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CHAPTER 3

Balkan food cultures and traditions

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3.1 Introduction

Food shaped by culture, traditions, ethnicity, national identity, and geography plays an important role in creating the Balkan region identity. Food is "the ideal cultural symbol that allows the historian to uncover hidden levels of meaning in social relationships and arrive at new understandings of the human experience" (Super, 2002). Occupying a small part of Europe, for many centuries the Balkans have been at the center of major events and at the crossroad of important trade routes, from east to the west of present-day Europe. The region was ruled by Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, and Ottomans who have determined the character of the Balkan food culture, which goes beyond the borders of the individual countries of the region. Of all, the Balkans are largely a reflection of the culinary tradition and influence of the Ottoman Empire (as the most recent ethnopolitical entity covering the whole region) (Jelavich & Jelavich, 1963; Lori, 2015). The legacy is more evident in Bulgaria, Greece, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia in comparison to Croatia and Slovenia that have experienced only short Ottoman occupation before becoming part of Austro-Hungarian Empire (Tracy, 2016).

Food cultures and culinary traditions in the Balkans may be viewed as a complex system of cultural values and common nutritional practices (Krasteva-Blagoeva, 2008). They establish and maintain national cuisines into the frames of a regional system. Overall, the Balkan food culture can be regarded as a variegated blend of dishes and ingredients typical for the whole region, but considered unique and belonging to a particular national cuisine only. It resembles to a Rubik's cube—one and the same elements are being arranged differently, but the final result is almost one and the same. Yet, it is perceived to be different and frequently experienced as such—evident similarities between Balkan cuisines are rarely rationalized on a mass scale. These similarities are due to the common natural environment and similar food ingredients, as well as the Ottoman legacy. The common base of Balkan cuisines is a result of cultural borrowings from the Ottoman cuisine—an unpleasant fact to be acknowledged by modern ordinary people. In turn, the Ottoman cuisine was deeply influenced by the

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medieval Byzantine cuisine. The borders between the national cuisines of the Balkans tend to blur, as they all enjoy the same foods, though they claim to be exclusively their own. Certain products and dishes are considered "typically" national and are contested by the neighbors. Among the most indicative examples is Turkish coffee, called this way all over the peninsula except in Greece. The Balkan names of this hot drink are the following: (1) Turkish coffee (*tursko kafe*) in Bulgaria and Macedonia, (2) *turska kava* in Serbia and Croatia, (3) black, homemade (*crna, domaca*), (4) our coffee (*nasha kava*), (5) ordinary coffee (*obicna kava*) in Serbia, (6) Serbian coffee (*srpska kava*) among Bosnian Serbs only, (7) *cafea turceasca* in Romania and Moldova, (8) Greek coffee (*ελληνικό καφέ*), or (9) Cypriot coffee in Greece and Cyprus (Krasteva-Blagoeva, 2008, p. 26). Some Turkish dishes like *sarmale*, stuffed peppers, baklava, and moussaka were borrowed by Balkan cuisines and considered typically Bulgarian, Greek, Serbian, etc. *Sarmale* or *sarmi* (cabbage or vine leaves stuffed with mincemeat) eaten with yogurt are a typical dish shared by many Balkan nations, especially on Christmas (Bradatan, 2003).

Rakija—the firewater drink that unites the Balkans—also contributes to the region's complexity. Although Bulgaria claims the oldest *rakija* (brandy) distillation container dated from the 11th century, which was found in the town Ivaylovgrad (Dikov, 2015), the country cannot use the discovery to boast with *rakija* originality. Nevertheless, with Bulgaria's accession to the European Union (EU), 12 of the Bulgarian *rakija* brands have been recognized as traditional products and have received a PDO and PGI mark to protect their name (European Commission, 2020). Many Balkan countries traditionally produce white *feta* type cheese, but officially *feta* is that of Greek origin only (WIPO, 2016). The list of such examples may continue. It is an evidence of the existence of a regional Balkan cuisine, separated and challenged by individual nations, and by stereotypes. On a psychological level it could be seen as an expression of the "narcissism of small differences." This term was invented by Freud to denote the tendency of people with minor differences between them to be more aggressive and hateful toward each other than those with major differences (Freud, 1963). In other words, we feel threatened by those who resemble us, who mirror and reflect us. This perspective proves useful for the interpretation of "national otherness" in terms of food (Krasteva-Blagoeva, 2008, p. 26).

