

# Building a Topic: Food in Romanian Ethnology

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## The Beginnings of Romanian Ethnology and Food Studies

**T**HE LAST decades of the nineteenth century are presented by the historians of Romanian ethnology as the time when the “folklore science was established,”<sup>1</sup> especially with the publication of the first representative collections for various folklore genres and for various regions.<sup>2</sup> A distinctive stage in this process follows the 1890s and lasts until World War I, when several small-town intellectuals take it upon themselves, with truly Benedictine-like personal efforts, to build the synthetic monographs of the main customs and beliefs, in an attempt to offer nationally integrated models for each of them. This is the moment when the first works are published about the main rites of passage in human life, birth, wedding and funeral,<sup>3</sup> volumes about the folk calendar and its moments,<sup>4</sup> collections about daily traditional beliefs and practices,<sup>5</sup> small corpora of legends identified on the basis of various thematic series, as well as studies about clearly defined aspects of traditional life (agriculture, coloring, dances, etc.).

Even if a lot of documentation was involved and a lot of publications appeared in this period, none of these monographs focuses on the study of the Romanians’ traditional food. However, information about nutrition and food is available in other places, differently positioned in the structured models of various traditional practices.

It must be noted, from the very beginning, that the monographs about calendar practices and those about regular customs include tiny sections with scarce reference to food. For example, following the rites of human life, in line with the three monographs by Simion Florea Marian, some chapters are to be mentioned about common meals<sup>6</sup> and the wedding meal,<sup>7</sup> moments which are, nevertheless, mainly presented as a succession of ritual stages, ritualized phrases or texts which are activated in certain contexts and various regions. Somehow compelled by the very name of the entire ceremonial moment, the ethnographer only observes that “the relation with the food served on this occasion depends more on the custom of the village where the wedding is organized,”<sup>8</sup>

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going only as far as to provide an enumeration of dishes to be served at the festive meal: “cake, aspic, noodle soup, *sarmale* and brandy.”<sup>9</sup> A similar approach is used in the sections about birth<sup>10</sup> and God-parenting,<sup>11</sup> the important moments of post-birth ceremonies, or, alternatively, those about koliva,<sup>12</sup> alms<sup>13</sup> and funeral feasts,<sup>14</sup> essential stages in funeral ceremonies. What is concretely left behind by these studies is a list of ceremonial moments which imply the ritual or festive food consumption, the ritual food exchange, the relatively well-structured design of gestures and words defining these moments.

Without having the same accuracy in identifying the moments which imply the ritual or festive food consumption, the studies about calendar practices still identify and select a larger number of examples and sometimes devote short passages to certain dishes. Such examples include the aspic commemoration,<sup>15</sup> candy cane preparation,<sup>16</sup> Dishes Tuesday,<sup>17</sup> St. Theodore’s koliva,<sup>18</sup> hallowed buns,<sup>19</sup> Easter bread,<sup>20</sup> as well as many Christmas bakings.<sup>21</sup> They all gain a place, no matter how marginal, in the calendar holidays described by Simion Florea Marian and, later, by Tudor Pamfile.

Slightly more diverse information about food, dishes and the traditional cuisine, beliefs about serving food or legend-like narratives about certain dishes and their main ingredients can be discovered by literally reading Elena Niculiță-Voronca’s corpus of customs and beliefs.<sup>22</sup> This is a monumental book, full of very heterogeneous information, which is often priceless, even if the structure is not very well defined, because the “mythological order” in which the customs and beliefs are arranged does not follow, in fact, a clear model. Formally, no section of the book refers to food. Still, because Elena Niculiță-Voronca doesn’t mean to insert the corpus she is working with in the predefined pigeonholes of a custom or textual genre, the material is revealing about many topics which were not necessarily of interest at that time. For example, the first reference to food appears in the second text of the collection, a small narrative about the “Genesis”:

*The Devil first turned into a duck and, as a duck, he was floating on water when he met God. This is why people don’t eat a duck’s head. The place where they had their first nest is where Jerusalem is. That is the center of the world.*<sup>23</sup>

A food taboo, the prohibition to eat a duck’s head, rarely mentioned as such in traditional communities, is justified here with a very brief and fragmented narrative about the Genesis and the original seas, about the mythical encounter, both tense and revealing, between God and the Devil, about the center of the world and Christian faith. Despite its obscure character, such a text can open up vast hermeneutical horizons, suggesting that food and the many practices it involves are not, in the traditional universe, marginal things, with merely natural functions doubled by technical components.

