

RESEARCH REGARDING TRADITIONAL AGRI-FOOD PRODUCTS FROM THE BANAT MOUNTAINS

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Abstract. *The Romanian rural economy in general, and rural tourism - an important component of sustainable rural development - in particular, have been confronted in the last three decades with the strongest international economic and social trends of globalisation and standardisation, by taking over and generalising agricultural, food and gastronomic practices, procedures and processes laid down in European framework regulations. Parallel to the phenomenon of globalisation, standardisation, phenomena opposite to globalisation and standardisation have also emerged in many countries, regions, areas and communities, areas of economic and social-cultural activities, tendencies of return, promotion and expansion of traditional, identity-based activities. This phenomenon has become increasingly evident in the last two or three decades in European countries such as Italy, France, Spain, Greece, Austria and, more recently, in the Eastern European countries that joined the EU after 2005 and 2007. In this paper we aim to present the possibilities of knowledge and extension of the production of some traditional products in the households of two areas in the South of Mountainous Banat - the Danube Plain and the Almăj Valley - and their economic effects on rural tourism in these areas.*

Keywords: *development, rural tourism, traditional products, Banat mountain*

INTRODUCTION

From a landscape point of view, the countryside of the two areas is incomparably more beautiful and appreciated by many inhabitants, thanks to their natural structure, their well-tended and airy landscape, their flora, fauna and biodiversity. The peace, quiet, climate, clean air, soothing, socially calm landscape are characteristics of the quality of this rural habitat. The rural way of life, traditions and customs together form the traditional local folk culture of the two areas. The treasures accumulated over a long period of time are also a highly attractive feature for country life, for spending a certain amount of time in the village or for rural tourism. Social and cultural life, characteristic of the countryside, is an unparalleled heritage, an element which, together with economy and ecology, gives the true dimension and value to the Danube and Almanjan countryside [4,5,6].

Rural tourism, Agrotourism. The extremely diverse, largely well-preserved rural landscape, the country life with significant traditional components, the agricultural and forestry potential of the Danube Gap and Almăj Valley areas, the specific architecture of the rural environment are factors that favour rural tourism. Rural tourism, unlike other forms of tourism, must be 'diffuse', imperceptible from the point of view of the usual component, based on the natural, folkloric, architectural and gastronomic heritage specific to agri-tourism areas.

To date, although there are some positive signs of expansion of agrotourism, there are still some restrictive factors blocking the expansion of rural tourism in Romania in general, and in the two areas studied, to the capacity offered by landscape and traditional culture. The limiting factors are the *infrastructure* (roads, railways, tourist port infrastructure on the Danube, fast and reliable banking, postal and telephone services), modest or unacceptable *housing conditions* even for less demanding tourists, offered by most peasant households, *insufficient education* of the householders (minimal knowledge

of tourism, lack of knowledge of modern languages) and the *safety, personal security* of tourists, etc.[1,7,8,9].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The traditional products we present are fig jam and fig brandy in the Danube Plain and plum brandy, prunes and plum jam in the Almăj Valley, and are obtained from the raw material - the fruit - from two fruit species: the fig (*Ficus carica* L) from the Danube Plain and the plum (*Prunus domestica* L) from the Almaju Valley [2,3].



Figure 1. Delimitation of the mountain area under investigation in Caras-Severin county and Mehedinți county

Source: *Harta turistică a Banatului Montan. București: Editura RoMania, 2007 [14]*

RESEARCH RESULTS

Traditional fig products from the Danube Gorge

The fig tree, a characteristic tree species of the Mediterranean and sub-Mediterranean area in Romania, has a limited extension (probably a few localities, in small plantations or in small trees in the Danube Clisura), southern Dobrogea and other small areas of Romania.

According to F. Stănică et al the fig tree was brought to Romania by the Greeks (probably in Dobrogea), by the Romans in the Danube Gap area in antiquity and by the Turks, starting in the 15th century, on the island of Ada-Kaleh.

