

Romanian Cuisine: Culinary Habits and Local Produce

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Abstract

From beach holidays at the Black Sea Coast, to viewing rare birds at the Danube Delta, to snow skiing or soaking in curative mineral waters in mountainous Transylvania and Bucovina, Romania's physical features offer a multitude of attractions for tourists. Gastronomy has always had a very important role in bringing cultures together. Romania has an important background of traditional food products, as well as the authentic way of preparing them. Focusing on the local gastronomy, although not exhaustive this article aims to offer a clear and impartial description of the regional cuisine and culture to potential tourist.

Keywords: Romanian cuisine, food habits, traditional food, gastronomy

1. Introduction

One of the most defining elements of a country, region or culture is its cuisine. Food represents a powerful part of the identity of a nation, region or people. Among others, local cuisines greatly contribute to enhancing sustainability in tourism, increasing the authenticity of the destination, strengthening the local economy, providing for the environmentally friendly infrastructure and last but not least raising awareness among tourists regarding the cultural richness of a region [2].

Gastronomy has always had a very important role in bringing cultures together and plays an indispensable role in the promotion of tourism [8]. That is why a cookbook is a very good way to discover a group of people—a real trip through its intimacy and its civilization. And because *hospitality* is maybe the Romanians' most important trait, we should definitely discuss the value of gastronomic tourism in this area [9].

Romania may become, without exception, an important touristic attraction at international level due to the Carpathian Mountains and its untouched nature by time and people, with a unique and beautiful Danube Delta with its particularities and the advantage of the position of the Black Sea. One can add historical areas with medieval cities well-preserved in time, a unique rural space with Orthodox monasteries [5].

Gastronomy or food consumption in its most general sense is one of the integral constituents of the human's life and thus it is the essential and very important condition of all forms of tourism [7]. Culinary tourism is increasingly appreciated worldwide and brings substantial income, thus Romania could also implement a development plan of this kind of tourism. This is possible due to the existence of traditional products, gastronomy and agricultural festivals, agrotourism, that are made in some regions of the country [11].

2. Romanian cuisine

Romania is located in South-Central Europe, north of the Balkan Peninsula, on the northwest shore of the Black Sea, on the Lower course of the Danube.

The earliest written evidence of people living in the territory of present-day Romania, the Getae, comes from Herodotus, in his *Histories book I*. Territories located north of the Danube were inhabited by Dacians, who are considered to have belonged to the Getae tribes, mentioned by Herodotus, that were a branch of Thracian people that inhabited Dacia (corresponding to modern Romania).

The cuisine is influenced by repeated waves of different cultures: the ancient Greeks, with whom Romanians traded, the Romans, who gave the country its name; the Saxons, who settled in southern Transylvania, the Turks, who for centuries dominated Romania, as well as Slavic and Magyar neighbors. All of these influences gradually blended into the varied and delicious Romanian culinary tradition. From Roman times there still exists the simple pie called *plăcintă*, the Turks have brought meat balls (*mititei* - fried meatballs or *perișoare* in a meatballs soup), from the Greeks there is the *musaca*, from the Bulgarians there are a wide variety of vegetable dishes like *zacusca*, from the Austrians there is the *snitel* and the list could continue.

As a result of intercultural exchanges, Romania has developed a variety of food culinary products in its villages. A part of the cultural heritage of a nation is the variety of traditional food, kept unchanged for generation to generation. The countryside is the heart and soul of Romania, where peasant culture remains a strong force and medieval life prevails, as it does nowhere else in Europe. Romanian cuisine can be defined as integer, but if we analyze food structure in terms of varieties, method of cooking, seasoning, and in terms of structure and association between various raw matters, then we observe that there are regional particularities [10]. Romanian cuisine, can be divided based on regional differences (Moldavia, Bucovina, Muntenia, Dobrogea, Transylvania, etc.). Every historical regions of Romania have its own specific in culture and customs, reflected in the folk music, the

architecture of the houses, the traditional costumes and, of course, in local cuisine.



