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Traditional Food and Tourist Offer of Istria: Characteristics of Istrian Regional Identity

Characteristics of Istrian regional identity at the turn of the 21st century can be considered in the context of traditional food as a tourist offer of Istria. The main characteristics of Istrian traditional meals are simplicity and modesty as well as togetherness of the Roman, German and Slavic cuisine. The global trend of coming back to authenticity and health food are cleverly used by the tourist communities from Istria in their work. In traditional-religious celebrations, nourishment takes over a more important place each day, especially for those meals that were consumed in the past. In newer times there are festivals organized exclusively to honour the traditional meals so they would be preserved from oblivion, but also as a specific tourist offer of the peninsula.

Key words: traditional food, tourist offer, Istria, regional identity

Introduction

Cultural identity is changeable. Every generation has its own view of the experience that is passed on. That difference can be seen in the facts of tradition, objectively changeable with time, but sometimes also interpreted or emphasized in the wrong way, depending upon the situation. Similar things happen, in addition to all the other symbols and/or ethno-differential factors, with the food that “...in anthropology has to be considered as means of expressing group identity” (Mennell, Murcott, Otterloo, 1998:40).

In this work we will investigate the nutritional identity of the Istrians who settled on the territory of the Istrian County. In other words, we will try to see the big picture of contemporary Istrian identity through the gastronomic offer conditioned by today's needs, primarily within the tourist industry, that leans on the traditional feeding habits of the citizens of Istria. Starting with the presumption that celebrations in Istria connected with food are organized from traditional nutritional habits, as well as political (giving significance to regional, romantic, traditional values) and tourist beliefs (with relation to supply and demand), there is a need to emphasize the traditional nutrition offer of the Istrian region that wants to be different from other tourist regions. The tourists expect something authentic and different, but because of the impossibility of preserving the original "...*something old that needed to be shown to foreigners, had to be made all over again...*" (Bausinger, 2002:187).

Nutrition, in the context of questioning identity, can be looked at from two points of view: as an objective differential factor that really shows the difference between certain groups but also as a subjective characteristic that "...*lays in the wish of a group to be different and not alike...*" (Čapo Žmegač, 1997:72). Kalapoš emphasizes the importance of food as a marker of ethnic boundaries, cultural identity and as a symbol of important events and emotional states. She especially points out at a long tradition of studying nutrition in the ethnographic sense, which is credited also to Radić's questions in *The Basics for Gathering and Studying the Documentation on Folk Life* (Kalapoš, 1998/1999:97-98). Costantinides considers gastronomy the fastest and most direct factor in the reexamination of history and tradition, and emphasizes its important role in gathering, archiving and transferring traditional documentation (Costantinides, 1996:VII).

Problems transferred to the present time raise some new questions. Sometimes, in a group's effort to separate itself from others, the authenticity gets pushed into the background by contemporary needs. Authentic folk culture lives in its true essence exclusively "...*in the authentic context of its creation...*" (Rihtman Auguštin, 1991:81), while being transferred into contemporary surroundings. "...*outside its authentic functions, on the stage, into the industry of fun and tourism, even into political life...*" (ibid., 81), it acquires new characteristics, while the question of its nativeness loses its significance. The authenticity of the substance is left only as a foundation onto which the contemporary is built. There are no negative connotations, of course, because this is one of the rare possibilities for keeping the tradition alive. Bausinger writes that the picturesque side of folklore leads us to easily forget "...*the fully tangible economical background as well as its political implications*" (Bausinger, 2002:174).

In the following chapters we will talk about traditional Istrian meals and their way of existing within a contemporary context. It is unnecessary to emphasize again the wide variety of Istrian ethnicity that is transferred into the spheres of nutrition in the past and present. The impossibility of precisely attributing specific meals to a certain region is brought to our attention by Rittig-Beljak. She mentions that we should not easily throw away the global views of the structuralists in nutrition "...*that the taste was formed through the culture and that it is under the control of the society. The society can change*

the taste, especially today when there are numerous mechanisms of offering and persuasion at their disposal” (Rittig-Beljak, 1998/1999:122).

