

TRADITIONAL ROMANIAN CULINARY PRACTICES AND THEIR HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE – A REVIEW

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Abstract

Food symbols, along with other important values in different aspects of life, individualize Romanian folk culture in relation to other cultures. Research in the field of traditional Romanian food has increased greatly in last year's resulting in many books, studies and articles that approach the changing complexities of taste and the world of food and its cooking. In this paper are presented the main traditional Romanian culinary practices in the context of their historical and cultural characteristics. Results of the study shown that, Romania is noted for many traditional foods and drinks. Romanian culinary practices are mainly determined by regional distinctions. In last years, because of industrialization, Romanian culinary practices have undergone a general trend of transformation and alignment to the imposed production and distribution standards, society has witnessed undermining of traditional food cultures.

Key words: *culinary practices, cultural aspects, Romanian gastronomy, traditional dishes.*

INTRODUCTION

Romania is a country located in south-central Europe, north of the Balkan Peninsula, in the north-western part of the Black Sea, along the lower Danube River. This geographical location places Romania at a crossroads of Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe (Figure 1), making it a country with a diverse cultural heritage and significant historical importance (Salanță et al., 2015).

The earliest written evidence of inhabitants in present-day Romania, the Getae, is found in Herodotus' Histories, Book I. The territories north of the Danube were inhabited by the Dacians. They are considered part of the Getae tribes mentioned by Herodotus. The Getae were an ancient group that inhabited the regions along the lower Danube River and the areas that are now part of Romania and Bulgaria. The Getae are often mentioned in historical sources alongside the Dacians, with whom they shared many cultural and linguistic traits (Păucean, 2013).



Figure 1. Romania on the Europe map
(<https://www.quora.com/Why-does-Romania-count-as-a-Balkan-country-and-why-does-Hungary-not>)

Gastronomy, defined as "the art or science of eating well", encompasses the study of food and beverage production and preparation, as well as the context in which they are consumed, with attention to natural resources, including water resources (Virsta et al., 2020). Gourmet tourism, according to other authors, involves tourists

purchasing or consuming regional products and beverages, and engaging in food production activities, from agriculture to cooking trainings (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2014; Jeroscenkova et al., 2016). Also, gastronomy has played a crucial role in uniting cultures. Romania boasts a rich heritage of traditional food products and authentic preparation methods. Local cuisines significantly contribute to sustainable tourism by enhancing the authenticity of destinations, boosting the local economy, supporting environmentally friendly infrastructure, and increasing tourist's awareness of a region's cultural richness (Sava & Cleșiu, 2013; Salanță et al., 2015; Dobre & Mocuța, 2022).

Romanian gastronomy throughout its history, highlights the influences of historical aspects, and socio-cultural factors.

Romanian cuisine is notable for its originality and the ingenious combination of traditional peasant recipes (from shepherding and fishing) with Oriental, Polish, Russian, Ukrainian, and French-Austrian-Hungarian influences. It encompasses both everyday meals and festive dishes, including those associated with Christian traditions, such as fasts and feasts. Romania's historical regions, represented by: Moldavia with Bucovina, Transylvania, with Maramureș, Crișana, and Banat, Muntenia, with Oltenia and Dobrogea, boasts a distinct historical, socio-cultural, economic, and gastronomic identity (Simoni, 2017; Simoni et al., 2021).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Gastronomy is a significant aspect of cultural identity and heritage, deeply rooted in the traditions and practices of a region's people. This paper explores how the unique culinary traditions of Romania's ethnographic regions play a vital role in both preserving cultural heritage and fostering economic development. The study is based on comprehensive research of bibliographic sources, including specialty books and papers, as well as publications and information from relevant web pages. The gathered information is thoroughly analyzed and processed to draw pertinent conclusions regarding the economic and cultural importance of gastronomic differences between traditional products of the ethnographic regions in

Romania. However, there are currently no works entirely dedicated to the Romanian history of gastronomy, and this work is an attempt to collect information from various sources.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

