

Loci Communes 2022, vol. 1 (2), pp. 1–19

ISSN 2720-6122


<https://doi.org/10.31261/LC.2022.02.04>



# Searching for Identity in the 20th-Century Lithuanian-American Food Exhibitions

Jurgita Senuliene

Lithuanian Institute of History

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2272-7644>

## Abstract

In this case the author of the article, using quantitative and qualitative analysis of the selected periodical publications, examines ethnic food fairs held in the USA in the 20th century. Focusing on the issue of food as an expression of ethnic identity, the article aims to reveal how Lithuanian emigrants, by organising and participating in ethnic food exhibitions, disseminated and aspired to maintain their ethnic and national identity. The theoretical approach of the research is based on the theories of coexistence of multicultural societies, that is the “melting pot” and a “salad bowl”. The author addresses the following questions: 1. How have world and food fairs developed in the USA? 2. What impressions did the Lithuanian diaspora leave in world and ethnic food fairs? 3. How was identity fostered at Lithuanian exhibitions of “national dishes” during World War II? and 4. What role did ethnic food exhibitions organised by the Lithuanian diaspora play in the construction of identity? The author concludes that exhibitions of “national dishes” organised by Lithuanians brings to light a certain fragmentation of the diaspora in terms of food and ethnic identity.

## Keywords

Lithuanian-Americans, identity, community, ethnic food fairs, Lithuanian food

## Introduction

The historical sources of world's fairs argue, "of all the events in recent history, only wars have had a greater impact on the expression of civilisation than world's fairs" (*Australian World Exposition Project* cited in Makaryk, 2018, p.5.). Lithuania also had a pavilion at the world's fair held in Europe and the USA in the early 20th century, and its participation was greatly supported and encouraged by the Lithuanian diaspora.<sup>1</sup>

The ethnic food fairs, which became popular in America, especially in the late 20th century, and which were intended to show the cultural traits of the multiethnic American population, could be considered a "smaller" version of the world's fairs. Communities by deliberately selecting certain foods that express heritage and ethnicity and reflect unique aspects of their history, highlight the singularity and exceptionality of their culture. According to John McCarry, fairs "allow us as communities to come together and to meet each other face-to-face" (McCarry & Olson, 1997, p.10.). Moreover, at these events, the connection between participants and visitors from the same community helps to avoid divisions and social alienation, and provides a space and an opportunity to foster a sense of community by building and strengthening belonging. The collective preparation of food and the exchange of knowledge on how to cook and eat are instrumental in establishing and maintaining social links between different social groups and generations in the community.

The topic of Lithuanian participation in fairs and exhibitions is an important one in studying the history of Lithuanian emigrants. However, only a small part of the world's fairs in which Lithuania participated have attracted much interest among the researchers. Stasius Michelsonas, a Lithuanian-American historian, reveals the details behind the idea of the Lithuanian-Americans to organise a "Lithuanian section" at the 1900 Paris Exposition (Michelsonas, 1961). The Reverend Jonas Žilinskas (1902), in an album on Lithuania's participation in the same fair, raises the question of the content of the Lithuanian exposition and its proper

---

<sup>1</sup> From the second half of the 19th century to the present day, there have been three waves of emigration from Lithuania. The first wave began with the uprisings of 1831 and 1863 against the Tsarist regime. After the defeat, some of the participants of the uprisings left for the USA, but mass emigration from Lithuania began in 1868. It is estimated that 374 000 blue-collar workers, tradesmen, landless peasants and rural craftsmen came to the USA before the outbreak of WWI (*Lietuviškoji enciklopedija* [*Lithuanian Encyclopaedia*], Vol. 1, 1933) and another 30 869 Lithuanians in 1920–1940 (*Eidintas*, 1993) hoping for a better, easier and more prosperous life. The second wave of emigrants was caused by WWII. In 1941, Lithuanians, having experienced the occupation of communist Russia, with the approaching second Soviet occupation,

arrangement. Remigijus Misiūnas's book *Lietuva pasaulinėje Paryžiaus parodoje 1900 metais* [Lithuania at the 1900 Paris Exposition], (Misiūnas, 2006) is perhaps the most comprehensive and extensive account of Lithuania's participation in the Paris World's Fair. It provides a coherent overview of the history of Lithuanian preparation for and participation in the event, as well as testimonies from contemporaries, archival documents and the publications prepared especially for the exposition. The historian Antanas Kučas analyses the issue of the establishment of the Lithuanian pavilion at the 1939 New York World's Fair (Kučas, 1971). Irena Mikuličienė's study (2019) on the preparation of Lithuanians for this exhibition is also very comprehensive. The author recreates and details the history of the preparation, opening and running of the exhibition and the fate of the exhibits after the event.

Unfortunately, fairs that took place in the USA in the 20th century and exclusively presented Lithuanian history and culture, have not attracted much interest among Lithuanian researchers. Exhibitions of Lithuanian food organised by Lithuanian emigrants have not been more widely studied. Most of the studies cover only the informative reports and testimonies of those who participated published in Lithuanian and American press. According to the researchers, the ethnic products and dishes exhibited in such events highlight the distinctiveness of the nation's culture, and the collective cooking and feasting reveal the spirit of communality of the group. Activities based on ethnic cooking practices support and transmit ideas of identity to younger generations. This article analyses ethnic food fairs in America, focusing on the issue of food as an expression of ethnic identity. It aims to reveal how Lithuanian diaspora, through the organisation of and participation in ethnic food fairs and exhibitions, has promoted and aspired to maintain its ethnic and national identity.

