

## Something Bulgarian for Dinner

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Abstract: This chapter studies the production of cultural identity in the hospitality industry, based on materials from a specific data set: the online self-presentation of the restaurants offering national cuisine. The questions driving the investigation are: is there an established new standard, new consensus among the caterers as to what the national cuisine and culinary heritage are. And if the answer is affirmative, how does it relate to past standards and how are they communicated to the consuming audience. The analysis of the advertised meals or the units (Barthes, 1980) and the menus or the syntactic systems (ibid.) makes various observations possible: 'the past', 'the authentic', 'the Bulgarian' qualities emerge, which are modelled on the pre-World War II Bulgarian peasant home. We witness an ongoing and dynamic process of constructing and naming the structures of the national cuisine and this process is, essentially, a *bricolage*, which leaves ample space for individual contributions. In contrast to popular nationalistic rhetoric, the national cuisine incorporates freely Turkish names and products, identified and accepted as 'Bulgarian'. The vocabulary of the national style is open, flexible, inventive and benignly contradictory.

### Introduction

Scholars have recently widened their interest in the symbolics of food production and food consumption. Building on the work of scholars such as Douglas (1966) and Levi-Strauss (1974), scholarship has examined the role and meaning of food both to the individual and society in a variety of contexts. Looking at food production through a constructivist lens and seeing it as cultural and social choices originating at the individual level (Appadurai 1988, Cwiertka 2006, Murdoch et al. 2000) has allowed research to go beyond an economic or exotically cultural dimension to pay more attention to the symbolics of food consumption (Cusack 2000, Wilk 1999). This chapter is a further attempt in this direction. Douglas and Isherwood (1996) and Miller (1987) have emphasised the significance of choosing and (non) consuming certain products for identity production and performance. By looking at practices of food consumption in the everyday life of Bulgarians, this study seeks to define the relationship between performed and declared identities.

Framed in a debate initiated by Billig (1995) on banal nationalism and continued in literature on everyday production of identities (Edensor 2002, 2006, Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008, Fox 2016, Polese et al. 2017) this chapter is constructed on the assumption that an individual's and groups' political choices are not always dictated by the state and may be performed through channels that are spontaneous, unofficial, informal, invisible or intangible (Antonsich 2015, Edensor 2002, Fox 2016, Pawlusz and Polese 2017, Polese 2009, 2010, 2014, Skey 2015). This, with particular reference to former socialist spaces, adds to attempts to reconceptualise the study of national identity in the region and look at a variety of tools and instruments to do so. From politically constructed identities whose meaning is reshaped by the context (Adams 2010?; Isaacs and Polese 2015, 2016; Polese and Horak 2015) to competition between segments of a society (Cheskin 2013, Isaacs and Polese 2015, 2016) with particular attention to the role of the everyday (Knott 2015, Morris 2016, Pawlusz and Seliverstova 2016; Seliverstova 2016, 2017). Accordingly, this chapter attempts to provide a further account confirming the importance of everyday practices to the processes of (national and local) identity formation. This chapter explores the influence of micro on macro processes, with regards to national identity building through the production of cultural identity in the hospitality industry. It is based on a study on the online self-presentation of the restaurants offering national cuisine. It explores the declared new standard and new consensus among caterers on what is "national" cuisine and national culinary heritage.

Ultimately, it is proposed that 'the past', 'the authentic', 'the Bulgarian' quality is modelled on the pre-World War II Bulgarian peasant home. In contrast, the paper unveils an ongoing and dynamic process of constructing and naming the structures of the national cuisine. This process is, essentially, a *bricolage*, which leaves ample space for individual contributions. In contrast to popular nationalistic rhetoric, the national cuisine incorporates freely Turkish names and products, identified and accepted them as 'Bulgarian'.

The flexibility of the vocabulary of national style, open to include new terms, test new products and in general experiment, it is argued, mirrors a tendency to construct a food identity that is inclusive and ever expanding. This is in contrast to or notwithstanding the official narratives on Bulgarian identity, which evolve in a less dynamic way and tend to be, typically, less inclusive and flexible.

## **Why Food as a National Practice?**

In Bulgaria, research on food and eating as a social and cultural practice is a scientific field in the making, if we can borrow the of an article by Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson (*A Cultural Field in the Making*, 1998). The statement implies by no means the absence of sufficient empirical material or general interest texts. The ethnography of pre-modern alimentation and of folk customs involving food, is represented by a number of publications.<sup>1</sup> The properly anthropological or - more broadly - cultural questions, surrounding the acquisition, preparation and consumption of food however became a matter of interest only recently and systematic observations, particularly longitudinal ones, are still scarce. The fact that this new field does not have a name in Bulgarian is indicative: the phrase 'culture of eating' is usually associated with disciplinary practices; 'food culture' points to the biological lab; 'nutritional anthropology' sounds awkward and is almost never used. The descriptive name 'research (or anthropology) of food and eating' is a poor substitute for the short and established field 'food studies' but is the closest approximation to a definition of the field. Food and eating are a powerful cultural forms, which puts on display essential individual and collective meanings (Douglas 2014, Wilk 1999). This idea, introduced by the founding fathers of sociology and anthropology and developed brilliantly by the structuralist tradition (Barthes, 1961; Douglas, 1966; Levi-Strauss, 1974), offers a possible approach to understanding social reality but also bring into the analysis systems and border fields of a different order. In a global situation of destabilized communities, models, boundaries and shared meanings, food and eating represent an anthropological field, where one can observe in a nutshell the formation, deformation and reformation of cultural practices and identities. The proposed text is an attempt to survey the commercialization of culture, and more specifically the food practices, as part of the big question of post-communist identities in Bulgaria. It builds on a venerable tradition of food metaphors, such as the historic *Paris à table* (Briffault, 1846); bows at Levi-Strauss' famous phrase that food could be *bon à penser* (Levi-Strauss, 1971: 89); recognizes the heuristic potential of Alsayyad's 'consuming tradition' (Alsayyad, 2001) and Bell and Valentine's 'consuming geographies' (Bell and Valentine, 1997). The play of meanings implied by these metaphors renders them irresistible and even more so by the fact that the relationship between culture and consumption is an established idea.<sup>2</sup>

