

Reading the Cookbooks of Communist Romania: A Very Intimate Defence

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ABSTRACT: When the Romanian Communist party uses food as a propaganda tool while pantry shelves are perpetually empty, cookbooks become double agents. Relying on the theoretical tools of discourse analysis, this article explores the ways in which cookbooks of the Communist era were edited to work as power legitimation tools for the political regime while serving the escapist goals of fictional literature for the wider population. It will be argued that these books were intended to project the false image of a modern and well-provided for society, comparable to any Western Capitalist one, while also serving as pretexts for daydreaming and learning for the food-deprived people. The present study adds to the growing body of sociological scholarship about Romanian culinary culture with a focus on a personal consumption of Communist cookbooks.

My personal Stake in Cookbooks

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A few years ago I read a collection of food *memoirs* belonging to various Romanian *hommes de lettres*. Reading about a poetess who was reminiscing browsing through old French almanacs as a way of fending off cold and hunger, I remembered my own daydreaming over the 1983 and 1984 editions of the Almanac of Literature and Gastronomy. I realised that, decades and living conditions apart, we were both reading recipes to indulge in revery and resist the present.

According to Bracewell (2013), a ‘certain anticipatory imagination’ is set in motion when reading recipes, ‘a thrill, a positive emotion that can easily turn into frustration when said recipes are impossible to prepare. And impossible they were in Communist Romania! With the increased pressures around food provisioning that hit Romania in the 1980s (Petrescu, 2014), cookbooks became an escapist pastime. Younger readers, such as myself at the time, used recipes as leaps into fantasy land: I was not able to experience the real taste of a 50-egg brioche, so I could only imagine the splurge. For some adults however, the reveries brought back real memories that made a meagre toast & tea dinner more palatable. In the process, something else also took place – education, with cookbooks acting as silent teachers. Scholars of the Communist food discourse have noticed that the way things were presented in cookbooks was likely to induce a ‘dreamy predisposition in the reader and stimulated imagination but it might have also activated possible frustrations’ (Bracewell, 2013). To

Romanian philosopher Gabriel Liiceanu, born in 1942, 'misery [childhood]' foods' seemed normal, he confessed to having no recollection of a feast back then, which caused him to speak of a 'fall from Paradise' era for food in Communism (Parvulescu, 2012).

Why Study Cookbooks?

Food scholars recommend using cookbooks as historical sources because they are not mere recipe collections, but they provide hidden clues about politics, religion, food ideology, in a nutshell the prevalent 'world views' of a historical age and social group (Albala 2012, Neuhaus (x), Bracewell 2013). While Black & Goldwaithe view recipes as 'culture-keepers as well as culture-makers, both recording memories and fostering new ones'. (Black & Goldwaithe 2014), Bower defines them as 'maps of cultural and social worlds they inhabit' (Bower in Danciu, Radu 2014), which makes them a suitable medium for a social history study.

Drawing on the existing research on daily life under Communism, this study starts from the premise that cookbooks are never removed from political and economic realities and that they 'help legitimate the system that put all this bounty on the table' (Bracewell, 2013). My research is indebted to Skhrodova's work around Bulgarian Communist cookbooks (Skhrodova, 2019) and Keating's analysis of the culinary discourse as a tool that delivers the knowledge produced by and supports the State's power (Keating, 2018). My analysis also builds on Hofland's discussion around the Soviet's Khrushchev regime 'perceiving [...] domestic cooking as a public affair' (Hofland, 2016). In advancing the theory of the educational role played by cookbooks, this article also relies on the theory that new models of consumption can act just as observed for the Yugoslavian space as 'potential tools for eradicating backwardness and building a modern socialist citizenry' (Bren, Pence&Betts 2013).

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Methodology

In conducting this piece of research, my theoretical arsenal is twofold. First, I draw on my own childhood memories and observations as an avid reader and collector of cookbooks. Although there is no consensus on the defining traits of the auto-ethnographic method, I follow Carolyn Ellis's definition: 'research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political' (Ellis, 2004). This echoes Mills' 'sociological imagination', and its 'awareness of the relationship between personal experience and the wider society' (Wright Mills 1959).