The variability of identity of a certain region can also be observed through the change of its feeding habits. The return to traditional food, at first noticed in public - at festivals and in the restaurants, and again in the intimate life of the individual, corresponds to the strengthening of regional identity. Istrianism – a regional orientation, as opposed to Croatianism – the state orientation, was felt in all segments of life throughout the middle 1990s. The euphoria of regional orientation slowly fades in harmony with the decentralization of the Croatian state government. It seems that the emphasizing of Istrian characteristics - the dialect in music, media and other segments of fun - loses its popularity and meaning; there are less “goats” (goat is the regional symbol of Istria) in the form of a badge or a pin... In my opinion, the recognizable characteristics of regional identity which are profitable, will survive global trends. That is the story of nutrition, especially the one connected with tourism.

The characteristics of Istrian food

Every particular geographic part of Istria tries to emphasize its own gourmand blessings which this, although a small region, really can offer. Istrians can thank the mild Mediterranean climate for their diversity in nutrition. Istria is on the 45th parallel with the perfect condition of clear seasons throughout the year, which is ideal for agriculture. Istria is also a peninsula of incredible diversity in regards to the soil and to the configuration of the land. Men lived very diverse lives on such a small space: a fisherman next to the sea, a ploughman working the fields, a shepherd on the hills of Čićarija. And above all, Istria had a historically exposed position, therefore frequent plagues, colonizations, wars and hunger also played the role in giving distinctiveness to this cuisine. It was made by their survival of misery, wars and poverty. Naturally, with the course of time, there was mixing of the population from different ethnic groups and each of them left some specific marks that were also built into the feeding habits of its descendents. Later on they assimilated with other newcomers, thus creating the rich cultural, as well as a nutritional, heritage of today's Istria. The framework of traditional authentic meals of 20th century Istria, that we refer to today, was formed by poverty and misery caused by wars and the unstable political situation. The art of making tasteful and nutritional meals from almost nothing was a true art and skill attributed to Istrian women at that time.

When we speak of Istrian cuisine today, it is a matter of the essence and union of three cuisines: Romanic, Germanic and Slavic. A lot of sifting through the centuries made this particular “sediment” a source of gastronomy. Although the time of Venice and Austria-Hungary has long since passed, their contribution to culinary diversity is still visible. Poreč (a courtyard of Serenissima) and Pazin (a residence of the Austrian counts) are only thirty kilometers away. For Easter in both of these towns pork sho-

ulder (*špaleta*) will be eaten, but since the shoulder-joint is not dry enough it can not be eaten fresh or raw. In Poreč it will be prepared in the so called flip-turn way (*diravolta*). Slices of ham will be thrown on hot olive oil, flipped twice and then white wine will be poured over them. Citizens of Pazin will boil the whole pork shoulder.

With the arrival of welfare that corresponds to the development of tourism, in the second half of the 20th century, we can notice shame on account of the former poverty that existed not so long time ago. This necessarily drew along associations with food. The guests are not offered soup (minestrone, *maneštra*) and pilchards (*sardele*), but meals *à la carte*. It gets even worse with wine. It was exactly those “*à la carte* guests” (the ones who choose themselves the meals in a hotel) as opposed to the “board and lodging guests” (the ones that have the menu arranged within the package deal), who unsatisfied with the hotel offer went to the inns and eating-houses nearby to discover some traditional Istrian meals new to them. Only fifteen years ago it was almost impossible to order minestrone (*maneštra*) in a restaurant in Poreč. Today the nutritional picture of Istria has completely changed, characterized by the global trend of coming back to what is authentic and local.

Istrian traditional meals and contemporary gastronomical festivals

There are really a great number of festivities in Istria. Every place has its own protecting saint, the town's patron who is beloved and praised on local holidays. The preparations for these local festivities last all year long, resulting in one-, two- to three-days-long celebrations which include sport tournaments, concerts of popular singers, dancing and the consuming of a great variety of food and drinks. While only until recently the offer of the meals was mostly represented with grilled minced meat fingers (*čevapčiči*) and hamburgers (*pljeskavice*), in the past few years more significance has been given to native meals. Naturally every family within its own intimate circle celebrated the holy patron with domestic meals that have been prepared since the early days.

The interesting thing about Istrian celebrations is also their name. It is always adjusted to the feminine gender, while the patron is, of course, a male saint. Therefore the festival dedicated to Saint Rocco (the patron of Nova Vas near Poreč) is called “Rokova”, to Saint Bartholomew (the patron of Žminj) “Bartolja”; to Saint Peter (the patron of Sveti Petar u Šumi) “Petrova”... So, in Istria the festivities are never called Rokovo, Bartoljevo, Petrovo... I presume that is because the festival (the Istrian name for the festival is *fešta*, which is a feminine noun) was more important to the people than the patron himself.