Recent research on food-related events emphasised how local, regional, national and international fairs, festivals and exhibitions reflect and construct people's perceptions of food as part of a culture, indicating ethnic belonging, production and consumption. It is seen from the perspective of event organisers, participants and other interested parties who create and experience the diversity of food cultures. In doing so, various research

---

fled to the West, mainly to Germany and Austria, taking with them only the necessities. It has been estimated that about 60 000 Lithuanians left the country (Šilbajoris, 2001), most of them intellectuals, prominent artists, politicians, academics and writers. In mid-1948, after the US administration passed the Displaced Persons Act, mass emigration to the New World began (Saldukas, 2013). Some Lithuanians stayed in Europe; however, most of them (more than 30 000) moved to the USA. Others went to Canada, Brazil, Argentina and Australia. When Lithuania regained its independence in 1991, a third wave of emigration began.

methods are applied. For example, Elisa Ascione and Christopher Fink draw on ethnographic fieldwork to show how local community food festivals take every day cooking to a higher level of “heritage cuisine” and functions as a form of identity construction (Ascione & Fink, 2021). Matt Comi and Ruth Stamper’s study of an annual community food festival in a small and aging American town in Kansas notes that the food festival serves as a bonding event, helping to maintain a connection between members of the community, becoming a place, which, despite the lack of conventional and everyday spaces, is able to articulate, create, or maintain a sense of neighbourliness and festive traditions (Comi & Stamper, 2021).

In this article, the analysis of ethnic food fairs and exhibitions organised by Lithuanian-Americans applying the “melting pot” (Fox, 2003) and “salad bowl” (Berray, 2019) theories of multicultural societal coexistence as a theoretical approach to the study was performed. In the first decades of the 20th century, the “melting pot” theory was implemented in order to “Americanise” migrants from different countries by introducing them to the civic values of the host country. Later, in the mid-20th century, the “salad bowl” theory emphasized the singularity of individual cultures in order to preserve their distinctive ethnic characteristics. In the context of these theories, which are related to cultural similarities or differences between places and peoples, the article discusses the issues of organising Lithuanian ethnic food fairs and exhibitions in Lithuanian diaspora.

The empirical research was based on quantitative and qualitative content analysis of selected periodical publications. The application of the quantitative content analysis method has highlighted (Neuendorf, 2012) the main trends in the organisation of ethnic fairs, namely their intensity and content. This method also allowed bringing to light how much attention was paid to the presentation of information about the organisation of these fairs in the Lithuanian-American and American press.

Qualitative content analysis, on the other hand, enabled us to identify and analyze the emotional side of the texts, look for hidden meanings and other elements that are relevant to the purpose of the research. The objectives of organising ethnic exhibitions, such as identification of Lithuanian dishes, passing of their preparation practices to younger generations, (Juozelėnaitė, 1945) community attitudes towards these fairs and exhibitions, and changes in the format and content of these events are revealed.

For this research, the articles from the 20th-century Lithuanian-American diaspora and American press were selected. The extensive collection of books and periodicals<sup>2</sup>, accumulated by Lithuanian emigrant Dr. Kazys

---

<sup>2</sup>This collection was donated to the Klaipėda University Library by Dr. Kazys Pemkus. In 1994, the then Rector of the University, Stasys Vaitekūnas, visited the USA, met

Pemkus and currently housed in the Department of Rare Printed Materials of the Klaipėda University Library, provided an opportunity to analyse the periodicals published by the Lithuanian diaspora *de visu*, searching for information about the ethnic fairs in a targeted manner. The American periodicals were searched in the US archive *Newspapers*, by formulating queries using such keywords as “Lithuanian food exhibition,” “Lithuanian food fair,” “Lithuanian food festival,” “International food festival,” and “Lithuanian food.” Due to the extremely large archive, the search was accomplished in stages: using the archive’s search filters, the analysed period was divided into decades. For each decade, the information was searched by repeating the above-mentioned keywords.

A comparative analytical approach to periodicals published in the USA considers the following questions: 1. How did world and ethnic food fairs develop in the USA? 2. What footmark did the Lithuanian diaspora leave on world and ethnic food fairs? 3. How was identity fostered at Lithuanian exhibitions of ‘national dishes’ during World War II (WWII)? and 4. How significant ethnic food and drink fairs organised by the Lithuanian diaspora were for the construction of its national identity?

## A Historiographical Overview of World and Ethnic Food Fairs

The first food fairs can be traced back to Europe, where the Great Exhibition of Products of French Industry was organised in Paris in 1798–1849 to help French producers compete with the British on the international market. Later, in 1851, on the initiative of Queen Victoria’s husband, Prince Albert, the Crystal Palace Exhibition was held in London in an attempt to compete with the French. It was the first modern world cultural and industrial exhibition that later became popular in the 19th century, highlighting the scientific and technological achievements of different countries.

The emergence of world’s fairs in the USA was inspired by the early exhibitions in Europe. Exhibition of the Industry of All Nations, more commonly known as the New York Crystal Palace Exhibition, took place in 1853–1854. In content, it was similar to the one organised in London, but it fell short in terms of the number of participants, thus costing the organisers a financial loss. It is likely that this circumstance was the

---

the collector and was introduced to his archive. The collection, which is versatile and multilingual in content, contains books published in the 16th–19th centuries, as well as other publications and periodicals published between the two world wars, in Soviet Lithuania and in the diaspora. It may be used by the researchers working in various fields.

reason why the organisers hold another exhibition only after more than twenty years, in 1876 in Philadelphia. The success of that exhibition which attracted almost 10 million visitors secured the triumph of the world's fairs in the USA for the next 40 years (Findling, 2018).

The American world's fairs were different from the exhibitions held in Europe. At that time, the US government only provided federal aid for fairs organised in the States and only for US government pavilions and exhibits. In European exhibitions, US participation was based on private initiatives only, whereas European countries were mostly represented at government level. Another attribute that differentiated the European and American exhibitions was that the latter much earlier introduced attractive elements, such as foreign or indigenous "villages", which showed the everyday life of the inhabitants of what were then considered to be "primitive" societies, such as those of Africa, Asia and the South Pacific Islands (Findling, 2018).