Figure 1. Regions of Romania [13]

Traditional local gastronomy and food production as a reflection of a specific complex of natural but also cultural-historical assumptions offer a possibility of differentiation of destination in the tourism market [7]. Unlike other travel activities and attractions, cuisine is available year-round, any time of day and in any weather.

3. Romanian culinary habits

Romania has a lot of traditional culinary products. Apart from this, the competitive advantage that Romania owns is the way of cooking, old customs, preserved from the ancient times. The products are being offered in many fairs and cultural events in order to gather a large number of visitors, by combining the entertainment with cultural education and food [5].

In accordance with the Romanian culinary habits, the main meals are: breakfast, lunch and dinner. Dishes are made with patience, even though nowadays, the society is inclined to think that getting something done as quickly as possible is the ideal solution. Only by being patient and attentive while cooking, can we be able to maintain a link with what we eat, with the place food comes from and with the way aromas combine [9].

A Christian nation for as long as it has existed, the Romanians use a variety of dishes at every Christian festal occasion, traditional meals are served on holidays such as Christmas, Easter and New Year [6,9].

Moldavian cuisine with its northern part - Bucovina is said to be the most refined of all. The specific of this area is the using of the sour cream at "almost everything" and the famous *poale-n brau* - small pies filled with sweet cheese. The sour cream may be the base ingredient for some tasty sauces and cakes, as well as a very important element who complete the final taste and aspect of some dishes. Is added in the delicious chicken soup, is served with fresh cheese and polenta. Moldavian *tochitura* differs from the same dish made elsewhere in Romania. It is made from pig's liver and kidneys chopped finely, mixed with pieces of lard and fried. When this mixture is fried, a glass of wine, pepper and garlic are added and the whole is simmered for a few minutes. This dish is never served without polenta.

The specific of Dobrogea is the delicious *tripe soup*, noted for its nutritional value, *plachie de crap* (carp cooked with onions and oil), *spitted lamb* and various sorts of fish prepared in a very simple manner and served with garlic sauce. The turkish influence is seen in the specific cakes with walnuts and syrup called *baclava* and *sarailie* and in the turkish coffe, with a strong flavour.

Muntenia region's cuisine is influenced by the French gastronomy. Some particular dishes from Muntenia are: *dried prune stew* or *prune with meat stew*, *pumpkin pie* (notably during winter), *duck with olives* and *goose jelly* or *pork jelly*. *Pork jelly* - is an aspic made from low-grade cuts of pig meat, such as trotters, containing a significant proportion of connective tissue. *Pork jelly* is a popular appetizer serve at Christmas.

The Oltenian cuisine is always seasoned with horseradish, pepper and chilli pepper. Oltenian *sausages* are famous: they are made from equal amounts of beef and pork chopped finely and mixed with garlic, pepper and salt, the paste being then stuffed into sheep casings, then the sausages are smoked.

Maramureș is known for it's small scaled agricultural character. Most villages are agricultural settings where families have their own piece of land, a homestead, a few animals and often an orchard. This means lots of villagers having a very self sufficient way of life, providing

their own families with home grown food and other self produced products [14].

Hungarian types of food that have found their place in the Transylvanian cuisine: *Gulyás*, *Paprikás*, *Vargabéles*, *Szilvágombóc*, *Szabógallér-leves*, *Tojásleves* or even the tasty *Kurtoskalacs*. Pork is by far the favorite meat in Transylvanian cuisine. Some particular dishes are: *cabbage a la Cluj*, *bean soup with smoked meat* and *cabbage rolls (Sarmale)*.

Cabbage a la Cluj- it's a traditional dish that comes from Ardeal, some people know the recipe named as "scattered cabbage rolls" or "layered cabbage in the oven".

The cuisine from Banat is characterized by tasty, fat and nourishing meals. "Ciorba" is soured with lemon, supplemented with cream and seasoned with tarragon. Soups are cooked with home-made noodles, and with "rantas", as well. Home-made noodles are much used for snacks, meals and also for sweets. With home-made noodles, we may cook the well-known "iofca" with cabbage, nuts, milk, poppy; there is also the goulash, which is cooked in most kitchens from Banat [10].