The second method I employed is the qualitative coding of over thirty-five cookbooks, from my own bookshelves and representative for the analysed period. Albala notes that cookbooks do not constitute proof of people's eating habits in a given period of time, as they are usually prescriptive in nature (Albala, 2012). However, he agrees that cookbooks can provide information if the researcher approaches them with a set of methodological tools (Albala 2012). In my research I followed historians' need to address five basic

questions to contextualize the information contained, namely ‘Who wrote the cookbook? What was the intended audience? Where was it produced and when? Why was it written?’. Content analysis and coding was also conducted on a collection of memoirs about food under Communism.

A Brief History of Cookbooks in Romania

Judging by the number of titles, cookbooks were a well-established publishing genre well before WWII. By the mid-twentieth century Bucharest was synchronising with the rest of Europe in terms of culinary books and experiences, gastronomy becoming a hard to ignore marker of civilisation (Pirjol, 2011). The interwar cookbooks were intended for the bourgeois mistress of the house, who employed a cook, a butler and had a refined culinary repertoire (see Bacalbasa’s 1935 recipes for crayfish soup, lobster, and chrysanthemum salad). That changed after 1947, with the new social order imposed by the Communist regime, designed to mimic its Soviet neighbour and guiding star. Part of building the new society was based on erasing the old order, purging ‘unhealthy’ bourgeois elements. The propaganda machine worked hard to shed a favourable light on the achievements of the Communist ‘new man’. Eating and cooking were also subject to this transformation. Social history recounts peaceful times when food preparation would be considered a private affair, an area that escaped the government’s interference being relegated to ‘the private space of domestic life, far from worldly noises’ (Giard, 1998). If the act of food provisioning was always political, cooking was usually relegated to the domestic sphere. Following the Soviet lead, the Romanian Communist regime perceived ‘domestic cooking as a public affair’ (Hofland 2016) and actively pursued its alignment to the party’s ideology. Moreover, who talked about food and how food was talked about or what remained unspoken was a matter of State policy (Annu, 2013). Under the Communist rule, food was subject to governmental regulation and its production, distribution and prices were strictly controlled by the authorities (Keating, 2018). The party understood the power Official communication about food functioned as a semiotic system likely to shape mentalities and ideologies (Net, X), which turned food consumption into ‘a deeply political experience’ (Burell 2003).

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Communist Culinary Discourse over Time

The 1950s were based on an ‘enforced consensus’ modelled on Soviet patterns of nationalisation, centrally planned industry and censorship. The state took control over everything; this included printing so cookbooks too received the call to arms. Culinary literature from that time is brimming with principles of scientific nutrition. A healthy individual meant a healthy worker, therefore a useful citizen. Food became a tool to supply the worker with the necessary calories – it was, after all, the period of the great construction sites: the subway network, the Danube-Black Sea canal, etc. The new workforce (villagers

migrated to urban industrial areas) needed to be both educated and fed. Cooking was approached as a part of a wider social endeavour; rational eating was a social responsibility so cookbooks had extensive opening chapters describing how the human body works fuelled by the appropriate caloric input. The state advanced the idea of personalized menus, proposing models of calorie intake customized for different age/ gender/ line of work, with the needs of a mine worker differing from that of a retired senior or pregnant woman. Physiologists were asked to determine precise meal rations, nutritionists were invited to write lengthy introductions. Signs of rationalisation and standardisation could be found in all cookbooks as they offered pretty much the same recipes, without variation. This is justified by theories of taste that relegate it to the bourgeoisie's mental landscape and define eating as a rudiment of existence, since the primary role of food was feeding, not pleasure (Glushchenko, 2010). The purge campaign that intended to clean the society of retrograde elements extended over cookbooks as well. All traces leading to Western, imperial or simply decadent foods, foodways and language were erased. There were also small adjustments of the ingredients, such as tuna becoming generic fish, etc. Another study (Ghita, 2016:1) shows that 'quantities and ingredients in traditional recipes were scaled down as the ingredients necessary to make them became more difficult to procure (such as *cozonaci moldovenești*)'.