History of Romanian Cuisine

The main information is provided by archaeological discoveries: charred seeds, osteological remains, household inventory (ceramics, metal vessels, kitchen utensils) (Jordan, 2013). The diet of the population in Dacia, both in the pre-Roman period and after the arrival of the Romans, included a wide and varied range of foods: cereals, vegetables, fruits, meat, dairy products, wines, and beer. Products could be consumed raw, in case of vegetables and fruits, most of them boiled, such as vegetables, cereals and meat, ground into flour and turned into bread, as in the case of the cereals, roasted and fried, in case of fish and meat (Chelariu, 2023). There are certainly differences in the diet of different social classes. In addition to domestic plants and animals, wild ones were also consumed. Diet is constantly influenced by social status, local customs and traditions, specific foods or animals available in the area, and the intensity of trade relations with other areas. Food, dishes, culinary customs, and recipes of the ancient world are a great fascination for modern people (Voinea et al., 2020).

After the founding of Rome, during the time of Romulus, the cuisine was military, lacking elegance or refinement. After marrying the Sabine women, the Romans remained soldiers during wartime, but in peacetime, they began to cultivate vegetables. Daily food consisted of cereals, pulses, and vegetables (Pop, 2020; Chelariu, 2023).

During the Republican era, the Romans conquered vast territories, especially for their fertile agricultural lands. Greek cuisine had a significant influence on Roman cuisine. By conquering the western Mediterranean, the Romans also took control of trade routes to India and China, introducing spices to Rome.

Roman cuisine gradually abandoned the virtues of rural simplicity, making way for the cosmopolitanism of Imperial Rome (Djuvara, 2016; Florescu, 2022).

Many changes occurred with the advent of Christianity. Roman gastronomy did not collapse due to dietary laws, and the transformation of a culture that had developed over more than a thousand years did not happen overnight. In Christianity, delicacies were considered the path to hell and damnation (Djuvara, 2016; Florescu, 2022).

Ancient cuisine was quite varied. Various species of fish were consumed, along with meat (pork, lamb, goat, chicken, duck, goose, pigeon, rabbit, wild boar, partridge, pheasant, deer, roe deer, thrush, snails, bacon, many types of sausages, ham), vegetables (asparagus, beetroot, cabbage, carrots, artichokes, horseradish, onions, leeks, cucumbers, mushrooms and truffles, beans, lupin, lentils, peas, chickpeas), milk, cheese, dairy products, fruits (apples, pears, pomegranates, quinces, plums, blackberries, mulberries, cherries, watermelons and melons, walnuts, hazelnuts, almonds, dates, olives, berries, figs, grapes), cereals (barley, spelt, wheat, millet, oats, rye, rice), the famous puls, and bread (Ghinea & Prisacaru, 2023). The Latin word for cook was "coquus" or "cocus," but "coctor" also appeared. The head cook was called "archimagirus" or "praepositus cocorum," and sometimes "supra cocos" (Ghinea & Prisacaru, 2023).

With the spread of luxurious meals, the popularity of specialized cooks grew. The culinary extravagances of the imperial era allowed cooks to showcase their skills, turning cooking into a true art.

Plautus provides information about the profession of cooking. Pliny, Plautus, and Terentius tell us that professional cooks were hired from the macellum, also known as the "forum coquinum". The characteristics of cooks were often those presented in Greek comedies: boastful, thieving, proud of their profession, and in rivalry with each other. Roman cooks were also boastful, proud of their profession, thieves who took food home and tasted all the ingredients during preparation, lovers of jokes, capable of deceiving with their culinary talents (preparing one type of food to resemble another that was requested by their master but not available), and quarrelsome with other cooks (Mulcahy, 2021).

