

---

## CULINARY HABITS, BETWEEN TRADITION AND CHANGE. CASE STUDY: ROMANIANS IN PARMA, ITALY

Laetitia Casangiu<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1)</sup> The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania

E-mail: laetitia.casangiu@gmail.com

**Please cite this paper as:**

Casangiu, L., 2020. Culinary Habits, Between Tradition and Change. Case Study: Romanians in Parma, Italy. In: R. Pamfilie, V. Dinu, L. Tăchiciu, D. Pleșea, C. Vasiliu eds. *6<sup>th</sup> BASIQ International Conference on New Trends in Sustainable Business and Consumption*. Messina, Italy, 4-6 June 2020. Bucharest: ASE, pp 25-32

---

### Abstract

In this study I will point out the eating habits of Romanians established in the region of Parma, a city with a powerful culinary tradition, recently awarded the title of “Creative City for Gastronomy” by UNESCO. The Romanian community established in this area are the most numerous among all foreign minorities and may be considered a young minority, of first generation, which have developed considerably in the last years. This high-impact phenomenon, both for Romania, their state of origin, and for Italy, the adoptive country, is worth the attention of researchers from more perspectives: linguistic, anthropological, social, economic, and historical. I focused my study on gastronomic features in order to see the progress of food behaviour patterns in a Romanian population who immigrated in an area with a strong vocation in gastronomy. As methods of research, I used the comparative study of specialized publications, completed by the statistical analysis of information resulted after the distribution of a questionnaire and direct interviews.

### Keywords

food, gastronomy, culture, immigration, traditions, culinary habits, migration, ethnicity, culinary.

### JEL Classification

A13, J15

---

### Introduction

Much ink has been spilled lately on cuisine, food habits and gastronomy in the specialized literature, but the term ‘gastronomy’, which represents a linguistic calque from the Greek *gastronymia*, was already introduced in modern languages through a French branch at the beginning of the 19th century, aiming ‘to indicate the art of cuisine, food preparation, manners of presenting and tasting food products’ (Petrini, 2007). In 1825, after a first remark in 1801 in the didactic poem “*La gastronomie ou l’homme des champs à table*”, written by Joseph de Berchoux, the term gastronomy was introduced in the Dictionary of the French Academy.

The most famous definition is the one given by J.A. Brillat Savarin in 1826: „Gastronomy is the intelligent knowledge of whatever concerns man’s nourishment. Its purpose is to watch over his conservation by suggesting the best possible sustenance for him” (Brillat Savarin, 2011-reedited). The French gastronome listed the disciplines which were interacting with this science in that era: natural history, physics, cooking, commerce and political economy, as well as the people involved in food preparation: farmers, viticulturists, fishermen and cooks. The current evolution of society imposes an update of the original definition as ‘a complex and interdisciplinary science which studies food and everything about it’ and ‘which implies and meets food-related knowledge, as material elements - in all its phases - and as a cultural element, traditionally transformed or not, equally changed or not, narrated or analysed more or less scientifically’ (Petrini, 2007). Gastronomy helps us discover the best qualities of food products, making a distinction between basic and accessory foods. (Nistoreanu et al 2013). Food behaviours are influenced by the environment in which the human being lives, their social life, religion, cultural and genetic heritage, by the conditions in which they develop their activities and the time they dedicate to food. (Nistoreanu et al, 2019). Like any other cultural element, culinary habits are situated at the meeting point between tradition (when we talk about knowledge, methods and values inherited from generation to generation) and innovation (when the knowledge, methods and values modify the situation of the human being with respect to the context in which they live, leading to the experimentation of new tastes) (Montanari, 2018).

The language, traditions, beliefs, together with culinary habits, are all part of one’s cultural baggage. All these ‘create the feeling of belongingness or social differentiation and all together transmit the values of the society, being inserted right in the heart of one’s identity-building process’. (Stano, 2015). Nevertheless, the culture is being learnt, it is not being inherited, it is being passed from generation to generation through language and socialization (Helman, 2007).

