

Romanian Foodways: A Crossroads of Tastes

Nicolae Constantinescu

“**P**oftă bună!” and “Noroc!” —
“Bon appétit!” and “Cheers!”
— are often the first words

that many visitors to Romania learn. And with good reason, for the rich and diverse cuisine of Romania is one of the country’s treasures. In Romanian cooking the hearty meats and vegetables of Central Europe meet the aromatic herbs and spices of the Mediterranean and lands farther east. The sharp smells of cheese with onion or of garlic sauce mingle with the delicate scents of vanilla and cinnamon. The plainest meals of grilled meats or “Romanian eggs” (poached eggs) can be accompanied by more elaborate dishes such as stuffed grape leaves served with yogurt or sour cream. At Easter and other holidays, tables groan beneath the weight of cold cuts and sausages, white cheeses made from the milk of sheep and cows, fresh and pickled vegetables, tomato and vegetable stews, and sugary cakes and sweet breads.

But above all these smells and tastes one food reigns supreme: bread (*pâine*, from the Latin *panem*). At private homes and in restaurants, meals are always served with a full basket of freshly cut bread. Made of wheat flour, water, and yeast, the bread in older times was baked under a simple clay dome. Besides daily bread, there is ritual bread, compulsory at holidays, celebrations, and feasts. Ritual bread may take the shape of a knot or braid (*colac*), a pretzel (*covrig*), a flat cake (*turtă*), or a sweet-cream cheese cake (*pască*); the shape and decorations vary according to the ritual function. The

Sweet Cheese-filled *Plăcintă* (pronounced pla-CHEEN-ta)

THE DOUGH: 500 grams/17 ½ ounces flour (about 2 ¼ cups)
3 tablespoons oil
1 teaspoon salt
1 cup warm water

Place the flour in the middle of a *very large* sheet of waxed paper or other preparation board (72" x 96"). In the middle of it add the oil, the salt, and the cup of warm water. Mix the ingredients with a tablespoon and then use two hands. The dough should be soft. If necessary add more water. Leave the dough in a warm, dry place, covered with a warm cloth, for 10 minutes. Make a one-inch-thick layer of dough and leave it covered with a cloth for an additional 15 minutes. Sprinkle more flour on the preparation board and then make a *very thin* layer of dough (like a sheet of paper) the size of the whole preparation board. Trim the edges to fit the preparation board, and leave the dough to dry for a few minutes before use.

THE FILLING: 300 grams/10 ½ ounces ricotta cheese
30 grams/10 ounces fresh butter
½ tablespoon flour
2 eggs
½ cup milk
salt
2 tablespoons melted butter

The *very thin* layer of dough needs to be cut in pieces that match a 9" x 12" rectangular baking pan. Mix the cheese, butter, milk, flour, eggs, and salt together. Coat the baking pan with melted butter, add one layer of the thin dough; coat with melted butter; repeat this action layering dough and coating with butter four more times. Add the cheese mixture and level it. Then add three more dough layers as explained previously. Sprinkle butter on the *plăcintă* and put it in the oven at 350° F for 30–45 minutes or until the top layer is golden brown. When done, cut the *plăcintă* into squares and serve warm with powdered sugar on top or with sweet or sour cream.

most common symbols pressed into the dough just before baking are the cross, the circle (representing the sun), the bird, and human figures. Another, newer kind of ritual sweet bread is the *cozonac*, made from wheat flour, yeast, milk, eggs, and butter. Crushed nuts, raisins, poppy seeds, and sometimes cocoa and Turkish delight are also added. *Colivă*, boiled

(*burduf* or *caș*), rolled into balls, and broiled on coals until the cheese melts. *Mămăliga* also may be combined with any vegetable or meat dish, especially stuffed cabbage.

Although the name for these stuffed cabbage rolls (*sarma*) comes from the Turkish (also *sarma*), and the dish is similar to that found throughout

tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, radishes with cheese, garlic with bacon, lettuce with oil and vinegar), cooked (green peppers roasted on the kitchen range, eggplant salad, or *salată de vinete*), or pickled (sauerkraut from white or red cabbage, cucumbers, autumn tomatoes, peppers, cauliflower, celery). Romanian housewives are famous for the various and ingenious ways in which they prepare pickles each autumn.

Fish from the Danube and the Black Sea, combined with a garlic sauce, are also an important part of seasonal and regional cuisines.

While Americans have general labels for foods such as "cheese" and "soup," Romanians make distinctions between different types of these foods. *Brânză* is a pungent white cheese made from sheep or cow's milk, while *cașcaval* is a yellow cheese similar to Swiss. Likewise, *supă* is a thin meat or vegetable broth, while *ciorbă* is a thick, slightly sour stew best eaten with both a spoon and a fork.

With respect to drinks, the pride of place is accorded to wine, each region of Romania having its famous vineyards. Varieties from Murfatlar and Târnave, for example, have found their way to Western markets. But a Romanian meal always starts with a little glass of *țuică*, a natural alcohol made from fruit (generally plums but also pears, apples, apricots, sweet cherries), distilled once in Muntenia and Moldova and twice in Transylvania. It has miraculous therapeutic value when drunk moderately, in addition to whetting the appetite and starting the conversation flowing.

Nicolae Constantinescu was educated at the University of Bucharest (Ph.D., 1971) and is professor of folklore and head of ethnology and folklore at the university. He is the author of several books on folklore and ethnology.

In Romanian cooking the hearty meats and vegetables of Central Europe meet the aromatic herbs and spices of the Mediterranean and lands farther east.

wheat grains sweetened with sugar and honey and mixed with nuts, is served at funerals.

As befits a population known for the cultivation of grains, another grain dish is the most beloved of Romanian traditional foods. *Mămăliga*, a kind of porridge or polenta, is prepared by boiling corn meal (formerly millet flour) with salt in a special cast iron pot. When the water is reduced and the porridge has become thick, the *mămăliga* is turned out of the pot onto a wooden board, allowed to cool slightly, then cut into slices and served. Eating *mămăliga* by itself is a sign of poverty. Traditionally, it is eaten with milk, sour cream, and cheese (*mămăligă cu brânză și smântână*) — products of the oldest activities of Romanian peasants, breeding cattle and raising sheep. The milk, boiled in the pot the porridge has been cooked in, has an excellent and unique taste. Shepherds at the sheepfold boil the porridge for an hour or more, then cut it, using a string, into large pieces. These are mixed with special sheep cheeses

southeastern Europe, in Romania they are called endearingly "little *sarmale*" (*sărmăluțe*) and are thought of as being part of the national cuisine. A mixture of ground pork and/or beef, onions, rice, and spices is wrapped in pickled cabbage leaves; these are slowly boiled in special pans (earthenware in some regions), then baked in the oven until they are golden brown, and finally served with "little *mămăligă*" (*mămăliguță*) and a rich paprika sauce. In summer the cabbage leaves are replaced with grape, garden sorrel, or even linden tree leaves.

Another mincemeat dish, also of Oriental origin but fully assimilated into Romanian cuisine, is *mititei*. It is made of beef and lamb minced twice, mixed with spices, formed by hand into finger-shaped pieces, then grilled over charcoal.

Romania's rich agricultural land and long growing season provide a wealth of fruits and vegetables, which are central to traditional Romanian cooking. Vegetables can be eaten fresh (i.e., onions,