In the context of ancient Roman cuisine, two vital elements in the cooking process were water

and fire. These foundational resources facilitated a sophisticated culinary culture that greatly influenced subsequent European gastronomic traditions. These aqueducts allowed many Roman houses to be connected to the city's water network, ensuring a consistent flow of running water for kitchens and baths. This innovation not only improved sanitation and daily living conditions but also enabled more efficient and varied cooking practices. In addition, fire was central to Roman cooking, utilized in various forms such as fixed stoves and portable stoves and ovens. The availability of both fixed and portable cooking equipment allowed for a versatile approach to meal preparation, whether at home or during communal gatherings. Some had water vessels and grills to prepare both vegetables and meat. Roman cooks had numerous cooking tools: knives, cutting boards, meat forks, soup spoons, sieves, graters, skewers, nutcrackers, measuring cups, and all sorts of pots and pans (Templeman, 2013). The basic flavors were the ones we know today: sour (lemon, vinegar), salty (salt, brine, various fish sauces), sweet (honey), and bitter. Among these four flavors, sweet was the most common. The bitter flavor was not very popular. Cooks usually tried to mask or soften it. There is a multitude of herbs mentioned in Latin literature, including lovage, cumin, rue, mint, basil, celery, parsley, marjoram, thyme, dill, fennel, anise, bay, myrtle, mustard, poppy, saffron, sage, rosemary, and sesame (Kocevski & Risteski, 2020). The scientific difference between herbs and spices is not clear. The most used spices were pepper, cinnamon, cassia, cardamom, and ginger. Other ingredients used in Roman cuisine included olive oil, animal fats, perfumes, and cheese (Kocevski & Risteski, 2020).

Ensuring a constant and sufficient food supply for armies has always been an important issue. The basic diet during peacetime seems to have included: cereals, bacon, cheese, vegetables, sour wine, with access to salt and olive oil. A certain amount was deducted from the soldiers' pay for these basic foods. A greater variety of foods were available on military calendar holidays. Meat was a constant part of the soldiers' diet, sourced from provincials, acquisitions, hunting, unit vivariums, and sacrifices. Domestic animals, wild game,

poultry, fish, and shellfish were consumed. Milk and cheese were also consumed, as were fruits and nuts. Among vegetables, beans and lentils were the most frequently consumed. All evidence indicates a very good diet for Roman soldiers, both qualitatively and quantitatively (Templeman, 2013; Kocevski & Risteski, 2020).

The gastronomic landscape of Romania is a rich mosaic created by centuries of cultural interactions and historical events. From the introduction of borscht with meat by the Slavs (7th-8th century AD) to the significant influence of Hungarian (12th-13th century), Ottoman, Greek, Arabic, Armenian, and Byzantine culinary traditions (13th to the 19th century), Romanian cuisine reflects a diverse heritage. These influences have not only added to the variety and richness of Romanian food but also helped shape the country's culinary identity, making it a unique and flavorful part of European gastronomy (Smaranda, 2017). During this last period, tomatoes, eggplants, onions, peppers, corn, quince, and melon were introduced and cultivated. Consequently, the Romanian menu was enriched with Turkish dishes (such as meatball "perişoare" soup, meatballs, pilaf, stuffed bell peppers, "kebab," "ciulama," "tuslama," "baklava," "sarailie"), Greek moussaka, and Bulgarian vegetable stews like "zacuscă" and "ghiveci." In the 18th century, Romanian cuisine was further influenced by neighboring ethnic groups: Ukrainians in Maramureş, Lippovans in Northern Dobruja, and Serbians, Austrians, Germans, Hungarians, and Ukrainians in Banat. Following the formation of the Romanian state in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many restaurants featuring fine Western dishes (French, Italian, Austrian) opened in major cities (Simoni, 2017; Nacu, 2021; Raba et al., 2021).

Over the years, Romania's population remained predominantly rural until the latter half of the twentieth century: 88% were rural in 1912, 68% in 1960, 50% in 1985, and 46% today. Throughout history, most Romanians were poor peasants whose livelihoods were primarily rooted in agriculture. This agrarian lifestyle was supplemented by various local activities that were closely tied to the natural environment, including forestry, fishing, hunting, and beekeeping. These activities not only provided

essential resources but also contributed to the cultural and economic fabric of rural communities. The period after 1960 marked a significant transformation in Romania, characterized by industrialization, agricultural mechanization, and urbanization. These changes modernized the food industry, increased agricultural productivity, and led to significant socio-economic shifts. While these developments brought about economic growth and improved living standards, they also introduced new challenges and changes to traditional lifestyles. Prior to this, everything from clothing to food was homemade using agricultural products from local farms (Simoni, 2017).