### **What is Food as a national consumption practice?**

The lack of systematic observations on individual and collective consumption that could provide a sound empirical base made it necessary to use a specific archive: the self-presentation of restaurants on the internet. The intentions behind these representations are obvious: attract attention, patrons, consumption, and revenues through provision of services and merchandize

appealing to paying customers. Within this broad research field I will focus on a particular type of establishment, which have direct bearing on the questions about culture, national identity and cultural heritage: restaurants that advertize Bulgarian national cuisine and ambiance. The fact that these are commercial establishments which monetize cultural preferences is particularly interesting because it allows us to glimpse certain hierarchies and, correspondingly, make an assessment of the gravitational pull of the proposed and consumed culture. In the absence of (publicly available) market research on the hospitality sphere in Bulgaria, the owners become marketing specialists, whom Richard Johnson calls 'the cultural accountants of capitalism' (quoted in Tomlinson, 2005: 16).

The tradition of restaurants offering national cuisine dates almost from the time of the very emergence of commercial caterers in Bulgaria (see Velichkov, 2004:160-162; Kiradzhiev, 2001:352-257). The efforts to develop public eating into a profitable economic sector gained momentum during the communist period and resulted in the proliferation of a special sub-category 'home-style establishment' (*bitovo zavedenie*<sup>3</sup>) in the seaside resorts first and then in the bigger cities, managed by a special enterprise 'Balkantourist'. Unlike regular restaurants, the purpose of which was 'to provide affordable and nutritious food and satisfy the food needs of the broad working masses', these establishments were created to 'satisfy the needs of the foreign guests in our country' (Kratki lekci 1957:7). I came across the term 'home-style establishment' for the first time in a text from 1969, which laid out the standardizing norms and practices of the regulated economy. These new public places adopted a number of specific features, which entered for good the food nomenclature, settings and props: 'The cutlery used in the home-style establishments should be selected according to their category; the tables must be covered with decorative *bitovi* tablecloths and *bitov* crockery' (Lekcii 1969: 3). Both items were freely modeled on traditional forms, color, patterns, and materials, derived from the traditional pre-modern peasant ware.

The empirical base of my research is the systematized information on the restaurants in Sofia, presented on the site Zavedeniata (The Establishments - <http://zavedenia.com/> - 05 January 2015 r.) and tagged as offering 'Bulgarian cuisine'. The category displays information on 934 establishments, defined as restaurants,<sup>4</sup> which means they offer the full range of services: comprehensive menus; eating on the spot; service by a waiter; formal list to choose from. 137 of them were defined as 'tavern';<sup>5</sup> 110 - as 'beerhouse'; 153 - as 'pubs' and 31 - as 'folk clubs'. That means less than half of the establishments use the designation 'tavern' (*mehana*) - the traditional name for a national cuisine restaurant. The examination of the visual representations shows that only the taverns exhibit the recognizable interior of the 'home-style establishment' as well. In addition to being listed in the 'Bulgarian' category, 876 of the restaurants claim that they offer

'Bulgarian cuisine' exclusively or together with other cuisines (Italian being the most popular). The observation that 93.8% of the restaurants advertize that they offer 'Bulgarian cuisine' deserves a brief comment. The fact that ethnic identity influences food preferences is well known and extensively discussed (see for instance Smith, 1967; Finkelstein, 1989; Girardelli, 2004; Vukov, Ivanov, 2010; Krasteva-Blagoeva, 2010). It does not matter whether the 'ethnic' is one's own or 'alien': its attractiveness and influence on consumer choices is ubiquitous. These interpretations could be developed in several directions: the purely sensory experience; the confirmation and the pleasure of rediscovering one's own identity; public demonstration of loyalty or/and statuses; proxy for experiencing the exotic. The national/ethnic sells food . Here my interest is not so much in the attractiveness of the national (which hardly could be studied on the base of promotional texts only) but rather in the 'brand', the product sold, and more specifically in the question is there a new established norm, new consensus among restaurant owners what is national cuisine and culinary heritage; how does it relate to past models; how is it communicated to the consuming audiences? In this perspective one would like to find out whether the dishes (the 'units') of the national cuisine and the menus (the 'syntactic systems) have changed. (I am referring, of course, to the well known article of Roland Barthes on the psychosociology of taste (Barthes, 1961). I have no doubts that the substantive work of (re-)construing the narrative of the national cuisine could be done only after a thorough examination of additional representational texts (including fora, chats, blogs and comments) and particularly after a systematic study of actual consumption practices. The next level of analysis and interpretation - the study of the diets (the 'styles', in the above semiotic metaphor) - cannot be done without field research. I was not able to engage in this task at this moment and decided to limit my analysis to the space, situated between the real product and the consumer, where the collective imaginary unfolds and where 'significant production of false perceptions and values' (Barthes, 1979) takes place.

