

Культурологія

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THE BAKING TECHNOLOGY OF THE TRADITIONAL KOROVAI: FROM CRAFT TO ART – THE TRANSFORMATION OF TRADITION IN THE MODERN ERA

Summary. *This article explores the evolution of the baking technology of the Ukrainian korovai, tracing its transformation from an archaic craft practice to a contemporary form of culinary and cultural expression. The korovai is examined as an element of intangible cultural heritage, preserving ritual functions, symbolic meanings, and artistic value. Its traditional preparation includes sacralized stages of kneading, fermentation, decoration, and baking—each of which has undergone adaptation in the context of urbanization and technological advancement. The aim of this study is to analyze which elements of the korovai-making process have been preserved and which have been transformed through the integration of new ingredients, forms, and tools. The research is based on comparative historical analysis, ethnographic observation, and content analysis of five verified Ukrainian sources. Particular attention is given to the role of flour quality, the freshness and origin of eggs, the type of leavening agent, the temperature regime, and the nature of the oven—from traditional clay ovens to modern electric ones. The study highlights how fermentation critically influences the bread's texture and aroma, anchoring the cultural identity of its flavor. The findings suggest a high degree of resilience within the tradition, allowing for the preservation of ritual semantics even when modern technological solutions are applied. The korovai continues to fulfill not only a sacred and aesthetic purpose but also a unifying socio-cultural role,*

especially in the context of intergenerational continuity. This article is intended for ethnographers, cultural scholars, researchers of gastronomic heritage, artisans and educators in traditional crafts, as well as professionals in cultural policy and intangible heritage preservation.

Key words: *korovai, baking technology, ritual culture, fermentation, sourdough, clay oven, symbolism, intangible heritage, tradition adaptation, Ukrainian wedding.*

Introduction. The korovai, a sacred wedding bread, holds a distinctive place in Ukrainian traditional culture. Its preparation historically combined artisanal techniques, ritual-magical practices, and collective participation, reflecting cultural beliefs in fertility, prosperity, and ancestral continuity. The baking process was not merely culinary—it was regarded as a symbolic act of creation. Every stage, from kneading to decoration, was governed by strict, inherited protocols passed down through generations.

As societal structures and technological conditions evolved, these practices underwent significant transformation. Yet, in the context of contemporary cultural revaluation and a growing commitment to safeguarding intangible heritage, there has been renewed interest in restoring traditional korovai techniques and adapting them to 21st-century realities. What once was a localized craft has become a subject of cultural reflection, educational engagement, and gastronomic tourism.

Modern artisans, researchers, and enthusiasts are increasingly focused on recipe modifications, the role of fermentation, ingredient quality, and thermal processing methods—all within the framework of traditional practice. A prominent trend is the search for a balance between preserving authentic principles and embracing modern food technologies, from new flour varieties to silicone molds and electric ovens.

In this cultural revival, the korovai emerges as both a symbol of ritual heritage and a model of how ancient techniques can be meaningfully adapted to modern contexts. Renewed attention to the baking process helps preserve its physical form while deepening the understanding of its cultural essence, creating a space for intergenerational continuity.

The aim of this study is to examine the baking techniques of the traditional Ukrainian korovai through the lens of historical and technological development, to identify which core elements have been transformed, and to analyze current approaches to incorporating new ingredients and methods without compromising the ritual and cultural significance of the tradition.

Materials and Methods. This study is based on an analysis of sources related to Ukrainian wedding traditions and intangible cultural heritage. The methodological framework includes comparative historical analysis, ethnographic observation, and content analysis. These approaches enabled the tracing of how korovai recipes, techniques, and symbolism have evolved from rural customs to contemporary artisanal practices.

The comparative historical method was applied to materials that document the korovai's development across regional wedding traditions—from Poltava to Halychyna. For example, the publication CuriousUA highlights the symbolic importance of each ingredient and step in preparing the ritual wheat korovai [5]. Ethnographic data on wedding practices in southeastern Ukraine—where the korovai was baked “for happiness” and accompanied by blessings—were used to qualitatively observe the persistence of archaic forms [4].

Content analysis focused on materials exploring the contemporary revival of traditional foods. An article in ELLE Ukraine, for instance, presents the korovai as part of the mosaic of intangible cultural heritage, emphasizing changes in form and recipe adaptation in modern contexts [2]. This allowed for a comparison between documented ritual techniques and their 21st-century reinterpretations.

