

Gastronomic Dobrudja, Between Identity and Identities

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Abstract:

This paper aims to identify the specific gastronomic dishes of Dobrudja, a historical region in the South-East of Romania. While the previous papers were based on an analysis considering the inhabitants' perspective or from testimonies of foreign travellers who visited this land surrounded by bodies of water, this paper is based on the information obtained by the distribution of a survey which was filled in both by respondents who are very familiar with this region and by respondents who have never lived in Dobrudja. Unfortunately, for the people who do not have a direct connection with Dobrudja, the gastronomic aspect is not adequately known, a more thorough promotion at local, national and international levels being necessary, starting from the elements which are considered representative, and which have been highlighted in this study. Then, the data, which was collected, processed and classified, may be used for registration purposes, at a European level as new traditional and local products such as PDO, PGI or TSG or at national level as "traditional products". Moreover, they may contribute to the development of local tourism by adding ethnical and gastronomical elements to the existing tourism opportunities.

Keywords

culinary, Dobrudja (Dobrogea), food, food identity, gastronomy, multicultural values, traditional food
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Introduction

"Tell me what you eat, and I shall tell you what you are" (Brillat, 1825) is the advice given by a famous aphorism of Brillat Savarin, which entered the common language and can therefore be considered as authentic today as it was two hundred years ago. Nutrition defines all human beings from both an identity and social perspective, it establishes their belonging to a certain group and differentiates them from the others, thus representing a primordial identity factor: "even if the human being can eat anything, or maybe due to this, they do not actually eat everything but they choose what to eat, according to certain criteria related to the economical and nutritional dimension of this gesture, not less than the symbolic values with which nutrition itself is endowed. By these means, food is configured as a decisive element of human identity and one of the most efficient instruments to communicate it" (Montanari, 2018, p. 12). Nutrition, first through the transformation of primary natural products with the use of fire, then by other more elaborated means of cooking and preservation, made the difference between primitive people and animals, or other entities: "Besides conviviality rules and rituals, food itself has had an essential role in establishing human identity. Food, especially meat, differentiated human beings from gods" (Flandrin and Montanari, 1997).

This connection is very complex, "It combines at least two different dimensions. The first runs from the biological to the cultural, from the nutritional function to the symbolic function. The second links

the individual to the collective, the psychological to the social”. (Fischler, 1988) Nutritional lifestyles also indicate the contrary: “one way to establish that a person is not a member of a certain cultural group through diet” (Kittler, Sucher, Nelms, 2012).

As “all nutritional cultures have their own identity which communicates its origins, processes of transformation, economic role propagated in the past and in present days and the social composition of the population” (Seminario internazionale di geografia medica, 2005, p.161), this study aims to highlight some of the identity gastronomic hallmarks of Dobrudja, a region in the South-Eastern part of Europe, consisting of the counties of Tulcea and Constanța. As a historical region, Dobrudja represents an atypical community model, comprising 18 different ethnicities, according to the data from the latest census of 2011. Therefore, the total population of 897,165 inhabitants (213,083 for Tulcea and 684,083 for Constanța) consists of: Romanians, Turks, Tatars, Russians, Ukrainians, Bulgarians, Roma, Greeks, Armenians, Italians, Macedonians, Hungarians, Serbs, Slovaks, Poles, Csango Hungarians, Jews, and Germans. There are also the Aromanians, who were not considered separate from the Romanian population by the census but who, due to their gastronomic habits and specific traditions, may be considered different for the purposes of this paper, thus reaching a total of 19 ethnicities who live together in a very peaceful manner, on the territory between the Danube and the Black Sea.

Research Methods

Simultaneously with reading specialised literature, we chose a survey as our research instrument, which we provided in two phases, between September - October 2020 and March 2021, through the Google Questionnaire platform, which was filled in by approximately 268 people, of which we selected 265 valid surveys, representing a substantial sample for this study.

Contents

Regarding the subject of considering the Dobrudjan nutritional system as “part of the Romanian nutritional system”, Ofelia Văduva, who in her work *Valori identitare în Dobrogea. Hrana care unește și desparte* analysed the common and different aspects of the nutrition of Dobrudjan ethnicities, states that “its elaboration has been performed throughout time, by conjugating the local resources with the inhabitants’ occupations and with a lifestyle characteristic to the multi-ethnic space” (Văduva, 2010, p.18). Reconstructing the evolution of this nutritional system is no easy task: “studying food in the past is becoming more difficult as you go back in time. Documents reveal too little on this aspect, considered unimportant for entire generations. At the same time, considering that each period has brought new elements (and we do not only consider raw materials, but the fact that each generation has brought their own experience and considered the inherited or innovating elements in a different manner)”. (Văduva, id.).