500 This crusade for total renewal was not original, the Soviets did it too and turned 'consommé Printanière' into 'stock with roots and greens' (Hoffland, 2016). Not all cookbooks renamed recipes; some just adapted their orthography preferring the Romanian phonetic pronunciation *sarlota* for charlotte, *bavarez* for bavaroise, *babe* for baba, etc. Others managed to keep the original orthograph such as Bouillabaise fish soup, butter a la Strasbourg, etc. Natalia Tautu's 1975 book gives recipes for *pain d'Espagne*, *mille feuilles* or *madeleines* and if in 1975 Silvia Jurcovan provides instructions for a white sauce, her 1987 edition openly names the concoction Béchamel. A 1984 culinary wall-calendar featured recipes from all over the world, including the Western Capitalist World.

The 1960s and especially the 1970s were the golden age of the East trying to catch up with the West (Stone, 2012). Social scientists agree that the European Communist countries became 'mass consumer societies' (Crowley & Reid 2010). The State paid attention to the consumer and the shops were filled with foodstuffs. A new educational goal was set and cookbooks obliged: a good housewife must be able to entertain at home, an idea which had to do with proving affluence and education, perks of a lifestyle comparable to the West.

However, in 1980 the EEC chose not to renew its trade partnership with Romania. Ceausescu took a highly nationalist approach that culminated with the need to be independent from the USSR and the West. In 1981 he decided to pay off the foreign debt estimated at \$10 billion by exporting gasoline, clothing, and several basic foodstuffs (Boia, 2016). The 1980s meant for Romania the rationing of meat, oil, and sugar; overnight queues appeared outside of stores for basic items, with bodies immobilized in food lines (Verdery, 1996). Eggs

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were saved weeks in advance for Easter and Christmas menus. Real coffee was something one would keep to bribe doctors or any other provider of informal services otherwise; at home ersatz brewing was the norm. Ceausescu justified these measures on the basis of Romanian sovereignty and in the name of good health, promoting his program of scientific nutrition.

Nonetheless, local cookbooks did not follow life's realities. They lost their nutrition-centric approach and ideological weight and started offering substantial amounts of foreign recipes. Culinary literature illustrated a simple but satisfying cuisine ignoring the reality of food shortage.

Some Polish cookbooks, on the other hand, would indirectly acknowledge the grim reality of lack of resources by abandoning the game of pretence and by publishing austerity-driven recipes that also gave real useful advice on how to make do with limited ingredients (Keating, 2018).

Romanian Communist culinary literature is quite rich; I worked on 35+ such books. The most widely known source is Sanda Marin's Cookbook, her 1936 first edition being reprinted in abridged form until the late 1960s. Authors are mostly amateur cooks; some volumes do not have an author at all. Titles are generic, – 'Cookbook' or simple, and descriptive title – 'Practical advice for the housewife'. Unless they focus on a single food category, most are exhaustive, compendium-like tomes featuring hundreds of recipes, some reaching or exceeding a thousand. Special diets have dedicated chapters or entire books. Some of them have introductions signed by dieticians – supposedly in an attempt to give a more professional appearance to the advice being provided. I found recipes to portray a simple, standardized, fairly conservative and monotonous cuisine. The techniques are basic and so are the dishes, there is no 'ornamental cookery' (Barthes, 2013). I noticed the recurrence of the same recipes across volumes, in the introductions that outline the same, almost inexistent culinary creed(?), and in the identical structuring of the universe of ingredients and cooking techniques. A single, unified set of recipes thus reflects the propagation of a bureaucratic cuisine, likely to ensure the nation's proper nutrition. This secured both science-approved products and control for a higher uniformity of quality and quantity. The epitome of prescriptive cooking appears to be the national *Standard Recipe Collection for Food Products* intended to serve as the Bible of all restaurants.