In this study we intend to observe the food behaviour for a sample of people belonging to the Romanian community in Parma, which is aimed to detect their food tendencies in the context of integrating in a reality of food habits which are sometimes very different from the Romanian ones and which have a marked individuality at the highest level of gastronomy.

The migratory adaptation process to the new reality in which the immigrant must integrate themselves is not linear, but it oscillates between the old habits of the country of provenance and the ones of the new space, which are strong and begin to prevail. Specialized literature indicates more types of behaviours. Usually, ‘first-generation immigrants remain emotionally connected to their culture of origin. They integrate themselves in the new society by adopting some of the values and occupations of the majority culture, but generally they are surrounded by a reference group composed of family and friends of the same ethnicity as themselves’ (Kittler et al., 2012). Other immigrants ‘become bicultural and this happens when the new dominant culture is seen to be complementary and not competitive with the ethnic minority from which the individual is part of. Positive aspects of both cultures are embraced and the individual develops the necessary abilities to operate with both cultures’ (Bookings, 1993). There are also extreme cases, where the immigrants are refractory to the new culture, integrally maintaining the habits of their country of provenance or, in opposite situations, they want to interrupt any connection with the past and invent a new identity (Romania, 2004).

### **The Romanian Community in the Province of Parma**

Historical connections between Romanians and Italians are known to have existed for the last nineteen centuries, from the conquest of Dacia by the Emperor Trajan, in 106 BC. The most important migrating flows are registered in the period between the second half of the 18th century until the onset of the Second World War, when Romania became a country of destination for numerous Italians mainly coming from the regions of Friuli, Trentino, Veneto

and Puglia. Apart from seasonal workers, ten thousand Italians settled in Romania at that time, many of them remaining here after the war started.

After the fall of the Communist regime, following the closure of state factories and the reduction of workplaces, the material situation of many Romanians worsened, the emigration being for them the only suitable solution. In those years, an unprecedented phenomenon in the history of Romanian people came into existence and intensified around year 2000, when the requirement of entrance visas in the countries of the European Union was eliminated for short-term visits. Another important moment was the accession of Romania to the European Union, in 2007, which facilitated the migrating process, Italy being one of the countries preferred by Romanians, who started to establish especially in the most industrialized areas, in the North and Centre parts of the country (Caritas, 2010).

From the statistics provided by the Population Reference Bureau of the Province of Parma, a representative image of the total number of Romanians established on the territory of the Province emerges (the city of Parma and border localities are included). Therefore, on the 1st January 2019, 9.583 Romanians were registered in Parma, out of a population of 452.015 inhabitants.



**Fig. no.1 Foreign citizens residing in Parma in 2019**

Source: <http://www.provincia.parma.it/notizie/cresce-la-popolazione-del-parmense>

### Culinary Tendencies, Between Tradition and Change

Among the main factors which determine the ethnic communities established in another country to maintain their own food habits, by often adopting a common food model, we can list the need of belongingness to a group and the desire to strengthen the feeling of identity (Balma, 2010). The integration process of Romanians in Italy implies numerous aspects, among which those related to their food habits.

In order to see the manner in which the food behaviour of the Romanian community in Parma is evolving, we chose the questionnaire and the direct interview as research instruments, which integrate the information given by specialized literature. The questionnaire, provided between September and October 2019 on the 'Google Questionnaire' platform and in printed form, was filled in by 155 people, a representative sample.

Most of respondents (74%) are female, with ages between 35 and 55 years old, perhaps because they have a greater tendency towards the theme suggested owing to socio-cultural factors. At the question 'How long have you been living in Italy?', most of the answers ranged between 10-15 years (68 people), then for the ranges 15-20 years (41) and 5-10 years (21), while 19 people declared to have been established in Italy for over 20 years and only 6 of them for 1-5 years. Consequently, the sample can be considered to belong to an immigration

of first generation, born and grown up in Romania and established in Italy at adult age. As regards the geographic area of provenance, most of them are from the region of Moldavia (42.5%), followed by Transylvania (19.6%), Muntenia (15%), Dobrogea (8.5%), Bucovina (4.6%), Maramureş (3.9%), Oltenia (3.9%), Banat (1.3%) and Crişana (1.3%).

