearly every roadside café with French fries and ketchup or mayonnaise. It is a routine dish and together with potatoes is almost inseparable from Latvian identity. In a contemporary, sophisticated wedding meal the union of *karbonāde* and fries might be considered a little too ordinary or even vulgar. It is not surprising, therefore, that different names and appearances are invented for this dish to make it appropriate for the occasion. As is shown in wedding menus, there are exotic or prestigious or even better sounding ingredients added, for example, *karbonāde* might be filled with prunes, served with Korean carrot salad or in cherry-wine sauce.⁹ Breading or dipping in egg and flour is rarely used, so *karbonāde* retains only the rib chop meaning. As far as potatoes are concerned, there is no festive meal imaginable without them, although attention is drawn to the appearance. Both potatoes and meat are considered more festive in fried rather than boiled form, as well as whole rather than chopped or pureed.

Rasols

Rasols is a traditional kind of salad that consists of cooked root vegetables, pickles, boiled eggs, meat and/or fish, all mixed together with mayonnaise and/or sour cream. *Rasols* (*salat olivye* in Russian) was borrowed from Russian cuisine at the end of the nineteenth century. Legend has it that the famous French chef Lucien Olivier was serving this salad as a combination of exquisite products (such as lobster, grouse, caviar, etc.) accompanied by mayonnaise dressing in his restaurant in Moscow in the middle of the nineteenth century. Uneducated merchants, the clients of the restaurant, mixed together all the ingredients, in this way offending the chef and creating the traditional appearance of *rasols*.

So the legend goes. However, the first written recipe for *rasols* (1897) includes grouse, crayfish, capers and olives. At the beginning of the socialist period in Russia *rasols* was regarded as a bourgeois luxury and excluded from the menu of the proletariat. In the 1930s *rasols* returned with its ingredients changed: sausages instead of grouse, crayfish substituted by cooked carrots, pickled cucumbers and peas in the place of capers and olives. As a party food it was at its acme between the 1960s and 1980s, being served in parties of every social stratum and becoming a symbol of new democracy. This was the party food – an integral part of every festive table (Kushkova 2005).

In the Soviet period the main feature that made this salad a festive meal was the limited availability and hence the prestige of the ingredients, such as pickled peas, sausages and mayonnaise. Today the typical ingredients of *rasols* are not considered pres-

tigious but it remains on festive tables as a satisfying and simple dish, *proper* festive food – appetiser, starter, main dish and side dish simultaneously. Today, along with nostalgia value, it also has modern twists – olives and capers, shrimps and sea food, etc. In the contemporary wedding meal *rasols* is rarely served as part of the main meal but is almost obligatory on the night table. Ēriks, an experienced chef, summarises:

For modern couples *rasols* is like a relative from countryside – you must invite him to the wedding and you actually like him but you are always a bit ashamed of him. This is the reason why the appearance is changed and different names are invented to keep it on the wedding table.

Wedding cake

White, iced and with at least three tiers this kind of wedding cake originated in England and acquired modern form during the Victorian period (Charsley 1988). In Latvia this European tradition was probably adapted some two decades ago. However the festive bread was undoubtedly the first forerunner of the wedding cake. There are many Latvian customs and beliefs connected with making, breaking, serving and eating the wedding bread. The extreme significance of this festive bread is illustrated by the ancient belief that if the wedding bread crackles, one of the newlyweds could die (Straubergs 1944: 287).

The ritual and symbolic capacity of bread originates from the meaning of grain. Grain continues to represent fertility across the world's cultures in the form as special wheaten cakes prepared for the newlyweds to walk on, women throwing betel and barley over the groom as he enters his new home, and the bride's brother pouring wheat, rice, or barley over the bride as she turns around (Bothwell 2003). Pouring wheat over the bride in the marriage ritual is also one of the ancient Latvian customs, now extinct (Straubergs 1944: 23).

In Soviet times the so-called country cake was very popular in celebrations. This term was used to refer to homemade, very rich cake decorated with butter roses. Today country cake denotes the exaggerated amount of fat and clumsy design in opposition to spare and elegant tiered wedding cakes.

The tiered wedding cake can be made only by professionals. It requires a special stand, baking and decorating techniques and ingredients that are commonly industrially produced. The designs are international, sometimes taken from foreign websites or magazines. This makes the elaborate, 'design' cake a symbol of status. At least three tiers are obligatory to fulfil this role. If the number of guests is rather small, some tiers could be made of foam plastic, which is, of course, inedible. As Dina, a pastry chef, said:

If the couple desires a very big and imposing cake, which could feed 130 guests, but the actual amount of participants is 30, I have to make at least two false tiers, which of course looks exactly like the edible ones and cost correspondingly.

While tiered and iced cakes are made not only for weddings but also for other occasions, especially corporate activities, the most characteristic feature for the wedding cake, nevertheless, is its white colour, which is often employed as the theme colour of the celebration and might be interpreted as a symbol of the bride's virginity. The typical cake decorations are flowers and fruits – real or made from icing. The symbolic

meaning of cutting cake together is that it can be considered the first joint activity of the newlyweds.