When defining the general framework of a nutritional system, we have to take into account ethnographic, anthropological, sociological and ethnological factors. If within the social structures characterized by a dominant ethnic presence it is simpler to identify and characterise major identity hallmarks, among which there are those related to nutrition, the situation is more complex when referring to multicultural areas, as in the case of Dobrudja. Here, besides the above-mentioned factors, there are social and cultural cohabitation phenomena: “in their cases we have to operate with intercultural and transcultural concepts which mirror the mutual interferences and borrowings, as the acculturation process and the syncretic operational principles shall also activate in case of nutrition, as well as in all other segments of human life” (Știucă, 2013). Thus, Dobrudja is a “sui genesis” model manifesting “a series of convergent points - food universalism” and “Balcanism” - but also many divergent aspects - specific elements dictated from a religious or occupational perspective or originating due to the conservatism of some ethnic groups (Știucă, 2013, nd.).

The nutritional behaviour of every individual has been evolving throughout time, it does not remain static, and an essential role is held by: the place where that individual lives, their social life, religion, cultural inheritance, activity and last but not least, their genetic characteristics (Nistoreanu, 2020).

However, food identities, and identities in general, “are not registered in the genes of a people or in the archaic history of its origins, but have been built along history, in the daily dynamics of dialogue between various people, experiences and cultures (Montanari, 2010).

By the survey provided we tried to find out which is the knowledge level of Dobrudjan gastronomy and its elements of identification. When distributing the online survey, we considered both Dobrudjan inhabitants and residents from other regions of the country. The general situation is as follows: 51,5% declared to have lived for a certain period in Dobrudja, while the rest of 48,9% submitted a negative answer; among those, 56 are currently living abroad.

The age of the respondents, who were mainly women (72,7%), appeared to be determinant in providing certain answers, which indicated a good knowledge of a certain economic and historical context: the majority (41,1%) are aged between 45 and 55 years old, followed by the category of 35-45 years (27,5%), and then of those aged between 25 and 35 years old (12,5%). The category of people aged between 55 and 65 years old comes afterwards, with 4,5% of answers, then the category 15-25 years with 2,6% and finally people over 75 years old with 0,4%. Those aged over 45 years old and living outside Dobruja, have a better knowledge of certain historical brands, such as “Murfatlar”, which frequently appears in the answers, not being familiar with any brands which appeared recently and have reached affirmation in the period after 1989 (year of the Romanian Revolution).

Moreover, the people who spent a period of their lives, or who still live, in one of the localities which are part of the two counties of Constanța and Tulcea and who, therefore, have a closer contact with the Dobrudjan reality, also possess a better knowledge of natural resources, food behaviour of the inhabitants and gastronomic-related traditions.

In this paper, we have selected some of the questions present in the survey and analysed the relative data, while the other fields of the survey shall represent the object of a broader research dedicated to the Dobrudjan gastronomic traditions.

Dobrudja, Identity Hallmarks

The aim of this study is not to give an encyclopaedic definition of the historical region of Dobrudja, which is situated in the South-Eastern part of Romania and comprises the counties of Constanța and Tulcea, but to centralise important elements which outline a local identity and to elaborate a narrative discourse in which we can introduce and present local food traditions and products. For the question “*What do you associate the word “Dobrudja” with?*” 87 respondents indicated “**the sea**”/“**Black Sea**”, which represents more than a water surface, having a strong nostalgic impact related to cultural and personal aspects of each individual’s life. In the close semantic proximity is the word “**seaside**”, which was indicated by 10 persons. These elements, associated with “sun” (10 answers), “**heat**” (3), “**sand**” (2) lead immediately to the idea of “**holidays**” (“a place from my holidays which I miss”).

A conceptual nucleus is placed in the area of the “**Danube Delta**”, mentioned by 30 respondents. Other 10 people associated the area of Dobrudja with the river “**Danube**” and fishing activities. However, this region is also linked to its **cities and towns** (“Tulcea”, “Constanța” and “Techirghiol”), “**mountains**” (10), “steppe” (7), “**lowland**”, “**prairie**”. The land is at times “arid” (2), “typically steppe” (2), with many rock formations, the effect of a climate characterised by “drought” (2) and “wind” (4).

The local multi-ethnic/multicultural presence is extremely relevant in the collective imagination and it was highlighted in 26 responses; we include here other words and expressions which define the same feature: “diversity” (4), “ethnicities” (4), “traditions” (5), “Turks”, “Tartars”, “Lipovan Russians”, “Aromanians”, “the peaceful co-existence of multiple ethnicities”, “with peace between people”, “mix of peoples”.