Science-based nutrition had a longer history in Romania, though. Local cookbooks had hinted at it well before WWII. In 1935 journalist and *bon viveur* Constantin Bacalbasa argued that 'when it comes to feeding, as well as in politics, abuse is anti-constitutional'. In Communist Romania, the woman of the house was to bear the responsibility of understanding the nutritional needs of the family and to meet them at a minimum cost of time, materials and energy. Set against the background of food penury, this opens the door to substitutions and alterations. The results were the so-called economic recipes, cheaper versions of the printed ones. The reader would therefore write their own alternative

cookbooks, by hand, exchanging recipes within their social circle and editing the official ones (Skhrodova, 2019). Even some official cookbooks exceptionally included this type of substitute recipes. Probably the most famous is the fake fish roe salad one. Replacing roe with beans or semolina and adding fish paste resulted into something described as ‘imitate[ing] real fish row well’ (Jurcovan 1957). Silvia Jurcovan who, in her 1987 edition, followed up on her readers’ feedback by offering ideas, recipes and advice on how to use canned meat – a novelty at the time, which she referred to as ‘sterilized meat’ – a much more reasonable and readily available ingredient than fresh or frozen meat. Low-quality or substitute products became staples which prompted humour as a common way of coping; that’s when you would hear on Romanian streets about ‘chickenware’ (wings, heads and claws) and about ‘pork Adidas’ (pork hooves). Life acquired a ‘gradual redefinition of luxury’ (Crowley, Reid 2010).

Reading Communist Cookbooks Then and Now

502 While reading cookbooks as a child, I’d skip the info on vitamins, proteins, and the like, as those sections reminded me of biology class, while I saw food items as embodiments of the stories of the world. On the other hand, I was obviously attracted by practical examples – which foods should my mother, who worked as a clerk, eat? How should my grandfather, who worked in oil mining and would commute to work every day, be fed at the factory’s cafeteria? Apart from (arguably) educating me about nutrition, my cookbooks also taught me about planning and optimizing the use of resources. There were so many ways one could use a slice of stale bread. But, what really caught my imagination as a kid were recipes such as flavoured butters, eggs *a la Strasbourg* and American lemonade. I remember a complex, butter-rich, decadent French *mille feuille* pastry followed, a few pages later, by economic recipes based on cheaper ingredients like bread, potatoes, starch and marmalade. Though I did not give it too much thought back then, it now seems like the breeding ground of a cognitive dissonance.

There is something else my cookbooks taught me: the value of patience and imagination. Not having enough eggs to spare for recipe testing is how I understood what austerity meant. In the 1980s, Romanian food shops offered mainly toilet paper, Vietnamese shrimp crackers and canned beans stew displayed in a skilful way so as to fill the empty shelves. Therefore, when cookbooks proposed more international and flamboyant combinations, they also became useless or, at least, not functional.

From my cookbooks I learnt that women should cook while men and children will eat. Today I simply know Communist cookbooks were highly gendered. Woman, ‘this wonderful being who brings us the joy of days spent together through every meal she makes, masterpieces of her work’ (Olexiuc 1979) was, at the same time, the tractor-operating symbol of gender equality in the workforce (Boia, 2016). Despite claims that ‘Communism

will liberate woman from domestic slavery, so that her life can be richer, fuller, happier and freer' (Aleksandra Kollontaj as quoted by Hoffland, 2016), cookbooks appear to have promoted this multi-lateral, multi-tasking ideal that adds domestic work on top of official, paid work. Communism legitimized the double work day for women (Miroiu, 2014).

Communist culinary literature could also deliver lifestyle content. The gem of my collection is called *Gospodina si oaspetii familiei* 'The housewife and the family's guests' (Neagu 1968/ 1977). It is a small, delicate book borrowed by my aunt in the 1970s and never returned to the village's public library. It features menus for specific events such as a small wedding, an anniversary, children parties, picnics, etc. These come with advice on style, plating, manners and hospitality as well as lots of sketches showing how to creatively fold a napkin, make a seating card or decorate a New Year's Eve aspic. Due to its focus on good taste and display and it taught me, as a child, that food is not simply about cooking. It is about planning, pairing, and presenting. The author believed the family meal educated participants by providing not only nutritional information but also by honing soft skills such as aesthetics, table manners, entertainment guests. It showed me a whole world outside the food I knew, and this started a lifelong interest in gastronomy. If cookbooks were meant to educate the masses this is a perfect example, especially since it was available in rural public libraries too. Reading this kind of cookbooks helped me challenge what I would be told about the material culture of the old world, the denigrated bourgeoisie (dining room vs all-in-one family room, silver cutlery vs nickel, foamy cotton tablecloths, Bohemia crystal glasses, etc). This is how I learnt about class, inequality, glamour, taste and political regimes. Later on, while going back to this book to do my research, the reference to silver cutlery brought up bigger questions – was it a slip, a tacit acknowledgement or an intentional move, part of the propaganda? Was the Communist party using the kitchen as a (distorted) mirror to cover up the shortages and pretend Romania had a normal existence? Was this the way to build the image of a rich, civilised, modern society, similar to if not even superior to any Western one? That is one possibility supported by cookbook authors such as Clementina Petra: 'the rising of lifestyle level is manifested throughout all sectors of our socialist society and it generates opportunities and superior needs. Eating has changed, aside from the higher caloric intake there is also a form of aesthetic display and consumption' (Petra 1969:).

