

# Moldovan Cuisine in Search of Identity

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**A**FTER A long period spent at the periphery of scientific research, folk gastronomy has recently begun to attract more and more attention and the interest of the general public. Since the last decades of the last century, food and culinary practices have become the subject of sociological, anthropological, ethnological, and literary analyses. In all these fields, the role of cuisine in the construction of identity is discussed, directly or indirectly.

The generally accepted axiom is that the cuisine of any country is organically linked to its culture and history. It has been often pointed out that cuisine is more conservative than religion, language or any other cultural aspect because certain fundamental elements remain resistant to conquest, migration, colonization, or social and technological change. This is because our attitudes to food are learned and emotionally instilled, which gives it a particularly lasting effect. We need to remember that identities are not only made up of objective attributes, but also of subjective beliefs and feelings about these attributes. Although food, as an element of identity, is one of the cultural characteristics that can be modified by contact with other socio-cultural groups, food practices tend to vary slowly in relation to other elements of culture. In this respect, Roland Barthes stated that “food provides a continuity of the nation, a dish being, by constituting a memory, a history in modern life,”<sup>1</sup> while Léo Moulin stressed the identity function of food, which, beyond satiating, defines and connects people:

*We do not eat with our teeth, nor do we digest with our stomach; we eat with our spirit, we taste according to cultural norms which are linked to the system of mutual exchanges which underlies all social life. That is why each people defines itself by its eating practices and its eating habits, just as it defines itself by its language, its beliefs or its social practices.*<sup>2</sup>

A turning point in the research on the biocultural anthropology of food was Claude Fischler’s inter- and transdisciplinary study of the “embodiment principle” in a cultural system. The author highlights the fact that the food imaginary is a determining factor in defining a sense of identity.<sup>3</sup>

In correlation with gastronomic identity, the so-called *food models* are configured as a set of knowledge, practices, behaviors, norms, rules, representations, which unite a human group and which for J.-P. Poulain represents a “system of symbolic codes carrying collective values that participate in the construction of cultural identities and processes of individualization.”<sup>4</sup>

In a similar research carried by Ofelia Văduva, she mentions that “in Romania too, the search for identity is increasing in intensity, and the particular emphasis on food is gaining value in demonstrating the controversial Romanian *specificity*.”<sup>5</sup> However, the author disapproves of “hasty assessments of the influences noted in Romanian food,” considering them groundless, while advancing her own opinion on Romanian gastronomic identity, considering that it derives from the ethno-psychological characteristics and the cultural matrix of the people, and that “the observance of numerous fasting days, food taboos and prohibitions, the use of foods with a ritual role,” prove the “Romanian creative potential” and can be considered real keys to “deciphering the Romanian identity profile.”<sup>6</sup>

Also, for sociologist Angelica Marinescu, food becomes a major factor in marking cultural identity, “being the very core of the identity-building process.” According to the author,

*certain dishes are considered national food, symbols of national identity, or of a migrant group, for example. The food of the ancestors is a foundation of a social group’s identity, regional cuisines are a symbolic representation of the nation or national identity, in the desire to affirm historical continuity and belonging.*<sup>7</sup>

Lately, more and more authoritative voices in the field have expressed their concern about the possibility of preserving traditional gastronomies unaltered in the context of the increased impact of globalization, a phenomenon that could lead to the destructuring of food habits, causing a real identity crisis. Threatened by the danger of universalization and standardization, cuisines with established food models, such as the French or Italian ones, are marked, in J.-P. Corbeau’s view, by two trends: on the one hand, the search for novelty, freedom and a prospective view, and on the other, the crystallization of traditional models and the search for the past.<sup>8</sup>

Starting from this general context, we considered it appropriate and interesting to analyze a cuisine unaffected by popularity and global recognition, such as the Moldovan cuisine.