The fig plantation of about 1600 square meters (80 trees planted at a distance of 4x5m) from which the two traditional products (jam and țuica) are obtained in the Danube Plain, is located on the banks of the Danube, in the commune of Șvinița (11 km downstream of Berzasca and 12 km upstream of Șvinița) in the place called Jlebura Dunării.

F. Stănică et al describe the morphological, pomological and biochemical characteristics of two fig genotypes grown at Jlebura Dunării (Figure 2).

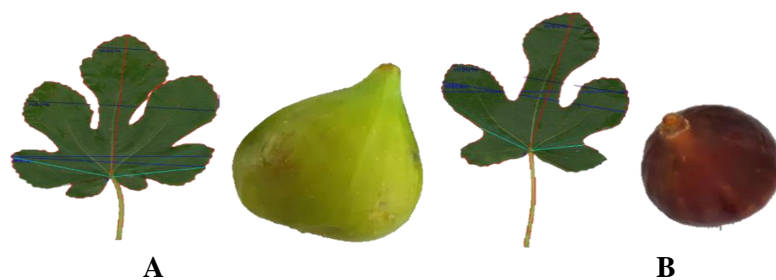


Figure 2. Fig genotypes in the Danube Belt

Source: Stănică, F. et al [9,10].

The first genotype (A), with more vigorous growth, large, developed crown, has brown fruit at maturity, smaller size (about 25-27 mm diameter) and high sugar content.

Both genotypes flower around 5-15 May (depending on the weather), ripening starts in the second part of July and lasts until the end of October. In principle, the fruit is harvested in three harvests (45-50% first harvest, 35-40% second harvest, 15-20% third harvest). The second genotype (B) has a short stem, a shorter and more branched crown, larger fruit (50-55 mm) and slightly lower sugar content than the first genotype [9,10,11].

Grandma's fine fig jam. The fruit is ripened in the late ripening stage to full ripeness, light brown colour, without the fruit being bent. From the freshly picked figs, select the healthy ones with the stalk well detached from the stalk, then carefully cut off the stalk (stalk), without hurting the fruit.

The fruit is washed as follows: placed in a sieve, it is immersed in the bowl of water, without water running directly into it so as not to crack or break the fruit.

Weighing fruit. After washing, leave for 10-15 min to drain the water, weigh out 2 kg per portion. *Be careful* not to exceed 2 kg per portion.

Ingredient. To 1 kg of fruit, add 1 kg of sugar, 200 ml of cold water and 1 sachet of lemon salt. The preparation takes three days.

Boiling (first). Bring water and sugar to a boil, rapid heat, skim gently until milky, crystal clear and add lemon salt. Remove from the heat, add the figs, previously washed and zested, then bring the pot to a boil over medium heat. Throughout the boiling time, do not stir, only shake the pot gently. Simmer for 15 minutes, turn off the heat and cover. Place a damp gauze cloth over the lid and tie it over the lid so that nothing gets into the mixture.

The second boiling is done the next day for 15 minutes (after the fruit has drawn the syrup) in the same way: a little hotter at first, always shaking to avoid catching, and leave to rest in the same way until the next day.

Ingredients: On the third day prepare two grated lemons, diced, seeded, one vanilla stick diced, one sachet of vanilla sugar. Put the pot on the heat and after it has heated up well add all the ingredients, shake the pot and let it simmer for 15 minutes. After 10 minutes it is important to watch how well the mixture binds. To do this, spoon a little of the juice onto a small plate, making sure to make a dividing line at the bottom of the plate.

When removed from the heat, cover the pot with a wet, well-squeezed gauze and tighten the gauze tightly over the pot. Do not cover the pot with a lid.

Leave the mixture to cool for 12 hours.

The jars are *filled in* such a way that the fruit is covered with the jelly (not left uncovered on top). Seal the lids, wash the jars thoroughly in an upright position so that they do not stick to the shelf. From this quantity you get 7-8 jars of 400g.