These few examples of typical wedding dishes highlights several hallmarks which signify the festive character of the meal, such as the prestigious nature or great number of ingredients, which could be also difficult to find or afford. For example sweet-and-sour soup (*saldskābā zupa*), which was a traditional Latvian wedding dish until the beginning of the twentieth century, was made exclusively for weddings and consisted of all the best products available, including sugar, butter, berries, spices, nuts, cream and even vinegar. Saffron as well, regarded as an expensive and exclusive ingredient, was used only in wedding bread (Heinola, Stinkule 2006). One more characteristic feature is complicated cooking technique, which might be known and performed only by professionals, as in the case of the wedding cake. Serving an elaborate dish makes the occasion more ceremonial, festive and marks a difference from everyday meals.

Alcohol

One more essential element of a festive meal is alcohol:

Alcoholic beverages frequently have a privileged role in the feasting context because they are essentially food with certain psychoactive properties resulting from an alternative means of preparation that tend to amplify their significance in the important dramaturgical aspect of ritual. (Dietler 2001: 72–73)

Alcohol, especially beer, but also homebrewed spirit, has symbolic value in all traditional Latvian feasts. The expressions “to drink the wedding” or “to drink the funeral” was commonly used. In the wedding it was a very bad sign if the beer ran short during the feast. For stimulation of fertility and productivity beer was used also in magic rituals. (Dumpe 2001: 135–138) As long as both beer and spirit is brewed from grain, the symbolic meaning of fertility might also be attributed to the alcohol.

In the Soviet period village inhabitants still made beer and spirit at home, while in cities it was gradually substituted with vodka and champagne. The history of Soviet champagne is similar to that of *rasols* – from “bourgeois luxury” to Stalin’s approved “important sign of material well-being and the good life”, starting from in 1936 (Gronow 2003: 17). In the Soviet period the proletariat could afford so-called champagne (sparkling wine produced in the USSR) and thus was convinced that luxurious living was available to every Soviet citizen, in contrast to Western capitalism. Champagne, or more often sparkling wine, is still a popular festive drink and is served in wedding ceremonies very often.

Typical Latvian weddings today are supposed to involve the consumption of alcohol, sometimes even immoderate drinking.¹⁰ This might be considered partially a Soviet heritage, common in post-socialist countries (see Lankauskas 2002). However, social consumption of alcohol is also relevant to performing rituals, as with toasts, for example.

Desserts

Desserts are similarly characteristic to celebrations, often signifying luxury because sweets not only satisfy hunger, but also enable the possibility of using provision for pleasure (see Mintz 1985; Bourdieu 1996). The sweet taste also symbolises fertility. It is revealed in rituals as well as in language. Honey and sugar are most often used as vehicles for the description of feelings of love and sexuality. In English there are such metaphoric expressions used as sweetheart, honeymoon, and women can be called sugar, honey, sweetie, etc. (Mintz 1991: 858) This kind of expression is also common in Latvian and other languages. Accordingly, sweet foods are often used as fertility symbols on the wedding table; they might be associated with ritual practices such as cutting the cake or mixing beer with honey, or have a symbolic form like traditional wedding biscuits and pretzels with an erotic shape. (Kursīte 2008: 76)

One ancient custom related to sweetness in the Latvian wedding meal is practised even today. Several times during the meal a ritual dialogue is performed. At first one of the guests refuses to eat or drink something, complaining about its bitter taste. All the other guests agree and everybody shouts repeatedly: bitter, bitter! Then the newlyweds stand up and kiss each other. Everybody applauds and the food or drink is symbolically changed to have a sweet, acceptable taste again. This custom is based on the opposition of bitter and sweet. As Kursite (2008: 29–30) puts it: “Bitter as an inedible, even poisonous taste, is mythologically in connection with evil. [...] A sweet taste as the most agreeable is connected with God.”

Plenty of food

Sweets as well as alcohol are essential foods in the wedding meal. But the most important belief, connected with the meal, is necessity to have plenty of food, which signifies the prosperity and opulence. There is a Latvian saying that characterises a good, proper wedding meal: there is so much food on the table that it nearly breaks. It is better to have leftovers after the third wedding day than have empty plates after the meal.

This principle is observed today and with great respect. If the wedding meal is prepared by a professional chef who runs a fine dining restaurant, the bride and groom or their parents are concerned about the satisfying amount of food and are inclined to make corrections. Valts explained about his planned wedding feast:

In our wedding we do not want a plate with two peas and drops of sauce between them as it is in a restaurant. We want normal food – potatoes, different kinds of meats. As far as wedding ceremony is concerned, my parents worry mostly about the table – there has to be plenty of food so as not to be ashamed in front of our relatives.

In this way parents might display their place in the structure of power in local society and symbolically hand it over to the new family (Bela-Krūmiņa 2005: 96). Decisions about the process are made by the party who pays, and traditionally parents offer their financial support.

