

Nada Matijaško  
Museum of Nutrition "Podravka", Koprivnica  
Nives Rittig-Beljak  
Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research, Zagreb

UDK 392.8-053.6(497.5)  
*Conference paper / Izlaganje sa skupa*  
Received / Primljeno: 26.09.2003.  
Accepted / Prihvaćeno: 02.12.2003.

# Role of Traditional Meals in the Menu of Croatian Teenagers<sup>1</sup>

*The paper analyses the diet of the teenager population who stay in Croatian pupils' hostels during school education, focusing especially on the role of traditional nutrition. By processing pupil responses, the authors attempted to show what children think today about their own diet, the culture of food and the role of traditional dishes in their life and the life of the community.*

Key words: traditional food, teenagers, Croatia

The process of growing up has not been given enough attention by ethnologists. It is also true that one can analyse and criticise a clearly formed and stable attitude more easily than one in the process of change. On the other hand, a whole *anthropology of upbringing and education* fights for the inclusion in the government's research plans, of a whole series of problems that classical ethnology never had to deal with, such as: the nature of cultural transmission processes, the role of upbringing and education on changing cultural patterns, and the relationship between identity and education.

## Survey materials and methods

Instead of waiting to see those initiatives accomplished by the government, the authors, who are ethnologists, have cooperated in a youth research programme with researchers of youth nutrition, food chemists and nutritionists. For the purposes of our particular study we worked together with Jasenka Gajdoš who included our ethnological questions in her survey<sup>2</sup> which involved the reactions of 15-18 year old

---

<sup>1</sup> Paper from: 14th International Ethnological Food Research Conference, Basel and Vevey, sept. 30. - oct. 6. 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Nives Rittig-Beljak was the initiator of this paper and the author of ethnological questions included in the survey on nutrition styles of young people in Croatia.

students to food supplied in hostels for secondary school children all over Croatia. After Jasenka Gajdoš had interpreted the results she needed as statistical data for her doctoral dissertation, she handed over to the authors a great number of surveys handwritten by the students, which gave us direct contact with respondents' opinions. We extracted the responses which appeared to be seriously written, then chose the hostels where there were pupils from various regions, and by using the replies of some two hundred sample respondents got a reasonable representation of the territory of Croatia in this way. The survey was completed two years ago. The questionnaires included three groups of questions. The first two groups had an indirect effect on the third, which we call the 'ethnological questions'.

The first group included questions on the time spent daily in studying, rest and physical activities and included questions about smoking habits. The second group dealt with nutrition in the hostel and the differences between food at the hostel and food at home. The third group explored how well the respondents knew the traditional food of the region from which they originated, and how much, if at all, it was present in the menu of Croatian teenagers.

## General Survey Results

As we had anticipated, the pupils who lived in the hostels usually came from villages (60.13%), smaller towns (37.91%), and only 1.96% were from larger towns. The pupils spent on average 4.48 hours a day studying, sitting and writing. They slept on average 7.89 hours a night, and 40.88% sleep on average for 62.82 minutes during the day, also. Apart from the reading necessary in the process of studying, 62% of the respondents read in their free time also, on average 40 minutes a day, while the remaining 38% did not do so at all. 45.98% of respondents were engaged in sports and spent on average 2.98 hours a week in a sports activity. Other leisure activities were not as common: only 29.19% of pupils were engaged in singing, playing a musical instrument, acting in a drama group, or in similar pastimes. Such activities also got less of their time: only 52.35 minutes a week. 24.83% of pupils did not answer this question.

Almost all respondents (only 6.56% excepted) walked on average 60.39 minutes a day. However, our survey also showed that no less than 30.65% of secondary school pupils smoked, on average 12.44 cigarettes a day. As regards food, we found that students generally ate all three meals at the hostels where they stayed. They sometimes consumed just two meals there because they did not have enough time, or a meal collided with school, or other obligations, or simply because they did not like the food. Sometimes they avoided breakfast in order to sleep longer, but one should think twice when five out of twenty-two respondents in the District of Karlovac answered that they ate only breakfast in the hostel because it was 'edible' - a statement which does not really speak well of other meals.

Only around 15% of the respondents answered that they have similar food patterns at home and at the hostel. A significant number of respondents (57.66%) eat more fruit

at home, and 45% drink more milk there. The provision of fruit and milk in supplement were most often quoted as disadvantages of eating in hostels. Around 50% of the respondents stated that the following kind of food were more often consumed at home than in the hostel: fresh and healthy food, meat, sweets, cakes, vegetables, more regional specialties, more ham and eggs, or generally 'more of everything'.