Fig jam for cakes. Figs that are more cracked or of second quality can be prepared as jam for cakes.

Quantities: 5 kg figs, 4 hg sugar, 1 litre water, 3-4 lemons cut in quarters, 2 vanilla sticks, cut in half, then halved, 4 sachets lemon salt, 4 sachets vanilla sugar.

The first boiling is done in the same way as for the fine jam.

The next day, after the jam has started to boil, add the ingredients and simmer for about 20-30 minutes. The mixture can be stirred gently, just on the bottom of the pot, to loosen any deposits. When it is bound remove the lemon and vanilla pieces, place the gauze and put in the jars. From this composition 15-16 jars of 400g are obtained.

Fig brandy. The fruit is fully ripe, when it is brown and tends to bend, at which stage the quantity of accumulated sugars is maximum. The fruit ripens in two or three stages, depending on the ripeness of the fruit.

Fermentation of the fruit is carried out in 200 kg pots (two barrels) placed in the shade. Due to the high sugar content (25-26%) and the high temperatures (30-35°C) in the shade, full alcoholic fermentation takes about 8-10 days (without any additional sugar), after which the juice must be prepared (boiled). If the fermented fruit (in local terminology *comina*) is left for longer, unethical secondary fermentation occurs, which is detrimental to the quality of the spirit.

Preparing the still (boiler). The cauldron is made of solid food-grade copper by local cauldrons with a capacity of 100 l/barrel. Before the first boiling and after each boiling the boiler is washed and the still is rinsed with vinegar.

The boiling of the spirit is done over a low heat to avoid still entrapment or over-evaporation, both of which are detrimental to quality. A mash takes about 3-3.5 hours. The first half litre is necessarily discarded as it may also contain a methylated fraction. The spirit flows from the cooled still into the water pot at a rate the size of a matchstick. Checking that the sparge has ceased is done by throwing a spoonful of the spirit into the fire until the liquid no longer makes a flame. The yield is about 8-10 l of spirit at 50° alcoholic strength per 100 kg of wine. The spirit is kept for half a year in a glass vessel, then transferred to an acacia vessel, where it remains for a further half a year, until a straw-yellow colour (similar to cognac) is obtained. The mash obtained at 50-55° can be normalised to 40° with the addition of distilled water before transferring to wooden vessels.

Traditional products obtained from plum cultivation in the Almăj Valley. We have few writings about the patriarchal life and promotion of some traditional agro-food products in some closed areas such as, for example, the Almăjului Valley (fig. 4) in the mountain Banat, which we present below. Older people are still living sources, through whose memories of childhood and youth it is possible to reconstruct, in part, traditional patriarchal life or, in other words, to bring back to the present day snatches of traditional patriarchal life, because this life - in integrum - is almost impossible to reconstruct. Why? Because the 20th century, in Romania in general and in Almăj in particular, was the century of transition from an archaic, patriarchal type of life to a different type of life, the modern life of the second half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, which 60-70 years ago was unimaginable.

The life of the people of Almería before the installation of communism and in the first years of this period (until collectivisation in 1962) can be broadly defined as the traditional life of agropastoral societies. In contrast to the Banat Plain, for example, this characteristic of life, as well as the geographical configuration of the Almăj Valley and its communication isolation, delayed modernisation in Almăj. While in the Banat Plain the embryos of agricultural modernisation appeared at the end of the 19th century, accelerating

in the first part of the 20th century, in the Almăj, patriarchal life, through agriculture and traditional shepherding, continued for another half century.

Regarding **plum culture**, it is accepted by horticultural historians as one of the oldest fruit species in Romania. The Turkish traveller Elia Celebi wrote about the beautiful plum crops found in the hilly area of Banat in the 16th century and the Italian historian Francesco Grisellini in the 17th century.