Food is one of the many exhibitions offered to visitors at world's fairs. The rise of industry and science has inspired exhibitors to showcase technological innovations that promoted food production efficiency, improved the sanitary environment and enhanced taste appeal. World's fairs provided an opportunity for companies to present new food products, showing the production process from raw material to ready-to-eat product. The comparison of different regional and ethnic food cultures has highlighted gastronomic differences and strengthened the creation of culinary identities (Scholliers & Teughels, 2015).

Alongside the world's fairs that attract millions of visitors, there are also much smaller but not inferior, local food fairs and festivals held in towns or communities, usually focused on trade, religious practices and/or harvest festivals. These events bring the community together to share agricultural achievements, cooking experiences and a sense of togetherness in sharing food. Small, monocultural exhibitions are characterised by a more intimate space and activities based on the local community: traditions of ethnic food produced by residents and local businesses, exhibits created by local organisations and artists, and a program of local performers. These exhibitions support shared values, bring out the experiences of local participants and promote communality.

A chronological analysis of community food fairs in 20th-century America reveals several trends. In the early decades, food fairs aimed at introducing new foods (e.g. breakfast cereal). As the focus fell more and more on separate ingredients of the products, the attention was shifted to new quality foods (e.g. brown rice). The target audience for these fairs were housewives; therefore such events contained plenty of useful tips for

the home, such as how to keep food fresher for longer or how to make it easier to clean a stain on the carpet.

Another trend of early 20th-century food fairs refers to festivals dedicated to a specific dish or product, where different variations of one dish or product were demonstrated and enjoyed. According to the American press, “food festivals which celebrate everything from artichokes to zucchini are the classic American tribute to local products” (*Food Festivals Whet Country’s Appetite*, 1944, p. 16). In these homogeneous food events, a particular product was made into an icon or symbol, in the attempt to brand a region or a city as the “world center” for a particular food item.

Unfortunately, the outbreak of WWII had an impact on food fairs. Their content and the issues raised reflected the moods and concerns of the civilian population at the time. The latter were the result of the food rationing introduced by the US government and put into effect in the spring of 1942,<sup>3</sup> which limited the availability of the necessary products and severely cut the daily diet of the population. The fairs of that period focused on cheap and, above all, complete nutrition for the population, on the representation of the harvests grown in the “Victory gardens,”<sup>4</sup> and on the possibilities of long-term preservation (canning, drying) of vegetables and fruit.

After the end of WWII, in the late 1940s, a different kind of food event sprung up in America. The organisers of these events turned to the individual communities, their ethnic origins and culinary features. One American periodical argued, “the foreign food festival is a great idea, and let us hope that all communities will become part of it” (*Foreign Foods Festival Plans For Fiesta Are Underway*, 1966, p. 1). At these events, participants were encouraged to dress up in national costumes and to decorate their tents with ethnic elements, thus “adding more color” (*Foreign Foods Festival Plans For Fiesta Are Underway*, 1966, p. 1) and highlighting cultural differences. Although food was one of the main attractions at these festivals, the events also featured dance and song groups from various ethnic communities, as well as souvenirs and ethnic merchandise. Such events often drew large crowds, sometimes as many as fifty ethnic communities that lived in the USA, including Lithuanians.

---

<sup>3</sup>Food rationing constituted one of the three parts of the US *Food for Freedom Program* introduced during WWII. The program was based on a points system and limited quantities of food. (*Maistas kovoja už laisvę [Food Fights for Freedom]*, 1943)

<sup>4</sup>To compensate for the shortage of food in the stores and to stock up on canned goods for the troops, the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) encouraged people to start Victory gardens. (*Pažangioji šeimininkė [Progressive Housewife]*, 1945) The population was encouraged to grow fruit and vegetables in the smallest patches of land in family and community gardens, in backyards, on the roofs of high-rise buildings, or even in flowerbeds.

## Lithuanian Diaspora in World and Ethnic Food Fairs

The Lithuanian diaspora was essential in Lithuania's participation in world exhibitions. The idea of Lithuanian participation in the 1900 Paris Exposition originated among Lithuanian-Americans (Misiūnas, 2006). According to one of the theories, the particular person who came up with the idea was Joana Baltrušaitienė, the author of the first Lithuanian cookbook published in the USA, *Valgių gaminimas ir namų prižiūrėjimas* [Cooking and Housekeeping] (1919) (Michelsonas, 1961). It was only at the urging of their fellow countrymen in America that Lithuanians became involved in the organisation of the events. Financial support also came from Lithuanians living in the USA. The majority of the funds needed to set up the Lithuanian exhibitions at the 1900 Paris and 1939 New York exhibitions were raised by donations from private Lithuanian-Americans and their organisations. Thus, the diaspora contributed and helped in every way to promote the name of Lithuania before and during the world's fairs.

The first mention of Lithuania's name in world's fairs was at the 1900 Paris Exposition. Even though Lithuania as a state "did not yet exist on any political map," the decision was made to have a 'Lithuanian section' in Paris (Mikuličienė, 2019). Later, Lithuanians had their exhibitions at the following fairs: the 1925 Paris Exposition, the 1929 Barcelona International Exposition, the Exposition of 1930 in Liege, the Chicago World's Fair of 1933–1934, the Brussels International Exposition of 1935, the 1937 Paris Exposition, and the 1939 New York World's Fair (Vizgirda, 1960). Unfortunately, this tradition was interrupted by the outbreak of WWII in Europe.

The goals of Lithuania's participation in world's fairs had changed. In the first world's fairs, Lithuanians tried to show the world that "on the one hand, Lithuania still exists, and on the other hand, how Russia is trying to destroy it" (Michelsonas, 1961, p. 214). The exhibitions that followed became an important sign of the international presence of the modernising independent state of Lithuania between the two world wars. The Lithuanians used the events to showcase Lithuanian history and culture, the high level of education and economic development, and to create an image of a state that had preserved its deep historical roots and traditions, which would inspire Lithuanians to be proud of their country (Mikuličienė, 2019).