Fruit, milk and dairy products are an important part of the nutrition of secondary school pupils. Only 2.18% of the teenagers in question did not eat fruit at all, and only 2.91% never drank milk. 61.31% of the respondents ate fruit every day if it was served with a meal at the hostel, and 35.76% of pupils ate fruit even if it was not served there - the students then bought fruit. Furthermore, 56.20% of the respondents drank milk and consumed dairy products when they were a part of the meal at the hostel, and 40.87% bought milk, chocolate milk, yoghurt, fruit yoghurt, sour cream and other products if they were not served with daily meals in the hostel.

The grading of meals provided by the respondent showed how the perceived quality of a meal varied from hostel to hostel. At any rate, we can state that the grade for any given meal was not lower than 'good', but also not higher than 'very good'.

The grading of the taste and appearance of particular foodstuff and courses of a meal (soup, side dish, meat, salad, desserts and beverages) shows great differences, in relation to the different hostels. Desserts and beverages got best grades in general. For example, the taste and appearance of soup in the District of Lika and Senj got grades ranging from 2.43 to 2.64, whereas in the District of Karlovac it got grades of between 4.06 and 4.21.

The respondents ate on average 3.56 slices of bread with a meal. Around 44.64% ate bread between meals (around three slices a day). Most of the teenagers found the quantities of sweet food insufficient at the hostels, and they compensated for this by eating food between meals: 63.10% of the respondents stated that they ate mostly sweet food between meals (chocolate, biscuits, ice cream, cakes, bread and jam), while 53.40% ate mostly salty food (chips, salt sticks, sandwiches, bread and patty), and 22.33% ate both sweet and salty food between meals. 29.12% of the respondents ate mostly fruit between main meals, and 14.56% only drank water or juice between meals.

When asked about the possibility of choosing an ideal menu, the pupils were rather surprised and their answers showed rather moderate requirements; we concluded that they must have answered the question bearing in mind the real chances of their suggestions being accepted: 22.40% thought they should be able to choose between two or more side dishes, 41.60% wished to have a choice of two completely different meals, 25.60% wished to be able to choose between several completely different meals, and only 5.60% wished to have at least one vegetarian meal. The pupils did not use the chance to suggest meal venues; only one of them suggested 'more different foods' and one suggested 'pizza'. 4,80% of pupils did not answer this question.

According to the replies, daily nutrition in the hostels is not sufficient in relation to the following foods, according to the following percentages of respondents:

fruit (36.50%); milk (13.13%); sweets: desserts, cakes, chocolate-hazelnut spread, ice cream, biscuits, jam (15.32%); beverages: juice, various beverages, and a drink along with lunch (13.13%); salty nibbles: chips, crackers, salt sticks (2.92%); salad and vegetables (3.65%); meat (2.92%); French fries (and potatoes) (2.19%); eggs (2.19%); pizza (8.03%) and kebab (1.45%).

The following were mentioned once each as foods that were lacking: fish, patty, *burek* (meat-pie), and Italian pasta, while several respondents answered that there was a lack of 'everything', a lack of 'food', and a lack of 'taste'.

The following foods were mentioned as excessively presented: stewed vegetables (seven replies), and goulash, wine goulash, beans, soup greens, thick soups, soups, potatoes, chicken, mousaka, pasta, gnocchi, spaghetti Bolognese, cabbage, rice, fats and fatty sausages (five times each). Nevertheless, most respondents argued that there was no nutritional surplus in pupils' hostels.

We now come to the third group of answers - the survey initiated by the ethnologists. The answers to these questions should make us familiar with the nutritional patterns of secondary school pupils in their homes and at the same time in the places from which they originate.

The survey showed that home-cooking by women is still very common - this being the task of a wife and mother as a matter of conventional wisdom. She is the cook in 92% of cases mentioned by the respondents, while a grandmother is a cook in 3.2% of the cases, and the mother and grandmother cook together in 19.20% of the examples. An aunt also cooks in 3.2% of the responses and she cooks together with the mother or grandmother in 15.20% of the cases. A father was mentioned as the cook only once.