Traditional in Almăj were the classical plum plantations in the communal fields, granted to the peasants since the time of the Community of Property organized according to the Habsburg model, where, in most cases, they also built their summer huts. The plum trees grown in the Patriarchal Almshouse (but also in part today) belong to four local populations: **summer aubergine**, very productive, juicy, with a high sugar content, specific to the production of țuja (grape brandy), **summer yellow** (cork tree or boboloașă) for țuja (but of poorer quality), **autumn aubergine**, with a higher consistency, the flesh of which separates from the stone (bone) when ripe, suitable for jam, jam, prunes and liqueurs, and **round autumn yellow** for liqueurs.

Local plum populations are adapted to local conditions, planted at heights of 500-800 m, with shorter growing seasons, highly resistant to diseases and pests, easy to maintain. In fact, every year, the Almería peasants did only one work in the plantations, clearing the dry branches, and the more scrupulous ones, in spring they pruned the stems. The peasants who were more careful in maintaining their plum trees and those who had their plantations or their plantations were located near the sheep threshing floors, in spring, when the trees were pruned, they fertilised each tree with a basket of sheep or bull dung. The manure was administered around the stem by embedding it in the soil in a round hole about 1-1.25 m in diameter. Digging the trees had another advantage, as it allowed water to infiltrate more easily to the roots of the trees. The effects of tree digging were more evident in dry years.

The local plum populations in Almăj have a negative characteristic - the periodicity of fruiting, but which the Almadjans accept, saying: "as God wills and as the year is, good or bad". The years rich in harvests in the patriarchal Almăj, in the peasant's mentality, were the years with many plums, the rest of the years were considered poor, however good the harvests of corn, wheat, fodder, vegetables were.

Plum brandy. The beginning of the plum harvest was a celebration. The whole family, from young to old, from the youngest to the oldest, grandparents and great-grandparents, took part in the plum-picking, which sometimes lasted up to two weeks in families with large estates. The picking was done when fully ripe by shaking with hands and alum sticks and gathering in wicker baskets or buckets, then concentrating in wagon crates lined with straw to eliminate the loss of ripe plum juice. Every evening or when the crate was full, the plums were poured into large truncated cone-shaped fir pots called steazuri (figure 3), prepared in advance by washing, filling, mending and sealing with pappus. As the plums were harvested at the beginning of August, fermentation began immediately and lasted 2-3 weeks.



Figure 3. Steazides

In order to learn about the processes (technologies) used to prepare traditional products, we interviewed current producers who use traditional methods of preparation or former producers, who recorded, in writing or through witnesses (family members or close relatives - owners or workers on the fig and plum plantations), their working processes as recorded over time.

The roasting in Almăj started at the end of August. In plum-rich years, and among peasants with many "căzane", the boiling could last until before Christmas, sometimes even after Saint John. The traditional boilers in the villages of Almería were located on the rivers, so that the cooling water for the boiler was provided by catching and feeding the coolers with the help of the gardener's wheel or other ingenious systems made by the Almería people. The roasting of the wicker was an art that consisted in "leading" the fire in the copper cauldron (with a thick bottom) and, at the same time, moments of joy and merriment for the hunters, for the one who was, in line, at the roasting, but, especially, for the visitors of the cauldron (the pilgrims of the village who, sometimes, were not few in number). In the majority of Almería households, the liquor was 'broken' at a strength of 32°-34°, maximum 36°, with the exception of the profripte (pre-fried) liquor, turned the second time, which was made up to around 55°, but in much smaller quantities, this liquor being used more, according to the Almería people, as 'miluțână', for rubbing people and sometimes also cold animals, etc.

The cauldron, lula or luleaua (serpentine, alembic) were made by local laiezes (gypsies) from good quality brass. Although there were many boilermakers in Almăj, few of them were skilled or, more precisely, did not cheat at making boiling cauldrons and alembics. Boiler cauldrons had different capacities, ranging from 40 litres for household boilers to 250-500 litres for commercial boilers.