Besides religious holidays, Istria is in the newer times flooded with tourist festivities based upon traditional meals. Attempts are made to harmoniously incorporate tradi-

tional meals with the religious holidays, which can be more or less successful. One of the most famous is the festival of truffles (*tartufi*). Then there is the festival of a maize porridge (*palenta*), of fish stew (*brodet*), of soup (*maneštra*), asparagus (*šparoga*), tomatoes (*pomidori*), snails (*puževi*), pilchards (*sardele*), mushrooms (*gljive*), sweets (*slastice*), pork loin (*ombolo*), sausages (*kobasice*) and a younger festival, called “*gramperijada*”¹ – the festival of potatoes. Contests are organized to pick the best quality wine, called “*VinIstria*”, the best oil, the tastiest pancetta...

The festival of Istrian soups (*maneštra*)

Soup, a meal that is cooked in a pot, is the base of Istrian cuisine. A great number of proverbs, of which only some will be mentioned here, speak about the importance of this dish and its eternal presence in the lives of the Istrians:

Žlica je gospodarica dobre kužine - The spoon is a mistress of good cuisine.

Žlica je za stepliti dušu, pirun je za tilo - The spoon heats the soul, the fork heats the body.

Brodo da verdura xe medicina che dura - Vegetable soup is a medicine that lasts.

Micisia refada xe la minestra riskaldata - A restored friendship is like a reheated soup.

The basic components of these vegetable soups are beans and potatoes, while the third vegetable gives the actual name and specific taste to the soup. Young corn (*bobić*, *trukinja*) gives minestrone a sweetish taste, but there is also crushed corn (*stupana trukinja*) eaten in the wintertime, that turns minestrone into a splendid thick cream soup, as opposed to the young corn (*bobić*) which makes it clearer. The taste of fennel minestrone (*maneštra od koromača*) is distinctly bitter. *Jota* is minestrone with a sourish taste, made from sauerkraut, prepared in the winter. Minestrone made of chick-peas (*slanac*) is slightly salty. The one made with barley has numerous names (*maneštra od fara, šena, orza, jačmika...*). It is well known for its beneficial effect on digestion. Actually, it cleans the intestines, and it is mostly eaten for the Ascension of Christ called “*Sensova*”. The bean-and-pasta soup is the most popular minestrone. Instead of the third vegetable there is pasta. *Miništron* is a soup made from the season’s vegetables.

The main topic when it comes to minestrone is: how to season it? With chopped bacon (*pešt*), browned flour or just with some olive oil? And how to make the soup “stronger”: with pancetta or just with some pancetta rind left over, or with some bones or a sausage or, of course, the bone from prosciutto ham.

Once forgotten, minestrone has now started to experience its gourmand renaissance. I believe that the reasons for this are the trend towards healthy foods, the stressing

¹ *Gramper* is the name for potato in Kaštelir (Istria).

of local identity caused by political manipulation, the global trend of coming back to the authentic and the always present tourist motive. Because of all of these reasons, this dish really deserves to be celebrated.

In the middle of July 2004, there was a gastronomic manifestation of domestic soup, recorded in the daily press. One of the articles critically points at the practice of non respecting the seasons when preparing minestrone. For example, the co-called domestic minestrone soup from young corn, most probably made from canned corn which significantly alters the taste of the soup, can be ordered in restaurants during the winter period too: “*The aim of this action, organized by the county Tourist bureau, was to evoke the memories of those old minestrone that fed the numerous generations of Istrians, and to emphasize that today, especially with the object of agro tourism, there should be real Istrian minestrone on the tables, and not those that are offered today by that name in the Istrian catering.*” (Benić, 2004).²

On July the 18th, 2004, during the ‘Cultural summer in Fažana’, there was a gastronomic evening organized by the name of “A Festival of Cuisine” with a competition in cooking Istrian minestrone. A review of this celebration was given by Mrs. Snitch (Šjora Špia) in the column “I heard, I saw...”³ The question whether it is possible at all in today’s conditions to cook the soup that should taste exactly like the minestrone of the past, can be transferred to all other meals as well. In the example from Mrs. Snitch we can see that it is impossible. It is impossible, because the woman of today has no time for cooking, especially for cooking soup. To live in the fast lane today, a young housewife must rely upon fast food or frozen food or at least some heated up minestrone that somebody else’s grandmother cooked a day earlier. We can also observe the problem of finding the right ingredients important for cooking traditional food.

