

## Cultural Food Practices After a Death

A funeral meal is not just a bite to eat; it's a way of easing the transition from death to life. Traditional food and beverages serve important cultural roles. Ethnic backgrounds and religions have a great impact on the components, quantities, preparation and presentation of post-burial repasts.

Food and drink are one way of strengthening and encouraging those who remain in the face of death. The mercy meal and the company of those who care aid the mourners in transitioning from death to life, from grief and sorrow into community and hope.

There are so many different practices worldwide. I will attempt to cover a few of them here.

### DIFFERENCES AMONG RELIGIONS

#### Judaism:

Immediately upon returning from the cemetery, before the week of Shiva begins, the closest mourners eat a traditional repast of hard-boiled eggs and salt. Eggs represent the regeneration of life while salt stands for absolute incorruptibility.

Shiva is a seven-day period of intense mourning and contemplation of life. During this time, family members and friends provide deli food, fruit and bakery goods. Mourners always sit low while eating.

#### Hinduism:

During the first 24 hours after death, cooking in the household of the deceased is prohibited. Close family members usually fast on that first day.

#### Islam:

Mourners usually give guests halva, a mixture of flour, sugar and saffron, along with tea and dates after they pay their respects.

#### Latter Day Saints:

Funeral potatoes are a traditional Mormon dish. In Utah they are commonly called Mormon Potatoes and are typically accompanied by ham, green beans, salad and rolls.

The casserole generally consists of frozen hash brown potatoes, lots of cheese, condensed cream soup, sour cream, plenty of butter and some onion, topped with crushed potato chips. Frequent consumption of this dish may speed partakers to their own funerals as it's extremely high in fat and cholesterol.

#### Amish

Mourners eat a traditional funeral feast prepared by the female relatives and neighbors. It generally consists of sliced meats, cheeses, vegetables, breads and desserts.

Here's the recipe for a raisin pie the Amish call Funeral Pie. There are many variations, but this one is my own.

## Amish Funeral Pie

### Filling

2 cups raisins	2 tbsp. flour
1 - 3/4 cup water	1 tbsp. cornstarch
1/2 cup light brown sugar	2 tbsp. grated lemon rind
Pinch of salt	1/4 cup lemon juice
1/4 tsp. allspice	9" pie shell

Preheat oven to 400°F.

1. Place raisins and 1 cup water in a medium saucepan and heat until boiling; turn burner off.
2. Mix the sugar, salt, spice, flour and cornstarch; gradually mix in remaining water.
3. Add to raisins in saucepan and cook, stirring constantly, until bubbly.
4. Stir in lemon juice and rind. Remove from heat and let cool until just warm.
5. Pour into pastry-lined 9-inch pie pan. Cover with streusel topping (recipe follows).
6. Place in oven and bake for 25-30 minutes or until golden brown.

### Streusel

1/2 cup all purpose flour	1 tsp. cinnamon
1/3 cup light brown sugar	1/3 cup butter, cut into small pieces
1/4 cup rolled oats	1/4 cup chopped walnuts

1. Combine dry ingredients.
2. Cut in butter with food processor or by hand; work till mixture is crumbly.
3. Stir in nuts.

## DIFFERENCES INTERNATIONALLY

### UNITED STATES

Family and close friends of the deceased frequently gather at the home of a family member for food and fellowship after the burial. In the South, fried chicken and macaroni and cheese are typical fare. In the Midwest, Jell-O salads, potato salads, relish trays and meat and cheese sandwich trays are more common.

Occasionally there will be a reception at the church of the deceased that features sandwiches and finger foods. In some cases, the family chooses to go out to eat at a restaurant.

### Netherlands and Belgium

The Dutch have a tradition of thick cookies made from flour, molasses, eggs and caraway seeds called Funeral Cakes. In olden times, the hosts handed mourners these as they left the service.

After the service, mourners eat plain rolls with butter and slices of cheese, coffee and tea.

### Hungary

A multicourse meal called "the last supper" is traditionally served before the burial. After the funeral, mourners return to the home of the deceased and partake in a full funeral feast. Family and close friends normally serve Funeral Goulash, a rich stew of beef, vegetables and noodles.

### Poland

Traditional funeral food is stypa – bulgar with poppy seeds and honey.

### Germany

After the burial, funeral participants have coffee with biscuits, pastries and sandwiches at a local hostelry.