When presenting Lithuania at international exhibitions, the works of fine art, especially of ethnographic nature, were the most popular. Only a small part of the exposition consisted of Lithuanian food products. The 1939 New York World's Fair featured the products of the Lithuanian companies *Maistas and Pienocentras*, mainly canned meat, cheeses and other dairy products. The display of these companies' products at the world's fairs was



considered to be a promotion of their production, so when the Lithuanian government refused to support these companies, they had to prepare the exhibits at their own expense (Mikuličienė, 2019).

In addition to the major world's fairs, Lithuanian diaspora actively promoted its culture in the international ethnic food festivals, Nations of the World, that became popular in the 1940s in the USA. The events were aimed at getting to know better the ethnic communities living in the area, their culture, and traditional dishes. In these local events, unlike the major fairs, the organisers paid a special attention to ethnic food. The opportunity to taste dishes from different countries was highly appreciated by the visitors.

Lithuanians always participated in these events dressed in national costumes. Usually they enriched the table of the world's nations by presenting dumplings, kugel, sausages with sauerkraut, buns with bacon, *grybukai* ("mushroom" cookies), *Napoleonas* cake, and *šakotis* ("tree cake"). In addition to ethnic food, woodwork, amber jewelry, straw gardens, spinning, weaving and other crafts were on display. This cultural exposition was complemented by a program prepared by Lithuanian-American song and dance groups.

Taking part in such events was important for Lithuanians in two ways. Like other nations, they strove to "introduce Americans to [their] culture" (Dosti, 1990, p. H48). However, the participation in the fairs was motivated by a far more important desire to "preserve one's ethnic origins and customs" (*Who They Are, What's Served*, 1977, p. 3) or, in the words of the emigrants themselves, "it's important that people celebrate their heritage – even if it's just once a year at the Folk Fair" (Riegert, 1987, p. 9). Thus, events that brought different communities together around the same table were also important for the promotion of Lithuanian identity.

## Presenting the Lithuanian Dishes during WWII

Of all the food- and ethnic-related events organized in the USA in the 20th century, it would be interesting to single out and analyse in more detail the series of exhibitions of "Lithuanian national dishes and drinks"<sup>5</sup> which took place during WWII and differed from the earlier events by focusing exclusively on Lithuanian culture. It was an unprecedented event for the

---

<sup>5</sup>The first "national food and drink" exhibition was organised on Palm Sunday, 25 March 1945, at the parish hall of Nativity of The Blessed Virgin Mary in Chicago's neighborhood Marquette Park. The second one was held on 22 April at the parish hall of St. Anthony Church in Cicero. The third event took place at yet another Chicago's neighborhood, Bridgeport, at St. George's Lithuanian parish hall on 27 May.

diaspora, because “nobody had ever thought that such an exhibition could be organised among Lithuanians.” (*Užkviečiame į Valgių Parodą* [*We Invite You to Food Exhibition*], 1945, p. 5). The Lithuanian-American press announced that “(...) such a novelty is a serious matter. It deserves (our) serious attention. Just as the organisers of the exhibition take the work seriously, so the public must take it seriously” (*Tautinių valgių paroda* [Exhibition of National Dishes], 1945a, p. 4). The special attitude of the organisers of the exhibition is evidenced by at least seven articles in the Lithuanian-American newspaper *Draugas* before the exhibition began, reports in the Lithuanian radio programs, Margučio radijas and Šaltimiera, and the advertising of the event in the Lithuanian churches during the mass.

The event also stood out because of its organising committee. In the following years, Lithuanians participated as guests in the events that emphasised ethnicity, together with other communities living in the USA. However, the organisation of these “national food” exhibitions was entrusted to a Lithuanian agronomy teacher, Salomėja Juozelėnaitė-Šagamogienė,<sup>6</sup> member of the Press Section of the Lithuanian American Roman Catholic Women’s Alliance (hereinafter—LARCWA). Born and raised in Lithuania, Juozelėnaitė-Šagamogienė graduated from the Academy of Agriculture in Dotnuva, for about ten years worked as the headmistress of the girls’ agricultural school in Salaimiestis (Kupiškis district), and later ran a canteen in Klaipėda. She was no stranger to food, to say the least.

The headlines of the publications that appeared in the Lithuanian diaspora press and the invitation issued to Lithuanian housewives, owners of Lithuanian businesses and farms to participate in the exhibitions seemed to imply that the events were to be devoted exclusively to Lithuanian dishes and drinks. However, it was also announced that preference would be given to “national and ancient Lithuanian dishes and drinks, but innovative Lithuanian, European-style, and American well-prepared food will also be considered” (*Lietuvių tautinių valgių paroda!* [Exhibition of Lithuanian National Dishes!], 1945, p. 5). It can be assumed that as Lithuanians settled in a multicultural environment, their cuisine not

---

<sup>6</sup>Salomėja Juozelėnaitė-Šagamogienė was born in 1893 in the village of Deikiškės, Vabalninkas county, Biržai region. Her sister invited her to visit America, where she met Jonas Šagamoga, a Lithuanian who came to the USA sometime earlier. Salomėja married him and never returned to Lithuania. After WWII, when a new wave of Lithuanian emigrants arrived, Juozelėnaitė-Šagamogienė became involved in Lithuanian activities and was deeply concerned about the fate of Lithuania. Unable to give her savings to Lithuania, where she was educated and lived, she donated generously to the Lithuanian Foundation, Inc. (from 1972 until her death, she and her husband donated \$366,000 to the Foundation), which supported Lithuanian education and culture in the USA. She died on 23 April 1990 in Chicago (Juodvalkis, 1990).

only became enriched with “American” and other food or dishes from other ethnic groups living in the vicinity but also, in a sense, replaced the ingredients of Lithuanian dishes with food that was not typical of the Lithuanian cuisine. In other words, it started to assimilate, or to “melt” (Senulienė, 2021).