A good range of alcoholic drinks are available (national Romanian drinks), many of them home-made: *Tuica*: a type of brandy made of plums, *Palinca*: a very strong brandy, wines: *Feteasca*, *Grasa de Cotnari*, *Pinot Noir*, *Riesling*, *Chardonnay* from Murfatlar vineyards, local beers: *Ursus*, *Silva*, *Ciuc*.

Each historical region has its specific gastronomy, which has been maintained, completed and enriched in terms of variety and quality through borrowing from the traditions of the other people it contacted or cohabited with [10].

The best way to enjoy a Romanian specialty is in a Romanian dish called "strachina", they are made of burnt clay and richly decorated.



Figure 2. Romanian dish [12]

4. Food and local produce

In what concerns the types of food, in Romania there are a variety of products, even if one can talk about cheese, meat, fish, fruits, chocolate, wine, beer, tea, jams and compotes or other traditional related products [5].

Romania is one of the few countries in Europe where organic fruits and vegetables are widely available at farmers' markets at very affordable prices. Vegetables can be found in both fresh and preserved forms in various dishes, such as: soups, salads and other cooked dishes. Fruits are present in a wide variety of sorts, ranging from the ones that appear throughout summer to those from late autumn. Some fruits are stashed and then consumed throughout winter, while others are preserved and then transformed into: jam, stewed fruits, marmalade, jellies, syrups, etc. [9]. Human nutritional research is continually showing that a well-balanced diet, rich in fruit and vegetables, promotes good health and may reduce the risk of certain diseases [1]. Some herbs (parsley, lovage, dill, savory, celery, basil, caraway) are used to flavor many traditional meals, meat dishes, soups, sour soups (borscht), salads, sauces and pickles. For the food preparation, Romanians use many fats: oil, margarine, butter, grease. For cooking, the mostly used are: oil (87.4%), butter or margarine (5.1%), grease (0.4 %), oil and grease (1.1%) [3], therefore the traditional culinary preferences are for fatty food (Festila, 2013) [4].

Dairy products are obtained as a result of the traditions in some areas, where people have always been concerned about sheep breeding. The sheep milk, cow, buffalo cow or she-goat milk are used for obtained cheese specialties. Romania cuisine also varies per seasons, such as, plenitude of vegetables and fruits in summer and pork based recipes in winter.

Traditional food products have been considered to be a part of our national identity and culture. They are connected to a particular territory or place and their name is connected to their historical trademark.

Smoked bacon - is made from the fat found either in the abdominal area or on the back of a pig. In various regions of the country, bacon is flavored in

various ways with garlic, paprika, pepper and other spices, but the most widely used flavoring method, which also acts as a preserver, is the smoking process

Cabbage rolls - are made of ground meat (usually pork, but also beef, sheep, poultry, or even fish) mixed with rice and other ingredients and rolled into cabbage leaves. In some regions cabbage rolls are served with cooked corn meal and sour cream.

Corn meal with salty cheese and sour cream - "Mămăligă" is the name of a food made from boiled corn meal similar to polenta. Layers of cheese added to the cooked cornmeal and a sour cream topping make this specialty a delicious entrée or side dish.

Smoked sausages - ground meat is pressed into pieces of animal intestine, and then placed in smoke. Traditionally, this delicious specialty is flavored with sweet and hot paprika, salt, garlic and cumin.

„*Caltabosii*” called in some areas and “*calbaji*”, are sausages made from pig offal cooked and grind on the day of sacrificing pig. Is consumed fresh or smoked. If in the composition we add blood (collected in cutting pork, allowed to clot, boiled and grind) we obtain the so-called “*sangerete*”.

Pork feast - is an ancient tradition, involving a thank-you dinner to honor those friends and relatives who helped in processing food obtained from butchering a farm-raised pig. For the feast, the meat, liver, bacon, ribs and hocks of the pig are fried in its own fat.

Greaves with onions - this food is obtained by frying pieces of bacon (its high cholesterol content). Nevertheless, around Christmas many people enjoy some golden colored greaves with some salt and red onions.

Lamb haggis - is a Romanian food traditionally served at Easter referring to the sacrifice of Jesus, the Lamb of God, it is made from lamb liver, rice and eggs.