Within the limits of this analytical approach we will consider *Moldovan cuisine* as the result of the synthesis, over time, of practices, dishes and tastes common on the territory of today’s Republic of Moldova. It includes countless culinary traditions, specific dishes, and customs resulting from the intersection of gastronomic culture with the traditions of other peoples with whom our nation has come into contact throughout history. The identity profile of Moldovan gastronomy has invariably been determined by the historical and socio-economic development of the population living in the area between the Dniester and the Prut rivers.

Angela Brașoveanu, co-author of the most popular cookbook, described Moldova’s controversial identity as warm, sentimental but ruthless with itself, rich but without valuing its own riches, always lost between the terms “conquered” and “liberated,” nostalgic but lacking memory, conservative but always ready to embrace what came from abroad as superior, proud of its own history but often ignorant of the names of its own great-grandparents. The author of the book believes that Moldova has become so multi-

plied in its identity that it no longer seems to have an identity at all. It lives at the same time in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and in the Middle Ages, it wavers, without ever deciding, between East and West, it celebrates two Christmases, it opens the New Year's champagne at different times, it puts on the same pedestal of traditional food the dishes made "by *mămuca*" the *sarmale*, and the *olivie* salad.<sup>9</sup>

In order to capture a dynamic phenomenon, multifaceted and fluid, we will take a multi-aspectual approach to the subject, trying to reveal the main characteristics of the local food, as well as the trends and direction in which the Moldovan cuisine is moving in the process of setting its gastronomic profile among the other world cuisines.

In the first instance, we can see that, unlike the established cuisines, which, faced with the unifying whirlwind of globalization, are raising strongholds of gastronomic traditions, trying to fix them and possibly adapt them to the realities of post-modernity, Moldovan cuisine is still in the naive phase, in which it does not necessarily question the originality and authenticity of the recipes or the "purity" of the names and processes of product processing.

At this stage, Moldovan cuisine does not feel uncomfortable using recipes from its Slavic neighbors or from Balkan people who have travelled to these lands in different times, without bothering to indicate the source of the borrowing, considering that the recipe rightfully belongs to it, as long as the food has been eaten "in our land" since times immemorial. Angela Brașoveanu describes this characteristic of Moldovans with great finesse and humor in her presentation of *sarmale*: "Although many people put the *sarmale* on the plate of their own tradition, Moldovans hold on to the last dumpling with their teeth and their parents, making them on every occasion."<sup>10</sup>

This situation is also accentuated by the fact that the Romanian culinary and cultural matrix has been overlaid with dishes, names and practices of the nations of the former USSR family, which Moldovans have assimilated and adapted to their realities, as it happened with the famous and everlasting Moldovan barbecue, taken over from the Georgians "unawares" and turned into an "extension of the hands and an extension of the rib cage"<sup>11</sup> of Moldovans.

Another factor that cannot be neglected in establishing the Moldovan gastronomic identity is the influence of the cuisines of the neighboring ethnic groups, the importance of which Angela Brașoveanu acknowledged in a recent interview:

*We are neighboring nations, we live fence to fence, gate to gate and it would have been totally unfair to exclude them, especially since the cuisines are also influenced. In the South, the cuisine is very mixed. The Moldovans also influence the Gagauz, the Gagauz influence the Moldovans, the Bulgarians influence the Gagauz and they have all obviously taken something from the Southern cuisine, from Turkish cuisine, from Tatar cuisine...*<sup>12</sup>

Talking about the history and culinary traditions of the Republic of Moldova, it can be noted that Moldovan cuisine has a short memory, because the frequent expressions, with a promotional flavor: "like grandmother used to make," "like at my mother's house," "like in the country" refer to our very recent history, to the cuisine of Moldovan peasants in the postwar period. And if we analyze our traditional cuisine, replicated with great

success in top restaurants in Chişinău and abroad, we will see that the collective and individual memory has remained imbued with the tastes of Soviet cuisine that were part of our childhood, just as the cakes of the consumer chain *Medovic*, *Napoleon*, *Smântânel*, and *Guguşă's Cusma* were adapted to domestic conditions, through recipes passed from housewife to housewife on school notebook sheets.