3.2 Traditional food and food practices used by the Balkan people

3.2.1 Cuisine and cultural identity in the Balkans

"A traditional food product is [...] a product frequently consumed or associated with specific celebrations and/or seasons, normally transmitted from one generation to another, made with care in a specific way according to the gastronomic heritage, with little or no processing/ manipulation, that is distinguished and known because of its sensory properties

and associated to a certain local area, region or country" (Guerrero et al., 2009). The Balkan cuisine is part of Balkan cultural identity (Koc & Welsh, 2002, p. 2), which is by definition expressed in various everyday habitual performances, leisure activities, and preferences including food choices, eating, and drinking practices. Culturally and historically, Balkan food is part of the Mediterranean cuisine (Handjiev, Handjieva-Darlenska, & Kuzeva, 2017). General differences to be found inside of its frame are due not so much to national peculiarities, but to environmental characteristics—food in the plains used to be different from food in the mountains, etc. In historical context it is indicative that—with single exceptions—generally in the Balkans there were no periods of mass famine as in medieval Western Europe. Balkan land was fruitful enough to ensure survival of people. Crusaders in the 13th century were impressed by the abundance of products and dishes in lands they were invading on their way to Jerusalem. A culture of respecting and overvaluing food was, and still is, typical of the Balkans: stockpiling, preparing homemade preserves, conspicuous and excessive eating, and drinking, gormandizing, etc. A comparison between food attitudes of modern Balkan and West European grandmothers toward their grandchildren shows that the former are anxious to pile lots of food around their grandchildren by all means, while the latter insist on training table manners and proper behavior, rather than urging and calling for everything on the plate to be eaten. Traditional patterns of slow food are still kept in the Balkans. Having a meal is an autonomous social action, subjected to its own rules, which should not and cannot be confused with other activities, such as working, traveling, speaking on the phone, etc. (Krasteva-Blagoeva, 2009). Furthermore, having a meal is (and probably has always been) a collective action with important social functions; it completes the daily activities, bringing together the family members, relatives, and neighbors around the table. Sitting in a circle and sharing a meal creates strong social bonds and communicative interactions. It is related to a special cultural ritual. In Bulgaria, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Romania, Moldova, Montenegro, and Macedonia a glass of *rakija/raki/rakia/rachiu/rachie* (brandy) or *slivovica* precedes the main meal, in Slovenia *sganje*, in Greece it is *ouzo* or other alcoholic drink along with appetizers (*mezedes*), salads, or pickled vegetables, so that one can drink slowly taking small sips and relax without rushing. The traditional ideas of slow food in the Balkans to have a meal are at odds with the global concept of "fast food". Nevertheless, the latter is widespread, especially among young people (Krasteva-Blagoeva, 2009).

Grilled meats are a staple in the Balkan cuisine. The prevalence of chargrill cooking is because until fairly recently, in some countries charcoal was the only form of readily accessible fuel (Salter, 2015). Baking is also a big part of home cooking and filo pastry is common. The similarity in food and cooking tastes is typical for everyone in the Balkans. An example is that of typical Ottoman baked, filled pastry that share alike names: *Börek* (Turkey), *byrek* or *lakror* (Albania), *pite* (Kosovo), *boureki* (μπουρέκι) or *Bougatsa* (*μπουγάτσα*) in Greece, *burek* or *pita* in Bosnia and Herzegovina, *burek*, *бурек*, *börek*, or *pitas* in Serbia. Although in Romania and Moldova (*plăcintă*), or

Bulgaria (*banitsa, баница*) the name is different, it is a similar pastry with countless ways of preparation and various fillings, including minced meat, white cheese, spinach, leeks, mushrooms, potatoes, pumpkin, etc. This pastry is a multifunctional meal eaten on various occasions—for breakfast, instead of a snack, for cocktails, and other official events, as well as a ritual food with fortune slips on some traditional feasts and for New Year's Eve.