Such small narratives, which connect food with the organization of the world, with the gender division of work, or with sacred practices, can be identified in several other passages within the corpus *Datinele și credințele* (Customs and beliefs). For example:

*Wheat was going to church when it met rye. Come, dear neighbor, let’s go to church! You go ahead, I can see the church from here for I’m taller than you! This is why priests only use*

*wheat in their service and rye is not accepted in the church because it was proud and made a mistake.*<sup>24</sup>

*The oven shovel was given by God to the woman when God banished Adam from Paradise. God gave Adam the spade, to work the land, and He gave the woman the spindle and the oven shovel to dress and feed the house.*<sup>25</sup>

However, Elena Niculiță-Voronca sees food as a component of the community's main customs. But, unlike other authors of her time, she also refers to daily meals, including table layout and the protocol of eating with the family or eating in the community. She also frequently remarks on the preparation of various dishes and even provides a few recipes. Some passages are noteworthy as early examples of Romanian food ethnology:

*Cornbread cakes are made during the summer when the cabbage leaves are big. Just as sausages are must-haves for Christmas and Easter bread is a must-have for Easter, one cannot celebrate St. Peter's Day without cornbread cakes. They are made with maize flour, sifted through a thick sieve, mixed with a little wheat flour. The maize flour is scalded in milk, then cream, butter and some sour milk or cheese are added, and the mixture is flavored with finely cut dill, chives and red amaranth; the mixture is poured on the cabbage leaves, which are then baked in the oven. When it's ready, it is served with boiled cream: cornbread cakes, soft cakes!*<sup>26</sup>

*The borsch is made from bran or rye and maize flour etc.; first, it is sprinkled with cold water, then boiling water is added and the mixture is left to leaven on the oven. To make it go sour faster, yeast from the old borsch or leavened dough is added. Hard-working women who start preparing the borsch early in the morning have it ready by the evening; with other women, it takes three days for the borsch to be leavened. But then it's very hot because the borsch goes sour fast but it's no good if it's too soft. When the mixture is poured, you should pull somebody's ears fast and say: Sour borsch! And you should nod, so the dough grows.*<sup>27</sup>

Each of these two texts summarizes the concrete preparation process of a well-known and regionally representative dish. Ingredients are enumerated, the preparation steps are presented in a succession, restrictions and behavior prescriptions are mentioned, allusions are made to various beliefs of the community and finally a stereotypical formula is uttered, which necessarily includes the name of the dish. All these elements make up a genuine comprehensive description *avant la lettre*. The two paragraphs are also suggestive of a certain lack of interest which unfortunately characterized the Romanian food ethnology for a long time, a lack of interest in accuracy, which is vital in descriptions: quantities, qualities, technical recipes, which ensure the successful preparation of the dish.

An important step forward in food ethnology, unfortunately too little known, was made between 1895 and 1903 with the publication of the vast corpus of proverbs by Iuliu A. Zanne.<sup>28</sup> Read from the perspective of presenting local food and gastronomy in relation with other Romanian ethnographic publications at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, the Zanne corpus stands apart, because this

is the only text which bravely selects and names an entire section of folk/traditional culture organized around food.

Zanne proposes a hierarchical arrangement of the folk belief universe, which is reflected through proverbs, in two main sections: the physical nature, on the one hand, and humans as complex creatures, on the other. In terms of anthropological representation, humans are regarded as a concrete, “physical” reality, then as a presence in a social structure, respectively as a locus where knowledge, convictions and feelings occur. Within this hierarchical structure, in Zanne’s view, food and its counterpart, drink, are connected to the anthropological sphere in its natural manifestation. Looking back, it is obviously hard to accept now that a corpus of texts which refer to hospitality as “receiving (someone) with bread and salt,” love as “sharing a bowl of food,” or separation as “no longer eating bread and salt (with someone)” are suggestive of a segment of material life, rather than a social reality. But these texts belong to the early twentieth century, when everything was at the beginning in Romanian folk culture and, respectively, in Romanian food ethnography.

The chapter written around the keywords “food” and “drink,” the seventh, is quite substantial. It contains a vast textual corpus bringing together 1,437 proverbs (between the entries 8,055 and 9,492). More often than not, these proverbs have numerous regional, historical or stylistic variants. The proverbs are arranged according to 360 keywords referring to food, including drinks, of which 301 examples are extensive, while the others are limited to synonymy or to words already presented in other chapters (plants, fruits, animals etc.).

However, for the same period of time, the most structured studies on traditional cuisine belong to the Bukovina school teacher Mihai Lupescu. A diligent collector of information on numerous categories of traditions, Mihai Lupescu obstinately gathered data on Romanian food and cuisine, offering them for publication to the Romanian Academy in 1916. Postponed because of the war, the publication of Lupescu’s monograph, modestly titled *Din bucătăria țăranului roman* (From the kitchen of the Romanian peasant), was returned to the author in the early 1920s, being published only in the year 2000.<sup>29</sup>

Unknown for almost a century and published during an intense revival of interest in the Romanian food ethnology, Mihai Lupescu’s book provides a clearly structured model of the system of food production and consumption, presenting, in turn, the spaces necessary for cooking, the ingredients and utensils of food preparation, and a wide range of dishes. The book presents the types of wood used for various cooking fires (for baking, boiling or smoking), the ingredients used in the kitchen (meat, flour, fat, fish, milk, 42 vegetables, 30 fruits and 27 mushrooms), 188 tools and recipients used in the kitchen, 277 dishes and the most synthetic traditional recipes, as well as 15 drinks and their preparation methods. The book pays careful attention to the overall image, but mainly to details. It describes and systematizes a very vast series of observations, offering a faithful yet nuanced image, showing sensitivity to the transformations engendered by the relations between the Romanians’ traditional rural cuisine and the new city life.