The idea of organising exhibitions of “national dishes”, which was part of the activities of the Lithuanian diaspora, had other important goals. In America, charitable activities organised by Lithuanian diaspora were common. Funds were usually raised to support organisations, activities and initiatives in Lithuania and the USA. The exhibitions of “national dishes” were no exception; the money raised during the exhibitions were to be used for the publication of “[...] a serious, well-grounded study – a work in English on the issue of Vilnius and its region” (*Tautinių valgių paroda jau Bridgeporte* [The Exhibition of Ethnic Dishes Has Arrived in Bridgeport], 1945, p. 6).

Beyond this rather pragmatic goal, there were even higher aims. According to the organisers of the exhibition, the exhibitions of “national dishes” were meant to show what kind of food is Lithuanian, as this question had often been raised at various banquets and parties. It was therefore hoped that “when the dishes made by Lithuanian women from different parts of Lithuania are brought in, it will be easier to determine which dishes are purely Lithuanian and which have an international character” (*Tautinių valgių paroda* [Exhibition of National Dishes], 1945a, p. 4). It was also important to display the variety of dishes from different regions of Lithuania, because, as the press noted, “not all of us are familiar with what each region of Lithuania used to eat” (*Užkviečiame į Valgių Parodą* [We Invite You to Food Exhibition], 1945, p. 5). Moreover, according to Juozelėnaitė-Šagamogienė, “(...) it is not right to think that what we have learned in cooking or baking in Lithuania is all Lithuanian. After all, the dishes and cooking methods of Russian, Polish and Western European nations have been intermixed with those of Lithuania for ages. (...) Only Lithuanian rural cuisine has been less affected by foreign influences” (Juozelėnaitė-Šagamogienė, 1945, p. 5). The organisers of the exhibitions were interested in showing “more characteristic Lithuanian dishes and drinks” (*Vis tik tai didelė naujanybė* [It’s a Big Novelty After All], 1945, p. 5) and concerned about preserving the culinary heritage. The Lithuanian dishes exhibited in these events were to serve the younger generations of emigrants “as a sign of the uniqueness of the Lithuanian nation” (Juozelėnaitė, 1945, p. 5) and short instructions on how to cook the Lithuanian way were to ensure the continuity of culinary traditions.

The exhibitions were not only about sharing cooking experience and knowledge but also about introducing cooking innovations. As Juozelėnaitė-

Šagamogienė noted, housewives often make the mistake of thinking “that only they know the right way to prepare this or that dish.” Thanks to the progress of science, “improvements are being introduced from time to time in all domestic life, and old tools and methods of cooking are being put aside” (Juozelėnaitė-Šagamogienė, 1945, p. 5). Therefore, the old traditions of Lithuanian cooking when implemented in a modern environment must inevitably change.

Not only scientific progress but also the scarcity of products caused by the war encouraged Lithuanian housewives to change their cooking practices. Thus, one of the more important goals of the exhibitions – to show how emigrants could adapt to wartime conditions, which was accomplished by focusing on “(...) wholesome products that can substitute meat, adapted for wartime” (Juozelėnaitė, 1945, p. 5). Although the food situation in the USA during the war was not as difficult as in Lithuania, where, as the Lithuanian diaspora press reported, “one could not buy rye bread without a ‘*korčiukė*’ [ration card]” (*Sovietiškos kainos Lietuvoje* [*Soviet Prices in Lithuania*], 1945, p. 1), great importance was attached to the provision of a cheap but adequate diet and to the maintenance of people’s health. The prevailing opinion at the time was that the health of every citizen reflected the health of the nation. If people are healthy and strong, so is the country. For these reasons, nutrition was a matter of particular concern, since the well-being of the individual and, therefore, the survival of the nation depended on what was eaten.

The cheap diet during the war was juxtaposed with the fasting in Lithuania. It was argued that the dishes, which replicated the cuisine of “ancient” Lithuania, where “long and frequent fasting, (...) the lack of meat taught Lithuanian housewives to cook nutritious and tasty meals without meat” (*Vis tik tai didelė naujanybė* [*It’s a Big Novelty After All*], 1945, p. 5) will allow an easier and more nutritious way to survive the period of constraints.

The organisers and the participants of the exhibitions were interested in attracting as many visitors as possible and in presenting their products and dishes in the broadest and best way possible. The visitors could not only look at the food but also taste it. The offer of Lithuanian food was rich and varied. Guests had the opportunity to taste cold and hot beer from the Aukštaitija region, made by the Biržai, Vabalninkai and Pasvalys brewers, Lithuanian *knupnikas* (honey liqueur), liqueurs, mead, and gira, smoked and fresh Lithuanian sausages, hams, roasted piglets, poultry, *skilandis* (matured sausage) from the Suvalkija region, Samogitian *šiupinys* (hash) and *kastinys* (beaten cream dip) with fried potatoes, pancakes, various types of fish, herring, mushrooms and other appetizers. For a desert, the exhibitors served Lithuanian cake *Boba*, fragrant cakes, pies, pastries,

candies, cookies *grybukai*, kissel, puddings, jellies and creams. The abundance and variety of food on offer made an impression that the war did not affect the exhibitors.