Milk, dairy products, and especially yogurt were consumed on a mass scale, predominantly by the population of the Balkan mountainous region, in the past. Yogurt was considered a reason for the longevity of its consumers and, due to its "therapeutic qualities," it was successfully marketed worldwide as an authentic Bulgarian product, though challenged by neighboring countries (Stoilova, 2015). Fresh meat was rarely consumed in the past since frequent slaughtering of domestic animals would harm household supplies with milk, dairy produce, and wool. That is why the time for slaughtering was carefully chosen and usually male animals were butchered—females were kept for breeding and dairy supply purposes. In traditional Balkan culinary cultures meat was preserved via drying and smoking. Even in cases when meat was produced in order to be sold, it was previously processed and salted. Unlike in everyday diet, consumption of fresh meat was the main characteristic feature of festive food rituals (Blagoev, 2004, pp. 301–302).

Offering *rakija* to guests on various occasions is considered a gesture of hospitality, respect, and care. Typically in summer, *rakija* is usually served ice-cold, while in winter it is preferred "cooked," with spices, heated and sweetened with honey or sugar. According to the Orthodox Christian tradition, after the funeral service visitors are offered bread (*pogača*) and a glass of *rakija* or other liquor. Pouring *rakija* or other liquor on the ground is practiced when the name of the deceased person is mentioned. This is typical for Bulgaria, Serbia, Macedonia, Romania, and Greece. The libation related ritual requires taking a sip for the soul of the deceased and then, before drinking the rest, to pour some *rakija* on the ground for honoring the dead person and wishing him peaceful rest of his soul. *Rakija* tradition is also central during the wedding ceremonies—it is used for inviting guests at the wedding; by taking a sip they accept the invitation. *Rakija* is offered to the guests for the newlyweds' happiness, as well. In the past in Bulgaria, after the first sexual intercourse of the newlyweds the so-called sweet *rakija* (*blaga rakia*) was sent in an ornamented vessel and with music to the bride's parents, as a symbol of their daughter's virginity.

3.2.2 Food taboos

According to Lévi-Strauss (1963) and Douglas (1966), the established practices or customs of society determine what food is and what is not, what food should be eaten, and on what occasions. Food taboos, like all taboos, are universal unwritten social rules that govern human behavior toward food. Food taboos are not alien to the Balkan

peoples. Some of them are strictly imposed by the religious dogmas on food. The taboos shared among the Balkan nations are mainly related to animals and the consumption of their meat. Meat, such as pork, was considered dirty and forbidden "haram" for consumption by the Muslims—respectively lamb was allowed or "halal". Yet, the majority of the Balkan Christian nations adopted the pork meat as their main meat (Bradatan, 2003). What is more, in Orthodox tradition pig was considered a special animal associated with the pre-Christian sun cult. Not accidentally pigs were slaughtered on Christmas Eve—a day celebrating nativity of "the new sun"—a pre-Christian sacred figure, later related and transformed into Jesus Christ.