From the combination of all these factors and circumstances, the Moldovan gastronomic conglomerate has taken shape, and recently it has become increasingly interesting and attractive, both to amateurs and to ethnologists and anthropologists.

In the description of the scientific efforts to discover, analyze and promote the local gastronomic color, the very rigorous and well-documented synthesis of Moldovan food in Chapter VII (“Knowledge on Traditional Food”) of the Register of Intangible Heritage, by ethnologist Valentina Iarvoi, should be appreciated. In compiling the list of traditional dishes, the author was guided by the principle of functionality, the source of the product, the system of religious prescriptions and prohibitions, the area of distribution, and the age of the food’s documentary evidence. Based on these factors and the richness of food traditions, 71 names of dishes and drinks were included in the Intangible Heritage Register of the Republic of Moldova.<sup>13</sup>

A pioneering research in the study of traditional food was, at the time of its publication in 1999, the monograph *Bread, Food and Symbol: The Experience of the Sacred* by Varvara Buzilă, in which the author argues that “bread” provides a reintegration of the sacred into human life, and in traditional Romanian culture, the “life” of wheat is a reflection of human life.<sup>14</sup> Varvara Buzilă also establishes a symbolic relationship between the rites of passage, which mark the birth, wedding and burial of the human being, and the “categories” of bread used, such as grain, flour or the finished product. The author concludes that the choice of bread as a key product in the performance of rites is the result of a long process of symbolic instrumentalization, through the timing of which the continuity of folk culture is maintained.

The contribution of researcher Natalia Grădinaru to the study of Moldovan gastronomy refers to the curative-therapeutic action of the traditional food system, resulting from the correctness, balance and intelligence of the choice, preparation and consumption of food. The author introduces the concepts of “healing food” or “medicinal food” which, in addition to their prophylactic effect, also possess important therapeutic qualities. Some of these foods are still eaten today, but much less frequently. The so-called “cultured plants” (food weeds) are described in great detail, as are the vegetables that were the main source of nutrition in spring and summer feeding or on fasting days. From Natalia Grădinaru’s study we learn that stevia, widely used, is classified as a superfood, with the ability to regulate blood sugar levels, curb the craving for sweets and temper the acute sensation of hunger. Stevia is excellent for boosting mental and physical energy, and can even destroy the bacteria that cause tooth decay.<sup>15</sup>

In analyzing what could be called the Moldovan food model, in the opinion of J.-P. Poulain, it is first necessary to mention the direct link between traditional food and the Christian calendar, which marks the lives of Moldovans during periods of fasting and non-fasting. While fasts require an austere and balanced diet, the holidays are characterized by an abundance of sophisticated and highly varied dishes, making them ideal

occasions for developing the culinary skills of housewives. In addition, the great Christian festivals of Easter, Christmas and Easter Sunday involve numerous techniques and symbols, rules and norms of behavior, prohibitions and prescriptions which take the act of eating out of the profane and give ceremonial dishes a strong spiritual value.<sup>16</sup> From this perspective, the local food model invariably has a Christian symbolic value, in line with the belief that “food is a divine gift,” regardless of the raw material or processing techniques used.

The analysis of the area of regional menus and the culinary preferences of Moldovans shows that, despite the relatively small geographical area, Moldovan cuisine is distinguished by a very rich diversity, each area having specific dishes made from local raw ingredients.

Thus, for example, the central area stands out for its traditional, austere, vegetable-based recipes, while in the north, on the other hand, abundance reigns supreme, sometimes turning into waste, with a preference for pork and dairy dishes, and the south is dominated by eclecticism, with mutton, fish, vegetable and fruit dishes.