### **How to read the food as text**

The site *Zavedeniata* was chosen precisely because it offers good opportunity to compare cases. The information is standardized: each entry includes profile photo, visitors counter, and uniform chapters. From the list of restaurants that offer solely Bulgarian cuisine (18 out of 900) and 37 other, which offer Bulgarian cuisine plus grilled dishes and 'Balkan grill', plus 55 establishments where the interior was entirely or predominantly traditional (*bitov*) I formed a group of 18 establishments. All restaurants in the group have full information (including menus); they are rather popular; the food and the ambiance are typically 'Bulgarian'. Their menus and photo formed the sample to study the representation of national food identity.

Every restaurant from the group included on its page a short text for self-presentation. All but two contain explicit claims for origin or affiliation, sometimes two or more: 'Bulgarian', 'national', 'patriarchal', 'authentic', '*bitov*', '*traditional*'. Some descriptions are mostly general invitations and statements, such as:

'*Bitovo* establishment with its own style' (Mamin Kolio, Mama's Kolio); 'authentic Bulgarian environment from once upon a time' (Izbata, The Cellar); 'the atmosphere is in traditional *bitov* style, the quality of the food - guaranteed. Come taste the magic of the Bulgarian cuisine' (Magiata na chergite, The magic of the carpets); 'cosy *bitov* environment' (Nashe Selo, Our village); 'Welcome and come in to eat a bite of home cooked dishes, and to immerse yourself in the coziness of the times bygone. The setting in 'Petleto' will impress you with its authentic *bitov* style' (Petleto, The Little Rooster); 'a contemporary establishment in traditional-national style, adapted to the requirements of the modern times' (Pri Shopite, At the Shopi<sup>6</sup>; 'authentic Bulgarian cuisine' (Delvite, The Jars).

Others make clear attempts at poetry:

'Right here, close to the Vitosha lakes, where the Bulgarianness is still to be found, our tavern was created to bring together people around rich wines and music [...] With recipes collected over the ages, once you taste them, you come back' (Djorevata kashta, Djore's House); or 'built in the spirit of the Bulgarian home, exuding coziness with its authentic interior [...] dishes accompanied with flowing wines [...] collection of authentic Rhodope<sup>7</sup> bells and elements of the culture of the Rhodope corner of Bulgaria' (Rhodopski chanove, Rhodope Bells); or 'The Bulgarian restaurant 'Chevermeto', whatever your heart desires! The restaurant 'Chevermeto' brings together authentic setting, old recipe dishes and a folk performance' (Chevermeto, The Spit); or 'a combination of authentic Bulgarian national revival atmosphere, infused with classic folk motives, recipes of older [sic!] Bulgarian recipes and music, which merges the sound of the pipe and the shepherd's flute with the sprightly and solemn voice of the bells. The tavern offers to its guests the opportunity to immerse themselves in the depths of Revival Bulgaria<sup>8</sup>, to feel the spirit of the *voivodi*,<sup>9</sup> to savour the traditional Bulgarian hospitality, to see and listen to the sound of the popular bells and their clear voices' (Mehana Chanovete, Tavern The Bells).

Some even present small dramatic scenes:

The common table in the restaurant 'Rodopska kashta' brings together family, friends and even just acquaintances, therewith strengthening the patriarchal tradition of the Rhodopians - the tradition to be always together. The host-Rhodopian is always welcoming. He treats every guest - a traveller, a beggar or a relative - with an open heart.

We meet our guests with 'Welcome' and direct them to the table: 'Please partake of what you find'. For the newcomers we have prepared a small sample of the traditional Rhodope dishes. The incomparable taste of the Rhodope dishes and the wonderful Bulgarian wines [...] The magic of the Rhodope song [...] The colours of the folk costumes [...] The magical sound of the Rhodope pipe and the silver ringing of the bells.(Rodopska kashta, The Rhodope house)

or

In front of you our chef will cook special dishes on a wood-fuelled grill and following old Bulgarian recipes. The meat is always fresh, coming from livestock raised high in the mountains exclusively for the restaurant Murafeti. The establishment has a folklore program - including authentic Bulgarian instruments and human voices that bring you in touch with the cosmic feel of the folklore. (Murafeti).

And finally the emblematic presentations (abridged):

Restaurant "Under the Lindens" is located in an old Bulgarian house, which is a historical monument, a classical Bulgarian house built of stone and wood. The restaurant enchanted visitors since its very opening in 1926 as a pub named 'Select'. Elin Pelin, the creator of some of the best Bulgarian short stories in that tumultuous period gave it the name 'Under the Lindens', which survived until today. Elin Pelin was among the patrons of the small neighbourhood pub, which sheltered a number of famous Bulgarians and offered them tranquillity and cosiness to write their stories and articles, while sharing the wine from Karabunar and Vinogradets. [...] The meats and hash prepared on the spot, the yogurt and the cheeses, the bread and the preserves bring our guests back to the world of their childhood memories and grandma's dishes. [...] The pitas and the *piperades* being and a constant element of the Bulgarian table, we prepare for our guests a number of pita breads and pastries baked in ovens, as well as delicious *piperades* and *baba ganoush* with freshly roasted vegetables. (Pod Lipite, Under the Lindens)

(All quotations are from January 5, 2015).