The exhibitions tried to show Lithuanian dietary trends, concepts and features, for example, that Lithuanians like and eat a lot of meat (paradoxically, meat was one of the most strictly regulated products in the USA during the war). Exclusive dishes from “ancient” Lithuanian cuisine showcased at the exhibitions in terms of variety and cost, resembled the food of inter-war Lithuanian city dwellers rather than that of rural ones. The articles on exhibitions of Lithuanian dishes did not mention that guests were treated to *cepelinai* (grated potatoes stuffed with meat, cottage cheese or mushrooms), *kugelis* (potato pudding), dumplings or *šaltibarščiai* (cold beet soup) – all of which were very popular dishes among the later second wave of Lithuanian-American emigrants. These dishes became very popular in Lithuania between the wars, but the trend had apparently not yet reached Lithuanian diaspora in the USA.

Although during the war the Lithuanian newspapers paid a lot of attention to the potato – they emphasised its nutritional and energy value, stressed financial benefits for the family, urged people to cook as many dishes using potatoes as possible, the vegetable was considered a symbol of patriotism (*Valgyk daugiau bulvių* [Eat More Potatoes], 1943, p. 3) and even the “food of the national victory” (*Bulvės* [Potatoes], 1943, p. 6) – its place in the exhibitions of Lithuanian dishes was very modest. It was mentioned only in the recipe of *kastinys*. This detail suggests that the first wave of Lithuanian emigrants still perceived the “Lithuanian nature” of their cuisine through historical Lithuanian dishes, and only later was this perception affected by the twisted culinary aesthetics introduced by the Soviet era.

The second exhibition of “national dishes” slightly differed from the first. It dealt not only with practical issues of food production but also looked for aesthetic and entertaining experiences. To this end, there was not only an exposition of Lithuanian food, but also “(...) a demonstration of modern table settings for formal lunches, dinners and coffees.” (*Tautinių valgių ir gėrimų paroda* [Exhibition of National Dishes and Drinks], 1945, p. 5) The exhibition featured lectures on topics that were relevant at the time: How to set the table for breakfast, lunch, and dinner for the household and guests? How to serve and behave at the table at home and at the guests? The lecturers also dealt with the composition of dishes and the most important nutrients, the benefits of fresh vegetables and fruit for the human body. It is very likely that the organisers hoped to attract more interest and more visitors by expanding the content of the events.

The exhibitions received mixed reviews. At the end of the first one, several positive comments appeared in the diaspora press describing the impressions of the event. However, the main organiser of the exhibition, Juozelėnaitė-Šagamogienė, stated, “I was hoping that the exhibition of national dishes would be more appreciated by the general public” (*Ir žiūrėjom, ir valgėm, ir gėrėm* [We Watched, Ate and Drank], 1945, p. 5). The county secretary of the LARCWA, Elzbieta Samienė, noted that the exhibition was “a somewhat mediocre success” (*Ir žiūrėjom, ir valgėm, ir gėrėm*, 1945, p. 5). Despite the negative opinions, it was hoped that the exhibitions of Lithuanian dishes would become traditional, organised annually, so that “Lithuanians could be proud of their national dishes” (*Tautinių valgių paroda* [Exhibition of National Dishes], 1945a, p. 4) and that foreigners would see how “Lithuanian women know how to prepare delicious meals” (*Tautinių valgių paroda* [Exhibition of National Dishes], 1945b, p. 4).

## Discussion

The Lithuanian food exhibitions organised during WWII were special events in their content (only food was showcased) and purpose (they focused on maintaining and passing on Lithuanian identity). Thus, one might ask what factors had contributed to the fact that the exhibitions did not attract much interest from Lithuanians.

This question can be considered from several angles. One of them is the dissemination of information. It was commonly believed that cooking is a women’s activity, and therefore the exhibitions are more likely to be targeted at a female audience. Paradoxically, the women’s magazine, *Moterų dirva* [Women’s Soil]<sup>7</sup> published only one piece of information on one of the three exhibitions that had already taken place. Meanwhile, as many as nineteen news and articles of one kind or another were published in the newspaper *Draugas* [Friend]<sup>8</sup>. This large number of publications in *Draugas* may have been because in 1927–1968, its editor-in-chief was Leonardas Šimutis, the chair of the LARCWA from 1940 to 1948, which women’s section organised the series of exhibitions. It is therefore possible to assume that not only common ideas but also common views of a Christian orientation motivated this large number of publications. Other Lithuanian-American publications, such as the magazine *Margutis*<sup>9</sup>,

<sup>7</sup> *Moterų dirva*: a periodical for Lithuanian women in the USA published in Chicago from 1916 to 1991.

<sup>8</sup> *Draugas*: a Lithuanian-American newspaper published in Chicago since 1909.

<sup>9</sup> *Margutis*: a Lithuanian-American magazine published in Chicago from 1928 to 1965.

which played a very important role in Lithuanian cultural life in the USA, and the newspaper *Dirva*<sup>10</sup> [The Soil] made no mention of the exhibitions. Apparently, the advertisements that appeared in only one of the few Lithuanian diaspora periodicals published in Chicago also contributed to the unusually low number of visitors. Just the same, the news about the Lithuanian food exhibitions in Chicago reached as far as Boston, about 1,500 kilometers away from Chicago. The events were featured in the Lithuanian-American newspaper *Keleivis* [Traveler]<sup>11</sup>.

Another aspect that might have contributed to the low interest of visitors is the highly unfavourable political context. On the one hand, the exhibitions were constrained by the food rationing already discussed earlier and on the other hand, by the “melting pot” theory that prevailed in America in the first decades of the 20th century. The ideas of the “melting pot” were reflected in the processes that took place in the kitchens of Lithuanians and other ethnic groups living in America. The dishes prepared by housewives of different nationalities blended foods, flavours, cooking and consumption practices. It is not surprising that Lithuanians, influenced by this theory, were unwilling to visit the exhibitions offering Lithuanian food.