Rissoles from Moldova - Made mostly in Moldova but in other regions of the country as well, rissoles are fried meatballs made from pork occasionally mixed with sheep meat, beef or poultry, with eggs, dried bread crumbs, garlic, herbs and salt added to it.

Peasant's platter - is always a great success at festive meals. The advantage of this platter is that it is a combination of foods of both animal and vegetable

origin such as feta cheese, the tangy cheese called “burduf”, pork rinds, bacon, greaves, fresh tomatoes and plenty of onions.

Grilled sausages- “Mici” or “mititei” meaning “little ones” are a kind of grilled sausages that usually come in a cylindrical shape, consisting of ground beef, which is often mixed with pork and sheep meat. Garlic, black pepper and hot paprika are used to flavor this tasty food, usually they are served with mustard.

Chicken Soup with Dumplings - is a worldwide cure-all for cold days and also it is very appreciated by the children. This soup doesn't need a lot of ingredients, some fresh vegetables and chicken.

Bean soup with hocks- is one of the core foods in Romanian cuisine, even though there are noticeable differences in the way it is prepared in various regions. In the South, bean soup is prepared with several kinds of vegetables added, in Moldova it is flavored with dill or tarragon, in Transylvania, it is thickened with flour cooked in oil and with sour cream and vinegar.

Tripe soup- there are two common recipes of tripe soup traditional in Romania: one of them is made with sour cream, the other one is served with garlic sauce and vinegar. Besides tripe, which is calf stomach cut into strips, this soup contains carrots, celery roots and beef hocks.

Vegetable soup from Radauti-this food is somewhat similar to tripe soup, except it is made of poultry meat and lots of vegetables, which makes it a lighter version of tripe soup.

Transylvanian vegetable soup with pork- contains tarragon, which, combined with pork, adds a very special flavor to the soup.

Potato goulash with smoked meat - this traditional Transylvanian goulash is very special. It is basically a kind of stew, but the ingredients used confer an interesting flavor to it.

Bean paste with smoked meat- a traditional culinary delicacy originating from Transylvania can't be missing from festive lunches and dinners.

Eggplant pasta- “Zacusca”- is obtained from eggplant, tomatoes and carrots in a complex

process that is based on baking, roasting and boiling.

“Pickles” - are a result of the lactic fermentation of cucumbers, green tomatoes, red peppers, etc. Some other pickles are obtained after adding a special solution based on vinegar and other plants, such as: horseradish, lovage, calamint, pepper or mustard beans.

Cozonac-Sweetbread - to bake a truly delicious sweet bread always represents a challenge. Old experts say that the quality of the flour used is very important, but kneading the dough with a firm hand and baking the bread in a tightly closing oven make a significant difference as well.

Sweet dough figurines - are a dessert baked for a traditional holiday to celebrate the first 40 martyrs of Jesus. In the honor of the martyrs, women from Moldova bake 40 figurines from dough using a recipe resembling that of sweet bread.

Fried dough - is an ancient traditional food in Romania. This delicious dessert is usually filled with sweet cheese and it is sprinkled with powdered sugar.

Vargabeles- noodle cake - the recipe was prepared for the first time in Cluj, in XVIII century by an innkeeper named Varga and the name of the recipe means lining cobbler. It's a pudding with noodles, cottage cheese and eggs.

Papanash with cow cheese and blueberries - is a dessert made from sweet cow cheese, served with marmalade or jam, and powdered sugar, it is very popular in the local restaurants.

5. Conclusions

Romania is one of the European countries with a strong traditional culture, that is still alive, in the same form as the old times. The country has a cuisine influenced by other cultures, whose route somehow intersected with the Romanian culture.

Romanian cuisine can be divided based on regional differences (Moldavia, Bucovina, Muntenia, Dobrogea, Transylvania, etc.). The traditional ways to prepare food it is characteristic for each region of the country.

The developing of the culinary tourism and agro-tourism represents an important step in the promotion of our cultural and historical heritage to the world.

Compliance with Ethics Requirements. Authors declare that they respect the journal's ethics requirements. Authors declare that they have no conflict of interest and all procedures involving human / or animal subjects (if exist) respect the specific regulation and standards.

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