The main elements of the 'national taste' expected to attract the customers/consumers are easy to pinpoint even in this small sample: 'once upon a time/past/old/national revival period', *bitov*, 'authentic', 'domestic', 'gozba'<sup>10</sup>, 'wine', 'music/folklore/pipes/bells/songs', 'grill/meat'. In all cases but two the visual representations in the available logos, posted on the front page of each restaurant complements or supplements the story: a sample of ten images exhibits repetitive

motifs: use of retro fonts; the name written in a circle or arc (association with a vault, wheel, stamp); graphic representations of traditional houses; imitation of old illustrations, etc. The colour palette is also surprisingly uniform: sepia and brown prevail, with accents in red, yellow and white. The leading marketing strategy of selling 'Bulgarianness' however is at its clearest in the photo spreads, available on the website. All establishments present from a few to more than 50 photos of their interior, garden (if existing), dishes and events, organized in the restaurant: clear evidence of the importance of the visual aspects in the presentation of the national restaurant. If we are to describe it summarily, the ambiance is *bitova* - traditional, domestic, peasant, 19th century. Seventeen out of our 18 cases are arranged in this style. Like the written descriptions, it is not difficult to identify the almost canonical elements: stonewalls; wooden pillars and lintels; wooden rustic tables and benches; rugs; white lace curtains on the windows; several decorations such as cart wheels (on the wall or as lamps), traditional pottery, lanterns, farming instruments, costumes, baskets and kegs, plaited onion or dried red peppers. Almost half of the restaurants have a fireplace or an oven in the main space. Almost all have a designated place for a music band or a dance floor. The planning and the execution vary from kitsch (Kaiser, Mamin Kolio) to almost museum-quality authenticity (Pod Lipite, Rodopski Chanove) and from stuffed tawdriness to tasteful minimalism. The elements of the interior leave no doubt that the past, the authenticity, and the Bulgarianness are imagined as sanitised versions of the pre-World War II rural house. This is not surprising if we recall the fact that in 1944 78% of the Bulgarian population lived in villages, meaning that this kind of environment is the familiar domestic scene of their childhood or of their grandparents for a significant portion of the adult Bulgarian population. The claims of authenticity ring true. The intriguing aspect is the total lack of awareness of the incongruity and dissonance observable in more than one places: we see TV sets hung on wooden pillars (in one case the pillar is wrapped in sheep skin); arcopal sets arranged on top of machine-woven traditional style tablecloths; modern oil and vinegar sets on rustic tables; kitschy paintings on the walls. In only few of the establishments one sees consistent effort to maintain the authentic atmosphere, to clearly separate the old from the modern, or even more rarely, to reinvent the traditional creatively in the space of the modern restaurant. I would suppose that the lack of interest among the owners mirrors the general absence of interest in real authenticity among the customers. The *bricolage* of randomly selected signs is sufficiently recognizable and satisfactory.<sup>11</sup>

### **The structure of the menu: the sign system**

The study of the structure of the menus - the kinds and sequencing of offered dishes - is an interesting approach to reveal the changes in social practices and cultural attitudes, as Jean-Louis Frandrin (2002) has demonstrated convincingly. The menu as a concept and as a practice



did not exist in the everyday life of Bulgarian families until the accelerated modernization and urbanizations at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries: people ate just one dish (something cooked or something dry taken to work), rarely preceded by a soup or pickles (Gavrilova, 1999: 99). The end of the 19th century saw the importation of the idea of a three-course meal: first course (soup), second course (cooked or a-la-minute), and third course (dessert) for those who could afford them, of course. The practice was a radical sometimes objectionable novelty: sources from this period offer testimonies that people from the older generations found the idea of eating more than one dish in one meal shocking (Hadzhiiski 1974: 220, n. 2). As far as we can determine in the absence of representative and longitudinal data, the practice spread primarily among the urban middle classes, from the lowest segments (qualified workers, petty clerks, artisans) to the highest (senior state servants, entrepreneurs, senior military officers). The adoption of the new model was undoubtedly facilitated by the proliferation of knowledge about the 'proper', 'good' (i.e. bourgeois) eating and was predicated on the availability of a housewife or domestic help to prepare three course meals every day.<sup>12</sup> If the introduction of food categories such as soup, dessert and salad was a result of the above-mentioned processes and accounts for the change in the domestic style of eating, it was the festive food, which provided the prototype and influenced the development of the meals eaten out. The traditional festive table was distinctive in its contents and volume: it started with aperitif of strong alcoholic beverages, consumed with *meze* (Turkish from Persian - a selection of small dishes served to accompany alcoholic drinks), followed by rich soups, main dish (often roasted or baked), pastry, dry fruits and nuts. The model of the French festive meal, introduced by the royal palace and the foreigners and expats, brought the appetizers (starters) and the real desserts. Very soon the growing number of published cookbooks cemented the new norm of a decent meal: a starter, main course and dessert.<sup>13</sup>