The gastronomy of Romania is a testament to the country's rich history, diverse geography, and cultural resilience. Shaped by natural factors, historical influences, and socio-economic changes, traditional Romanian cuisine continues to evolve while retaining its unique identity. It serves as a source of pride and connection to the past, offering insights into the cultural fabric of the nation. On the other hand, historically, Romania's division between various empires exposed its people to a variety of cultural traditions, leading them to adopt and adapt numerous dishes from Turkish, Arabic, Greek, Hungarian, Austrian, French, Russian, Jewish, Polish, Serbian, and Italian cuisines. This resulted in a unique culinary tradition characterized by the creative fusion of old peasant recipes. Western cooks began to appear in major cities (Smaranda, 2017; Dumitrache & Nae, 2023).

The traditional gastronomy of Romanian regions

The regional specificities in Romanian cuisine highlight the country's cultural diversity and culinary richness. Despite its size, Romania's various regions offer a wide array of flavors and dishes that reflect historical influences and local ingredients. These culinary traditions not only satisfy the diverse preferences of the population but also serve as a source of cultural pride and identity (Morăraşu & Drugă, 2015; Smaranda, 2017; Dumitrache & Nae, 2023). Exploring the nuances of Romanian cuisine across different regions provides a deeper understanding of the country's vibrant gastronomic heritage. In

Romania, as small as it may be, different regions have their own specificities. The cuisine of Dobrogea or that of the Delta, where fish predominates, differs significantly from that of Transylvania, where pork fat and dishes with roux predominate, or that of the southern regions, based on cornmeal and soups, and broths. The Moldovans also have their specialties, such as "tochitura", "poale-n brau", or "parjoale" (Salanță et al., 2015).

However, it can be said that some dishes are equally popular in all regions, such as polenta, grills, "mititei" (grilled minced meat rolls), pork aspic, stuffed cabbage rolls ("sarmale"), and among pickles, pickled cucumbers and pickled cabbage, not to mention that bread is the staple of the diet in all regions at this time (Teodoroiu, 2015). As the connection between different regions of the country intensifies, numerous dishes that were once specific to a certain area are found throughout Romania. Furthermore, globalization is also felt in gastronomy, with the exchange of recipes and culinary customs between different parts of the world becoming increasingly intense (Sohodoleanu, 2020).

Moldovian Cuisine

Considered by some specialists as the most "elaborate" cuisine in the country, it is characterized by creamy sauces or light sauces, with or without a little flour. Minced meat is preferred in the preparation, and lard is used in many dishes. Renowned are the pies with meat, with mushrooms, with cabbage (cabbage pies), vegetable soups, pumpkin dishes, beans, homemade noodles, chicken or beef, giblet soup (gizzards, livers, wings, heads, feet), etc. (Ghinea & Prisacaru, 2023).

Other Moldovan specialties include "alivenci" (a dish made from polenta and cottage cheese baked in the oven), "tochitura" (made from pork and organs fried in lard), Moldovan meatballs and one of the most appreciated meal, forest mushroom "hribi and opintici" stew. Among desserts, the most famous is the "cozonac" (made from leavened dough with walnut, poppy or Turkish delight filling). Also, we should mention "invartita" (thin pastry sheets sprinkled with nuts and rolled, baked in the oven and syruped), Moldovan "mucenici" (made from sweet bread dough, baked in the oven, coated with honey and sprinkled with nuts), "poale-n

brau" (another sweet bread dough, rolled out and cut into squares, filled with cottage cheese, baked in the oven), and "tocmagei" with nuts (<https://sadova.ro/mancare-sadova-bucovina/>).