In spite of this variety of preferences and the accentuated gastronomic diversity, Moldovan cuisine has a fairly unified and consolidated character, thanks to dishes prepared and eaten with pleasure by any Moldovan, regardless of their birthplace. It is what Angela Brașoveanu calls “the pentagon of holy things that no Moldovan will ever do without, no matter how cosmopolitan he or she may be” and which includes *mămăliga*, chicken stock, cold cuts, pies and *sarmale*. The general popularity and appreciation enjoyed by these dishes legitimizes their presence and generous description in the Register of Intangible Cultural Heritage:

*Sarmale are a culinary dish loved by Moldovans. They consist of a mixture of bulgur, rice or other grits, minced meat, carrot and onion sautéed and wrapped in pickled or fresh cabbage leaves, vine leaves, podbal. During the fasting period, sarmale are prepared without meat. On feast days, the sarma is prepared in clay pots, in a wood-fired oven or on a roll. The preparation differs according to the composition of the filling or the leaves in which they are wrapped. In some areas, this dish is prepared in chard, cleaned of the core and baked in the oven. As part of the wedding ritual, the sarmale are brought in by the cooks with shouts and cheerful music.*

*Pies: In the Republic of Moldova, there is no housewife who does not know how to make pies. They are made of leavened dough, liver or thin sheets of dough + a filling of cheese, potatoes, cabbage, pumpkin or various fruits. Pies are cooked both for celebrations and for everyday consumption. The traditional shape of pies is round. They can be baked in the oven, on the hearth or in a pan. Traditional pies retain their place of respect in national cuisine, often mentioned by visitors to our country...<sup>17</sup>*

This Moldovan gastronomic pantheon is also confirmed by the data of a semi-structured questionnaire, developed within the framework of a master’s program<sup>18</sup> and circulated among Moldovans in the diaspora to determine the degree to which those who live abroad connect gastronomy to national identity. The question “What is/are the dish(es) with an identity mark for Moldovan cuisine?” was answered by most, invariably, by

naming the same five dishes, supplemented, however, with dishes specific to their native place: those born in the north mentioned *low borscht with pork, alivanca, baba neagra, pomana porcului, tochtitura*, those from the center—*fried peppers with tomato stew and aubergine, stews with cheese*, and those from the south—*fried fish on the tin with salt, pies on the hearth, cuț-cuț*.

Asked to define what “home cooking” means to them, most respondents made the connection with memories of their mothers and grandparents, childhood, family, that “good and tasty” food they ate around the table.

Thus, we see that, associated with the place of origin, food helps to appease nostalgia, because food habits, then preparation techniques and the serving of these dishes remind them of home, family, and friends. In these circumstances, preparing and eating these dishes strengthens ties with family and friends: festive meals that bring together loved ones and bring back memories.

For those who have left the country, eating food from home is a way of participating in the community of the nation from a distance. Eating, beyond the physiological component, is an affirmation of identity that Moldovans ritualize through the consumption of specific foods, and, in these conditions, cooking is not just an everyday practice, but an attempt to synesthetically reconstruct and remember, to return to that world “at home.”

Asked whether food can be considered an element of national identity, 88.6% of respondents believe that national cuisine can be considered an element of national identity, and what we have on our plate speaks about our culture and tastes, 5.7% believe that food is not relevant to national identity, and another 5.7% do not know whether cuisine can be considered an indicator of national identity.

To the question “Do you think we need a culinary identity?” 77.1% answered yes, and 22.9% did not know how to answer. However, none of the respondents answered that we do not need a culinary identity, even among the 5.7% who considered that food is not emblematic of national identity.