What do we observe in the menus of the restaurants which advertize their allegiance to the Bulgarian cuisine? In most cases they organize their offerings according to the type of the dishes and not according to their place of the sequence as is the case with the classic Euro-Atlantic menus. For instance, the dishes that would normally be listed under the heading starters we find distributed between two to six separate categories: salads, soups, cold starters, hot starters, *meze-s*, sometimes as invented categories such as '*delicacies*', or '*caprices*'. The main courses usually appear under this very general heading but often they are grouped according to the meat, or the speed of preparation (long-cooking vs a-la-minute). The grill is always separate even if the dishes could be an appetizer or main courses. What is interesting is the mass introduction between the starters and the main courses of a special category - the '*satch*'.<sup>14</sup> Yet another idiosyncrasy are the purely invented categories observable only in one restaurants only,

such as 'selected old recipes' (Delvite), 'From the spit' (Chevermeto), 'Rhodopian specialties' and 'from Grandma's kitchen' (Rodopski chanove), 'The offer of the Master' (Zagorka), 'For seriously hungry people', etc.

This structure of the menus suggests a couple of interesting points. First, the occurrence of the same nine categories of dishes (even if named differently) in the repertoire of the majority of the establishments (salads, cold starters, warm starters, *meze-s*, grill, main dishes, *satch*, fish and desserts) indicates that there is an unspoken consensus among the caterers concerning the expectations of the patrons of national cuisine restaurants. If we compare this, let's call it, 'core menu' with the menus of the other types of restaurants we see a lot of commonalities, but two categories - the *meze-s* and the *satch* - are almost exclusively represented in our type of establishments. Second, in the other types of restaurants the headings of the different categories of dishes are as a rule the established designations (soup, salad, starter, etc.), while we see a great variety in the composition and names in the 'national' restaurants. As a first hypothesis I propose that we are witnessing a dynamic process of constructing and naming the national cuisine; that this process is, again, a kind of *bricolage* and leaves a lot of space for the contribution of individuals with their understanding what constitutes the national specificity (experimentation). In addition, the crafters of the Bulgarian national cuisine borrow unproblematically Turkish elements, which have entered Bulgarian language and practice (*meze*, *satch* in stark contrast with the popular and populist nationalist rhetoric. A number of these categories of dishes such as *razjadka* (roughly 'starter', something to start the process of eating), *topenitsa* (dip, something to dip into), *satch*, *gjuveche* (diminutive from Turkish *guvec*, earthenware pot), *keremida* (tile) are nowhere to be found in *A Collection of Food Recipes*, the bible of cooking during the socialist period (1968, 951 pages, 1303 recipes) and the cookbooks published before 1944. The term *satch* is mentioned twice in the first two Bulgarian cooking and advice books, published in 1870, and only with its original meaning of a ceramic plate. Inversely, two dishes with Slavic names and, possibly, provenance - the *parzhenitsa* (something fried) and the *trienitsa* (something ground) - that we can find in the earlier cookbooks have disappeared altogether. I would suggest that the reason is that they are specific dishes and cannot be transformed into a category. In general, it seems that the ancient sound of a food not so much the actual dish suffices to endow the new dishes with the consumer value of 'authenticity'. The menu, the syntactic system, has acquired an essentially European body (salad, starter, main dish, dessert) but has developed several Bulgarian-Balkan offshoots, some of which have no real precedents in the traditional cuisine.

### **The words of the national culinary discourse**

Our investigation becomes even more interesting when we start examining the collection of lexemes that make the sentences of the national commercial eating, i.e. the dishes in the context of their category. Any category is good for reading and analyzing but I will focus on the salads only, which offer particularly rich empirical data. The salads do not exist either as a concept or as a practice prior to the re-establishment of a national Bulgarian state in 1878, the growth of the trend-setting elites and receptive urban middle classes, and the emergence of the instruments of change of the culinary culture (media, cook books, vocational training). The name was mentioned for a first time ever in 1870 by Petko Slaveykov - 'beet salad' (Slaveykov 1870: 75); the idea of serving chopped vegetables with condiments was totally alien. Twenty year later, the Bulgarian lexicographer Naiden Gerov included the word in his magisterial five-volume *Dictionnary of the Bulgarian language* (1978, 5: 110), but, interestingly, provides a double form - a masculine and a feminine. Throughout the years the number of salads, included in the cookbook increases steadily: from eight in a cookbook from 1904 it goes to 47 in a cookbook from 1933.