The festival of fish stew (*brodet*)

Fish stew (*brodet*) in Istria, as well as a *brujet* in Dalmatia is brought to us from Italian cuisine. We can see that in the name itself, because the Italian term *brodo* means ‘a soup’. It is a soup made with sea food - fish, crabs or other shellfish. The story goes that fish stew can even be cooked from a skillfully chosen sea rock covered with some

² The best *minestrone* was being chosen. The problems that the folkloristic researchers deal with, can be observed in traditional cuisine too. In order to help the music, dance and folk costumes find their place outside of the museums, folk festivals are organized. In order to help the culinary art of our ancestors survive in the present, festivities are organized honouring specific dishes. It is important to mention that, besides chefs, ethnologists are slowly finding their way in to the juries.

³ A very popular character “Šjora Špia” is based on a talk that Italians use when they speak Croatian. Namely, as much as it was/is usual for the Croats to learn quickly and easily the Italian language, it was/is as unusual for the Italians to speak Croatian. But, here and there, on the market, for example, one could hear some Italian women, in order to sell their products better, start talking Croatian, mixing cases and genders.

sea grass and shells. Mate Balota writes about it in his “Tight land” (Balota, 1983:38, 280) describing the modesty and poverty of the Istrian man at the beginning of the 20th century.

What are the secrets of fish stew? Here is what Miranda Buršić, born in 1923 in Nova Vas near Poreč, has to say about it: *“The more fish, the better the fish stew. Fish stew is a soup made from fish: the soup can be from one fish, but it is better if there are two different kinds, and even better if there are three...someone who knows fish stews can feel the difference of the quality under his tongue. From the vegetables you can use: onions, actually a lot of onions, garlic, naturally, some oil, pepper, salt, parsley... The fish stew, if you have no time, if you are in a hurry, better don’t make it. You can’t make it faster; you have to be near a stove all the time... Fish stew is never left alone, just like a little child...”*

In addition to choosing the ingredients, the secret of a successful fish stew is, according to Mrs. Miranda, time and patience. Incompatibility of the past and the present, the traditional and the contemporary, share the same point together in a celebration.

On July 25th, 2004, in Medulin, the 6th Annual Fish Stew Cup was organized. This gourmet celebration is unique in the fact that famous people from public life prepare the fish stews. The Tourist bureau from Medulin, acting as a coordinator, is responsible for the cooking utensils and the groceries, while the contestants have to bring the specific ingredients that will make their fish stew win first prize. Rijeka was represented by the deputy mayor, Vesna Lukanović, and the special ingredient of her fish stew was potato-maize porridge. Labin was represented by its mayor Tulio Demetlik who brought capers (*kapari*), a Mediterranean plant, with him as a secret ingredient. The actors Helena Minić and Vedran Živolić as guests of the gathering were helped by the audience in cooking their very first fish stew. Last year’s winner, a district council chairman of Medulin, Emil Jakupila brought a few sea-spiders (*grancipori*) and some cleaned sea snails. The district council chairman of Lovran, Edvard Primožić, brought, as his original ingredients, some scampi and groupers, saying that a real fish stew is done already in 45 minutes, which does not go hand in hand with the theory of Mrs. Miranda who only fries her onions for an hour and a half... This year’s winner, the mayor of Bale, Edi Pastrovichio, boasted of bringing sea-spiders, some good wine and a rock in which there is a piece of dinosaur bone. Representatives of Radio Pula, Mario Menčić and Alfredo Kocijančić, relied upon domestic tomatoes and entertained a large audience, while the district council chairman of Vodnjan, Klaudio Vitasović used as a secret ingredient - their very famous and much heralded olive oil (Sofić, 2004).

This year’s competition between the mayors and the district council chairmen along the Istrian coast was graded, among others, by the famous chef, Stevo Karapandža. The audience, comprised of both domestic and foreign tourists, enjoyed themselves, and according to the reporter, Žižović *“...in hardly half an hour all the pots were empty”* (Žižović, 2004).

The festival of the wild asparagus

The following proverbs talk about the nutritional qualities of asparagus:

I sparisi e i bruscardoli i xe del sangue i meio santoli. – Asparagus and black bryony are the best godfathers for the blood.

Co fiorissi la sanestra i sparisi xe boni piu che manestra. – When the Spanish broom blooms, asparagus is better than minestrone.

