

**TRADITIONAL CUISINE OF FOREST LAND REGION,
HUNEDOARA COUNTY**

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***Abstract:** Culinary specificity's study of the Forest Land region reveals an area with a unique gastronomy, little explored, but with huge potential. The dishes have a special taste and are obtained from few ingredients, from their own farms. Although it is an isolated area, the local women have created tasty dishes, convincing future generations to prepare them and carry on the traditions. In this region of Hunedoara county everything is a cycle starting from the animals and their well-being to give good productions of milk, meat and eggs to the agricultural works that are carried out in a natural and classic way without introducing agricultural equipments.*

***Key words:** gastronomy, traditional dishes, Forest Land*

INTRODUCTION

Hunedoara is a county in Transylvania, part of the West Development Region of Romania. Hunedoara County is located on the middle course of the Mures River, near the Apuseni Mountains (N), Oraștiei and Sureanu (SE), Retezat-Godeanu, Valcan and Parang (S) and Poiana Rusca (S-W). The most important rivers of the area are Mures, Strei, Raul Mare, Crisul Alb, and Jiu. The extensive depressions of Hateg and Zarand are located within the county [1,2,3].

Between the mountainous area of the Poiana Ruscă Mountains and the peripheral depressions, there is a relief of hills with altitudes between 200-300 m. In this area is defined the Forest Land region, whose locals have contributed over the centuries to the development of the zone by practicing an original agriculture, when shaping the hills by terracing them [10]. This county is an "ethnographic island" where archaic folk culture has been preserved, extremely original and differentiated from that of neighbouring regions. The main features of this culture are: the location of settlements on hillsides, agricultural cultivation on terraced hills, the lack of pottery, specific costumes (especially for women) and the language [8,9].

The villages of the Forest Land are located between the Mureș and Cernei Basins (figure 1). A peculiarity of the land is the deeply humanized landscape, to the realization of which generations of local residents have contributed. The organization is first of all what makes this land unique: up on the hilltops, the village surrounded by gardens, below the grain fields arranged in terraces, followed by hayfields, then the pastures and finally down the forest, at the foot of the hill [6,10].

The Forest Land is an area different from other regions, surrounded by a long history, customs and preserved traditions kept over time by its people. Compared to many of Hunedoara County today's rural areas, this land has remained untouched by the changes carried by ordinary daily life or the widespread phenomenon of pollution [4]. Since 1681 when 30 villages were inventoried, there is an uninterrupted settlement and a proper organization, having a "pârcălab" (administrator of the villages). Each village has its own

colours, language and customs. On the feast day when they meet, at Nedee, everyone knew the originating village of the people which meet [4,5].