The most representative wines produced and consumed in Moldova include: "Grasa de Cotnari", "Galbenă de Odobești", "Feteasca alba", "Feteasca neagră", "Zghihara de Huși", "Frâncușa", "Băbeasca neagră", "Busuioaca de Bohotin" and "Tămâioasa Românească" (Nedelcu, 2017; Petcu C.D. et al., 2019).

Transylvanian Cuisine (including Crișana and Maramureș)

Transylvanian cuisine is strongly influenced by Austro-Hungarian traditions and offers rich and hearty dishes.

Transylvanian cuisine is also characterized by sweet fruit sauces and garnishes, thick sauces bound with plenty of flour, and soups with roux. Sweet paprika is used more here than in other regions (Păucean, 2013).

Pork is predominant in dishes, and lard is frequently used for cooking. Borscht and sour soups are less common, often replaced by soups (broth), and souring is often done with sour milk (yogurt). Among soups, cumin, sorrel, lettuce, bean, or bean pod soups with smoked ribs, beef soup with noodles (lăște), and sausage soup are notable. Renowned sour soups include pork with tarragon and potato soup (Păucean, 2013).

In Maramures, dishes have an „ancestral taste” influenced by Romanians, Saxons and Hungarians. Polenta with cheese (with lard), baked in the oven, and "balmoș" (boiled cornmeal with "jintuială" - the fatty whey from making sweet cheese), Cluj-style cabbage "varza a la Cluj" and larger-sized Transylvanian stuffed cabbage rolls are highly esteemed (Mitu, 2021).

Crișana cuisine is influenced by Hungarian and German culinary traditions, prominently features pork and vegetable dishes. Some notable examples of traditional dishes are pork stew, stuffed peppers, liver dumplings, goulash, vegetable stew and beans with Sausage (Raba et al., 2021). Other specific dishes include Banat-style pork chop, pork roast with fruit sauce (especially sour cherries). Desserts include pancakes with jams or preserves, and in urban areas, "cremes" (cream cakes) and tortes. Related to the drinks, the most popular wines

are: "The White Feteasca", "The Royal Feteasca", "Muscat Ottonel", "Babeasca" and "Feteasca Neagră" (Păucean, 2013).

Muntenian and Oltenian Cuisine

Muntenian cuisine is influenced by French cuisine but also by Turkish cuisine. Generally, it is refined and subtle, reflecting the capital's influence. The dishes highlight the richness and variety of Muntenian cuisine, characterized by robust flavors, hearty ingredients, and traditional cooking techniques that have been passed down through generations (<https://www.romanian-places.com/muntenia-oltenia.html>). In all Muntenian regions, many similar or identical dishes can be found, such as sour soups, broths, grilled roasts, and "mititei" (grilled minced meat rolls).

Among broths, we can mention those made with orach, sorrel, nettles, porcini mushrooms with beans, and the classic meatball broth. Among sour soups, notable ones include the potato soup from Câmpulung, bean soup, pork bone soup, stuffed zucchini soup, and rustic chicken soup. Tomato and lentil soups are also prepared. Salads include eggplant salad, green bean salad with garlic, cucumber salad, and mushroom salad (<https://www.romanian-places.com/muntenia-oltenia.html>).

Various dishes are prepared, including pilafs, stews, and "ciulama" (a creamy dish), with different vegetables or mushrooms, small stuffed cabbage rolls, and a wide range of fish dishes (Danube herring, carp), chicken dishes (with various vegetables), beef, and pork dishes, including various vegetables stuffed with meat (zucchini, eggplants, potatoes). The national vegetable stew ("ghiveci") is also a specialty from the southern part of the country (<https://bucatarianationala.wordpress.com/>)

Oltenian cuisine is characterized by heavily spiced dishes – dominated by hot peppers – and simple culinary operations. Boiling is the most used cooking method. Especially in Oltenia, leek holds a place of honor and is prepared in various forms. Olives are also found in numerous dishes. Desserts include donuts, puddings, and pancakes (<https://www.romanian-places.com/muntenia-oltenia.html>). The wines which are produced in this region of the Romania are: "Feteasca regală", "Băbeasca neagră", Sangiovese,

"Roşioara", "Pinot noir", and "Zaibăr" a local sort considered the pride of Oltenia (Nedelcu, 2017; Smaranda, 2017).