One of the best preserved traditional gatherings of food still active today is the picking of the wild asparagus. In its delicate bitterness, the asparagus is one of the highest points of Istrian cuisine. People, but also contemporary medicine, ascribe to asparagus healing characteristics for safeguarding the urinary tracts and the kidneys. Proverbs reveal to us its beneficial influence on the quality of the blood and they tell us that in the spring time wild asparagus tastes even better than minestrone. Besides the most wide-spread asparagus dish – fried eggs with asparagus (*fritaja sa šparugama*), asparagus can be boiled and offered as a side dish, as well as a soup, and you can fry them in batter, or make a tasty spread out of them. My personal favorite, however, is a type of pasta with wild asparagus and prosciutto (*pljukanci sa šparugama*).

The district of Buje takes the greatest care, so that the wild asparagus will not be forgotten. For seven years now, each April, they organize a folk festival called 'Šparogada' within the church holiday *Otava*, celebrated eight days after Easter in Kaštel. This year the festival of wild asparagus started with the first international gastronomic competition in making meals from wild asparagus and pork shoulder (*špaleta*). It was held under the name 'Golden asparagus'. Co-organizers of this festivity were a tourist bureau from Buje and the Istrian County, whose representative described the aim of this competition as the refinement and enrichment of the offer of traditional Istrian spring cuisine already used to the *fritaja* (Kocijančić, 2004). According to the judgment of a jury the title of 'best' was won by the Italian bar 'Ca dei bocci' from Trento. An article from the Italian newspaper 'L'Adige' proves this marketing-tourist connection with the festival a good one, mentioning Croatia, the peninsula of Istria, the district of Buje, the town of Kaštel and the quality of the traditional cuisine (Casagrande, 2004). In order to make this festival even more interesting, there is also an award for the longest wild asparagus picked. A pork shoulder that weighed seven kilos was awarded to the owner of a 283 centimeters long wild asparagus.

The festival of Istrian cakes

The common opinion says that Istrian cuisine is not one of cakes. In the times of hunger and poverty it was that way for sure, but Istrian traditional sweets were present in all of the religious ceremonies (during christenings, weddings...) and at the two most important religious holidays of the year - Christmas and Easter.

Mikac lists a type of strudel (*štruklje*) that is characteristic for the northern part of Istria. It is made from wheat flour by stretching the dough into two planes, putting on the smaller one chopped prosciutto, bacon, hard boiled eggs and onions, adding then some salt and pouring grease on top of it. After all that it gets covered with the bigger plane, the edges get adjusted and the cake, spread with some egg yolk on top, is put into the oven to bake. These strudels can also be made with raisins, sprinkled with sugar, while some jam or marmalade can be added (Mikac, 1977:286). In some parts of Istria, strudel is also called *povetice*, *štrukolo*, and today, even more often, it is known as *savijača*.

Fritters (*hrostole*, *brošule*, *kroštule*, *fjoketi*) are a simple cake made from flour that is mixed into dough with eggs, butter or some oil. The stretched dough then gets sliced with a knife into strips 10 centimeters long by 5 centimeters wide, fried in the boiling oil and then sprinkled with some powdered sugar on top.

A type of doughnuts called *fritule* are also made out of flour, oil, a few egg yolks, sugar, raisins and some brandy. In a special bowl a little amount of sugar is melted together with yeast in some warm milk. It is left on a warm spot until the yeast starts to rise. The dough is beaten well and long in order that it becomes homogeneous and it is left for about half an hour until it starts rising. Then small lumps are formed with a spoon and fried in hot boiling oil. At the end they are similar to doughnuts but shaped irregularly. And here is how Balota describes this cake: *“And those ‘mlinci’ are not a worthy gift. A plain fermented dough, somewhat raised, with a small amount of figs, raisins and brandy; ‘fritule’ is how the people in towns call them now; from wheat flour, drawn out from the dough with a spoon and fried in oil. But considering that plain wheat bread was made only three times a year: at Christmas, Easter and the Nativity of the Virgin Mary, and considering how rare wheat flour was, and how there was no better meal nor a better prepared one all year round, except the Easter lamb or a day when a pig was slaughtered, ‘mlinci’ were highly praised and a remembrance of the occasion when oil was being pressed. Sending the cake to relatives was a sign of a good and solid friendship and interconnectedness”* (Balota, 1983:119).