Dobrudja is a land loaded with history (3) a place which some people call “**home**”/“**residence**” (11), full of affective and nostalgic value: “*place of birth*”, “*city of my youth*”, “*grandmother*”. The old Scythia is also considered the cradle of Christianity in Romania, by the presence of numerous testimonies regarding the missionary activity of “Andrew the Apostle” on this lands.

All considerations are positive: “*the beauty of autumn*”, “*the beautiful Romanian seaside*”, “*the most beautiful women*”, “*overwhelming beauty*”, “*a beautiful region*”, “*joy*” (2).

Out of 265 answers, only 20 respondents characterised Dobrudja with elements related to the field of food and gastronomy. The situation is as follows: 4 people identified “**fish**”, (fish products, especially freshwater fish, but also sea fish, which characterizes many local dishes), 3 mentioned the “**plăcinta pie**” (a dessert enclosed in a layer of pastry with various fillings, the cheese *plăcinta* being specific to this region), 2 persons mentioned the “**baklava**”, and the “**şuberek**”, a Turkish meat pastry. Dobrudja is considered to be the “*granary of Romania*”, “*an area with rich gastronomy*”, with an “*Oriental and Mediterranean cuisine*”, “*having an Oriental aroma*”.

From the analysis of this data, it follows that food, and generally the Dobrudjan gastronomy, does not yet represent a distinctive element in the collective imaginary as powerful as the other ones (sea, seaside, Danube Delta, multiculturalism).

Dobrudjan Gastronomy

It can be said that cuisine is by excellence the place where we can chiefly consider exchanges and influences, more than origins. If a product can be the expression of a territory, its use in a recipe or a menu may almost always be the product of a hybridization (Capatti and Montanari, 2014). This definition is also applied in Dobrudja, where the historical co-existence between the 19 ethnicities has led to the exchange on multiple levels, including the gastronomic one.

From the perspective of raw materials, Dobrudja can be divided in two macro-areas: the one of fish and the one of meat, milk and vegetables dishes (Ştiucă, 2013). In the second area we can include fruit, which is representative for the Dobrudjan food.

“Since the exiled poet Ovid and until nowadays, the Dobrudjan cuisine has been standing on two feet: sheep and fish. Sheep belong to the land, fish to the fresh water of the Danube, or to the salty water of the Black Sea. Flipped by various influences, Tartar, Greek, Turkish, Lipovan Russian or others, these basic meats have brought into existence a variety of dishes which can attract any tourist (Nistor, 2004, p.86).

“Among the most important elements of Dobrudjan-characteristic food, fish stands out (together with other underwater creatures, such as crabs, seashells) as it has been long procured by practising the ancient occupation of fishing, in the villages near the Danube or by exchanging products with fish traders coming by carriages in all of the Dobrudjan villages at the beginning of the 20th century. The continuous practice of fishing throughout time has led to an increase in production and to the commercialization of fish, as throughout history it has been the highlight of the inhabitants’ diet, even in the villages situated far from the Danube, from adjacent lakes or from the Delta” (Văduva, 2010, p.69) The supremacy of fish is also evident from the answers of the survey, when the respondents were required to indicate three traditional Dobrudjan dishes: the word “fish” appears more than 200 times in all the dishes and specialities which were enumerated.

The most frequently specified in the “fish bortsch” (27), written also as “fish broth” (39) or, in its more noble variant, as “*starceak*” (22). “The fish bortsch in the Danube Delta is by far the most complex dish of this region” (Nistor, 2004), a soup where firstly the vegetables are boiled and, at the end, big pieces of fish are added. It is soured with bortsch (sour liquid made of wheat bran, rue or sugar beet fermented in water) or with vinegar. The *starceak*, originally cooked from pieces of Sturgeon, is also a soup, “a mixture of Ukrainian and Romanian cuisine, a slightly variegated - both continental and piscatorial at the same time - but light recipe” (Anton Roman, 2001, p.505). It can also be prepared from other types of white fish, and its taste can be adjusted with cream and vinegar at the end.

The following dish which is considered representative for Dobrudja is the “fish brine” (58): “Appeared on the shore of Danube, in a country especially rich in salt, the brine itself is the expression of poverty and rush: no pots, oils or fine creams” (Anton Roman, 2001, p.241). The recipe is simple: fish baked in salt on the stove, soaked in a simple, spicy sauce, with pepper and parsley.