We could therefore say, about the Moldovan food model, that although it has not enjoyed the advantage of a popularity similar to that of cuisines with established traditions of processing and combining ingredients, Moldovan cuisine nevertheless has a fairly well-defined specific profile, which has recently become increasingly recognizable, especially when interacting with carriers of other cultural patterns. Broadly speaking, the culinary identity of Moldovan cuisine comprises a very rich body of knowledge, handed down from generation to generation, enriched with new gastronomic acquisitions as a result of cultural exchanges, adaptation to development and new interpretations of old culinary practices. All social groups, all generations and all communities have worked together to develop, perfect and promote the recipes and drinks that have become part of our cultural heritage. This social collaboration has resulted in a food system that is rich in knowledge, skills and practices and is still relevant today.<sup>19</sup>

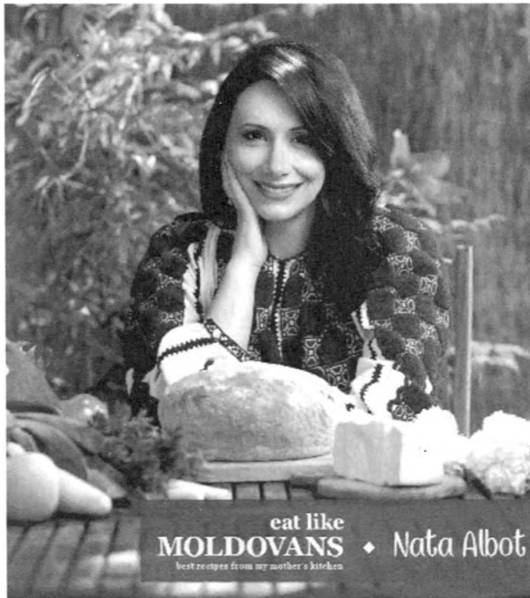
Thus, we can see that, over time, Moldovan cuisine has developed into a very coherent cuisine, with its own pronounced features, managing to organically combine different and sometimes contradictory influences, to find the most successful combinations of products and to designate its favorite foods.

## Promoting Specific Gastronomic Features

**I**N THE last decades in Moldova, two trends can be identified, similar to a certain extent to those stated by J.-P. Corbeau. On the one hand, Moldovans are learning to know and appreciate the full diversity of their culinary treasures, and on the other, once they have discovered these values, they are trying to promote them by various means and make them known to the general public.

The promotion of the local specificity of Moldovan cuisine is carried out at several levels, both at the central administrative level, through the formulation of state policies in the field, and at the individual, community level through cookbooks, culinary blogs, festivals, and the Moldovan diaspora. In the category of traditional cookbooks, Moldova has achieved an extraordinary performance in the last five years with two gastronomic albums that have received the highest international acclaim: *Moldova din bucătăria mamei mele* by Nata Albot and *Moldova: Oameni, locuri bucătărie și vin* by Angela Brașoveanu and Roman Rybaleov.

The author of the first book, Nata Albot, mentioned in the preface to the English edition of the book published in 2015:



The cover of the book *Eat Like Moldovans: Best Recipes from My Mother's Kitchen*.  
Photo credit: <https://nataalbot.md/>

*“Eat Like Moldovans” is a culinary archive of Moldovan traditions—the tradition of one specific Moldovan family, my family. I’m sure that all of you have something very special to share from your mother’s best homemade recipes. This is what I tried to do with this project: to collect, cook, take pictures and write the best recipes from my family. I worked on this book together with my mother, Alexandra, and it would’ve been impossible to write it without her.*

*More than a year and a half I collected, cooked, photographed, designed around 90 recipes. Be ready to live a pleasant experience by feeling the taste of the well known “Suba” salad or my mother’s pastry, called Plăcinte. You will also be surprised by the best recipes of pickled watermelons or Adjica sauce.*

*My goal is to translate the Moldovan recipes and make them available to everyone.<sup>20</sup>*

Two years later, Cartier published the album *Moldova: Oameni, locuri, bucătărie și vin* (Moldova: People, places, kitchen, and wine), in which the authors Angela Brașoveanu and Roman Rybaleov set out to bring fame to the cultural-culinary and tourist potential of the Republic of Moldova and to establish “a little portrait of the country, through people, places, cuisine and wine.” In addition to the detailed and rigorous recipes themselves, the book’s delights include short culinary essays that contain precious information about the origin of the product, about processing techniques, and sometimes personal meditations on Moldovan cuisine and their tastes. Full of flavor, warmth and humor, the book is more than just a book of recipes, it is a panoramic view of contemporary Moldova in which cuisine is an indispensable part of the identity profile.