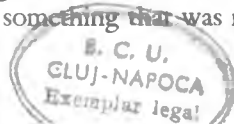
## Interwar “Exercises”

ONCE THE First World War ended and Greater Romania was formed, folklore studies and ethnology studies entered a new stage, primarily oriented towards the monographic restitution of traditional realities from different regions, mainly the ones newly integrated within the Romanian state. Furthermore, the main researchers who led the way in these studies underlined the importance of the scientific aspect of activities undergone in order to gather information on the traditions, understanding that this “scientification” of these activities would provide a more faithful observation of what was happening, concretely, on the field. Thus, the fieldwork of scholars, the reports they wrote, the materials obtained as a result of interacting directly with local people, the careful transcripts of information, became *sine quibus non* elements of research, slowly leaving aside the concerns of previous decades regarding the discussions between the intellectuals of the villages and the few diligent organizers of information in thematic monographs, who had the ambition to create a national synthesis on certain topics.

This important change of paradigm concerning the conception, and even more so, the practice of Romanian ethnology, was not very conducive to the preparation of any studies related to food. At the same time, the choice for other genres of texts, which focused on transmitting information portraying the traditional realities, contributed to delaying other works with a synthetic role in the ethnology of food and/or the Romanian cuisine. Absent before, the monographs about this subject did not appear even during this period. The type of works with synthetic features and ambitions of national relevance, is considered, now, at least, obsolete if not debatable in scientific terms, due to the impossibility of the author to verify the information at the source. On the other hand, the regional monographs, conceived by the coordinators of the Folklore Archive in Cluj, mostly Ion Muşlea, allow for descriptions of species relevant to the area, displaying transcripts of extensive dialects, insisting on certain local particularities, again leaving out the topic of food. As such, it remains to reflect about the causes of this disinterest in the topic: how much can it be motivated by the absence of previous works, which would have confirmed its canonic character, and how much it is seen as a topic of secondary importance, due to the fact that the authors of the first published monographs are young men, with general intellectual preoccupations, mostly avoiding this topic, seeing that any other subject matter would bring them an advantage.

Despite this overall mixture of unfortunate factors, there are some marginally heterogeneous contributions which can be noted, during the interwar period, as more of a sort of “exercise,” difficult to understand within the cultural context they appear in, but which offer, however, continuity to the theme.

Thus, in the year 1937, a short monograph by Artur Gorovei<sup>30</sup> was published, discussing *Ouăle de Paşti* (The Easter eggs), a book that refers to one of the most significant ritual foods in the entire folk calendar. The author prefers to fit his volume within the series of works that concerns itself with folk art, noting that “in October 1928, at the International Congress of Folk Art in Prague, I made a disclosure regarding the decoration of the Easter eggs for Romanians, something that was not yet talked about,”<sup>31</sup>



simultaneously ignoring the potential significations of the culinary traditions that could indicate the marginalization of the theme regarding food in the Romanian ethnology of that period. Alternatively, Gorovei's study mentions "painted eggs" primarily as elements related to the Easter holidays, trying to offer explanations about the ancestry of the practice, about the legends that can be associated, about community games in which Easter eggs are used, or about the folk name of the ornaments. Even the functions of Easter eggs in folk medicine are presented, but not their importance in the act of traditional conviviality and the importance of the festive meal with similar functions.

Only three years later, Ștefania Cristescu-Golopenția's study about the household of Drăguș<sup>32</sup> included a few sequences dedicated to traditional food from the local area. Written after the author's participation in several complex field work campaigns of the Sociology School of Bucharest, the text is important firstly because it shapes the theoretical space that food and the preparation of food occupies in social life, as imagined by sociologists. The actual information about food is, thus, part of a section which talks about "Muncile din gospodărie" (Household labor),<sup>33</sup> which follows the chapters which discuss "Oglindirea tuturor aspectelor gospodăriei și credințelor țărănești în credințele și riturile domestice de ordin magic" (Mirroring all the aspects of a household and the peasant domestic beliefs and magic rites) (cosmological framework, biological framework, psychological framework, and historical framework). Although sparse, the information about nourishments can offer an image about the aspects towards which the attention of sociologists was heading (at the School of Bucharest) when they focus on the following matters: the primary foods are identified (bread, dishes derived from pork, pickled vegetables), beliefs alluding to the production of food are mentioned, as well as the relation between food and people. Every example taken from the field interviews by Ștefania Cristescu-Golopenția can be interpreted as a comprehensive description of an entire set of relationships that allegedly go beyond the act of cooking in the rural Romanian communities from the interwar period. For instance:

*When [they] pickle cabbage, they make sure to put in the tub dill picked from the garden on the day of Sânziene [the fairies' summer festival], without eating beforehand because [they] say the mice are thus kept away.<sup>34</sup>*

*They make sure not to slaughter the pig on new moon eves, because the meat will grow worms. . . . When [he] slaughter[s] the pig, the man must not lie with his woman. [He has to] be clean when [he] lays his hands on the meat, otherwise the meat will grow worms. This is the truth, not a lie. And the woman who works with the freshly cut meat [must] be clean (not to have rows) because the meat will grow worms.<sup>35</sup>*

Examples like the ones given above put food preparation in relation with the folk calendar system, with the rhythms of agricultural work, but also with the mannerisms of everyday life, with sexual life, with belief systems, as well as with the pragmatism of securing the household and providing a certainty of good quality food.

The interest in local dishes assumes, during the interwar period, in a more relaxed form, the shape of the gastronomical essay. The most representative practitioner of this

genre is Al. O. Teodoreanu, also known during the age with the pen-name Păstorel (“Little Shepherd”). In his gastronomy column of the *Adevărul literar și artistic* (The literary and artistic truth) journal (briefly continued after 1945 in *Glasul patriei*/The Voice of the homeland), which dedicated a few memorable pages to certain Romanian dishes, of which it is necessary to mention sweetbread,<sup>36</sup> *sarmale*,<sup>37</sup> Moldavian meatballs,<sup>38</sup> Romanian plum brandy<sup>39</sup> and *mititei*.<sup>40</sup> These texts enable us to retrieve recipes together with direct comments or allusions about the origins of certain ingredients necessary for these dishes, as well as restore the domestic/festive/community atmosphere in which these dishes were made and consumed. Talking about sweetbread for which “150 eggs for 3–4 kg of flour” are needed, about kneading the mixture “for 12 hours,” about particular kinds of meat necessary for each type of food (for example: “beef from the neck or the tail”), Păstorel manages to configure, for the urban public opinion, for which his essays were written, the image of a national cuisine marked by representative, lavish and sophisticated dishes, whose production relies on mastering complicated and elaborate processes. He proposes, thus, starting from a few widespread Romanian dishes, what we could call the first exercise of gastronomy with national specificity.

## Communism: or “Breathless” about Food

**B**ETWEEN TWO major food crises, the Great Famine in Moldavia and Wallachia, in 1946, and the food restrictions imposed after 1982 by Nicolae Ceaușescu, communism in Romania is the period in which ethnological research on cuisine and food finds little scope for manifestation, but their realization becomes extremely sensitive, always on the verge of political unacceptability.

Apart from these significant historical inconveniences, the systematic absence of interest in the study of food can be explained, during communism, by the official efforts to force the population into behavioral practices relying on austerity. One of the most popular slogans during those days went: “We don’t live to eat, we eat to live.” On the other hand, food is not the only topic in this situation during communism. Magic practices, funerals, licentious oral texts were also under the pressure of an unspoken taboo, which was not legalized or regulated, but which was implied and, with very few exceptions, maintained.

An important gap in the formalized silence in the research on traditional food occurs in the middle of the eighth decade, in several stages. At the beginning of the decade, in 1971, when *Ethnologia Europaea* published a thematic issue on food and the architecture needed for its production throughout Europe, Romania was represented by a contribution by Paul Petrescu,<sup>41</sup> which remained focused exclusively on the Saxon architecture in southern Transylvania, without a special interest in the special constructions for food preparation and/or preservation. Later, however, starting with 1972, the general bibliography of ethnography and folklore, one of the most important working tools of the ethnological disciplines in Romania, began to include a separate chapter dedicated to food.<sup>42</sup> The first work described with this keyword is a two-page article on the *fest/*

*bread mould*, published in the *Revista Muzeelor* (Museums Review).<sup>43</sup> Viewed from the present, this classification seems to be related to an intention to open a field of study rather than a real need for cataloging, since a presentation of the *fest/bread mould* could be placed, at any time and with equal ownership, in the better-received sphere of the peasant household ethnography.

The apex of these attempts, to insert the study of traditional food on the map of ethnological concerns in Romania is, however, the publication by Ofelia Văduva, in the most visible scientific journal in the field, of a substantial study on the issue.<sup>44</sup> Deeply innovative for the Romanian space, coherent, well-informed, this first text about food by Ofelia Văduva configures, in my opinion, at least three big questions regarding the studies on the ethnology of food on Romanian soil. It is first of all about emphasizing the importance of this topic in the ethnological sciences as a whole:

*A complex problem, with many implications for the entire structure of society, folk food is limited to all the phenomena that concern the ethnological study of an ethnic group. The research is largely confused with the study of the history of civilization itself, so it has been appreciated as one of the most significant indicators measuring the degree of civilization of an ethnic group; some researchers consider it a key element, with multiple correspondences in the structure of a people's culture; whereas its research provides an opportunity to highlight elements of rich significance for traditional life . . . it is as important as the study of dialectal elements.*<sup>45</sup>