“Fish Plachi” (26) is another dish which is characteristic for this area “The plachi can be both a festive dish and a day-to-day one. The distinction is made by the type of fish used. [...] It can be made with fish (carp, crucian carp, asp, rudd, and others), onions, tomatoes, peppers, courgette, and any other vegetables which are available (except for root crops). Chopped onion is fried in oil, vegetables are added and boiled until softened, then the tomatoes are added. Everything should be boiled, and finally a sprinkle of salt and the already fried fish added; a lid should cover the pot. In case of fresh fish, it can be boiled or fried separately, after which it is added in the stew. For festive meals, the Plachi does not have too much sauce and is pan-fried, as a day-to-day dish, it becomes a “long soup” prepared in the pot”. (Stroe, Iancu, 2012). Other types of fish follow as answers: “fried anchovy” (5), “mackerel” (5), “filled pickerel” (2), and “fried fish”.

As fish is not accessible all time of the year, people have tried multiple preserving methods. Among these, the following were cited in the survey: “zacusca fish stew” (12), a dish prepared in tomato sauce with vegetables and fish, preserved in the jar, “marinated fish” (4) or the dry and salty fish used for preparing “skordalia” (3).

Although the consumption of seafood from the Black Sea (rapa wheels, mussels, clams) has increased lately, especially in the restaurants on the seaside, it is still not perceived as a local product, this aspect emerging from the very reduced number of answers (only 2): “Romanians eat shellfish, especially as an exotic game, typical for an intellectual holiday on the seaside”. (Anton Roman, 2001, p.211).

“Fish eggs” or roe is a product mentioned by 5 respondents. We consider it to be likely that after the Tulcea pickerel roe salad will be recognized at a European level as PGI, the media will give more attention to this dish and it will become more popular. Besides this, “Deltaica” carp roe salad and “Deltaica” pickerel roe salad have already been registered as traditional products on a national level.

The category of meat dishes brings a product widespread in the entire Balkan area to the fore, which was originally prepared with slight variants in mixing the ingredients, in Greek and Turkish cuisines. This product is the “moussaka”, stated in 39 answers: “Minced lamb and mutton, beef or pork meat is used for Dobrudjan moussaka, which is mixed with eggplant, tomatoes, potatoes and various spices: as other dishes of the region, it is served with cold yoghurt” (Nistor, 2004, p.86).

Special attention needs to be given to a Romanian product widespread in many areas of the country, which is also specific to Dobrudja due to the great number of people of Muslim origin living in this territory. This special product is “pastrami”, made of beef, lamb or mutton meat, indicated by 10 respondents as a local specialty. According to the definition given by the Slow Food Foundation, “pastrami is lamb or mutton smoked meat, well-known and prepared in Romania. The word “pastrami” comes from the Romanian word “to keep”, which means “to preserve”. The term could also derive from the Latin word “pastor” which means “shepherd”. Pastrami was also introduced in the United States of America by the immigrant Romanians of Jewish origin at the beginning of the 19th century” (Slow Food Foundation). According to the travel diary of Evliya Celebi, a Turkish explorer who related about Dobrudja in the mid-18th century, pastrami was made on a Danubian island “where seventy-eighty thousand calves were sacrificed annually. This pastrami took the path to Anatolia, Arabia and Europe”. (Cioroiu, 1984, 209-210). Later on, in 1879, another treatise about the Romanian economy refers to this culinary specialty, which in our opinion deserves to be registered and protected at a European level: “At the beginning of spring, calf traders buy calves from fairs and from the countryside, take them to grazing until autumn comes and bring them to slaughterhouses (*zalhana*). The meat is dried for the purpose of manufacturing hardened meat preserves, which people consume under the name of pastrami” (Obedenare, 1876, p.144). Remaining in the area of meat products, the respondents indicated “sheep meat” (9), “lamb” (5) and “ram” (2).

Dobrudjan “*tochitura*” (36 answers) is a traditional Romanian dish, generally made of pork, with or without adding sausages and organs, fried, with sauce and garlic. It is characteristic for many Romanian areas, as the recipe is slightly different from one region to the other.

From the dowry of two local ethnicities, Turkish and Tartar, the şuberek “fried pie with meat filling” (Chiselev, 2019), found its place in the gastronomic panorama and is considered representative for local cuisine by 42 persons. The Turkish “ghiuDEM” (5), “dry sausage, pressed and very spicy, made of sheep, goat or beef” (Popoiu, Tudor, Anania, 2013) was registered as a traditional product at the

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Administration under the name of “Ghiudem tătăresc Moș Iosif” (Uncle Joseph Tartar Ghiudem). The Turkish “babic” (2), a “raw, dry and pressed salami, made of sheep or beef in equal proportions, highly spicy” (Popoiu, Tudor, Anania, id.), is another product taken over from the Muslim population.