Special attention was given to sources capturing processes of craft revival. For instance, RBK-Ukraine, in the context of discussions around the Yavoriv pie, underlines the importance of not just flavor but also presentation—an aspect that directly connects to modern interpretations of the korovai as a form of artistic expression [3]. Meanwhile, Fact News provided valuable insights into the ritual context and functions of the korovai within the wedding structure [1].

Taken together, this methodological toolkit and verified source base offer a framework for understanding the baking of korovai as a complex process in which technique, symbolism, and cultural heritage are intricately intertwined.

Results and Discussion. The history of the Ukrainian korovai recipe reveals a deep connection between culinary technique, ritual function, and regional identity. From the 19th century to the present day, the composition of ceremonial bread has demonstrated both resilience in its basic structure and flexibility in adapting to regional conditions, household practices, ingredient availability, and local rituals. Traditionally, korovai was prepared using only high-grade wheat flour, with the addition of eggs, milk, butter, salt, and occasionally honey or sugar. The principal criterion was the "purity" of the product—both physical and symbolic. Flour was always sifted three times, eggs were sourced from household hens, and the dough was kneaded in silence, with prayers and good intentions, which were symbolically "infused" into the dough [1].

As the 20th century began, recipe adaptations reflected changing economic conditions and the domestication of ritual practices. In some parts of eastern Ukraine, for example, commercial yeast became a common addition to the dough, and baking shifted to simplified household ovens. In contrast, regions such as Halychyna preserved the tradition of using naturally leavened dough with long fermentation times and baking in wood-fired clay ovens [3]. These recipe distinctions are particularly evident along the "central–western" divide. In Poltava, korovai was often made with clarified butter and adorned with dough-

based braids and birds. In Halychyna, by contrast, buckwheat or corn flour could be added, giving the bread a distinctly regional character [4].

Table 1 presents a comparison of traditional korovai recipes across Ukrainian regions, highlighting shared components and localized features.

Table 1

Comparison of Traditional Korovai Recipes by Regions of Ukraine [1; 3; 5]

Region	Flour Type	Leavening Agents	Additional Ingredients	Baking Method	Decoration
Poltava Region	High-grade wheat	Yeast	Eggs, milk, butter	Wood-fired household oven	Braids, birds, leaf motifs made of dough
Halychyna	Wheat / buckwheat / corn	Natural sourdough	Sour cream, cream	Clay oven, long bake time	Floral ornaments, symmetrical layout
Slobozhanshchyna	Wheat	Yeast	Sugar, lard	Metal form, evenly distributed heat	Large wreaths, dough birds
Podillia	Wheat	No leavening agents	Eggs, salt, matsoni	Traditional oven, moderate heat	Ornamental elements, centered composition

In traditional culture, the baking of korovai followed a well-defined sequence, where each stage carried both technical and symbolic significance. One of the fundamental principles was purity—of the environment and intention. Women allowed to participate in the kneading process were expected to be in a positive state of mind, and the dough was kneaded by hand while singing prayers and songs [4]. The process began with finely sifted flour, to which eggs, milk, salt, and sourdough starter were added. Yeast was typically used only in central and eastern regions, while western traditions favored naturally fermented starters, prepared a day in advance.

After kneading, the dough was left in a warm place to ferment, then punched down, shaped, and decorated by hand. The proofing stage was considered especially important. The dough was covered with a ritual cloth (rushnyk) and allowed to "rest" so it could "gain strength." For decoration, elements made from the same dough were used—such as kvitky(flowers), ptashky (birds), kolosky (ears of wheat), braids, and wreaths. The composition followed a symmetrical axis and often featured three tiers, symbolizing the triad of kinship: past, present, and future [1].

Figure 1 illustrates the technological sequence of preparing a wedding korovai in both traditional and modern interpretations.



Fig. 1. Technological Sequence of Korovai Baking [2; 3; 4]

While contemporary artisans preserve the step-by-step logic of traditional korovai preparation, they increasingly incorporate new tools and materials. For example, kneading may now be done using stand mixers with specialized attachments, and proofing can take place in temperature-controlled chambers. Despite these technological simplifications, the hand-shaping of decorative elements remains central to the bread's artistic and symbolic expression.

Fermentation plays a crucial role in the korovai-making process, influencing both the dough's texture and the depth of its flavor. In Ukrainian ritual practice, fermentation was never seen merely as a technical step—it carried symbolic weight, representing the "ripening" of a future family and its inner unity [1]. The length of fermentation depended on climate, flour quality, and the type of starter. In Halychyna, ethnographic sources describe how the dough was left overnight in a warm place, covered with an embroidered towel so it could absorb the good thoughts and intentions of the host [3]. This slow fermentation process yielded a light, airy structure and a mild tanginess that distinguished the korovai from everyday bread.