Mostly prepared in northern Istria, *landice*, *motanice* or *fritule na kušine*, are a very simple ‘cake’. Sliced bread is dipped into milk and several beaten eggs and fried on oil or fat.

Pandešpanja is a sweet bread made in such way that the egg yolks, flour and sugar are well stirred, and then well beaten egg whites are slowly added. The mixture is poured into a greased pan and baked.

So, the traditional Istrian sweets deserve their day to be remembered. ‘Sweet Istria’ is a festival of cakes held during folk celebration in Vižinada, connected with the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary. The exhibition of cakes started nine years ago as “Kroštulijada” with the poetry reading “Verses on the Cistern” (Verši na šterni). The local tourist bureau, recognizing the event as an interesting moment, decided to change the date of the exhibition and include it as a part of the festivity. On August 14th, 2004, there were 127 kinds of sweets exhibited, from many different parts of Istria and for the first time from Slovenia as well. The prizes were given in these

categories: *kroštule*, *fritule*, *pandešpanj*, *bucolaj*, *povetice*, *Istrian užanca* and *cukerančići*⁴ (Flegar, 2004).

From Ana Pahović (born in 1964 in Poreč), the 2004's winner in the category *bucolaj*, we find out that this cake is made out of fermenting dough rolled out flat, cut into strips and connected into a circle. The cakes are cut at a few spots in order to look nicer. After being baked in the oven, they are left to cool off. At the end they are dipped into white wine and sprinkled with some sugar. This type of cake was usually made for weddings, first communions, christenings, and was sold on festivals. In Motovun saleswomen would advertise their product by shouting "Sugared inside and outside!" (*Cukerani i iznutra i izvana!*). The children have often put them on their hands like a bracelet, and women that were selling them would put them on a string and connected like that, actually tied in a circle, they would carry them around their shoulders so that the cakes would not get crushed.

The 'sugar cookies' (*cukerančići*) are very similar to today's cookies. The eggs, flour and grease should be well stirred; then milk is added, in which the hydrogen carbonate of ammonia has been melted (serving as the raising agent). The dough is left to rest, and then it is rolled out flat as thick as the little finger and cut into a variety of shapes. After they are baked and cooled off, cakes are dipped into wine, brandy or rum. From wine they become a little bitter, so brandy or rum are better. Then they are sprinkled with sugar. They can last up to a month.

The festival of snails

In the literature available to me snails are almost not mentioned at all as a traditional dish. One of the possible reasons is the attribution of that kind of food exclusively to the Italian citizens of Istria. Perhaps they were not mentioned by the storytellers because of the difficulty in correspondence with the mostly Croatian researchers, as well as because of the political situation back then (in the middle of the 20th century) when there was a tendency to show Istria as all-Croatian.

Half a century ago the market in Pula in its bounty also offered the snails. They were sold alive, gathered in nature. Today there are no more snails from the vineyards, fields and meadows of Vodnjan and Galžana. I presume there will be some available very soon (because of the snail farms that exist in Istria) for sale on the markets again.

The ancient Romans also raised snails on their farms. Because of the highly prized snail meat, they could not rely only on the time of season or the conditions in nature. They probably fed the snails with their natural food, but they also fed them supplemental food from boiled wine and bran in order to make them weigh more and taste better (Bistričić, 194:86).

⁴ *Istarska užanca* is a name for different native cakes. I heard this name only in Vižinada for the necessity of the grading jury.

The preparation of snails is not simple. After gathering them, the snails are left in the box or in the net so they would throw out their slime. A week later they should be washed several times and then put into a pot of water. They are cooked for half an hour, drained off, taken out of their shells with a fork or a needle and rinsed again. Prepared like that, they are added to a sauce made out of olive oil, onions, garlic, parsley, fresh tomatoes and mint. A small amount of malvazija wine is added, together with salt and pepper. Snails are then cooked for two more hours and mostly served with maize porridge (*palenta con le cioche*) (Barbalich – Geromella, 1994: 90). Besides being prepared in this traditional way, snails can be grilled on the open fire, made in salad, fried in flour, batter or in breadcrumbs, and even made into steaks.

Today in Istria the traditional preparation of snails is ascribed to the citizens of Vodnjan and Galižana, specifically to the citizens of the Italian origin called The Bumble-bees (*bumbari*). A Festival of snails is held in Galižana. The 6th consecutive one was organized this year, in August of 2004. It is connected with the holiday of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary. Even the main award of their lottery was named the 'Golden snail' (*Ciochia d'oro*). There were 35 kilos of snails prepared for that occasion.