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Then again, these empty references to a no longer existent or desirable conviviality model may have been one of the 'authorized breathing valves, part of a strategy that aimed at giving the illusion of freedom while keeping things under tight control' (Skhrodova, 2019).

What I treasure about my old cookbooks even today is the fact that they helped me build a culinary capital (Lebescco & Naccarato, 2012). Among hundreds of recipes featuring plain ingredients, I was able to effortlessly single out the oddities, meaning the rare to-inexistent-and-never-seen-in-real-life recipes. This is how I learnt about parmesan, chocolate, butter,

champagne, asparagus, coffee, truffles, sturgeon caviar, etc. Although absent in the pantry, these were not so shy in books – I found seven asparagus recipes in one book only. The availability of these ingredients in shops before 1947 is documented in culinary and non-culinary literature. I read those recipes with an intellectual appetite, no hunger, no cravings. Decades later, I would smile reading Bracewell’s poetical definition of a recipe as being able ‘to quench hunger, quick and efficiently but also to educate it, to shape it, to celebrate it; through the foreplay of reading and anticipatory imagination the recipe gives an ancillary taste to any dish’ (Bracewell, 2013). Part of this educational process was also my familiarity with the Capitalist Other’s food early on, even if in theory only. When capitalism and officially entered Romania after 1989 I was already versed, theoretically, in the international kitchen lingo. I knew the recipes for French pastry dough, Greek pastry sheets, Viennese *schnitzel*, Greta Garbo cake, ketch-up, *vinaigrette*, *choux a la creme*, Chantilly, pizza, etc.

Conclusion

504 Cookbooks presented an imagined, fictional cuisine – the cuisine of a normal, well-provided for society which Romania no longer was. There was no direct causality between cookbooks and pantry; both the local asparagus of my cookbooks and the exotic manioc from my Peruvian fairy tale books were unicorns. When the morning cup of coffee was actually made of roasted chicory but the cookbook’s Drinks section featured a generous array of coffee recipes, the gap between reality and make pretend was hard to ignore. Even as a child I knew I need to treat my cookbooks as informative pastimes, yummy fairy tales; this makes the current introspection all the more unsettling and valuable.

I understand now they were a representation of the regime’s duplicity and a cause of its trickle-down reproduction. Austerity trumped nutrition. Responsibility took the basic form of fending for oneself, while planning and optimisation allowed for alteration. The state lied; people pretended to believe. The publisher sought legitimation and indoctrination; readers looked for revery, loose inspiration and maybe the feeling of normal. These different usages somehow managed to coexist. I brought myself up as a gastronome learning about the (truncated) world around. There was almost no legitimacy of indulgence in food and cooking but that did not deter me and others from discovering it. In a Communist context the cookbooks was first an escapist tool, but later revalued in a personal context as educational tool that eased my immersion in Capitalism. My cookbooks taught me not only about cooking or what it means to be a woman, but also laid the foundation of my culinary capital (Naccarato, Lebesco 2013) part of what Bourdieu (1984) calls cultural capital. They opened the door to concepts of identity or belonging and difference even if these were indirectly touched. So even if, just like in other countries from the Eastern Bloc, the cookbook was a tool of ‘cultural deceit’ (Skhrodova, 2018) it proved to be a useful guide to me in my formation years.

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