As in many cultures around the world, in the Balkans there are certain types of animal meat consumption prohibitions and prescriptions, including killing, touching, consuming an animal or its meat, consuming specific body parts, or consuming the animal under specific circumstances (Russell, 2010). Aside from formal rules, the Balkan countries share some cultural taboos regarding consumption of some animals, including apes, cats, dogs, frogs, rats, reptiles, snakes, and insects. Despite being viewed as delicacy in other parts of the world, in the Balkans they are simply considered outside the range of the generally accepted definition of a foodstuff. This is because food taboos are formed as part of special codifications of folk knowledge related to unsafe foods; some animals are more valuable alive than as meat option for consumption, or in some cases this is due to conservation measures to maintain game populations (Harris, 1985; Ross, 1978). For instance, the obnoxious attitude toward dog eating is the result of the way people looked at dogs as brave and faithful, loyal defenders of the family and guardians of the herds. On the other hand, dogs have names and are considered to be part of the family. As a rule, pets and domestic animals with names are not eaten because of their semihuman status as family members (Fiddes, 1991, p. 133). Dogs were considered important as they were part of the Balkan ceremonial practices, as well. Dog sacrifice was common among the ancient Greeks and the early Neolithic villagers in the Balkans (Lepenki Vir, nowadays Serbia) (Kraig, 1986, p. 177) and was decisive for the formation of the folk worship (Sergis, 2010, p. 61). The practice was preserved in Bulgaria (Vakarelski, 1969, p. 320) and in Turkey (Puchner, 1989, p. 48) in older days. The taboo of dog eating may derive from the abnormal status of the dog as a domestic carnivore or from a belief that dogs are unclean as they eat feces (Russell, 2010, p. 9). Similarly to dogs, horses were worshiped by our ancestors and unsuitable for food because of their nobility. But consumption of horse meat, which is taboo in America, Australia, and New Zealand (Australia and New Zealand Food Standard Code, 2012), was common practice in Serbia, Slovenia (Ryan, 2006), and Croatia, where is regarded as national delicacy (Lynch, 2013) and a significant culinary tradition.

Common food taboo shared among the Balkan nations also apply to certain parts of an animal. Different animals' offal like heads, brains, tongue, trotters, tripe are

considered staple and a delicacy in the Balkans, but these practices are taboo in some religions and many countries around the world. Consumption of tripe soup (*Skhembe chorba*) is among the popular in Bulgaria, Romania, Macedonia, and Turkey, *lamb drob/drob-sarma/drob de miel* made from lamb offal including kidney, liver, and heart is widespread practice around Easter in Romania and Bulgaria. Societal conventions also governed how certain foods should be prepared. For instance, some of the most popular foods among the Balkan countries, *sarma/dolmathes*, have a range of stuffing, but the use of fresh fish and herbs as filling was omitted (Salaman, 1986, p. 185). Similar considerations of the inappropriateness to consume some foods are related to mixing together in the same dish different ingredients; for example, in Bulgaria fish is not to be eaten with yogurt (Davidson, 1986, p. 115).

3.3 Influences of Balkan food culture: religion and religious practices, values and beliefs

Religion not only has built the ethnic stereotypes in the Balkans and their image, but has stifled ethno-cultural differences, too. It has been an important factor in the formation of the Balkan food culture. Similar to the rest of Europe, each religion has defined diet and food taboos (Parasecoli, 2005). The two main religions on the peninsula—Orthodox Christianity and Islam—have imposed their prescriptions of what, when, and how food is supposed to be cooked and consumed. Food regulations were strictly observed in the past and to some extent they are still practiced today, as well. As a rule, during Orthodox fasting periods (i.e., 52 days before Easter; 40 days before Christmas; 15 days before the Dormition of Virgin Mary—August 15; one, two, or three weeks before St. Peter's and St. Paul's Day—June 29), as well as every Wednesday and Friday during nonfasting periods, no meat, no animal fat, no milk and dairy products of any kind should be consumed. Long Lent and Virgin Mary's Fast are the most severe fasting periods because eating fish is allowed only two to three times on certain feasts. Although Orthodox time frames of fast are one and the same, there are differences in fasting culinary code determined by natural and cultural factors. For example, in Greece Mollusca μαλάκιο (octopus, mussels, etc.) are allowed even during Long Lent because they are available in large numbers; in other Balkan countries they are not so accessible and are forbidden. A considerable exception in the Orthodox culinary code is Mount Athos (and some Balkan monasteries) where meat is not consumed at all (Archimandrite, 2014). Monastic diet preserves ancient Byzantine tradition of two meals per day—breakfast and lunch together, eaten after liturgy around 9:00 a.m., and supper served at 5:00–6:00 p.m. Today fast regulations are differently kept in different Balkan countries due to the level of religiousness of people. Two neighbor countries are quite different in this respect: more than 90% of the Romanian population are practicing Christians declaring that they believe in God

(Stahl, 2018, p. 90) and presumably respect fasting, in one way or another, while in Bulgaria there is no clear number of believers, but regular churchgoers are approximately 5%–10%. Many Bulgarians regard fasting as a simple diet without spiritual content.