The festival of maize porridge (*palenta*)

In the introduction of the text about the town of Boljun, Frane Lovljanov says: "*The material of this attribution is written according the instructions from the "Basics" by A. Radić (unfortunately only a smaller part) in the year 1905*" (Lovljanov, 1949:125). The preparation of the maize porridge is described accordingly: "*Maize porridge is made from yellow flour cooked on water. The water is boiled in a big kettle – a pot with a handle that hangs on a hook above the fire. Then some maize flour is poured in: with one hand we sip the flour, while with the other we stir it with a wooden bat for mixing the dough (gumuoljnarica) or just with a simple bat. If the mixture is thick it is called a maize porridge – 'palienta', and if it is thin – 'skrop'. The maize porridge is taken out of the kettle with a spoon while the thin "skrop" is poured out*" (Lovljanov, 1949:131).

From all the meals listed above, the one most often consumed was definitely a porridge made out of maize flour. Porridge could have been cooked thin (*skrob*) with more water or thick (*palenta*), with less (Muraj, 1998:102). It is exactly through maize porridge and its supplements that we can tell the social, ethnic and geographic story of Istrian nutrition.

Maize porridge was eaten with milk, red wine, sheep cheese, curds, beans, wild chichory leaves, cabbage, and pieces of bacon (*črčki*). For the workers in the fields it would be prepared with sausages, pancetta, and with a sauce made from pork chops. On the coastal region it was mostly a side dish to fish stew.⁵

⁵ "*Besides with fish stew, maize porridge was, for example, in Fažana eaten together with whitebait, in Galižana with snails, in Rovinj together with mixed fish (mostly pilchards) cooked in some water on a light fire, in Novigrad with soles and in Premantura with sea-spiders*" (Lukež, 2002:238).

The richer inhabitants of Istria, like the merchants and the owners of large estates, would eat maize porridge together with game and birds (a deer, a hare, a quail). Nowadays maize porridge is eaten with cod or truffles. Toasted and sugared maize porridge was served even as a pastry. Maize porridge was also sung about in a folk song:

| | |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| La mula de Parenzo | A Girl from Poreč |
| <i>“Se el mare fossi de tocio</i> | “If the sea would be the sauce |
| <i>E i monti de polenta</i> | And mountains the maize porridge |
| <i>Oh mama che tociade,</i> | Oh mama what dipping, |
| <i>Polenta e baccala!</i> | The maize porridge with cod! |
| <i>Perche non m’ami pou?”</i> | Why do you love me no more?” |
| (Pauletich, 2003: 253). | |

It is in Poreč that the Festival of the Maize Porridge is held. It took place for the third time on November 21st, 2004, within the Festivity of Saint Mauro, the patron of the town Poreč. This culinary feast consists of two parts. The first part takes place at the main square in Poreč in front of a lot of spectators, where five caterers prepare the porridge in five different ways. The second part takes place in a chosen restaurant where the representatives of Italy, Slovenia and Croatia have a contest in preparing the maize porridge. Every country is represented with two menus. A jury picks between six meals, while the awards are a golden, a silver and a bronze *palentar*.⁶

Conclusion

Traditional cuisine, which does not exist any more in everyday life, has also become an important stronghold upon which the Istrian identity is constructed. A contemporary identity, among other segments, entwines the benefits of tourism with nativeness of the specific contents of folklore. The culinary art is one of those elements that is getting more important each day. In tourist advertisements for Istria, gastronomy gets emphasized more often. Actually, Istria is represented as a tourist destination valuable to culinary investigation (Prodan, 2004). Istria is nowadays represented with its culinary specialties at attractive tourist fairs around the world. It takes part in the growing number of culinary competitions amongst regions. A tourist bureau of the County of Istria, as well as the tourist bureaus of towns, districts and smaller places in Istria, confirm (with their sponsorship and the organization of their work) the thesis that traditional cuisine is an important part of the tourist offer. Their offer is different from the other similar gastronomic offers of neighbouring countries. The

⁶ *Palentar* is a wooden bat thinned from the middle towards one end, used for stirring the porridge.

offer needs to satisfy the objective needs of contemporary tourism by emphasizing its own objective differences as an advantage compared to the other offers, and by allowing its own distinctiveness to lean upon the subjective tastes of Istrian traditional cooking.

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