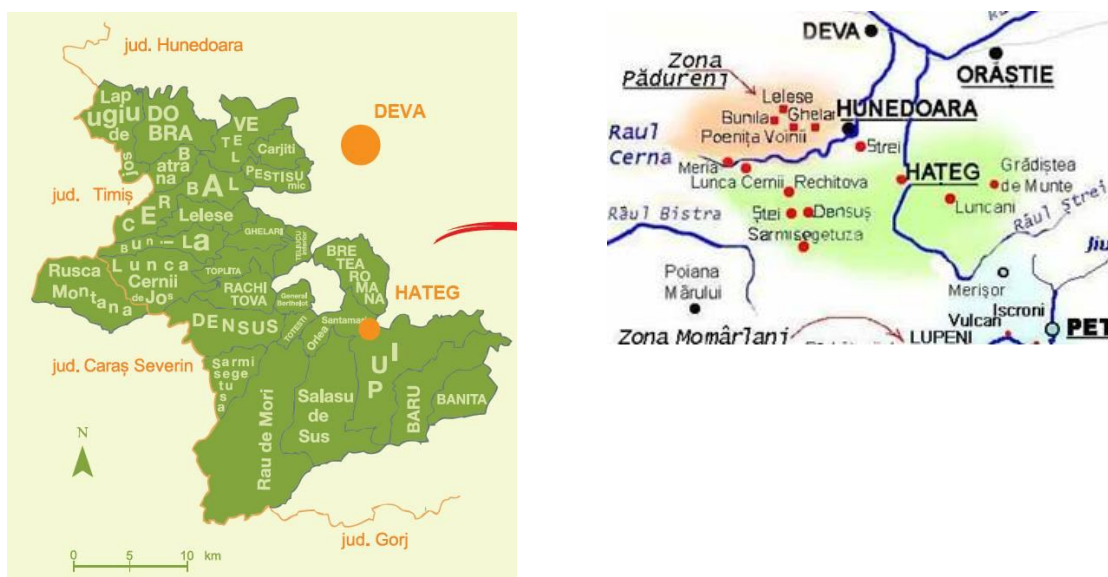


Figure 1. Forest Land

Source: <https://www.tinutulpadurenilor.eu/p/tinutul-padurenilor-prezentare.html>

It can be said that this is a fairy-tale land set on the peaks of the Poiana Ruscă mountains named the land of the Paduren (Land of forest people). The local people and the food that ensured their daily life have remained in the same note of simplicity and traditional good taste with the passage of time. The dishes and culinary preparations often have a mostly lacto-vegetarian structure, being made from natural and particularly tasty ingredients. All this, woven together, creates a beautiful story where the food is tasty, the ambience welcoming and friendly, and the natural setting is a wonderful one [5,7].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Romanian gastronomy has unmistakable elements of identity. Ancient procedures for baking bread, preserving and combining food, the way food is prepared, have been preserved to this day.

This paper highlights the originality of the culinary customs found in the Forest Land of Hunedoara County. The study is based on the collection of information directly from local elders and from various monographic documents specific to Batrana, Poienița Voinii, Dabaca, Toplița and Poiana Rachitelii localities.

For food preparation the villagers used three types of facilities: the *căloniu*, an open hearth raised to a height of 40-50 cm, on top of which was the *băbura*, a pyramidal basket built from the interweaving of reeds glued with a layer of thick earth that, at the upper end, went out into the attic where the bacon, sausages, bones with pork, along with its head and legs, were smoked. The oven and *țest* was placed on the hot hearth of the *căloniu* and bread and hominy were baked under it [6,9].

Foresters being people from disadvantaged areas and with few possibilities, the main ingredients were mostly those obtained from animals or from the garden. The most used ingredient is the lard also used in the *rântăș* for zama (soup). For fasting meals they used different broths containing tambura (pumpkin seed broth) and cir (wheat flour stew with water) [6]. Other frequently used ingredients are: crumpeni (boiled potatoes) consumed especially during fasting periods, cisalița by bran, moare (cabbage juice), corn

flour, eggs and beans. Cow's milk is used to make zămatișa (sweet cheese), sour milk and butter [8,9].

RESEARCH RESULTS

The local gastronomy of the Forest Land is characterized in particular by the forest pies whose origin is not known, though the forest people say that they date back to the time of the Dacians. Other region products are dairy products (milk, cheese), beef, honey, blueberry and raspberry jam, mushrooms, etc. Traditional food in the area is potato soup, lamb soup and roast lamb, sausages, potato stew with meat and pies [11].

Sour milk with hominy baked. This kind of food is especially eaten in the morning. It is made from milk left to ferment on top of the stove and then mixed with cow's milk cream, accompanied by baked hominy. Along with these, scrambled eggs with *jumeri* (melted bacon) are also served.

White soup is among the basic dishes of the forest people based on boiled potatoes to which are added salty sheep's cheese, cow's milk cream and beaten egg. Milk can also be added to the soup.

Lamb bortsch with *rântaș* is a delicacy for foresters. The meat and onions are added over the lard and once they are cooked, the water and potatoes are also added. The secret of this soup is the *rântaș* made from flour, sour cream and egg. It is a dish that the sheep breeders enjoyed as a rule, a soup that is served at the Easter meal by all the foresters [6].

Cricala is a mixture of onions sautéed in lard or oil with a little salt, pepper and wheat flour. It is served with baked hominy.