Apart from the fact that both books won the first prize for the Eastern European region at the Gourmand World Cookbook Awards (the 22<sup>nd</sup> and the 25<sup>th</sup> editions), the common element<sup>21</sup> that unites them and stands out even from the titles is the use of Moldovan cuisine to promote national identity. From this perspective, we could also appreciate the volumes as a gesture of gratitude and recognition of the Moldovan food model in the international arena, even more so as they are an expression of the collective mentality that has begun to value the local cuisine at its true value.

The same trend of promoting ethnic identity through gastronomy can be seen on electronic media platforms. The relative ease with which Moldovan housewives can share their culinary skills with the world has led to the emergence of a huge number of blogs, vlogs and YouTube channels, through which the secrets of Moldovan cuisine are becoming known to the world.

A superficial analysis of the contents of the local gastronomic online platforms reveals some features and preferences: the concern for the national, the revelation of genuine taste qualities, the revival of “home” traditions, the interest in curative, prophylactic recipes, characteristics that we will illustrate with examples.

The Facebook page *Gastronom.blog* offers its followers a wide range of dishes and pastries from the traditional cuisine, but also newer foods that have joined the gastronomic circuit of Moldovans. The love for the local cuisine is particularly evident in some of the posts in which the author of the page does not limit herself to a brief presentation of the recipe, but describes with great warmth and nostalgia the circumstances and atmosphere in which the food is prepared and consumed:

*This is how my mom made it, this is how my grandma made it, this is how I will make it. We pass on the spirit of the winter holidays from generation to generation, we enjoy every moment that brings peace to our soul and joy to our hearts.*

With the same commitment, the author also presents low borscht,

*a traditional Moldovan dish, prepared especially during the cold season. We can't call it borscht as such, because of the characteristic broth, but it is very delicious, aromatic and reminds us of those traditional country meals, of snowy winters and frost-bitten cheeks. It's very easy to prepare and, like everything simple, it's brilliant.*<sup>22</sup>



A more nuanced approach, in which the qualities of Moldovan cuisine are indirectly promoted, by describing the so-called “authentic,” “very aromatic” taste of “our childhood” and the secret of the recipe “learned from my mother” can be found on the YouTube channel *Cristina gătește din inimă pentru cei dragi*.<sup>23</sup>

A special case in the paradigm of gastronomic blogging is the website *bunica.md*, where the authors announce their

*immense love for everything that happens in the country kitchen, for the hardworking and tired housewives, for the traditional, healthy dishes, which we who live in the city miss so much, for the dishes of our mothers, grandmothers, mothers-in-law who knew and know how to cook from simple ingredients, particularly tasty, good and healthy dishes.*<sup>24</sup>

The site, in turn, has generated two YouTube channels named after the authors: *Gătește cu Alina Bunica md* and *Gătește cu Bunica md Lidia Moraru*, “a channel with recipes from the 60s and 70s generation where everything was cooked naturally, with simple homemade ingredients.”<sup>25</sup>

Both channels primarily promote traditional Moldovan cuisine, but also contain recipes from other nations, especially from the former USSR, thus confirming the eclectic, sometimes cosmopolitan character of our cuisine. However, as in the case of the authors mentioned above, the presentation of traditional recipes is made with more warmth, passion and, at times, even patriotism:

*Today I present to you jam with the smell of the loved ones, with the smell of the country, as I learned from my mother. It's the specific zeama of the Republic of Moldova with homemade sour borscht and noodles.*<sup>26</sup>

The last channel under review invites its viewers *into the kitchen of Zidana Uzakovna*, where one “can find herbal medicines, ointments, elixirs, infusions, tinctures and more that heal and cure many diseases.” This channel is very special in that it covers the lesser-known niche of folk medicine and curative cuisine and, despite its neo-Moldovan, not at all Moldovan name, it highlights many culinary and prophylactic recipes of great ethnic authenticity.