We see an impressive number and variety of salads on the menus of Bulgarian cuisine establishments, an average of 20.5 different salads per restaurant. In 14 out of the 18 restaurants they are placed at the beginning of the printed menus. Even more impressively, there is an absolute consensus about The National Salad, with capital letters, and this is the Shopska salad (named after the same regional group in Western Bulgaria, the Shopi). The salad is present on the menu of every single restaurant in our group, with the same name. Almost half of the establishments list the ingredients of the salad and again the uniformity is noteworthy: the five mandatory elements are tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers (raw or roasted), onion and Bulgarian white cheese (feta). Two restaurants find necessary to embellish by adding a blurb: 'The taste of eternal Bulgaria' (Mehana Chanovete) and 'The Bulgarian Tradition' (Magiata na chergite). The mythology surrounding the Shopska salad has been discussed by researchers (Dechev, 2010) and it is important to draw attention to the fact that two of its ingredients (tomatoes and peppers) were adopted by the Bulgarians only after mid-1800s, a circumstance that throws doubts about the claim of its 'eternal taste'. Any attempt to challenge the myth, however, as did Albena Shkodrova in her book *Soc Gourmet* (Shkodrova, 2014) provokes heated debates, revealing the high emotional temperature of the national food discourse. Second in popularity is the Shepherd's Salad (in 14 establishments), where eggs, yellow cheese, salami or ham and mushrooms are added to the ingredients of the Shopska. In seven cases we see a 'Peasant salad', virtually undistinguishable from the Shopska salad. In third place comes the green salad (from lettuce or different salad greens), present on 13 menus, with or without the additions of boiled eggs, chicken and cheese. It appears under several different names (Women's Salad, Chef's

salad, Rigoletto, Meze, Salad for connoisseurs, etc.) Separately, we see numerous occurrences of green salad with (canned) tuna fish (in 15 establishment) - a surprising finding, having in mind that canned tuna was not sold in Bulgaria before the end of the communist regime. Tomato salad is available in nine restaurants, most often served with feta cheese or buffalo cheese; separately seven restaurants offer tomatoes with mozzarella, in three cases correctly named Caprese. Next in popularity are the salads of peppers, carrots, cabbage and carrots. The salads made of cabbage and of cucumbers are relatively infrequent - a surprising fact, given that both vegetables were among the few autochthonous crops, cultivated in the region since prehistoric times. At the same time, salads with potatoes, native plants of the Americas, which came to Bulgaria in the late 1800s, are more popular. The common potato salad occurs with this name four times, but we see it once as 'Our own' salad and once as 'Chorbadzhi' salad (*Chorbadzi* is the Turkish name for a wealthy and influential man). The absurdity of the naming is obvious: the potatoes were neither 'our', nor *chorbadzhi*'s food as they were introduced at the time when the *chorbadzhi*-s were already history.

Of particular interest is a group of salads with names that occur just one time do not exist in the pre-modern cuisine; do not appear in the cookbooks, published between 1878 and 1944, when intense codification and Europeanization of the domestic food practices took place; and they cannot be found in the recipe collections for state canteens and restaurants during the socialist period.<sup>15</sup> This means, evidently, that the dishes have been invented in the last twenty years or so. Their names reveal clearly how the culinary culture is constructed and packaged for commercial purposes and I would claim that the observations on this phenomenon are valid for the domain of the national culture in general.

The reservoir of ideas how to define the 'Bulgarian' quality could be roughly structured in three main sources of inspiration. The majority of the names, a total of 19 cases, are derived from the designations of professions or statuses: salads of the 'Boyards' (2), 'The mayor of our village', 'the Monks', 'the Wagonners', 'the Inn-keepers', 'the Mummies', 'the Monastery', 'the Tavern', 'the Master', 'the Marketplace', 'the Priest', 'the Fisherman', 'the Haydut', 'the Choban' (shepherd in Turkish), 'the Chorbadzi' (without counting the above mentioned 'Peasant' and 'Shepherd's' salads. The second big group are the salads with geographic names: from Arbanasi,<sup>16</sup> Bulgaria, Vratsa, Lom, Samokov, Ihtiman, Chukurovo, Thrace, the Rhodope, the Balkan (Stara planina), etc. - a total of 18. The third category form the names, related to the kin nomenclature: Grandma's salad (2); Grandpa's, Women's, Men's, Daddy's, Maidens', 'Our garden'. Seven names hint at the quality of the salad: Connoisseurs<sup>17</sup> (2), 'More-more-most', 'Plum brandy', 'Three plum brandies', 'Old fashion', 'For *meze*'. The remaining cases mention an interesting

ingredient (iceberg lettuce, salmon), distant location (Cyprus, Sicily) or something idiosyncratic (Rigoletto, the Rugs, Pink kiss).

The intentions behind the choice of a name seem obvious in two groups. The kin group refers the customer to her/his childhood and youth memories, when everything was homey and 'one's own'. The same is valid for the geographic group, as the places are major anchors of identities. The first group however is very interesting and calls for unpacking. We see among the names a few recurring motifs and their connection with the food sold is not unilinear and the range of associations is far richer. Names such as 'Komita's' (Insurgents) and 'Haydut's' (highway men who opposed the Ottomans) carry the aura of heroism, rebellion, opposition, unsettlement, repudiation of the normal life, which sets itself radically apart from the idea of peacefully consuming food according the protocol and tradition. I would add to these names with provocative undertones the occupations of the inn-keepers and the tavern-keepers, which were liminal figures in the popular imagination. The salads served under these names offer different combination of common vegetables, with a more elaborate preparation (such as peeling the tomatoes). This is in comic dissonance with what we know about the lifestyle of the komita-s and haydut-s, not to mention the fact that many of these vegetables did not exist in the region at the time of the Ottoman empire. We observe the same discrepancy between the name and the substance, between the signifier and signified that we saw in the menu structure. The lexical spices added to an ordinary salad apparently provide the 'sizzle word',<sup>18</sup> which can have no relation whatsoever to the product - a trick known to every market expert. But the 'Komita's' salad offers something that cannot be found in the restaurants serving French cuisine: it is 'our own', masculine, rebellious cooking; its ingredients have nothing to do with the implied story, which unfolds in the space of the imaginary, between the name and the product. It is the association created by the name that makes the salad 'Bulgarian'. I should probably add to the context the fact that the ubiquitous presence of the grilled foods is due to their delectable taste in first place but no less to the strong link between roasted/grilled meats and festivity and its association with the 'manliness' and 'heroism': we are aware of the gendered eating<sup>19</sup> (women cook, while men roast) and we know that the real *Haydut-s*, who were living in the mountains and the forests prepared their food on open fires. The salad inventions, the popularity of the grilled meats and *satch-s* seem to lead to a conclusion that the Bulgarian cuisine as perceived, represented and sold in the restaurants clearly valorises the roasted/grilled/a-la-minute/manly/meaty/festive food. The imagery is not only manly and heroic but also outdoorsy, different from the tedious kitchen work. Even the salads, which are vegetable-based and vegetables are grown and cooked by women, manage to adhere to this perception.