Bread and wine are the most important elements of the Christian culinary code. They refer to the sacred food of the *eucharist*—via sacrament of the Holy communion, bread and wine are transformed into Christ's body and blood. Receiving Holy communion, the believers incorporate Christ into their bodies and souls. In traditional Balkan culture bread is sacred. It is part of all rituals performed on calendar and life cycle feasts. Diversity of ritual breads is enormous. They are made with or without yeast, in a variety of forms, and with multiform decorations. Bread should not be turned upside down or thrown away because good luck of the house will be lost. Women are not supposed to cut bread—this is men's task—otherwise they will quickly grow old, etc. In the Byzantine Empire and in the Balkans, as well, bread was made of wheat and millet. Rye bread, which was very popular in Western and Northern Europe, was not widespread in the region. For some Bulgarians millet bread was a synonym of poverty—they used to eat it in hard times and during war, white bread made of wheat was a symbol of wealth. In the 1930s peasant children coming to the city were given by their parents *simid* (a small expensive piece of bread made of the finest white wheat). According to a field informant Tzvetana Toncheva, born 1928, people ate it with a piece of ordinary bread instead of cheese as a supreme delicacy.

Wheat was a sacred plant—symbol of eternal life and fertility. It was handed out for health on family feasts called *saint* (*svetutz*)—the days of saints-protectors of the house in Western Bulgaria, Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia, Kosovo, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Romania (Pavlov, 1931, pp. 160–161; Zimmerman, 1985, p. 21).

Different types of blood sacrifices—the so-called *kurban*—were typical of Balkan traditional culture. Islam is the only monotheistic religion to preserve sacrifice in its canons as a part of pilgrimage rituals and in local Muslim celebrations of the feast *Id al Adha* or *Kurban Bayram*—the second main holiday in Islam. Each Muslim believer is supposed to slaughter an animal on this day. This is done as a commemoration of the sacrifice of Prophet Ibrahim (Avraam in Judaism) who obeyed God's will and tried to sacrifice his son Ismail. In the last moment a ram fell from the sky and God told Ibrahim that this was a test for his faith—so the ram should be sacrificed instead of the boy (Blagoev, 2004, pp. 35–68). There are strict ritual regulations how exactly butchering should be done without causing too much pain—the so called *nahr* system of prescriptions. The meat of the sacrificial animal is divided into three parts—the first is handed out to the poor because everyone should taste *kurban* meat on this day, the second is given (raw or cooked) to relatives and friends, and the third is kept at home. Different dishes are prepared with it by adding rice, groats, or dried ground yeasty dough (*tarhana*). Fasting period for the Muslims is during the sacred month of

Ramadan preceding the feast *Ramadan/Ramazan Bayram*. During this period Muslims are permitted to eat and drink water only after sunset and before sunrise—in daytime this is prohibited. A special drummer awakens people to eat early in the morning. The drumbeats are heard on the streets of many Muslim villages and cities in the Balkans (for example, Chanakkale in Turkey) even today. Various sweets are prepared, exchanged and eaten on *Ramazan Bayram*. That is why the feast is also called *Sheker* (sugar) *Bayram*.