Such information is also extremely important in defining the food preferences of the Romanians established in this Italian area because many specialities that are effectively regional are indicated by the respondents as Romanian traditional foods (e.g. Radauti soup, which is specific to Moldavia or Bucovina, or creamy chicken stew, a highly appreciated food in Transylvania).

As age, it is situated between 35-55 years. Frequently, family nucleus comprises an adult/adults and one child/children (95 answers), then two adults (42) and one single person (16). Couples are made of Romanians only or are of a mixed nature, with one citizen of other ethnicity, and the children are born in Italy most of the times. The single individuals (over the ages of 50) present a special and very interesting case for our research, as they are mainly part of the professional category of people who take care of elderly Italians and, by the nature of their work, develop their activities inside the Italian houses. Subsequently, they are under a strong Italian influence, and their answers are very close to those which come from mixed families.

In the process of integration in the new social reality of the adoptive country, a complex process is triggered, which is being expressed through language assimilation, norms of conduct, social rules, clothing and behavioural rules. We observe a slow process, not without psychological and affective consequences, but necessary from the desire not to be rejected and, instead feel accepted by the majority population. Frequently, in the process of naturalization, food habits are mostly resistant to changes as they are practiced in domestic spaces, far from the critical eye of the majority community members (Kittler et al., 2012). This concept has already been formulated by the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu who used to sustain that nourishment represents one of the most profound connections with the social-belonging group, being part of our most profound interiority that he called habitus (Boudieu, 1972). The conclusion that immigrants maintain the traditional food and culinary habits unchanged in time may be erroneously drawn. However, studies performed on immigrant groups of second generation demonstrated a new reality: children raised in Italy would rather eat Italian food every day, the same as the food consumed by their Italian peers or which they receive at the canteen of their kindergarten or school. Traditional food will have a marginal space, as it is consumed only during holidays and special events, strictly inside the family or the ethnic group of provenance (Tatarella, 2010; Di Renzo, 2014).

At the question 'how often do you cook Romanian food?' the interviewees answered as follows: daily: 15%, more times a week: 35.9%, once a week: 12.4%, once a month: 2.6%, occasionally 25.5% very rarely (6.5%), and never 1.3%. These results, corroborated with the question about the presence of a person of another ethnicity in the family nucleus (40.3% live together with at least one person of another ethnicity, usually Italian), with various culinary habits), lead to the following interpretations: the people who cook Romanian specialities on rare occasions generally live together with people of another ethnicity and have been established in Italy for many years. From the investigation in the field, which provides more details to the answers in the questionnaires, we found that the people employed by Italian families to provide care to the elderly or to people with health problems, strictly cook what the employers indicate them, that is Italian food, and almost never Romanian food. Italian culinary habits are also adopted on an accelerated basis in mixed families, where the Romanian food has a peripheral place. At the opposite poles are the families exclusively comprising members of Romanian origin, with or without children, who cook Romanian specialities on a daily basis or several times a week. Nevertheless, their food habits have encountered radical changes and we shall observe this aspect comprehensively in the other

questions of the questionnaire, as ‘the tastes are being learnt, determined by the culture of belongingness, as well as by the historical and social context, and not as objective, natural, universal, unchangeable data: they are generated from the capacity of any new member of the community to imitate, reproduce and acquire the gestures they see, the emotional expressions and reactions they notice’ (Carrara, 2013).

The ingredients necessary for the preparation of traditional specialities (sauerkraut for cabbage rolls, bottled or lyophilised borsch, dry dill) or Romanian culinary products (white cheese, sour cream, boxed fish-egg salad, white cheese, smoked pork hock, cold meats) are procured by 63.2% of the respondents from food stores with Romanian products, which become real aggregation points for them to preserve their own traditions and culinary identity (Castellani, 2007). The so-called nostalgic-value products are acquired from here, reminding of the period spent ‘at home’: *cozonac* (Christmas sweet bread), corn snack *Pufuleti*, fruit-flavoured *pufarins*, home-made chocolate, pate, *parizer* sausage, roasted sunflower seeds.