Dobrogea Cuisine

Dobrogea cuisine is based on the natural resources of the area: freshwater and marine fish, particularly tasty lamb, and it is strongly influenced by Oriental cuisine, featuring dishes characterized by the presence of raisins, nuts, and concentrated syrups. A specific culinary method is spit-roasting (Nedelcu, 2017).

Among the soups, notable ones include tripe soup, fish soup (with a creamy consistency, made from various species of small and large fish, the latter served separately with garlic sauce), and carp head soup. The Lipovans, originally from Russia, cook a fisherman's soup called "uha" following old 18th-century Russian recipes. A renowned specialty is the Dobrogean pie (with grated sheep's cheese, wrapped in puff pastry) served with yogurt. Similar are the "merdenele" also prepared with sheep's cheese (Nedelcu, 2017, <https://www.info-delta.ro/retete-culinare-31/>).

Unique to this region are the stuffed cabbage rolls with rice and raisins. Fish dishes are numerous: baked carp, carp stuffed with nuts and raisins, carp with rice, and especially spit-roasted carp, to name a few. Lamb and mutton are prepared in various ways, including lamb drob (a type of haggis), ostropel (a type of stew), ghiveci (vegetable stew), and shashlik (skewered meat), with mutton often baked with a rice garnish.

The most famous sweet dishes are baklava (two layers of nuts sandwiched between three layers of pastry, brushed with butter, baked, and soaked in a fragrant syrup), "sarailii" (similar to baklava), homemade halva, and gingerbread (Nedelcu, 2017).

The wines from Dobrogea are among the best known and appreciated wines in the world and come from the Murfatlar winery, including Chardonnay, Pinot, Riesling and Muscat Ottonel (Nedelcu, 2017).

Trend of Romanian culinary practices

The accelerating global industrialization in recent decades has led to a clear tendency to adapt the food system to production and distribution standards imposed by current

legislation, resulting in the systematic undermining of traditional food cultures everywhere. In addition, the emergence of the concept of "world cuisine", dominated by the rationale of quantity, has led to the supremacy of standardized products and uniformity of taste (Petriani, 2015).

Traditional Romanian culinary practices have also been affected by the changes that have also taken place in our society. Globalization, urbanization, modernization of production and packaging technologies (Petcu, 2014) and migration have profoundly impacted how modern Romanian consumers consume food, leading to significant changes in culinary practices and the emergence of a "world cuisine" (Privitera et al., 2018). Despite this, in Romania, traditional foods continue to garner significant interest, particularly within the context of the growing economic importance of gastronomic rural tourism. This trend underscores a desire to preserve and promote local culinary traditions, which play a pivotal role in attracting tourists and maintaining the cultural identity of different regions (Tanasa, 2014).

However, the adoption by Romanian consumers of the new model of food behavior, with an emphasis on seasonal vegetables and fruits of local origin, on reducing meat consumption and access to sustainable methods of food preparation, while preserving the most representative characteristics of the Romanian ancestral food culture would have the effect of improving consumer health and at the same time protecting the environment (Voinea et al., 2020).

CONCLUSIONS

Romania's culinary history has its origins in pre-Roman times and has undergone a number of cultural influences over the centuries, reflecting the diverse heritage and rich agricultural landscape of the country. From ancient times to the present day, Romanian cuisine has evolved, incorporating elements from various civilizations and neighboring regions.

Romania's regional specificities in cuisine indeed underscore the country's cultural diversity and culinary richness. Each region boasts distinct flavors and dishes, shaped by historical influences and local ingredients,

which together create a vibrant culinary tapestry and embody cultural pride and identity.

New trends in global food culture have also influenced Romanian culinary preferences and practices.

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