According to the Christian doctrine, blood sacrifice is no longer needed because of the expiatory sacrifice of Christ—that is why He said, "I want mercy no sacrifice" (Mathew 9:13). Nevertheless, people continued practicing it because it symbolized the ancient pre-Christian *do ut des* relation between men and God. Sacrifice was made in order to constrain God to answer peoples' prayers positively; it was—and still is—perceived as a kind of a contract with God. Genesis of blood sacrifice in Orthodox cultures is not studied. It is part of the traditional cultures in Bulgaria, Macedonia, partly in Greece, Serbia, and Romania. It is performed on feasts of saints, community, and family feasts. Medieval Orthodox Church tried to ban blood sacrifice with no success. During the Ottoman rule, between the 14th and 19th centuries, it became part of the local Christian traditions because of the Muslim influence, and the church finally became reconciled with the mass practicing of *kurban*. The ritual was transformed into a common table after the end of the liturgy. According to the rules, the sacrificial animal should be sanctified; in Bulgaria there is a special prayer for such cases in the missal. More frequently, instead of sanctifying the animal, the salt used in the ritual meal was sanctified. Often, one of the animals' blade bones is given to the priest. From canonical point of view, blood sacrifice practiced in some Balkan Orthodox countries is considered part of the so-called folk religion (Blagoev, 2004, p. 19). Very typical is the traditional lamb sacrifice on St. George's Day, the patron of farm animals, practiced by Christians and Muslims in Bulgaria, Macedonia, and Serbia (Sobolev, 2007). In Bulgaria, blood sacrifice of an animal is frequently done in the survival of an accident or miraculous healing—a kind of promise to God that, in gratitude, the *kurban* will be made on a particular date of the survival/healing every year for as long as man is alive.

Cooking techniques of *kurban* meat are rather old. In old Slavic tradition the meat was baked; probably under Ottoman influence baking was partially or entirely replaced by boiling, which is typical of Islamic sacrifice. This was done for practical reasons, as well—boiled meat could feed more people than baked meat. *Kurban* is boiled in big metal vessels and a ritual soup is prepared. The most indicative exception of this rule is the sacrifice on St. George's Day, when the lamb is baked in one piece. For Muslims, cooking details are not so important, but according to Christians the dish should be "ritually clean"—the meat is boiled only with water, salt, and rarely with onions. In Macedonia, cabbage, potatoes, tomatoes, paprika, and oil are added (Bocev, 2007, pp. 271–272). Christians traditionally hand out *kurban* soup to people

as a kind of symbolical redemption and thanksgiving of the spared human life and healing. Very popular all over the Balkans are community celebrations. They are done on community festive days—as a rule, these are the days celebrating patron saint of the main church in a village. In some villages in Macedonia, several *kurbans* per year are celebrated (Bocev, 2007, p. 269). In Bulgaria, common village sacrifices are done in cases of drought, frequent car incidents, or diseases in a village or town. Common eating of the ritual food of the *kurban* integrates the collective identity of the members of these social groups as people with a common descent.

In Serbia, Romania, and Bulgaria, three blood sacrifices are performed in death rituals—during burial and at commemorations at 40 days and one year after death (Cirkovic, 2007; Djordjevic, 2007). On these services, wheat is given to people for the commemoration of the dead—it is a symbol of eternal life. It is indicative that this wheat is called *kolivo*—a noun deriving from the verb "to slaughter" (*koliam*). In other words, the etymology of the noun encodes the fact that wheat is handed out instead of butchering an animal. An indicative case of ritual food is the custom called *pomana* performed by Wallachians (Romanians) in Bulgaria. This is a unique tradition—a posthumous commemoration that is usually done on the 40th day after death is made while person is still alive, so he/she attends his\her own memorial service (Grebenarova, 1995, pp. 160–161).

In Bulgaria, the system of the so-called *komshuluk* (neighborhood) is established—Christians and Muslims living together exchange ritual food. Christians give their neighbors Easter eggs and Muslims treat them with *kurban* meat, kindly asking them not to drink alcohol with this sacred food.

Alcohol prohibition is followed differently by various Islamic communities in the Balkans. Through it the level of religiousness could be measured. As a rule, Sunni Muslims use to keep it, although in many cases it is abandoned by some worldly-minded people under the influence of their Christian neighbors. In periods of repression executed by the state, such as the so called Revival process in communist Bulgaria (1985–89) when names of Muslims were forcibly changed and the Bulgarian Turks were expelled to Turkey, alcohol prohibitions and all other elements of Muslim cultural and ethnic identity reflected in food and drink were strengthened as a defensive reaction of the threatened communities. Nowadays, the most diligent adherents of alcohol prohibition are some Bulgarian Muslims (Pomaks) who, due to identity crisis, propagate prohibiting alcohol consumption "Saudi Arabian" Salafi Islam instead of the "Turkish" folk Islam of their parents who used to drink alcohol (Krasteva-Blagoeva & Blagoev, 2008). Such tendencies are registered among Muslims in Macedonia, as well (Dragouni, 2020).