Aromanian indigenous people have left a mark on the Dobrudjan cuisine with products obtained from milk (yoghurt, cheese), filled pies (with cheese, spinach or leek), and with a specialty which has lately become very famous, going from its initial chiefly domestic consumption, inside families, to the public space, leading to a cultural exchange with other local populations. It is the case of “*piperki*” (13), a stew made of peppers, onion, tomatoes and Telemea cheese.

In the field of sweets, the absolute protagonist is the “Dobrudjan pie” (73), a product pending trademark as PGI at a European level, “maybe the most famous Romanian pie” (Anton Roman, 2011, p.300), imported in the old Dacia by the Roman people, who in turn had taken it from Greeks, in the 2nd and 3rd centuries B.C (Nistor, 2004, p.12). Besides the more consecrated recipe, with a salty cheese filling, the pie can also be filled with cheese and dried grapes, “pumpkin” (3), apples.

“Dobrudjan cuisine, standing on two feet, sheep and fish, contains a small annex which should never be forgotten: Turkish sweets”. (Nistor, 2004). Radu Anton Roman considers the baklava as a queen of Oriental, Levantine and Mediterranean sweets and takes into account the fact that it actually belongs to the antique culture, from where it has reached the rest of the world: Arabs, Greeks, Armenians, Turks and Tartars” (Anton Roman, p.286). Out of all respondents, 55 indicated as representative for Dobrudja the “baklava”, and 6 the “sarayli”.

Other specialties indicated are the “Dobrudjan cookies” (4), “breaded apples” - apple slices passed into a paste of milk and flour, then fried- (4), “Dobrudjan *kerdele*” (3) - pies filled with cheese, cream, yoghurt and vegetables.

Unfortunately, 51 persons declared that they do not know any specific Dobrudjan dish, or left a blank space, while 62 persons declared the fact that they do not know any Dobrudjan desert or left a blank space, all these responders belonging to the part of the people who have never lived in Dobrudja.

Dobrudjan Wines

When it comes to Dobrudjan wines, without which any gastronomic discourse is considered incomplete, “Dobrudjan vineyards, favoured by extremely hot summers and by the calcareous and sandy soil of the region, have always had an advantage compared to the rest of the country. Murfatlar wines were mentioned by Ovid, the Roman poet, who noticed that, sometimes, Dobrudjan people used to harden wine by freezing it. Nowadays, Murfatlar produces more white than red varieties, but most of people associate the region with a scented Merlot” (Petrică, 2013).

From the Dobrudjan Annals, which were published on the occasion of the semi-centenary of Romanian independence, we find out that in order to encourage grape growing in Dobrudja, the State introduced two farms at the beginning of the 20th century: one at Isaccea (Tulcea) and the other one at Murfatlar (Constanța). The one at Isaccea had as its main purpose to “produce seeding material, and the one at Murfatlar to experiment and value the calcareous soils in the steppe region by producing superior table wines and to transform them into champagne. For this purpose, special installations were made, obtaining therefore the most satisfying results” (Filipescu, 1928,p.516). Among these, the wine nursery in Murfatlar had “the role to constitute the pivot of developing wine growing in Constanța County and in the entire Dobrudja” (Filipescu, 1928, p.519).

Today, the map of Dobrudjan wineries includes 21 places which are distributed in four great Vineyards: Sarica Niculițel, Istria-Babadag, Murfatlar and Ostrov (Vineyards Romania). Considering the historical resonance of its name, it is not actually a surprise that 155 respondents indicated “Murfatlar” as the main wine trademark. It is followed by “Niculițel” (56), “Rasova” (30), “Ostrov” (23), “Vișoara” (15), “Alira” (19), “Histria” (13), “Vlădoi” (8), “Bogdan” (4), “Clos des Colombes” (4), “Gabai” (4).

As was the case with other questions mentioned above, there are 52 responders who do not know any trademark of Dobrudjan wines.

Conclusions

This paper, which is part of a greater research, highlights some of the Dobrudjan identity hallmarks in the culinary field, on one hand reflecting “the cultural synthesis which was produced throughout time by merging the material accumulations and non-material ones” (Văduva, 2010, p.63), and on the other hand the preservation of specificities belonging to each ethnicity. Unfortunately, for the people who do not have a direct connection with Dobrudja, the gastronomic aspect is not adequately known, a more thorough promotion at local, national and international levels being necessary, starting from the elements which are considered representative, and which have been highlighted in this study. At the same time, local tourism may be varied and intensified by integrating it with the hallmarks of the gastronomic field. The results of this research may also constitute the basis for selecting some traditional food products which could be registered as PDO, PGI or TSG.

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