On the other hand, the researcher also notes that “the lack of previous special concerns in this field, in our country, makes the methodological approach difficult.”<sup>46</sup> Thirdly, Ofelia Văduva’s study presents some components of the traditional food system that should be studied: regular food, ceremonial food, culinary utensils, eating habits and beliefs regarding eating.<sup>47</sup>

In an attempt to understand the framework in which it was possible to publish this extremely important text for the emergence of food ethnology in Romania, I will briefly outline the disciplinary and historical context, respectively a generic context. In the first sense, it should be noted that the publication of Ofelia Văduva’s article takes place in the context of the first field campaigns conducted for the *Atlasul Etnografic Român* (Romanian Ethnographic Atlas) during the years 1972–1975,<sup>48</sup> and *nutrition* is the central theme of one of the questionnaires. Unfortunately, the documents obtained from this field research are largely still unpublished, and so far only those produced on the investigations from Oltenia became public, in 2018, so Ofelia Văduva’s article remains solitary and amazing, without obvious filiations and connections at the time. On the other hand, the published text, erudite and well-structured, moves, discreetly but suitably for the 1970s, from the presentation of the actual casuistry of food and cuisine to the structural analysis of food, so that the option for this genre officially associated with its “scientific character” also functions as very appropriate “camouflage,” designed to support the acceptability of its publication.



Discussions about food intensified in the last years of communism with the introduction, by the Ceaușescu regime, of food restrictions.<sup>49</sup> Presenting the age as a whole, the historical monographs record:

*Rationing of bread, flour, sugar and milk was introduced in some provincial towns in early 1982, and in 1983 it was extended to most of the country, with the exception of the capital. The monthly personal rations were progressively reduced to the point where, on the eve of the 1989 revolution, they were in some regions of the country one kilo of sugar, one kilo of flour, a 500-gram pack of margarine and five eggs.*<sup>50</sup>

*With the support of health specialists (Dr. Iulian Mincu) and other sectors, the RCP leadership, and first of all Nicolae Ceaușescu, decisions were made with serious consequences for the daily life of Romanian citizens: artificial shortage, organized by the state, dramatic reduction of the consumption of electricity for the use of citizens, and, moreover, the falsification on fake scientific grounds of deliberate policies to starve the population. . . . Romania in those years was dominated by hunger, cold and fear. Natural foods were lacking, vegetables had become a rarity, substitutes (from “nechezol” barley coffee to soy) were glorified as treats.*<sup>51</sup>

Thus, it becomes obvious why it was very risky to have discussions with people, especially in villages, on this issue and, implicitly, why the interest in food ethnology had to be at least postponed.

The period of the last decade of Romanian communism was, however, extremely productive for the creation of a genuine petty folklore, full of urban legends, cynical jokes, deconstructed narratives, which at the same time led to the emergence of many general practices, primarily from the category of the replacement of ingredients, given that this was the period when any ingredient needed in a dish could be replaced by another one, cheaper and more readily available.<sup>52</sup> At the same time, attempts to provide a variety of dishes, given the food scarcity, led to the emergence of an entire recipe compendium, carefully recorded in the recipe books of housewives and then transferred from one household to another, through recipes written on odd pages, retrieved from school notebooks.<sup>53</sup>

Part of this ambience was restored through a series of researches carried out a few years later, in the first years after 1989, by a group of researchers from the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant. Some of their observations and notes were published in an original dictionary volume that includes 265 entries, words that describe the realities of late Romanian communism. Of these units, 34 are food-related items, namely: *alimentară*/foodshop (pp. 24–25), *alimente*/groceries (pp. 25–30), *aprovizionare*/supply (pp. 33–36), *aprozar*/greengrocer (pp. 36–37), *aragaz*/stove (p. 37), *băuturi*/drinks (pp. 53–54), *brânză*/cheese (p. 67), *cafea*/coffee (pp. 74–75), *cantină*/canteen (pp. 76–77), *carne*/meat (pp. 77–82), *cartofi*/potatoes (p. 84), *casă de comenzi*/trade house (pp. 86–90), *cărciumă*/pub (pp. 99–100), *coadă*/queue (pp. 100–109), *congelator*/freezer (p. 116), *dulciuri*/sweets (pp. 142–143), *foame*/hunger (pp. 167–168), *înlocuitori*/substitutes (pp.

196–197), *Kent* (p. 201), *lapte*/milk (p. 203), *nechezol*/barley coffee (p. 234), *oase*/bones (p. 243), *ouă*/eggs (pp. 244–245), *pește*/fish (p. 254), *pâine*/bread (p. 256), *plasă*/bag (p. 256), *restaurant* (pp. 278–279), *rețete*/recipe (pp. 282–284), *unt*/butter (pp. 337–338).