The production of liquor in the Almasj Valley was an activity that brought income to the Almasj households, by selling on the market the surplus quantities for their own consumption. Over time, the production of liquor by the inhabitants of Almajj reached a level of great refinement and diversification. In addition to plum brandy, which accounted for the largest share of production in most households, the people of Almería ended up using almost any kind of fruit, grapes or other plant products, mainly cereals, in their brandy.

Very high quality jam, particularly sought after by consumers, was produced from cherries picked from mountain cherry orchards or from cherries scraped from the forest (sweet or bitter bird cherries). Also, the farmers who had plantations or trees (in the garden, in the salads, in the orchard, etc.) of apple, quince, apricot, peach and pear trees produced the famous apple, pear, quince, apricot, grape, peach and mulberry jam, and less frequently, berry jam (raspberry, blackberry, strawberry, even from the boxwood in years without fruit). Also, in the years without fruit, the people of Almería made "rana", i.e. from cereals (most often from ground and fermented corn), although the quality of this was doubtful and difficult to accept (only if necessary) by the refined taste of the people of Almería.

Preparation of prunes and jam. From the autumn plums, when fully ripe, the almjans prepared pecmez (breadcrumbs) or magiun, without added sugar (or, in cool years, with the addition of smaller quantities), plum jam and prunes (fried). The preparation of roasted plums requires a more 'refined' preparation technology, as the making of the leash from split hazel, the glazing and the driving of the pitcher were the 'key' to successful preparation.

The layout of the hearth was on a sloping ground, level enough to ensure horizontality, placing the slab at a height of about 40-50 cm above the hearth rim. The art of drying plums consisted in respecting the phases of drying. In the first phase of drying

the plums (de foițeți, in Almería terminology), the fire could be a little hotter until the plums swelled, but without cracking. Then, in the second phase, the fire is tempered to ensure the slow loss of water from the plums and drying to the consistency needed for preservation.

The roasted plums were kept, at first, in a thin layer in the attic in the shade, then in a thicker layer in the attic in buckets or wooden baskets, in a thicker layer, but with periodic checking and turning. If the plums were too dry before consumption, they were put in water or in liquor for a short time and only in the quantities that could be consumed daily or weekly [12,13,15,16].

CONCLUSIONS

Rural tourism and agritourism, through their specificity of internal agri-food consumption in the household where the food is produced, have an important function of economic empowerment of peasant households. In the case of foreign tourists, who spend their holidays in guesthouses, rural tourism and agritourism are the form of "internal" export of agri-food products. Since most of the food consumed in agritourism comes from the household's own production, it makes agritourism activity highly profitable and prices for agritourism services below the prices charged in other forms of tourism. Calculations carried out by the specialist tourist services show that the price of an agrotourism lunch in all agrotourism guesthouses is 40-50% lower than a lunch served in a restaurant in the Horeca tourist hotel network (at the same classification level). The explanation for this price difference is simple. The price of agricultural products obtained and consumed in the agri-tourism guesthouse (farm) does not include commercial additions, VAT, excise duties, transport, storage and preservation costs, etc. Meat, meat products, eggs, cheese, milk, butter, jams, jam, jam, prunes, pickles, mushrooms, teas, wine, brandy, sour cherries, blueberries, etc., prepared according to traditional processing methods, are delivered from the agri-tourism farms' own production directly to the table of the rural tourist consumer. On the other hand, rural tourism services (accommodation, services, etc.) do not incur indirect additional costs (royalties, commissions, etc.) which make the price of the agri-tourism product much lower than the price of the urban tourism product. Agro-tourism policies must encourage the advantages of rural tourism, in terms of tax exemptions, taxes, and a reduction in the overall tax burden, in order to lower prices and maintain traditional customers (urban dwellers with more modest incomes, foreigners keen to learn about local Romanian traditions, urban children, etc.).

In the cases presented, the production of traditional products in the Danube Plain and the Almăj Valley are attractions for those who want to get to know "country life" with all its special values: participating in the harvesting of figs and plums, making traditional jam, prunes and magiun and spending a night in a "cauldron" making jam, and above all, serving special, high quality and affordable traditional local products.

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