### Sweden

The funeral meal is simple and sparse, sometimes only offering something to drink such as Glogg, a spiced wine with fruit and almonds. It is a solemn affair and the mourners offer many toasts to the memory of the deceased.

### Turkey

The family provides sesame seed halva and other candies to friends and neighbors.

### Vietnam

Vietnamese believe that a funeral is the most important event in a person's life and food plays a major role. An elaborate feast of typical Vietnamese food begins after the burial.

### China

On the day of the funeral, the family gathers to eat a breakfast of Monks Food. In Chinese restaurants in the United States, this dish is called Buddha's Delight. It is composed of tofu with vegetables and Oriental mushrooms served over rice.

### Japan

Food is usually ordered from a catering service, including a number of specific funeral foods that are essential to make the event proper. After the ceremony, family members and friends eat heartily.

### Greece

Kollyva is a traditional dish served at funerals and memorial services. It is a mixture of boiled wheat kernels with spices and sugar, decorated with nuts and raisins. At the service, close relatives also have bread, biscuits, coffee and wine. They also traditionally abstain from meat for 40 days.

At the 40-day anniversary, a memorial service is performed at the cemetery. After the service, a priest blesses a sweet wheaten pudding that is served to guests along with funeral bread, pastries, candy and vermouth. The mourners invite guests to the home of the deceased for an elaborate meal that includes meat.

### Lebanon

Traditionally, people brought food to the home of the deceased after the burial. Now they more often get together at a restaurant. This is also true in Italy.

Similar to the Jewish Shiva, Orthodox Christian mourners sit at home for three days. Hosts serve visitors water and Turkish black coffee in espresso cups.

### Portugal

Mourners distribute funeral corn or rye bread to guests at the church and cemetery.

## WAKES

The wake is a tradition of feasting and celebration connected with funerals. Although death is a sad occasion, a traditional wake is seldom solemn. Friends and family alike gather and share memories and stories about the deceased. A groaning board of food with a variety of alcoholic beverages is traditional.

### Great Britain

In England, A Funeral Tea is commonly held at a nearby restaurant or at the home of one of the mourners or relatives after the service. Because ham has long been a traditional component of any Funeral Tea, the post-funeral meal is termed as being “buried with ham.”

### Ireland

Mourners hold an immediate post-burial meal in the mourning home or in a restaurant. At the wake which follows, plenty of beer, wine, stout and whiskey are standard fare. The Irish Church tried repeatedly from the 17th to 20th centuries to ban alcohol from wakes, but achieved no success.

At a wake house, the men tend to congregate outside if the weather is good. The women are in the kitchen making tea, sandwiches and washing the dishes. Friends and neighbors bring a cake or a plate of sandwiches to help out as it's typically a busy affair with a constant stream of visitors.

### Scotland

Immediately post-burial, mourners serve cheese, oat biscuits and sometimes shortbread cookies with tea and ale or spirits.

The wake features plenty of liquor and food, including the national dish of haggis, a spiced lamb and oat meat loaf.

### Australia and New Zealand

As former British colonies, these countries follow many of the customs of the mother country, including wakes.

### Jamaica

The wake is called Nine Nights. Family and friends eat, dance and drink rum until midnight each night.

### Thailand

The wake lasts seven days with plentiful food and drink.

### Austria

Mourners provide various kinds of bread, cheese and fruit at the wake along with coffee, schnapps, and wine or beer.

### Haiti

After the burial, family members and friends usually gather at the home of the deceased for a reception, where mourners serve pastries, black coffee, tea and other snack foods.

The wake is carried out at the home of the deceased each night from the day of death until the burial. Attendees socialize, eat, drink, and share jokes.

## Summary

This is an incomplete list of dietary practices related to the death of a loved one. As you can see, there is immense variation among various cultures and religious affiliations as to their view of appropriate practices for aiding the bereaved through this difficult time.

Nowadays in the United States, there is a growing openness to doing what those closest to the deceased prefer. Some find comfort in the communal atmosphere of a wake while others prefer greater solitude and contemplation.

Bereavement Services at Haven Hospice offers grief counseling for those going through this difficult transitional time. We are available to help those who have suffered loss, no matter how long ago it may have occurred. Skilled counselors are here to help those who grieve find resolution and healing.

## Resources

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