The experienced chef Kaspars has observed that if a couple finances their wedding themselves, they are usually more economic, making calculations and trying to avoid excesses. In these cases food might have lost its central role in the wedding ceremony and social status might be expressed otherwise – through the prestige and cost of, for example, the chosen venue, the band playing or the ensuing fireworks.

The contemporary Latvian wedding meal is characterised by a synthesis of traditions. Exploiting further the wrestling metaphor, the following inference could be made: “the function of the wrestler is not to win; it is to go exactly through the motions which are expected of him” (Barthes 1957: 4).

CONCLUSION

My research explores the structure and construction of the contemporary wedding meal, referring to one social group in particular whose wedding is celebrated in a fine dining restaurant or a rented venue of the same class. Describing the wedding ceremony in general, a shift from rite of passage to social distinction can be observed. Furthermore, this shift could be attributed to the wedding meal.

To analyse a wedding feast it is important to point out that it is constituted of various separate meals, each with its own meaning and value. The syntagmatic structure of this feast seems to be strictly defined and almost invariable. With several exceptions this structure seems very traditional, with deep historical roots. While the wedding ceremony has changed dramatically as a result of social and cultural transformations over the last two decades, the structure of the wedding meal, nevertheless, experiences alterations rather than fundamental changes.

The specific character of the contemporary wedding meal is expressed in several distinct dishes or other elements with exceptional symbolic capacity. I have examined examples characteristic to Latvia, such as *pīrāgi* and *karbonāde*, some characteristic to the post-socialist space, such as *rasols*, and some elements essential for every celebration – alcohol, dessert and plenty of food.

I have attempted to demonstrate how three different traditions or modes of thinking – national, Soviet and modern – interact and affect the wedding meal. This study showed that all these traditions, as representatives of particular time periods, thinking and value systems, together form the wedding meal and this mutual influence also displays the relationship between generations. Another aspect of tradition is the question of consciousness – traditional practices might be applied without awareness and without knowing the meaning of them. To modernise the wedding ceremony, old rituals have been given new symbolic meanings, new objects are used in place of the customary and new rituals have been invented.

If the structure of the marriage ceremony depends on the wedding feast structure, it seems that the feast itself is the most stable wedding tradition. While many rituals have lost their sense or significantly changed, and new ones might be temporary and without roots, the meal, nevertheless, proves an invariant element that helps to strengthen the sense of identity and gives the whole ceremony deeper meaning.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Latvian Professional Chefs Association *The Chefs' Club* and especially Ēriks Dreibants for providing the essential information for this study.

NOTES

1 Denoting a particular set of practices as traditions, the significant features are singled out: transmittance from one generation to another, common identity, stability and the feeling of continuity as well as sustenance of social structure.

2 The Repository of Ethnographic Material at the Institute of Latvian History provides ample variety of documentation about food, especially festive meals, and it still serves as a main source for describing and interpreting the national cuisine. It is not surprising, therefore, that even today national cuisine is regarded as a constant and unchangeable entity, reflecting the culinary tradition of the beginning of the twentieth century.

3 Food historian Pokhlebkina used the term Soviet cuisine in the context of culture studies, referring to characteristic features of culinary scenery in the Soviet Union. Pokhlebkina (2005) argues that Soviet cuisine varies from European or Asian or even Russian cuisines with specific tastes, culinary technology and composition of dishes.

4 The empirical material for this study was gathered and interpreted due to the contribution of the Latvian Professional Chefs Association *The Chefs' Club*. Chefs and new couples were interviewed, menus and photographs of the wedding tables were analysed and interpreted. The gathered data was compared with information in wedding magazines, web sites and other sources. From different stories and sources a coherent pattern was established demonstrating the similarities in the structure and design of the wedding meal.

5 According to data from the Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia the average age of newlyweds was 20–24 years in 2000 and 25–34 in 2007.

6 On ancient Latvian wedding traditions, see Aizsils 1941, Šperliņš 1937.

7 There is a custom in Latvia that after the marriage ceremony in the church or registry office the newlyweds together with the ushers go on a symbolic trip during which different rituals are performed. In the meantime the guests go to the venue and wait for the newlyweds to arrive to commence the wedding feast. Sometimes this could be quite a long time.

8 On contemporary Latvian wedding traditions, see Pozņaka 2007; Sēja 2008.

9 Different tactics of altering familiar names of dishes or reflecting the important ingredients in the dish might be observed in wedding menus, provided by *The Chefs' Club*.

10 Different Latvian websites with wedding tips provide information about food and drink calculations for the festive meal. For example, a two-day feast with 35 guests requires 80 bottles of champagne, 24 bottles of wine, 6 litres of vodka and a barrel of beer. Calculating the minimal consumption of alcohol for the wedding, there is the suggestion to take into account the desired extent of drunkenness, starting from light dizziness to the “face in the salad” stage (*Kāzu laiks*; cf. Precos).

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