The other status-related salads in our sample point to a different set of questions. Most of them are named after professions or social roles of whom it is known that they eat well: Boyard-s, Mayors, *Chorbadzhi-s*, priests, masters, tavern-keepers. These salads seem to be promising something more than the ordinary Shopska, Peasant, Shephards', tomato, cabbage, even potato salads, something prepared according to the tastes of the traditional village people and in general of the more affluent and influential classes. I should mention that I did not find a single salad named after the professions of the modern elites (officers let's say, or ministers). At the opposite end we find salads named after the profession of hard and intense laborers: the shepherds, who tend to their flocks all day and in any weather, under different names (pastoralists, *chobani*<sup>20</sup>); the harvesters; the wagoners, the regional transhumance pastoralists *Karakachani* (sarakatsani). Again, all names belong to the rural way of life - I never found a salad named after a tailor, let's say, or a painter. A quick comparison of the ingredients of the laborers' and the elite's salads actually reveals a certain preference to use mostly common vegetables, white cheese and olives in the first group, while the second group in most cases includes some kind of meat or meat products. The selection of the statuses perceived as relevant to the national cuisine/culinary identity makes a strong case that not only the core, but the entire discourse on national identity is borrowed from the pre-modern peasant society and culture. The intrinsic 'Bulgarianness' is sought and found within the traditions of the ethnographic and social bygone.

### **The 21st century image of Bulgarian national cuisine**

My attempt to interpret the language of the national cuisine on the empirical material of restaurant salads is intended as a demonstration of the possibilities of the method, rather than as a set of hard arguments, leading to large-scale conclusions. And yet, similar readings of the other menu categories that were not included in this text give me some confidence to suggest that most of the above observations will be confirmed, therefore I would like to propose a few general observations with promising potential.

The Bulgarian national restaurant cuisine exhibits at present an identifiable style, based on syntactic rules, recognized and adopted by the establishments, which offer 'Bulgarian' cuisine. The vocabulary of this national style is open, flexible, unproblematically contradictory ('*Chorbadzi saladlet*' (sic) with balsamic dressing (sic!)), as any live vocabulary is. Often it is impressively creative: we see the use of archaic words and archaic sounding words; of diminutives of nouns in unthinkable versions ('saladlet'), wrongly spelled words that nobody cares about.<sup>21</sup> The syntactic system, on the other hand, is deeply contradictory: the most visible self-presentations (the blurbs on the site) almost always speak of '*gozba*' (archaic and intimate word for 'dish', with etymology in the Slavic and Indo-European '*gost*' (guest), therewith clearly

establishing a mental image of homeliness, grandmotherliness, slow cooking,<sup>22</sup> everyday food, pre-modern times. The dishes actually served in the restaurants however are mostly grilled, meats, *satch-s*, *hayduts*, i.e. the manly, heroic, festive, a-la-minute, open to foreign tastes and the food industry.<sup>23</sup> One participant in a Facebook group on restaurants even goes as far as saying: 'no one cooks in the restaurants any more'. This is incorrect of course: in the 18 surveyed restaurants we see a number of slow-cooked dishes<sup>24</sup> and still the persistent advertizing of *gozba-s* is in clear dissonance with the dominance of the salads, the grill, the *satch* and the *meze*. The discrepancy between marketing strategies (the brand) and the actual contents gets resolved apparently in the sphere of the collective imaginary. The caterers adapt to the expectations of an audience, which likes national cuisine without bothering to question its Bulgarianness and authenticity. The consumers adapt and adjust their ideas about the national cuisine to the food they receive in the restaurants.