As far as the respondents could tell, the mother, or any other person who does the cooking, uses a printed or handwritten cookbook in only 37.40% of cases. However, they hardly mention the title of any cookbook at all. Furthermore, 84% of the respondents think that their household members do not use recipes presented in TV shows, or they do not know the answer to that question. The exact formulation of the question was: 'Do you or your household members ever try meals shown in TV shows, for example Podravka's recipes?' Podravka, the counterpart of Nestlé or Knorr in Croatia, is the biggest producer of ready-to-serve food and food additives, so we were particularly interested in reasons why the respondents never tried Podravka's recipes, or why they think their household members did not do so. The reasons given were as follows: the TV recipes and methods of preparing food were presented too quickly; the recipes cannot be used because not all the foodstuffs requested were accessible, or one did not own all the necessary equipment. The pupils also generally thought that their household members did not have enough time for watching television; some thought that it was impossible to cook a meal in exactly the way as shown on television, and the biggest number of pupils thought that their mothers or grandmothers were 'excellent cooks' anyhow and did not need television recipes at all. In several cases the respondents emphasized their repulsiveness towards television recipes (and meals): 'They neither try them, nor plan to do so in the future'.

The answers to the questions about who cooks in the family, the use cookbooks and the watching television recipes, arising from the survey, were not in harmony with the experience we had gained through direct contacts with consumers who called Podravka's free telephone line introduced four years ago. We could name this group of respondents the "control group", since they are all adults. First of all, it must be stated that many telephone calls came from men who very often seek information about the products, recipes and everything else connected with the culinary art precisely because they also cook - either because it is their hobby or pleasure, or because they live alone with their children and have to cook for them, or because they are bachelors living alone. In addition, the example of the TV series in which Podravka presented eight recipes and announced the printing of just these recipes in a booklet, showed us how strongly they resounded with the public and surprised even Nada Matijaško, the ethnologist in Podravka. If telephoning Podravka's free telephone line, it was possible to get the recipe booklet and in only two weeks there were around 1,700 calls from people who wanted to order it. The telephone line is open 8 hours a day and during that time some 250 calls can be answered. The free telephone line also monitors the interest of television spectators in relation to recipes. Podravka has been broadcasting the TV recipe series in cycles for twenty-eight years. The recipes require the obligatory use of Vegeta - a food additive and Podravka's most important product - and we had precisely those TV shows in mind in formulating our questionnaire. During the past four years over 3.000 copies of the book "Recipes from Vegeta's Kitchen" have been sold exclusively through Podravka's free telephone line, as well as 1,000 copies of other Podravka's publications. It is, thus, hard to believe that there is such a poor interest in the TV recipes as the survey among the teenagers appeared to show. Their responses seem to stem more from their own low interest in recipes (as well as in cooking), rather than from any poor interest in those matters of other household members who cooked on a regular basis and needed to try to provide something different or even completely new. We would also like to point out that the teenagers, who preferred their mothers' cooking, who did not wish to acknowledge even novelties from such a powerful medium as television, and who did not even have any idea about at least one printed cookbook, expressed a high degree of conservative views in relation to nutrition.

## **Local and Regional Specialities, Guest Meals and Favourite Foods**

Starting with the northwest of Croatia, then moving towards its eastern part, and finally through central Croatia to Istria, the Croatian Littoral and Dalmatia, we analysed how well the teenagers knew local and regional specialities, which meals they would offer to their guests, and which meals were their favourites.

First of all, it has to be stated that 27.37% of the respondents did not name a local or regional specialty, or they stated that they did not know the correct answer to that question. Moreover, the results depended on the number of respondents in partic-

ular regions; in areas where there were more respondents and more local or regional meals, they were normally mentioned.

## Continental Croatia

In the Districts of Međimurje, Varaždin, Krapina and Zagorje in the northwest of Croatia, the pupils named the following foods as regional specialties: *štrukli* 'Međimurje style', and *štrukli* 'Zagorje style', that is *štrukli* which originated either from German Strudel or types of pies, which can be boiled or baked, made into a soup or main course, but also served as a dessert. They may be savoury or sweet, containing plain cheese filling or a more exotic filling of marrow and poppy seeds<sup>3</sup>. In the District of Krapina and Zagorje, the respondents stated more precisely 'soup and *štrukli* 'Zagorje style', because these *štrukli* are cooked in the soup, whereas *štrukli* referring to other parts of Croatia are baked. They also mentioned turkey with *mlinci* - a kind of side dish prepared from fat-free dough, baked, then cooked 'al dente', roast chicken, hard-boiled corn mush, marrow pie, dumplings, and also pizza.