Each of these thematic units contains fragmentary memories of the interviewees, people who had lived, only a few years before, the experience of food restrictions in the last years of the Ceaușescu regime. Many of these semantic units have become relatively irrelevant over time (e.g. *Kent*), others no longer have an equivalent in society (trade house, “*nechezol*”/barley coffee substitute), and most can be generally understood, however, without the nuances they encapsulated at the time. The transcribed texts, reduced in size, define these elements by way of small narratives, some impressive and intensely subjective, most of them relying, however, on the reproduction of urban legends regarding the food supply of families in big cities (of course, mainly the inhabitants of Bucharest).

## The Waves of Food Ethnology in Post-Socialist Romania

**T**HE CHANGE of the political regime in Romania, after the Revolution of December 1989, was followed, almost immediately, by radical transformations, often sudden and spectacular, both in everyday life and in the economic and social field, as well as in the artistic world or in scientific activity. In this frame of reference, ethnological research has also undergone a series of fluctuations, being forced to redefine itself, recomposing itself by reference to the real interests of society, respectively to the major topics studied in European ethnology. In the logic of the years immediately following 1990, all the subjects that had been silenced before, for reasons ranging from mere coincidence to the open or at least presumed ban, gained special interest.

The ethnology of food has thus developed during this period, on the one hand in direct relation to the reduction of poverty, the access to food, and the efforts to increase the living standards of the population, but also as a reaction to the way in which it had been written before, challenging the subjects considered unacceptable by the communist regime. The first characteristic of the studies on this issue in the years of Romanian post-socialism would be a relatively substantial body of works, inevitably heterogeneous, which clearly belong to what can be recognized as food ethnology.

In my opinion, some “waves” created by the appearance of works in this category can be identified. There is, first of all, a first wave, between the years 1995 and 1998, characterized by the clear, open formulation, respectively by the careful argumentation of the importance of studies on traditional food/cuisine, a wave in which two ethnological pieces of research with pioneering character are included, the essay by Ofelia Văduva, *Pași spre sacru: Din etnologia alimentației românești* (Steps towards the sacred: From the ethnology of Romanian food)<sup>54</sup> and Vărbura Buzilă’s book about bread and its meanings in traditional communities,<sup>55</sup> and respectively a volume more difficult to define, somewhere between a gastronomic essay, a manifesto, and a cookbook. This book was written

by Radu Anton Roman, *Bucate, vinuri și obiceiuri românești* (Romanian dishes, wines, and customs).<sup>56</sup> The second wave must be associated with the works published in the year 2000 and is characterized by the efforts of reflective interpretation on the information about food and nutrition, being represented primarily by the works (projects generated both in a personal or collective context by) Vintilă Mihăilescu.<sup>57</sup> The most recent wave can be placed in the last decade, between 2013 and 2020, which is characterized by the publication of numerous works, both reflective, with obvious comprehensive openings, as well as by the appearance of works of synthesis, which begin to capitalize on a long line of archived research.

Beyond these contextual and chronological positions, each of these works participates in its own way in the configuration, in Romania, of the area of food ethnology studies. The first step is, even now, that of Ofelia Văduva, who had already published in periodicals a series of studies on food in previous years.<sup>58</sup> In fact, the book she published contains in its title the phrase *food ethnology* and develops, in the spirit of the age, the idea of the need for multidisciplinary studies in order to understand such a complex cultural field:

*An anthropology of food . . . means penetrating almost into the entire culture of a group. It can be achieved with the contribution of economics (through specialists in quantitative analysis), medical sciences (physiologists, nutritionists), humanities (historians, ethnologists, sociologists, psychologists, linguists), through specialists in semantics and communication.*<sup>59</sup>

Fascinating for the examples brought into discussion and for the bibliographical sources used, Ofelia Văduva's research does not go, however, beyond a certain comfort space of the Romanian canonical ethnology. The book talks about the meanings of bread, about the ornamentation of various rolls, about the necessary foods and the framework of different holidays, etc., so it converts a series of diffuse concerns, often unjustly marginalized in previous research, into the very thematic substance of Romanian food ethnology. At the same time, the research remains in the sphere of attention for the festive, ceremonial practices, disinterested in the daily life and, especially, disinterested even in... the food, under its concrete, material aspect.