Finally, we can conclude, as far as food blogs are concerned, that they have become not only an effective method of promoting traditional food, but also a very popular way (with many visitors) of transmitting recipes from one generation to another and from one area to another, thus replacing the traditional and obsolete oral method of transmission “by word of mouth.”

The most original means of promoting the national cuisine came, surprisingly, through the administrative channel, through thematic stamps and the ad promoting the Republic of Moldova, “Be Our Guest in Moldova,” made in 2017 by Viorel Mardare and the team *Atelier for Moldova.travel*.<sup>27</sup> The film depicts a sequence from the famous Hollywood actor Brad Pitt’s trip through the Republic of Moldova. Once he arrives in a village in the Orhei District, he (in fact an actor with a striking resemblance to the American star) is invited to dinner by a Moldovan family who celebrate him with wine

and traditional dishes. Seeing him captivated by the taste of the food, the housewife begins to explain the secret of cooking, and Brad Pitt ends up deftly “spinning” Moldovan *sarmale*. As with cookbooks and food blogs, this video production legitimizes the decisive role of gastronomy in shaping and promoting cultural identity. The same function is also fulfilled by the release by the Moldovan Post in September 2014 of the series of postage stamps consisting of 4 stamps with traditional dishes. The designers of the series focused on fried fish with *mujdei*, bean soup with thyme, cheese and dill pies and chicken *zeama* with parsley.



Postage stamp published in the series “Bucate tradiționale și plante condimentare” (Traditional dishes and spices). Photo credit: <https://diez.md>.

## The “Cuisine” in the Suitcase or Shaping the Gastronomic Identity in the Context of Migration

**T**HE DIASPORA is a space where food practices can gain the power to help Moldovans who live abroad to strengthen their sense of identity. Much of the research in this area shows that immigrants and ethnic minorities try to maintain their own cooking and eating habits for as long as possible, even against strong pressure to change them.

The example of Moldovans who bring their country’s food with them wherever they go is enlightening, and preparing traditional food is a way of preserving their culture when they move to other places. For Moldovans abroad, cooking food specific to our

culture is a symbol of pride and a means of coping with everyday hardships. Some illustrative testimonies in this regard have already been recorded in the framework of the abovementioned master project:

*In 2016–2017 I was awarded an Erasmus scholarship in Belgium. Being a group of students from different parts of the world, we frequently had “Cultural Evenings” which aimed to strengthen the community and showcase the students’ backgrounds. Most examples were food related. Food makes the quickest connections when you have to tell a story about your background. Telling foreigners about Moldova, telling them about the people’s culture, traditions or music is more complicated. Many of my colleagues didn’t even know where Moldova was. I chose to present Moldova from the plate. This was true for many students, the food thing. Italians are very fond of their pasta. We are more melancholic, homesickness in the case of Bessarabian students is more intense, and food “from home” appeases these longings. For me this experience was also a culinary experiment, I discovered tastes, textures and flavours, but, nevertheless, every day I had to have a dish made as if it was from home. Our real kind of food.* (Marina, 32, student)

In such a context, food, in addition to its importance as an element of identity affirmation, is also a means of cultural exchange, a first form of contact between groups and individuals, thus the kitchen becomes the most accessible threshold of a culture. To *eat* other people’s food is to cross this threshold, to discover a culture, a history. This cultural exchange, getting to know others and comparing oneself with them, through elements that are particular to the respective cultures, become reasons for strengthening identities.