However, the exhibitions of Lithuanian food became a kind of forerunner of a new theory of multiculturalism, which began to predominate in the USA in the 1950s. The theory, based on the notion of fostering socio-cultural diversity, metaphorically was called a “salad bowl”. Driven by this theory, emigrants arriving in America, while combining their own culture with others, did not merge into a homogeneous society but retain their ethnic features. Although we do not know to what extent the first wave of Lithuanians, long before the “official” rise of this theory in America, understood the value of ethnic food for the promotion of their identity, it is clear that some of the Lithuanians did understand the value of Lithuanian food.

The biblical adage popular in Lithuania, “no prophet is accepted in his hometown” (or “no one is a prophet in their own land”) partly explains the fact that Lithuanians living in the USA showed little interest in their ethnic cuisine. This is what the organiser of the exhibitions, Juozelėnaitė-Šagamogienė, stressed in the press after the series of exhibitions. When summarising the events and discussing the future of the exhibitions of “national dishes” she said, “No one has been a prophet in their own country, and we will not succeed among our own people with our national dishes

---

<sup>10</sup> *Dirva*: a weekly Lithuanian newspaper in the USA published by the Nationalists in Cleveland since 1916.

<sup>11</sup> *Keleivis*: a weekly socialist newspaper published by Lithuanian-Americans in Boston from 1905 to 1979.

either. (...) In order to see what we have (...) and to appreciate it better, one of our organisations should organise an exhibition of national dishes not in a Lithuanian colony but in the center of a large city, by bringing together experienced housewives and commissioning them to prepare individual dishes.” (Juozelėnaitė-Šagamogienė, 1945, p. 5) Apparently, Lithuanians, affected by the ideas of “Americanisation”, appreciated much more the food choices offered by multiethnic America.

Nevertheless, the exhibitions of Lithuanian dishes and drinks can be regarded as a phenomenon in the Lithuanian diaspora, which represented identity and contributed to the construction of Lithuanian self-awareness<sup>12</sup>. Representation bears witness to the present and allows for a better understanding of how a certain group of people sees the present. The same representations are perceived differently by people belonging to different interpretive communities, that is, having different knowledge and experience. Lithuanians who, until relatively recently, walked on Lithuanian soil and tasted Lithuanian bread have one kind of knowledge about Lithuanian food. The younger generations of Lithuanian diaspora, who may only know the taste of Lithuanian food from their parents’ stories, have a different one. Still others are individuals of other ethnic groups who, driven only by superficial curiosity and unbound by any ethnic ties, are interested in yet another ethnic group in multicultural America. These representations should have created a certain understanding for the Lithuanian diaspora that affects the relationship with their own nation and the society around them. The Lithuanians, influenced by the ideas of the “melting pot” and being at the crossroads of “Americanisation”, needed more than ever a signpost to guide them in the direction of fostering their own Lithuanian identity. By using everyday food practices, the organisers of the Lithuanian food exhibitions intended to become just such a signpost.

## Conclusions

The analysis of food exhibitions, fairs and festivals in the 20th-century America underlined certain trends. At the beginning of the century, food-related events could be characterised by an ethnic blend, when no specific ethnic group or dish was singled out. Food was presented as a showpiece to emphasise its qualitative uniqueness or taste appeal and not as part of a culture reflecting the features of one or other ethnic community. The

---

<sup>12</sup> According to Bronislovas Kuzmickas, self-consciousness is an essential aspect of national identity, “a reflection on who we are, who we have been, and who we would like to be” (Kuzmickas, 2009, p. 7).



focus was on the increasing manufacturing of the food industry, economic factors and the promotion of consumerism. It is likely that the ethnic leveling that prevailed at food exhibitions and fairs was a result of the ideas of the “melting pot”, which was dominant in America at the time and which sought to make all ethnic groups uniform. In the second half of the century, under the influence of another theory, “salad bowl”, food events with a different content thrived. They focused on the individual communities, putting them in one single “bowl”, while preserving the ethnic origins and culinary features of each.

Lithuanian diaspora played a significant part in initiating the presentation of the Lithuanian cuisine in world’s fairs. Its full support and financial backing allowed Russian-occupied Lithuania not only to declare of its existence to the world, but also to present a culture with deep historical roots. The mobilisation and participation of Lithuanian diaspora in food exhibitions, fairs and festivals in the USA also bore witness to Lithuania’s presence and deep culinary traditions.

Meanwhile, the exhibitions of Lithuanian “national dishes” organised during WWII revealed a certain fragmentation of the diaspora in terms of food and ethnic identity. Although the first wave of Lithuanian emigrants in the USA did not have particularly high cultural needs, there were those who understood the link between ethnic food and identity and the importance of preserving and passing on Lithuanian culinary traditions to younger generations. Unfortunately, for a large number of emigrants, these exhibitions did not evoke any sentiment and did not gain much interest. On the one hand, this indifference could be attributed to the grim everyday reality of war, where the satisfaction of physiological human needs was much more important than matters of identity. On the other hand, the passivity of the Lithuanian diaspora brought to light the problem of national self-perception and the emerging features of “Americanisation”.

Thus, events based on ethnic food practices, acting as mediators between human and food, provide knowledge or an opportunity to see, be introduced and taste, as well as have the power to emotionally stir and provoke self-reflection of identity. The exhibitions of “national dishes” can be perceived as another medium and an attempt for the Lithuanian diaspora to represent its identity in the multiethnic environment of the USA, to introduce a sense of national consciousness. Although it is difficult to assess the real impact of these exhibitions, one can assume that the efforts of the Lithuanians to present the signs of their own identity to the community as a whole had generated a lot of debate among the diaspora.