The merit of bringing actual food to the Romanian ethnology of nutrition belongs to a very talented amateur, Radu Anton Roman, a writer, essayist, gourmet and broadcaster, an extremely well-regarded public figure at the end of the decade of the last century, primarily due to the culinary shows he made and which were unique at that time. In his book, *Romanian Dishes, Wines, and Customs*, Radu Anton Roman mixes three categories of information and, implicitly, three categories of texts. First, he formulates, in an inquisitive journalistic style, some general considerations on Romanian cuisine. Secondly, he copiously reproduces passages from old ethnographic monographs, still little known to the general public, which were being republished around the same period, by Simion Florea Marian or Tudor Pamfile, from the books of Elena Niculiță-Voronca, thus creating a kind of corpus of ad hoc documents, meant to legitimize, through the recourse to the past, the interest in the Romanians' food. Last but not least, Radu Anton Roman's book includes actual recipes, offering a rich list of dishes specific to the

Romanian cuisine. In fact, one of the merits of the paper is that it proposes a rich list of Romanian dishes, emphasizing its open character. To the few dishes that had been canonized by public opinion as the only national foods—*sarmale*, polenta, *mititei*—some others are added, as well-known dishes in common kitchens: stuffed peppers, eggplant salad, *zacusca*, fish-egg salad, tomato salad, spinach dish, salad soup, etc. From the ideas synthesized by Radu Anton Roman in the tasty introductory pages of the volume, the idea of the variability of Romanian food and cuisine deserves to be retained. The author notes, for example, the existence of several Romanian cuisines, and not of just one, which can be referred to as the “old peasant cuisine (fisherman’s, shepherd’s) and small-town but also Romanianized cuisine.”<sup>60</sup> On the other hand, apart from this professional and social variability, the discussions about food in the Romanian space must be molded on the geographical cartography of Eastern Europe, taking into account the numerous and very substantial influences of the cuisines of the adjacent civilizations:

*What are mousaka, stews, meatball, beef salad, bean stew, pie, soup, pancakes other than deposits, alluvia, either of the Ottoman occupation or of French, German, Phanaro-Greek influences or whatever they may be. . . . The Arab-Balkan influence from the South, the Polish-Russian-Ukrainian influence from the North and the Franco-Austrian-German influence from the West should also be noted.*<sup>61</sup>

The book (and, conjointly, Radu Anton Roman’s television shows) is also responsible for a substantial transformation of the style of writing recipes, the whole process of food transformation being narrated and animated.

The two works manage to open a new perspective for local cuisine and for the cultural study of food, each targeting a different segment of the public: Ofelia Văduva addressed especially ethnologists, while the influence of Radu Anton Roman was more general, aimed at various groups of intellectuals and at the general public.

The third step in shaping the interest in local food and cuisine in recent decades is through the numerous series of inquiries and reflections initiated by Vintilă Mihăilescu. Apart from his group projects, the observations on the behaviors occasioned by family conviviality, which he proposes to his students and doctoral students, Vintilă Mihăilescu often wrote about food, especially in his column in the *Dilema veche* (The Old Dilemma). Of course, it is also worth noting that one of the titles of this highly regarded column anthologized in book format is *Etnogeneza și țuică* (Ethnogenesis and plum-brandy),<sup>62</sup> and this is a volume which pays a discreet homage (being published a century after the creation of the Romanian national state, in 1918). The importance of the gastronomic act is emphasized, thus, ab initio:

*Do you want to understand the troubled history of our nation, at the crossroads of empires? Well, nothing could be simpler: the historical geography of our national drink bears witness to this.*<sup>63</sup>

Beyond the flavor of Vintilă Mihăilescu’s texts and the intensely comprehensive nature of the analyses he proposes for different contexts, in which food is consumed or beyond

the presentations he makes, on various occasions, of dishes and/or drinks, what guides his interpretations is the anthropological rule that the study of these facts must make the transition from *good food to be eaten to good food to think of/good food for consumption to good food for thought*.<sup>64</sup> It is thus noteworthy that, despite the fact that the study of nutrition did not necessarily represent a priority thematic direction in Vintilă Mihăilescu's activity, his way of seeing things, in an integrative way, through observation and a holistic understanding of social life, led to this full acceptance of food in the sphere of our anthropological reflection.

Publications on food ethnology in recent years are consolidating this field of study. First, the appearance of the first corpus of documents from the answers to the questionnaires for the *Romanian Ethnographic Atlas* allows both for an understanding of the model according to which the researches were made and, especially, brings to light information obtained from direct field observations and the completion of questionnaires. Thus, nutrition is, according to this research, "part of the means of existence/subsistence section of the Romanian Ethnographic Documents corpus (RED), in which the series *Occupations* and *Peasant Technique* are also integrated."<sup>65</sup>

*The actual study, carried out in the villages of Oltenia between 1972 and 1975, followed: 6 types of cereals; 42 varieties of vegetables and herbs; 12 food plants harvested from nature; 14 species of cultivated fruit trees and shrubs to which several types of vines are added; 13 types of fruits picked from nature for food and drink; 13 species of animals and birds raised for meat; 9 kinds of game animals and birds for meat; 4 types of dairy animals; dozens of species of fish, crayfish, mussels, frogs, snails; bee honey.*<sup>66</sup>

On the other hand, the album of recipes, photos and comments on Moldovan food<sup>67</sup> by Angela Brașoveanu continues, after two decades, the efforts made by Radu Anton Roman to keep food present within ethnology. The book manages to offer a new list of dishes, more faithful to reality, with recipes presented more carefully, using an alert and tasteful style and relying on the interplay between the description of dishes and the good quality reflection on the importance of food in different regions of the Republic of Moldova. At the time of writing, the most recent publication in the list of Romanian food ethnology is the book based on Laura Ioana Toader's extensive doctoral dissertation,<sup>68</sup> a work that draws on numerous ethnology texts on Romanian food, in the spirit already developed by Ofelia Văduva and using materials from very diverse areas.