The regional foods of the District of Koprivnica and Križevci is *prge* (a kind of hard cone-shaped cheese), fish stew with paprika, *perica* (cottage-cheese pie), doughnuts filled with jam, *štrukli* and dumplings. One respondent from the District of Bjelovar and Bilogora mentioned shepherd's broth, grilled meat and potatoes as regional foods, and there was no answer for the District of Virovitica and Podravina to this query. The teenagers from the District of Požega and Slavonia found that their region could be characterized by fresh cottage cheese and sour cream, *kulen* - smoke cured meat produced from the best back cuts and cutlets of old pork from which all fatty and connecting tissue had been removed, ham, sausages, baked potato halves, mashed potatoes and various sauces.

The District of Slavonski Brod and Posavina is characterized by *gombucini* (dumplings), *Grenadirmarsch* - boiled dumplings with potatoes - ham, pork shank, shepherd's broth, beans, pork, beef, and fish stew with paprika. In the eastern District of Osijek and Baranja *kulen*, *kulenova seka* ('kulen's sister' - this being a smaller variant, similar, yet prepared differently and not from the same meat as *kulen*), sausages, shepherd's stew and *sarma* (stuffed sauerkraut rolls) are appreciated, whereas the District of Vukovar and Srijem is known for its fish stew with paprika, *kulen*, ham and cakes.

In the District of Zagreb the only culinary specialty mentioned was 'steak Zagreb style'. On the other hand, we had many answers in relation to the two central Croatian districts. In the District of Sisak and Moslavina the regional meals include: goulash, meat stew, fish stew with paprika, *riba na precijep* (fish halves), roast suckling, roast lamb, beans 'Moslavina style', greaves, sausages, *kulen*, turkey steaks, veal, hard-boiled corn mush, plum brandy and wine, beans with sausages, *sarma*, and one

---

<sup>3</sup> Biluš, J., Brkan, B., Ćorić, L., et. al., Croatia at table, Zagreb - Koprivnica 1997, 48-49

respondent even mentioned pizza. In the District of Karlovac, which borders Slovenia to the west, and Bosnia and Herzegovina to the east, the teenage respondents thought the guest might be offered such regional specialties as: prosciutto ham and smoked cheese, roast meat, potato pie, cabbage pie, marrow pie, apple pie, cherry pie, *gibanica* (fresh cheese and egg pie), sauerkraut, beans and cabbage, maize porridge with fresh milk, or, perhaps, *keške*, *pače* - that is aspic, and Bosnian pot (obviously meals of Turkish origin are known well in neighbouring Bosnia), but also bacon and eggs, baked potato halves with bacon, pork and potatoes stew, grilled meat, pizza, fish, mushrooms, *sarma*, or stuffed paprika.

## Mediterranean Croatia

In the southwest region of Croatia, in the District of Istria, respondents considered ink fish risotto, seafood pasta, asparagus, truffle pasta, thick soup, and *fritaja* with truffle to be the specialties of the region.

In the coastal and mountainous district (Primorsko-goranska županija) respondents mentioned the following foods as specialties: fish dishes such as grilled fish, scampi buzara, calamaries, ink fish, common mussels, fish brodetto; also risotto, olive oil, prosciutto and Pag cheese, lamb, cabbage, sauerkraut with potatoes and maize porridge, beans, *želodec* (pork stomach stuffed with ham, bread and eggs), frogs, *šurlice* (home-made macaroni), sheep prosciutto, ham and sausages, roast suckling.

The District of Lika and Senj is also known for lamb, dried meat (*prosciutto*), sauerkraut, *sarma*, baked potato halves and bacon, maize porridge with milk, but also meals with fish, potatoes and beans.

The District of Zadar could well be represented by grilled beefsteak, grilled fish, steaks in sauce, the District of Šibenik and Knin by ham (*prosciutto*) and pork, the District of Split and Dalmatia by *ročata* (a sweet dessert made of milk, eggs, caramelized sugar, baked and/or cooked over steam), and the District of Dubrovnik and Neretva by porridge with *brodetto*.

The teenagers in Croatia would offer regional or local specialties to their guests, but also pizza, French fries, *burek* (meat pie), hamburgers, kebab, and fried meat and cakes.

Respondents mentioned one or more meals as their favourites. Giving one point for each meal, pizza had the biggest number of points, being the favourite meal of 30 respondents (out of 179). French fries took the second place with 21 points, followed by: roast meat and potatoes (14 points), chicken (10 points), fried meat (8 points), and soups and cakes had also 8 points each. Five respondents stated grilled meat as their favourite meal.

