

# Katie's Legacy

by Syl Long

Grandma Katie was visiting for Christmas and we had traveled from Virginia, through a snowstorm, to Colorado so I could meet her. We were newly engaged, exhausted, and freezing on the doorstep. I remember blowing out my breath and watching it turn to ice crystals in the porch's glow. Wally knocked on his mom's door again. As I held his other hand, we shivered and waited. The door flew open and Wally's mom, Alma, with bright auburn hair and a smile warmer than firelight, reached out and pulled us in. The savory smells of browned meat, cabbage, and baking bread welcomed us home.

I saw Katie's tiny figure holding court at the head of the dining room table as we crossed the room for introductions. Katie was in her late 70s, hardly taller than the back of the chair she stood behind. She was charming. White-hair, bright blue eyes, with a wry grin and spunky vitality. Her face shone as she laughed, waved her delicate hands, and answered my questions about the family and the food I could smell cooking.

"Our family came here from Germany. They had been farmers. Back in the 1700s, the Russian queen, you know, Catherine The Great, offered free land and no taxes to anyone willing to come farm. So, my great-great-grandparents, I think it was, immigrated from Germany to Russia in the late 1770s."

"The family could hold on to their traditions and heritage", she said, "but they adapted some of their foods. The recipe we're having tonight is baroke. It's a homemade yeast bread filled with cooked sausage, hamburger, onions, and cabbage. It's influenced by a Russian dish called Perogi."

Katie told me her family lived peacefully in Russia until the political climate shifted. Her family was suddenly considered immigrants, though they had been there for generations. They were persecuted and fled back to Germany. Just a few years later, to flee the escalating troubles in Germany, they immigrated to the United States.

I watched Katie, fascinated, as she told me about traveling in a covered wagon to live in Bent's Fort, Colorado (now a state park and tourist attraction), when she was a little girl.

"I bumped and swayed in my dreams for years afterward!", she told me, swaying to show me. "When I married, I taught my children our history and how to make family recipes."

That night, listening to Katie tell her stories, I bit through the warm, buttery pillows of potato-yeast bread for the first time. Savoring the sauteed onions, cabbage, and sausage, the flavors and stories melded perfectly.

Today, making Katie's Baroke has become a family tradition. We invite our adult children over a few times a year to make it with us. Wally and I mix the potato-yeast bread and set it to rise under a dishtowel in the warm kitchen. While the dough rises, we divide up tasks and answer the grandchildren's questions.

My son-in-law stirs the browning sausage and hamburger. Across the kitchen, a couple of our daughters chop cabbage and onions, and cry, laughing together. After a few minutes, my son-in-law calls, "Meat's done!" I move out of his way as he pours the mouth-watering filling carefully into the shiny steel strainer. The smell rises with the steam, coating my glasses, as I rinse it in hot water. I dump the filling into a huge steel kettle with a clunk, stirring it over medium-high heat until a nice sauce bubbles up from the bottom of the kettle. The cloud perfumes the kitchen air.

When the filling's done, the fun begins. The family lines up around the dining room table. The little ones kneel on chairs, or on the window seat along the short end of the table. Wally dusts a low cloud of flour over the surface in front of him. As the cloud settles, he shapes large palm-sized balls of sticky, beige yeast dough between his hands. Then, he rolls the balls gently through the loose flour, until they're frosted white in it. Next to Wally, our daughter uses a wooden rolling pin to coax one of the dough balls into a square about ½ -inch thick. She presents them, one at a time, to our son who filling the dough today.

Our oldest delights in carefully scooping ¼ cup of the filling onto the dough and pinching the opposing corners together with precision. He crimps the edges firmly between his long, thin thumb and index finger. Last, he flips the square buns, seam-side down, onto a prepared baking sheet.

Four sheets of baroke go into the oven to bake. When the timer announces dinner's done, we swerve around each other transporting steaming pans of hot, golden buns to the table. Yells of "make a hole, hot bread comin' through!", and "watch out!", mix with the sound of contented sighs and the smell of fresh bread.

When we make baroke, Katie is alive again. I imagine her laughing, telling me about her resilient family, and swaying as she describes the trip to Colorado on that covered wagon.

I look around the table and lower my face close to the hot yeasty bun in my hand, breathing in. Her legacy lingers in the fragrance.