The theoretical interest in the Romanian food ethnology is further nuanced by the research undergone by such scholars as Narcisa Alexandra Știucă, Petronela Savin and Cosmina Timoțe-Mocanu, Eleonora Sava, or Laura Ioana Toader.

The historiographical approaches of food published by Olivia Senciuc<sup>69</sup> are also very useful. One of the most important moments for this period is the research carried out to publish the volume *Earthly Delights: Economies and Cultures of Food in Ottoman and Danubian Europe, c. 1500–1900*.<sup>70</sup> The book covers several topics representative for food history in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe. Topics related to Romanian food heritage are anchored in a multicultural and south-eastern European context. The approach is multidisciplinary covering history, ethnology and historical anthropology.

## In Lieu of Conclusions

THE LONG list of sparse passages, book chapters, then articles and, eventually, books which prefigure and then shape the interest in food and cuisine in Romanian ethnology bears evidence to a complicated process which can be narrowed down only with great difficulty. In fact, the first half of this timespan was when most ethnographers gave information on Romanian food and meals, without acknowledging, however, that food was an independent research topic. The information about food is hidden, in these texts, among descriptions of ritualized gestures, legends, narratives, tales and proverbs, as if they were lying beneath, waiting for the time when they would be discovered and integrated in their natural system. Only when food was included in the research for the *Romanian Ethnographic Atlas* of 1975, by Ofelia Văduva, the discussions about food ethnology became applied, so the efforts to shape it acquired a structured form.

Romanian food ethnology includes a book whose publication destiny can be considered emblematic for the entire discipline. This is the small volume *From the Kitchen of the Romanian Peasant* by Mihai Lupescu, a text with the ambition to be a monograph of the local food system and a nationally comprehensive synthesis. Documented and organized at the turn of the twentieth century, when the major syntheses on the great topics of Romanian ethnology were also written, Lupescu's text has remained unknown for a century, so the entire field was built without his contribution to the definition of thematic components or the argumentation of interest in certain areas over others. The main issues were redefined, re-documented, resumed from the beginning.

The marginalization of food studies, the lack of interest in works on this subject, as well as, for that matter, the omission of food from research in favor of the practices integrating food, gave Romanian food ethnology a specific profile. Initiated belatedly and ill-fatedly, relying on the restitution of an often-fragmented discourse by mainly converting information hidden in texts written for other purposes, Romanian food ethnology took a hesitant shape, which became coherent only during the post-socialist period. □

## Notes

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  8. *Ibid.*, 353.
  9. *Ibid.*
  10. Marian, *Nașterea la români*, 89–93.
  11. *Ibid.*, 145–162.
  12. Marian, *Înmormântarea la români*, 109–112.
  13. *Ibid.*, 126–128.
  14. *Ibid.*, 233–244.
  15. Marian, *Sărbătorile la români*, 1: 200.
  16. *Ibid.*, 1: 213.
  17. *Ibid.*, 2: 19.
  18. *Ibid.*, 2: 49 sq.
  19. *Ibid.*, 2: 114.
  20. *Ibid.*, 3: 69 sq.
  21. Pamfile, 269.
  22. See n. 5.
  23. Niculiță-Voronca, 1: 24.
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46. *Ibid.*, 187.
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52. See *LXXX: Mărturiile orale: Anii '80 și bucureștenii*, volume conceived by Șerban Angheliescu, Ioana Hodoiu, Cosmin Manolache, Anca Manolescu, Vlad Manoliu, Irina Nicolau, Ioana Popescu, Petre Popovăț, Simina Radu-Bucurenci, and Ana Vinea (Bucharest: Paideia, 2003), 196–197: “My wife prepared fish eggs from beans and onion”; “People made everything from everything, they made all sorts of odd improvisations.”
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### Abstract

#### Building a Topic: Food in Romanian Ethnology

The main question this study aims to answer is how Romanian ethnology has tackled the database of memory and behavior referring to food, so well-regulated but also so sophisticated, along a history of one century and a half. Also, how what can be defined as the ethnology of Romanian food has been built in time. The study focuses only on the works published by Romanian ethnologists or by amateurs with an interest in food. A complex analysis of Romanian ethnology cannot

ignore the numerous “projects” about writing down and, implicitly, preserving information about traditional food (from vocabulary to traditions related to certain dishes). The article deliberately leaves aside such research intentions, describing and interpreting only the visible side of things, the only one which, in time, has been accessible both to the general public and to the most important groups of specialists.

**Keywords**

Romanian ethnology, Romanian folklore, traditional Romanian dishes, food ethnology in Romania, peasant gastronomy in Romania