Ingredient quality was no less essential. Flour had to be finely milled, pure, and usually of the highest grade. Eggs were always home-sourced, with bright yolks symbolizing the sun and abundance. Milk was used whole and unboiled, and salt was coarse, "clean," and often either blessed in church or hand-harvested. These details, documented in ethnographic accounts and oral histories, underscore the korovai's sacred status as a protective ritual bread [5].

A comparison between ritual and everyday dough reveals clear differences in both ingredients and approach. Daily bread dough was prepared quickly, without ritual elements, often using yeast and plain water. In contrast, ceremonial dough was "nurtured." It was allowed to "rest," to "rise," and was handled with particular care, always within a carefully chosen circle of women [4].

No discussion of the korovai would be complete without addressing its most important element: the oven. Traditionally, the korovai was baked

exclusively in a clay oven, considered the sacred heart of the home and a source of spiritual energy. Clay ovens produced a specific kind of heat—dry, even, and gradually diminishing—which allowed the bread to bake thoroughly without drying out.

These ovens had thick walls that retained heat and required no open flame during baking. The korovai was placed inside only after the oven had been properly heated. Achieving the correct temperature (roughly 180–200°C) and cleaning the hearth of embers—by wiping it with a dry cloth or wormwood—was both a physical and symbolic act of purification before beginning the sacred process. The oven itself functioned as a ritual marker. Cracking or sinking during baking was considered a bad omen for the newlyweds, so skill in handling the oven was as important as knowledge of the recipe [5].

With the transition to urban life and the decline of traditional ovens, korovai began to be baked in gas and electric ovens. While this simplified the process, it also required adaptations in recipes and temperature management. Modern bakers now account for convection, thermostats, and heat distribution—including precise placement of the korovai on racks to ensure even baking. Nevertheless, craftswomen note that the flavor and aroma produced by a traditional oven remain unmatched. Even so, modern ovens have made it possible to preserve the korovai tradition in urban apartments, studios, and culinary schools—without losing its symbolic depth [2].

The contemporary development of korovai-making has been marked by the active adoption of new materials, tools, and techniques, broadening the possibilities for artisans and making the tradition more accessible in an urbanized context. At the same time, cultural authenticity remains a guiding principle. Increasingly, bakers use gluten-free flour, plant-based substitutes, and natural dyes to adapt the recipe to dietary and ethical preferences. Beetroot, turmeric, charcoal, and blueberry extracts are used to add color to decorative elements without synthetic additives—while still preserving the traditional symbolism [2].

Table 2

Modern Adaptations of the Traditional Korovai [2; 3; 5]

Aspect	Traditional Approach	Modern Adaptations
Ingredients	Wheat flour, eggs, milk, salt	Gluten-free flour, plant-based substitutes, natural colorants
Technique	Hand-kneading, natural leavening	Mixers, digital thermometers, simplified methods
Shaping	All elements hand-crafted	Silicone molds, stencils, 3D printing (in some cases)
Baking	Clay oven, experience-based control	Electric ovens with convection and programmable heat settings
Symbolism	Fully preserved and unchanged	Retained in handcrafted elements, adapted in scaled production

At the technical level, silicone molds have become popular for speeding up the production of decorative components. Electric ovens with convection ensure consistent baking and stable heat control, though experienced bakers maintain that nothing replicates the radiant heat of a traditional oven. Practice has shown that tools, materials, and time-saving techniques can be successfully adapted within the bounds of tradition. However, certain elements must remain intact: the hand-shaping of core symbols, the structured preparation process, and the ritual context [5].

Conclusion. The study of the traditional korovai baking technique offers a number of meaningful insights into the mechanisms that sustain cultural practices over time. The korovai process transcends everyday culinary activity; it represents a ritualized form of expressing cultural and familial identity, where each action carries semiotic weight. The strength of this tradition lies in its historical depth and its adaptability. The korovai demonstrates a unique capacity to incorporate modern tools and ingredients without compromising its symbolic

structure. The ritual retains its significance so long as its stages and principles are respected, even in new contexts.

This tradition affirms that adaptation does not equate to erosion. The use of new forms, techniques, and approaches is possible when grounded in a sincere respect for the meaning of symbols and the function of the rite. In this, the korovai reveals the vitality of tradition as a dynamic cultural mechanism.

Far from being a static ethnographic artifact, the korovai remains a living element of society's cultural fabric—a source of intergenerational continuity, a marker of identity, and a space for dialogue between heritage and the present.

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