

Old-World Easter

'Smingus-dyngus' a
wet rite of passage



PHOTO BY ANDREA BARRIST STERN

Wys'mienit! A Traditional Polish babka.

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Ulster County Press

Every year, the Sawka family of High Falls prepares a traditional Polish Easter that includes a sweet yeast-based cake called babka, rich cakes with nuts and dried fruits called mazureks, and other specialties. The table is decorated with eggs dyed naturally by boiling in onion skins, and sugar shaped into a lamb. Like many families, they sit down to a special Easter meal together.

The day after, however, the Sawkas sneak up on one another and splash water.

If they were in Poland, they'd try to douse their neighbors and passersby with a bucketful as well, but this could be badly misinterpreted in High Falls. This wet tradition is called "smingus-dyngus," and it takes place every year on Easter Monday in Poland.

"Getting soaked is supposed to bring

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luck," explains Hanka Sawka, who authored "At Hanka's Table," a culinary autobiography that tells her life story and includes 100 mostly Polish recipes. Sawka explains that "Wet Monday" commemorates the christening of the Polish Kingdom.

Some 1040 years ago, when King Mieszko I took baptism and became Christian, his subjects had to follow. Urban dwellers were baptized easily, but not everyone in rural areas, far from the affairs of state, understood what was happening.

With little time for explanations, villagers were christened en masse, with water thrown at them.

Sawka is baking up a storm for Easter, just having returned from a book tour in Washington, D.C., which included talks and dinners at three colleges and at the Polish Embassy.

Preparation of a dinner at Stratford University was overseen by chefs who cook for the White House.

"At Hanka's Table" was launched in High Falls in 2004, with a week of dinners at the Depuy Canal House and a book party at the New York Store. "Our community was incredibly supportive," says Mrs. Sawka. More information is available at www.afhankastable.com.

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