Sarmale cu păsat (stuffed cabbage with ground corn) is a dish similar to the traditional dish, where the rice is replaced with păsat (large ground corn) and meat or vegetables, supplemented instead of meat if its fasting. These stuffed cabbages were prepared for the festive days, and served on Sundays and holidays.

Reitasi is a preparation based on leavened dough. The dough sheet, similar to a pie sheet, is greased with melted butter and on top sprinkled with sugar. The dough sheet is rolled into a cylinder, which is then rolled out, rolled again and fried in butter. This dish was usually prepared by housewives from the leftover dough after making the forest pies.

Pițărei are sweet rolls, which are composed of wheat flour, sugar, water, butter or oil, yeast, eggs and after removing from the oven they are smeared with honey and ground walnut [6].

Scoverzi with **scrob** have a composition similar to pancakes, except its added fresh cheese sweetened with sugar and mixed with egg (scrob), once made on one side. They were usually prepared for the days when the villagers were doing "claca" (a custom of gathering several villagers to help each other with agricultural work).

Forest pies are one of the recipes handed down from generation to generation. The famous forest pies are an invitation to discover these places. They are prepared on Saturday evenings for the Sunday meal, but are not to be missed at any event, weddings, christenings, funerals and celebrations throughout the year [14].

The ingredients are: wheat flour, sugar, salt, eggs, sheep or cow cheese and dill. The dough made from flour and yeast is left to rise and the stuffing or scrobul, as the people from the region call it, is made by mixing two types of cheese (kneaded cheese and sweet cheese or zamatisa), a spoonful of cornflour and fat milk cream, then eggs and optionally chopped dill. The dough sheet filled with the mixture described above is browned in a pan [14].

In 2019, the recipe of the forest cheese pies was included in the collection Romania's culinary heritage (volume 2). Also in 2019, a Forest Pies Festival was organized in Poiana Răchitelii [12,13,15].

Periciori. This dessert is another local delicacy, sweetened with jam made from various fruits from the local orchard. They are made from a dough based on flour, yeast, sugar, milk, eggs, and are filled with liptari, a plum marmalade.

In the Forest Land, there are some traditions that are still preserved during the Christmas holidays. On Christmas Eve, they prepare **Craciunita**, a special bread made of flour, yeast, egg, salt, oil, sugar, lukewarm water and nuts or raisins [5,6].

The **Christmas cake** is another dish that is a must for the inhabitants of the Forest, a cake given to carolers as alms for the spirits of the dead. The Christmas tree can take different shapes, from circles and horseshoes to stars, representing the sun, moon and stars. It is made from a leavened dough of flour, yeast, salt, sugar, oil and sprinkled with ground nuts or poppy seeds [6].

The staple drink on villagers' tables is **vinars**. This alcoholic beverage is obtained by distilling the fermented mixture of certain fruits and was used at weddings, christenings, funerals and also after meals, as they believed that it "hardens" them (gives them strength to work), at agricultural work. Also, when they went anywhere they served their drinks to anyone they met. But the production of this alcoholic beverage was quite difficult, being different from year to year depending on how ripe the fruit was (it is made from pears, apples, grapes, cherries but the basic one is from plums) [6].

CONCLUSIONS

What really characterizes the cooking in the studied land is to a large extent found in the agricultural habits of the locals: they cultivate fruits, vegetables and cereals without using pesticides as the soil is of very good quality. When requested they fertilise the soil only with natural fertilizers (manure), and they let sheep and cows graze peripheral pastures along the valleys and forests.

We consider that the traditional dishes of the Hunedoara county Forest Land are part of the preserved gastronomic heritage, sustained almost strictly over time, to which with the passage of time no substantial changes have been made.

This gastronomic experience is intended to be a small part of what it means to collect, recognize, produce and keep not only local but also national traditions. These culinary elements have an immeasurable value, they are the ones that have helped to maintain the lives of the inhabitants, to keep them healthy and not least those that have brought them joy at meals with their families.

Although less known abroad, the Romanian cuisine always enjoys honest appreciation and enthusiasm among tourists from all over the world, surprised to find on their plates a dish perhaps known and whose taste is much different thanks to Romanian spices and cooking methods.

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