Religious holidays are another unifying moment between generations for families settled abroad, and synchronizing with those back home for the single ones. In both cases, the festive meals take place in full swing, with specific cooking and respect for each stage:

*At Christmas, the men of the family go out and buy a pig. Yes, a whole pig! And we make all the traditional goodies from it, according to home recipes. The Christmas meal is always prepared according to home recipes, no improvisations. Parsnips, cighire, sausages, caltaboș, toba and the pig’s pomana! Even if the pig is slaughtered at the abattoir, without any “traditional protocol,” the first thing we cook is the pig’s pomana. As we used to do when we were in Moldova, in a pot, with lots of onions and garlic and with mămăligă. The Belgians don’t understand these things, they look at us skeptically. The same thing happens at Easter, with red eggs, pasca, cake and lamb. It is a must-have, year after year. They cook lamb here too, but not like ours.* (Mihaela, 31, Belgium)

Returning to the trends of globalism described by J.-P. Corbeau, the impact of the Moldovan diaspora on food customs and traditions can be examined as part of the transnational flows linking the homeland and host countries. At the intersection of local and global, authentic and universal, restaurants serving traditional food demonstrate that Moldovans are aware of and benefit from the opportunities offered by the process of globalization and migration. As already mentioned, Moldovans consider food to be an

important element of national culture, which should be demonstrated to other cultures in their efforts to improve their social and economic capabilities. When they were able to start a business, some Moldovans opened traditional Moldovan restaurants all over the world. The restaurants Noroc in Tokyo, Lăutarii in Tallinn, Moldova in Seoul, Dor and Moldova in Moscow, Moldova in New York, Moldova in Philadelphia, Soba in Alaska, Capitol 2 in Italy, or Codru in Paris are just a few examples.



*Sarmale and plăcinte la tigaie.*

Photo credit: Restaurant Codru-Moldova (Paris)/Facebook.

The purpose of the national restaurants is, first of all, to relieve the homesickness of the compatriots settled abroad, but also to highlight Moldovan food on the world map. The owners of these restaurants frequently organize cultural events, promoting the national costume, customs and traditions of their ancestors.<sup>28</sup> The presence of these restaurants, however small, speaks of the fact that Moldovans appreciate the qualities and commercial potential of Moldovan cuisine and consider it competitive on the international market.



## Notes

1. Roland Barthes, "Pour une psycho-sociologie de l'alimentation contemporaine," *Annales: Economies, sociétés, civilisations* 16, 5 (1961): 977–986.
2. Léo Moulin, *L'Europe à table: Introduction à une psychosociologie des pratiques alimentaires* (Paris–Bruxelles: Elsevier Séquoia, 1975), 63.
3. Claude Fischler, "Food, Self and Identity," *Social Science Information* 27, 2 (1988): 275–292.
4. Jean-Pierre Poulain, *Sociologies de l'alimentation: Les mangeurs et l'espace social alimentaire* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2002).
5. Ofelia Văduva, *Pași spre sacru: Din etnologia alimentației românești*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Bucharest: Editura Etnologică, 2011), 5.
6. Ibid.
7. Angelica Marinescu, *Sociologia alimentației: Teorii, perspective și tendințe contemporane* (Bucharest: Tritonic, 2016), 120.
8. J.-P. Corbeau, apud Marinescu.
9. Angela Brașoveanu and Roman Rybaleov, *Moldova: Oameni, locuri, bucătărie și vin* (Chișinău: Cartier, 2018).
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### **Abstract**

#### **Moldovan Cuisine in Search of Identity**

The subject of the gastronomical identity of culture has become more and more popular in the recent decades, especially in the context of migration and the agglomeration of a sense of identity. In this article we aim to examine the gastronomic identity, the circumstances of building contemporary Moldovan cuisine and the influences that have left their mark on recipes and food processing techniques. We also consider it necessary to point out the contribution of ethnologists in the process of science researching traditional gastronomy. In the second half of the study we have described the modern methods in which the traditional cuisine is showcased in the international arena and the significant contribution of the diaspora in the process. We established that the most efficient promoting methods are the cookbooks, culinary blogs and specialty restaurants.

### **Keywords**

food, gastronomic identity, cookbook, culinary blog, cultural heritage, Moldovan cuisine