The survey of a set of names, categories and menus of the *bitovi* establishments allowed us to see the outlines of the model of construing and selling national culinary culture: the assembling of menus consisting of freely selected authentic dishes, names, products and dishes peacefully coexisting with products, techniques, and tastes of other national cuisines or the modern food industry and commerce; invented combinations of products and techniques, which at the same time stay in the realm of the familiar without taking the risks of experimentation. This hotchpotch however does not fall apart but is consolidated in an almost uniform nomenclature and presentation. From the mass adoption of the *satch* as a mainstay of traditional cooking (incorrect) to the choice of print fonts and colour palette of the logo we see a *bona fide* canon of the national-style restaurant cuisine. I would propose two possible and complementary interpretations of the observed situation. The first is related to the limitations and constraints of the restaurant cooking in general, the second - to the dictate of the consumers' expectations. Even those not familiar with the specificity of food preparation in restaurants know that cooks work with pre-prepared elements of the easily spoiled food. Only high class restaurants with numerous staff could afford to cook each dish from scratch. The pressure to keep the prices affordable puts a lid on the aspirations to build a real restaurant kitchen with different stations. This circumstance immediately impoverishes the cuisine by excluding an entire range of dishes (several slow-cooking dishes, roasted whole meats, fresh eggs and dairy products, freshly baked pastries). The corrective pressure of the consumer demand is no less tangible. The restaurants offer dishes that are in demand, and in mass demand. The Bulgarian public, lacking long-cultivated culinary tradition (interest in authenticity, in local brands and rarities, and only nascent interest in food discourse) or, if we add a more damaging circumstance - a public socialized in a culinary tradition shaped by the central-planning egalitarian economy, does not

seek authentic dishes with their original names and local ingredients. In addition, the sense and need to preserve the authentic cultural system is missing. The culinary culture is disintegrated and finds its identity in a limited number of individual significant elements, simulacra of the national, which turn to be sufficient in delivering the main objective of marketing the culture: offer 'easily recognizable markers of ethnic identity' (Lu, Fine, 1996: 536). Even if individual cooks and caterers have a genuine interest in authenticity, they know they cannot sell it. The consumer receives in the Bulgarian *bitov* establishment a version of the 'Bulgarianness' s/he expects and deserves.

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<sup>1</sup> The ethnographic literature is summarized in Etnografija na Balgaria, 1983; 2. For recent publications see Vukov, Ivanova 2010; Dechev, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Just to mention William Robertson Smith (1889), Audry Richard (1939), Claude Lévi-Strauss (1965), Mary Douglas (1995), Marcel Mauss (2001). For good review of the anthropological tradition more recent publications see Di Giovine, Brulotte, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> The term is untranslatable; it is an adjective of 'bit', in Russian 'быт' - segment of the human life, which comprises the satisfaction of material and spiritual needs.

<sup>4</sup> The data is from 23-25 January 2015. The numbers today may be different because of the dynamics of the field but the error is from 1 to 5 establishments.

<sup>5</sup> The *mehana* (tavern) is 'an establishment where alcoholic beverages are sold and consumed' according to the Guidelines for cooking laborers (Danailova, 1966: 31).

<sup>6</sup> The Shopi are a regional group in Western Bulgaria.

<sup>7</sup> Rhodope mountain is situated in the South-Central part of Bulgaria; its southern slopes are in Greece. The mountain has rich history, interesting regional cuisine and culture.

<sup>8</sup> The 18th and 19th centuries were the period of cultural modernization and nation formation among Bulgarians in the Ottoman Empire, known as 'National Revival' (*Vazrazhdane*).

<sup>9</sup> *voivoda* - Old Slavic, literally 'war-leader' or 'war-lord'.

<sup>10</sup> *gozba* - is an Old Slavic word for 'disk', 'meal'.

<sup>11</sup> My objective is not to discuss the social meaning of this 'displaced meaning' (McCracken, 1990: 104 ff.) but I have no doubts that the observations I propose could provide ample food to study the collective *psyche*.

<sup>12</sup> See Ruth Schwartz Cowan (1983) about the increasing volume of domestic obligations for the housewife in the modern period. (Cowan, 1983).

<sup>13</sup> See for instance 'Lunches and dinner - what should I cook today?' (Obedi i vecheri, 1942: 55)

<sup>14</sup> The *satch* (from the Turkish *sac*, metal sheet) is a sturdy ceramic disk, used to bake breads and pancakes on open fire or charcoal.

<sup>15</sup> The cookbooks published in Bulgaria before the 1990s mention just a few salads with names: Shopska, Shephards', Garden and a few interesting exceptions (the Work company's, Spring)

<sup>16</sup> A village close to Veliko Tarnovo, medieval capital of Bulgaria.

<sup>17</sup> The Turkish word *Merakli* is used

<sup>18</sup> A word that triggers an emotional response.

<sup>19</sup> Neuhaus, Jessamyn (ed.) Manly Meals and Mom's Home Cooking: Cookbooks and Gender in Modern America. The Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, 2003.

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<sup>20</sup> Greek for shepherd.

<sup>21</sup> A non-representative survey among the Facebook friends of the author whether they find the diminutive designations of dishes appealing or repulsive generated more than 50 comments (<https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=Rayna%20Gavrilova%20%D1%83%D0%BC%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5%D0%BB%D0%BD%D0%B8> of 22 January 2015), of which 30 were negative or critical, 10 - neutral and only six positive. An interesting comment was "In restaurants with folk taste (sic!) it is OK'.

<sup>22</sup> Najden Gerov defines *gozba* as 'cooked dish' (Gerov, 1, 230).

<sup>23</sup> The observed restaurants offer pre-prepared ingredients (such as chicken parts, blanched potatoes, cheeses with seasoning) en masse.

<sup>24</sup> Sarma (5), kebab (4), comlek (4), roasted stuffed whole lamb (11), stewed shin (10), kachamak (polenta) (6), cavarma (7), kapama (4).