When there were no such stores, similar products could be acquired from stores specialized in Eastern-European ethnic products (Russian, Ukrainian) or original recipes were adapted by using Italian ingredients. Another source of acquiring Romanian ingredients, as indicated by 28.3% of the people interviewed, are families and friends in the country of origin. Another reality is set forth here, tightly connected to the history of immigration and preservation of connections with the people in the home country: we are talking about the famous buses and minibuses used for international transportation of persons and packages. A small percentage (7.2%) consists of those who declare that they do not acquire Romanian ingredients and products, a result which leads us to the answer to a previous question, where the respondents declare to cook Romanian food very rarely or never.

A surprising result is the one regarding the preparation of home-canned vegetables and fruits for winter: in a social and economic system in which one can acquire anything, at any time, 38.4% of those who were interviewed still answered affirmatively. Alberto Capatti and Massimo Montanari, two experts in gastronomy, have dealt with the importance of canned food in the publication ‘*La cucina Italiana, storia di una cultura*’. According to them, there has been a move in time, from the space of primary needs, which were characteristic to a surviving culinary system, when canned food was put in the cellar for the sake of fighting starvation during market crisis or unfavourable meteorological conditions, towards the area of home-made delicacies for the purpose of satisfying the most refined tastes. In this way, we may strongly assert that Romanians in Parma prepare certain canned foods according to ‘home’ recipes, either by habit (‘we used to do it every autumn’) or in the research of an authentic taste for which they haven’t found an equivalent in local cuisine. Among them, we recall the vegetable spread - *zacusca* (eggplant and red pepper spread with or without mushrooms), pickles, sauerkraut, pickled red pepper and red chilli peppers, sweet red peppers stuffed with cabbage. The real problem stems from weather conditions (moisture, average higher temperatures) which do not allow their preservation for a longer period of time (e.g., because of high temperatures, cabbage is pickled faster and preserved in less time).

Religious holidays (Easter and Christmas in particular) are preceded by periods of Lent and Advent, in which the Orthodox Christians (the main religion in Romania) follow a vegan diet with few exceptions: the days when they can eat fish. From those who were interviewed, 45.8% declared to be fasting only when they can do it, mainly before the most important holidays, and 18.3% mentioned to fast in a strict manner, basically during the entire period of restrictions, with no deviations from the foods allowed, while 35.9% declared not to fast at all. The Church plays an important role in ensuring the obedience of religious precepts, contributing to the preservation of faith and, many times, acting like a gathering means for the Romanian community.

As holiday meals (religious holidays, important family events), 72.8% of those who were interviewed prefer to eat Romanian food, and 27.2% Italian food. It has to be mentioned that

Italian culinary specialities are making their way, little by little, among the preferences of Romanians, as they are adopting both local traditions from the region of Parma (*anolini* pasta soup, *spongata* desert) and Italian national ones (salmon, *panettone*, *pandoro*). Therefore, on the tables of Romanians in Italy, whether we talk about mixed couples or not, *sarmale* (cabbage rolls) and Russian salad never lack, together with *cottecchino* or *zampone*, and for Easter, Romanian *cozonac* sweet bread and chocolate eggs, together with *colomba*.

The questionnaire has also included open questions, among which those which were aimed to describe a usual breakfast, lunch and dinner. It is important to highlight, as far as breakfast is concerned, that an important part of those who were interviewed adopted the Italian style, consisting of a coffee or cappuccino and sweet pastry, very few of them maintaining a salty breakfast, specific to Romanian cuisine.

For the usual lunch meal, many Italian specialities have also been introduced, among which pasta, which is most frequently mentioned. Generally, a complete Romanian menu is frequently identified with a normal Sunday in the family or with a holiday. Italian specialities are making their way little by little into the Romanians' habits also because, compared to the Romanian ones, they need less time to be prepared, the ingredients are at hand and many times they cost less, being part of the daily food basket of the majority population.