Ritual food, as a rule, is the most conservative part of cuisine. Even when rituals are transformed and lose, partly or entirely, their symbolism, the ritual food remains unchanged. It is constantly prepared as an invariable part of the ritual—people know

that they should cook it according to the rules because "this is how it should be done," "this is how our ancestors had done." Without ritual food, celebrating traditional feasts is practically impossible. In migrants' culture, ritual food is frequently the only surviving element of the ritual. In other words, ritual actions grow narrower and frequently a traditional feast is reduced to cooking and common eating of ritual food only. That is why for migrants cooking ritual food properly is quite important and they make big efforts to provide original products needed although they are frequently not available at local markets (Krasteva-Blagoeva, 2009).

Fun is an important part of the "Balkan way" of eating out. Live music is almost inevitable in Balkan restaurants—many clients claim that it positively influences their appetite and puts them at ease. Musicians performing lively traditional or perceived as such melodies go from table to table asking the customers about their favorite song. In Turkey, they are accompanied by a belly dancer. Male clients are supposed to give tips—there is no way of avoiding that, it is an inevitable part of Balkan machismo imaginary. The Greek tradition of crashing plates saying Opa (ώπα) is linked with the Greek concept of *kefi* (high spirits and fun). It is a sign of wealth with ceremonial and ritual undertones and is used to protect from evil spirits. At a wedding ceremony, plate breaking was an important conspicuous ritual—it was officially banned several years ago. This time-honored tradition above all is a symbol of good luck and a happy, lasting marriage. Typologically it resembles the famous *potlach* ritual of North American Indians as a conspicuous demonstration of wealth and social status. In Bulgaria, there is a similar ritual of tearing to pieces hundreds of paper serviettes in Oriental *chalga* music discotheques. Because of this practice the serviettes offered there are unusually expensive. Nevertheless, the number of people performing this ritual every night is high. The most indicative among these examples is the practice of conspicuous pouring numerous bottles of champagne by some Bulgarian *nouveaux riches* members of the elite wishing to demonstrate their wealth and high social status.

3.4 Conclusions

In the context of the globalized contemporary world, food is still a culturally specific social action in the peninsula. Balkan food provides a perfect intermediary between the North, the Mediterranean Europe, and Near East (Anderson, 2005, p. 193). Despite mass penetration of foreign foodstuffs and dishes via global consumer culture and supply chains, the core of Balkan culinary code is preserved with its main elements: bread–meat–milk/dairy–alcohol. It reflects and contributes to the region's culinary character. It forms a special paradigm, the core of "Balkan taste" and Balkan cultural identity, because "having a taste means to be emotionally integrated in a culture" (Claessens, 1979, p. 130). In contrast with the past—when meat was eaten on festive occasions predominantly—the level of meat consumption has raised

significantly nowadays (Bogueva, Phau, & Marinova, 2018). Meat has become a main element of everyday diet—especially as part of eating out practices—mainly in the form of a grill. The consumption of bread and pastry remains widespread and symbolically important. Different types of white cheese and yogurt are marketed worldwide as "typically Balkan." Alcohol is crucial in terms of social communication and merry-making, as it integrates common and community eating patterns. All over the Balkans a meal begins with a glass of brandy or liquor with appetizers so that one can relax and enjoy food tastes. General food taboos are still respected. Deliberate actions for revitalization of gradually disappearing traditional food practices and cooking techniques are registered in the frames of the so called "slow food" movement. Balkan tastes are successfully marketed by numerous ethnic restaurants in the peninsula and all over the world. Due to the existence of these places, lots of resemblances in meals, festivities, and music are made visible and are given meaning. It is in this manner that a symbolic construction of the region through food is being formed.

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