Young people also like meals prepared of dough or with dough such as cheese pies, meat pies or apple pies (the latter also called *burek*), strudel (*štrukli*), pancakes, dumplings, pasta, square noodles with braised cabbage, *mlinci*, *mousaka*, *gnocchi*, *pirogues*, and party rolls with jam. Those and similar foods were mentioned as their

favourites 41 times, and if we add 30 points for pizza, it is clear that teenagers in Croatia stated as their favourite foods those prepared of, or with, dough 71 times. The favourite meals prepared with meat, (grilled meat, pork and potatoes stew, steaks, hamburgers, meat balls, kebab, pork, roast suckling, chicken, hare meat, turkey, goulash, sarma, stuffed paprika, and Italian pasta), gathered 63 points. Among their favourite foods teenagers also mentioned beans, fish, eggs, sauerkraut, seafood risotto, scampi cocktail, thick soup, small ribs with turnip, mushroom risotto, risi-bisi, *sekeli* goulash, Bosnian pot, braised Swiss-chard tops, spinach, green peas with chicken, kale and potatoes, scampi buzara, calamaries, hard-boiled corn mush, maize porridge, cottage cheese and sour cream, and vegetarian meals - which shows that young people actually do like home-made and healthy food, just as they themselves had stated several times: 'Everything is better at home', or 'I like home-made food'. Frankfurter sausages, *Čokolino* (wheat cereals with chocolate), custard slices and sandwiches were mentioned once each, and one respondent from Zagreb stated that he orders his favourite meal 'at wish and from outside'. It is interesting to note that insisting that children eat spinach regularly (because it is healthy) leads to the fact that children start to like spinach.

On the one hand it has to be noticed that teenagers are committed to 'home' cuisine, which is food prepared at home. The foods are mostly well known, regionally unspecific meals such as fried chicken, *sarma*, stuffed paprika, goulash, grilled meat, dumplings and similar foods. Since the teenagers usually pick only a few meals even from the 'home' cuisine, we could say that they are to a point favouring nutrition without much variation. They have also showed that they favour their 'mothers' cuisine' and home recipes, by answering the various questions, and, as we had previously stated, they expressed reservation towards anything new, such as television recipes. However, there are more and more such television shows accessible to a wider population, including children, on Croatian national television. These shows gradually establish norms for Croatian traditional meals, which is something our neighbouring countries such as Hungary or Austria had done in the nineteenth and at the beginning of the twentieth century, when national movements took place, by using written documents. In spite of that we cannot use the same mechanism today. At the same time as tourist brochures, books, regional food festivals, and TV shows promoted home food, modern viewers wish to be in contact with the world and view other shows on Chinese, Japanese, Mexican or similar food specialties. Some foreign food specialties have been accepted for more than twenty years in Croatia. Children, especially teenagers, have accepted fast food, especially pizza, as their favourite food bought in restaurants. Indeed, many of them also consider pizza to be a regional specialty since it is offered widely in restaurants in their relatively small communities. They would be glad to offer pizza to their guests, and it is obvious that pizza is also prepared in their homes. If we take into consideration that pizza can be offered in many varieties of topping and taste, it is clear that teenagers actually do enjoy different foods and novelties. As we had already mentioned, Croatia is known as a country in which tourism and gastronomy are being promoted, in which we are aware of the need to grow healthy food, where we want to cherish our traditional



culture, old handicrafts and so on. Consequently, numerous displays of several days duration are organised in smaller and larger centers in all districts of the country. Apart from other cultural and folklore events and attractions, one can also find out about regional traditional cuisine and, of course, taste the meals, on these occasions.

The survey has actually shown that despite insufficient training about traditional nutrition in schools, and although such cuisine is not necessarily practiced at home, on a large scale teenagers still have not shown a total lack of knowledge of local and regional food specialties. For example, all respondents from the District of Istria, although they themselves like pizza and French fries, showed that they knew about their regional cuisine, and they would offer their guests regional meals.

Such acceptance of the traditional cuisine by young people speaks well of the efforts tourist workers have made to organize tourist and gastronomy exhibitions, and at the same time it testifies that young people are open to variety and new tastes, even if it includes completely different tastes. We can therefore state that this paper is a verification of the thesis by Claude Fischler in his the article 'Food, Self and Identity' - on the one hand, needing variety, the omnivore is inclined towards diversification, innovation, exploration and change, which can be vital to its survival; but on the other hand, it has to be careful, mistrustful, 'conservative' in its eating: any new, unknown food is a potential danger.

Translated by Mirjana Kekez