The element of strength in Romanian cuisine, mentioned on a frequent basis, is *ciorba* (sour soup), in all its variants. Raw, cooked in the oven, roasted or steam-cooked veggies are indicated as garnish for the second meal. This practice represents a contamination with the local Mediterranean cuisine, where the accent is put on a healthy nourishment and vegetable use. In many answers, we find the Romanized Italian term 'verdură' (vegetables). One of the respondents considered important to mention the place where they have lunch (at home or at the workplace), which triggers limited possibilities of choice. Dinner, consumed at home, at the end of a day of work, mainly consists of cheese and tomatoes, salads, roast and garnish, cheese and polenta, in general light Romanian specialities.

Starting from Massimo Montanari's assertion according to which, by consumption, the representative meals of emigrants' food culture stimulates the so-called cultural memory and contributes to transmitting this culture to future generations (Montanari, 2010), we asked our respondents to indicate three meals which they find representative for Romanian cuisine. We received 124 answers which indicated *sarmale* (meat rolls stuffed in grape leaves or cabbage rolls), 98 mentioning sour soup (25 tripe soup and 11 meatball soup), to which we add 12 indicating the borsch (a variant of sourer soup), 8 indicating soups, 21 roasted pork and beef *tochitura*, 16 stews (together with the diminutive variant '*tocănițe*'), 13 aspic, 8 meat roast, 8 Russian salad, 4 eggplant salad, 6 stuffed peppers. Polenta is very popular (29 answers) and can be served with a portion of *sarmale* cabbage rolls, roasted pork and beef *tochitura*, or cheese and sour cream. With reference to dessert, the Christmas *cozonac* (sweet bread) is mentioned in 14 answers, *papanasi* (cheese doughnuts with sour cream and jam) in 8, and pies in 7.

It is interesting to see that some of the respondents indicated their local meals, from their own region of provenance, as Romanian national specialities: Transylvanian cheese polenta, goulash, Radauti soup, chicken paprikas.

In the last section of the questionnaire, the respondents were invited to describe the menu they would prepare for a foreign guest. The answers were different from the ones above, as a selection of proposals was evident and varied depending on their experience and the foreigners' tastes. Besides *sarmale* cabbage rolls, which this time have also gathered the consensus of the majority (91 answers), cold-meats-and-cheese-based starters came forth. Sour soups (44), soups (9) and borsch (4) remain among the preferences, but the number of enthusiasts of roasted pork and beef *tochitura* (only 5), stews (6) and aspic (5) decreases. Meat roast with various garnishes is indicated by 15 respondents; moreover, salads have an important place, with 27 suggestions, both starter-types and those which are served as garnish

(Russian salad 12, eggplant salad 7, roasted peppers salad, fish-egg salad, raw-veggies salad, mashed beans salad, pickles salad). Smoked-meat products are perceived as a Romanian traditional product and appear in 12 answers. As garnish, polenta is indicated 20 times, and fries, variously prepared, 15 times. For dessert, *cozonac* (Christmas sweet bread -7) and *papanashi* (cheese doughnuts - 7) are confirmed, but tarts, cakes, light marbled pound cake or *gomboți* (plum dumplings) also appear. A greater variety of meals and a better care can be noticed in the detailed description of every proposal.

### Conclusions

Romanians established in the region of Parma, Italy, are still maintaining Romanian traditions, this aspect being manifested in a culinary manner, especially when they offer traditional specialities on holiday meals or special occasions to their guests. They represent a precious means of promoting Romanian values outside the country borders, and from an economic perspective they are important receivers and consumers of food products made in Romania. Nevertheless, they are unconsciously facing a slow transformation process, thus assimilating behaviours and habits which are specific to Italian culture and to the region where they were born. This phenomenon can be observed in the preferences they have in choosing the foodstuffs for the main meals of the day, especially for breakfast and lunch, where many of them adopt the Italian style, confirming the theory that the 'culinary identity, just like any other one, is not registered in the gene of a people or in the archaic history of their origins, but it is established along the history, in the daily interaction between people, experience, and different cultures' (Montanari, 2010).

