

# The Traditional Cuisine

A plate of “tocană” (ground maize boiled in milk) with sheep cheese, cream and fried bacon scraps, a helping of rolls of soured cabbage stuffed with minced pork and coarsely ground maize, a slice of homemade bread baked in the hearth, a glass of “horincă” (plum brandy), and as last course: a crinkled pie or a pound caked with nuts – these would be some of the specialities of the traditional cuisine in Maramures.

The art of local gastronomy does not excel in delicacies and sophisticated combinations of foodstuffs and spices (like other Latin cuisines – French or Italian). It is rather sober and extremely ecological, alike the agriculture, cattle breeding and fruit growing that are the principal sources of food.

The culinary tradition relies mainly upon the **mobile pastoral dairy** the shepherds install in the mountains during the summer, the period when they graze their sheep. In these “miniature” dairy factories, the principal actor is the shepherd in charge of the sheepfold who is also responsible for the processing of the dairy products. The owners of the sheep used to climb to the sheepfold taking turns in order to collect their share of the product which had been established at the milk measuring. The ewe’s milk is used to prepare milk curds, cottage cheese, pot cheese, and a mixture of whey with the sediments from the boiled curds. The young cheese brought from the sheepfold is aged in the homestead.

As the meteorological and climacteric conditions and the quality of the soil had not favour the cultivation of wheat in this region covered mostly by hills, agriculture was based mainly on the growing of **maize**. Beginning with the 17<sup>th</sup> century, maize flour used to be “the principal element of nutrition for the rural population”. The maize was used in the preparation of the “mămăligă” (maize flour boiled in salted water), and for the baking of the **daily bread**. This is why, as I. Bârlea stated it (1924), “bread made of wheat flour is eaten only on important holidays; otherwise people eat only maize bread”. White flour was used for the preparation of the **communion bread** and of the **ritual knotted bread** for the important holidays.

But for the inhabitants of Maramures, according to their ancient customs, the meal is rather a **cultural act** with **social** significances. It represents actually an **integration rite**.

Hospitable and filled with empathy, the peasants of Maramures invite the stranger in their house animated by the thought that “having travelled so much, the visitor must be hungry”, but this is done also in order to facilitate a **cultural interaction**. Thus, the peasants value the most efficient way of having a **dialogue**, whether they do or do not speak the same language as their interlocutor. The **intercultural dialogue** by means of sharing the food is achieved on a non-verbal level, the words being superfluous. Each gesture and impression of the guest is watched attentively and decoded according to the behavioural acquisitions of the individual and the local customs.

In order to be shown respect, the guest is given “the place of honour” at the table, as it happens with the elders or with persons of authority (priests or teachers). The host,

following the unwritten law of hospitality, has the obligation to be the first who tastes the drink, showing by this that it is clean and deserves to be tasted, and the guests drink only afterwards.

Another local custom demands that the guest should eat everything offered by the host. The rule applies also to drinks.

To conclude, the cuisine of Maramures can accede to the status of a brand if the dishes will be promoted in the rural guesthouses from the region and the products will be also included in the menus of the great restaurants.