## References

- Ascione, E., & Fink, C. (2021). Italian sagra: preserving and re-inventing cultural heritage and community through food festivals in Umbria, Italy. *Food, Culture, & Society*, 24(2), 291–308. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15528014.2021.1873037>
- Baltrušaitienė, J. (1919). *Valgių gaminimas ir namų prižiūrėjimas*. Worcester, Mass.: Amerikos lietuvio.
- Berray, M. (2019). A Critical Literary Review of the Melting Pot and Salad Bowl Assimilation and Integration Theories. *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies*, 6(1), 142–151.
- Biržiška, V. (Ed.). (1933). Amerikos lietuviai. In *Lietuviškoji enciklopedija*, 1. Kaunas: Spaudos fondas.
- Bulvės. (1943, October 6). *Draugas*, 6.
- Comi, M., & Stamper, R. (2021). Chicken noodle night: conviviality, resilience, and food at the Vinland Fair. *Food, Culture & Society*, 24(2), 309–324. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15528014.2021.1873033>
- Dosti, R. (1990, September 20). A Place to Taste Tree Cakes. *The Los Angeles Times*, H48.
- Eidintas, A. (1993). *Lietuvių kolumbai*. Vilnius: Mintis.
- Findling, J. (2018, October 15). World's fair. In *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Retrieved September 25, 2021, from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/worlds-fair>
- Food Festivals Whet Country's Appetite. (1944, July 1). *The Morning Herald*, 16.
- Foreign Foods Festival Plans For Fiesta Are Underway. (1966, September 14). *The Reedley Exponent*, 1.
- Fox, R. (2003). *Food and eating: an anthropological perspective*. Social Issues Research Centre. <https://www.sirc.org/publik/foxfood.pdf>
- Ir žiūrėjom, ir valgėm, ir gėrėm. (1945, March 30). *Draugas*, 5.
- Juodvalkis, A. (1990, July 3). A. A. agronomė Salomėja Juozelėnaitė-Šagamogienė. Stambiausia Lietuvių Fondo rėmėja. *Draugas*, 5.
- Juozelėnaitė, S. (1945, March 9). Apie tautinių valgių-gėrimų parodą. *Draugas*, 5.
- Juozelėnaitė-Šagamogienė, S. (1945, June 8). Dar dėl tautinių valgių parodos. *Draugas*, 5.
- Kučas, A. (Ed.). (1971). *Amerikos lietuvių istorija*. Boston, Mass.: Juozas Kapočius.
- Kuzmickas, B. (2009). *Tautos tapatumo savimonė. Lietuvių savimonės bruožai*. Vilnius: Mykolo Romerio universitetas.
- Lietuvių tautinių valgių paroda! (1945, February 20). *Draugas*, 5.
- Maistas kovoja už laisvę. (1943, November 15). *Draugas*, 4.
- Makaryk, I. (2018). *April in Paris: Theatricality, Modernism, and Politics at the 1925 Art Deco Expo*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- McCarry, J. & Olson, R. (1997). *County Fairs: Where America Meets*. Washington, DC, USA: National Geographic Society.
- Michelsonas, S. (1961). *Lietuvių išeivija Amerikoje (1868-1961)*. South Boston: Keleivis.
- Mikuličienė, I. (2019). *Lietuva 1939 metų Niujorko pasaulinėje parodoje*. Vilnius: Lietuvos nacionalinis muziejus.
- Miller, A. & Brown, J. (2014, June 20). *Lost Ingredients: Kümmel. The Historians*. Retrieved September 25, 2021, from <http://thehistorians-jaredbrown.blogspot.com/2014/06/lost-ingredients-kummel.html>

- Misiūnas, R. (2006). *Lietuva pasaulinėje Paryžiaus parodoje 1900 m.* Vilnius: Versus aureus: Vilniaus universiteto leidykla.
- Neuendorf, K. A. (2002). *The Content Analysis Guidebook.* Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Pažangioji šeiminkė. (1945). *Motery dirva*, 4, 20-23.
- Riegert, K. (1987, November 17). Lithuanian fare featured. *Kenosha News*, 9.
- Saldukas, L. (2013). Tarp Lietuvos ir DP stovyklų: sunki naujo gyvenimo pradžia. *Oikos: lietuvių migracijos ir diasporos studijos*, 1(15), 143-147.
- Scholliers, P., & Teughels, N. (2015). Conclusion: The Multiple, Wide-Ranging and Complex Facets of Food at Larger Exhibition. In N. Teughels & P. Scholliers (Eds.), *A Taste of Progress: Food at International and World Exhibitions in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (pp. 311-315). London, New York: Routledge.
- Senulienė, J. (2021). Amerikos lietuvių tapatybės ir maisto istorinis naratyvas. *Tautosakos darbai*, 61, 195–212. <https://doi.org/10.51554/TD.21.61.09>
- Sovietiškos kainos Lietuvoje. (1945, March 14). *Keleivis*, 1.
- Šilbajoris, A. (2001). Emigracijos bangos. *XXI amžius*, 85(994), 9.
- Tautinių valgių ir gėrimų paroda. (1945, April 19). *Draugas*, 5.
- Tautinių valgių paroda. (1945a., March 24). *Draugas*, 4.
- Tautinių valgių paroda. (1945b.). *Motery dirva*, 4, 4.
- Tautinių valgių paroda jau Bridgeporte. (1945, May 19). *Draugas*, 6.
- Užkviečiame į Valgių Parodą. (1945, March 23). *Draugas*, 5.
- Valgyk daugiau bulvių. (1943, November 27). *Draugas*, 3.
- Vis tik tai didelė naujanybė. (1945, March 16). *Draugas*, 5.
- Vizgirda, V. (1960). Paroda. In *Lietuvių enciklopedija*, 22 (pp. 28-33). Boston: Lietuvių enciklopedijos leidykla.
- Who they are, what's served. (1977, February 26). *Kenosha News*, 3.
- Žilinskis, J. (1902). *Albumas lietuviškos parodos Paryžiuje, 1900 metuose.* Plymouth, Pa.: Spauda „Vienybės lietuvininkų“.

#### Authors' note

Correspondence concerning this article is to be addressed to Jurgita Senulienė,  
email: k.jurgita@gmail.com