### References

- Bookings, G.K., 1993. Culture, ethnicity, and bicultural competence. Implications for children with chronic illness and disability. *Pediatrics-Official Journal of American Academy of Pediatrics*, 91(5Pt2), pp.1056-1062.
- Bourdieu, P., 2000. *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique: précédé de trois études d'ethnologie kabyle*. points essais. Paris: Ed. du Seuil.
- Brillat-Savarin, J.A., 2011 (reedited). *The physiology of taste, or, Meditations on transcendental gastronomy*. Everyman's Library.
- Capatti, A., Montanari, M. and Editori Laterza, 2014. *La cucina italiana: storia di una cultura*. Roma; Bari: Laterza.
- Caritas Diocesana, Confederația Caritas Romania, 2010. *I romeni in Italia tra rifiuto e accoglienza*. Roma: IDOS, Centro Studi e Ricerche.
- Carrara, L., 2014. *Intorno alla tavola. Cibo da leggere, cibo da mangiare*. Torino: Codice edizioni.
- Chef Kumalé, 2007. *Il mondo a tavola: precetti, riti e cultura*. Torino: Einaudi.
- Di Renzo, E., 2014. *Immigrazione e interculturalità alimentare in Caritas e migranti - migranti, attori di sviluppo, XXIV Rapporto Immigrazione*. [pdf] Available at: <<https://immigration.caritas.it/sites/default/files/2016-09/XXIV%20Rapporto%20Immigrazione%202014.pdf>> [Accessed at 17 February 2020].
- Guigoni, A., 2009. *Antropologia del mangiare e del bere*. 1. ed ed. I colori del mondo. Torrazza Coste <Pavia>: Altravista.
- Helman, C.G., 2007. *Culture, Health and Illness*. Oxford: Hodder Arnold Publication.
- Leonini, L., 2015. Cibo, immigrazione e identità. *Progressus Rivista di Storia Scrittura e Società*, 2(2), pp.92-110.
- Montanari, M., 2018. *Il cibo come cultura*. Bari: Laterza.

- Montanari, M., 2010. *Identità italiana in cucina*. Bari: Laterza.
- Nistoreanu, P., Nistoreanu, B.G. and Nicodim, L., 2019. Typical Aspects of the Traditional Food Behavior within the Romanian Rural Environment. In *News Trends and Opportunities for Central and Eastern European Tourism*. Pennsylvania, USA. IGI Global Business Reference.
- Nistoreanu, P., Dorobanțu, M.R. and Gheorghe, G., 2013. Traditional cuisine, a major factor to help promote Romanian sustainable tourism. *Towaroznawczw Problemy Jakości, Polish Journal of Commodity Science*, 3, pp.24–31.
- Petrini, C., 2007. *Enciclopedia Italiana - VII Appendice*, [online] Available at: <[http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/gastronomia\\_res-5ddcdb6d-9bbf-11e2-9d1b-00271042e8d9\\_%28Enciclopedia-Italiana%29/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/gastronomia_res-5ddcdb6d-9bbf-11e2-9d1b-00271042e8d9_%28Enciclopedia-Italiana%29/)> [Accessed at 4 March 2020].
- Pravettoni, R., n.d. *Il cibo come elemento di identità culturale nel processo migratorio*. [pdf] Available at: <[https://digilander.libero.it/piepatso2/tav\\_int4/cibo-cultura-migrazioni.pdf](https://digilander.libero.it/piepatso2/tav_int4/cibo-cultura-migrazioni.pdf)> [Accessed at 28 February 2020].
- Romania, V., 2004. *Farsi passare per italiani: strategie di mimetismo sociale*. Roma: Carocci.
- Stano, S., 2015. *Cibo e identità culturale = food and cultural identity*.
- Statistica.Parma, n.d. *La popolazione 1.1.2019*. [pdf] Available at: <[http://www.provincia.parma.it/sites/drupal\\_lepida\\_provinciapr/files/Presentazione2019.pdf](http://www.provincia.parma.it/sites/drupal_lepida_provinciapr/files/Presentazione2019.pdf)> [Accessed at 7 April 2020].
- Tatarella, G., 2010. Verso la società multiculturale. L'integrazione delle seconde generazioni di immigrati. *Italies. Littérature - Civilisation - Société*, 14, pp.149–167.