

McMICI, anyone?



Mateo Urquijo

In Sibiu there is a local family restaurant that is said to serve the best *ciorbă de burtă* in town. Many foreigners won't try the stuff once they find out that it's made of tripe, or cows stomach. I think it's delicious though. In fact, on my father's side of the family they make a soup that is very similar, called *menudo*, which is also made from tripe. The two taste just about the same, but in my family's version we add coriander, cheese, hominy, fresh jalapeños, occasionally pig's feet and no sour cream.

It is funny how similar the two dishes are, considering they originate from countries a half a world apart. Having said that, I have never come across anything like the Romanian dish *mici*, in Mexico; nor have I seen *tamales* in Romania. Still, there are some universals in whichever country you happen to be: Big Macs, KFC, and Whoppers are pretty much the same no matter where you are. But why should American fast food be universal and not *mici* or *tamales*? Why McDonald's and not McPopa's?

I ask these questions in all earnestness. How can the small business of serving tripe soup compete with Chicken McNuggets? How can the corner store or the local farmer's market compete with Real and Carrefour? The simple answer is that, likely, they can't. Many Romanians are quick

to tell me that people in their country often buy from foreign stores and Western brands, because these are things that weren't available under communism; and they say that the younger generation is especially inclined to buy foreign goods. So maybe their choices are just an expression of shifting consumer attitudes. But I have a feeling that it is more than that. From my point of view, the growing trends of globalisation in Romania, while bringing many good things to new places, may well mean a diminishment of traditional culture and identity. I think small business could play a major role in curbing those effects in the coming decades, if, they are supported.

I will attempt to make my case for small business by continuing our discussion on food: if I asked you to tell me about German cuisine, you would probably tell me about "*Schweins-haxe mit Sauerkraut*"; French cuisine, you might say "*quiche lorraine*" or

"*coq au vin*"; and for Italian cuisine, you might mention "*vitello tonnato*". But if I asked you about American food, you would probably say McDonald's, right? Many Americans would give the same answer. But if you asked an American in the 1940's they would probably have said something like, "*roasted butternut squash soup*" or "*cedar-planked rainbow trout*".

So, when did Americans cash in their fish cooked on cedar sticks, for frozen fish sticks? Was there a time before America was covered in fast food chains and people had to cook? Last year I found a book called "*The Food of a Younger Land*" by Mark Kurlansky, which paints "a portrait of American food - before the national highway system, before chain restaurants, and before fast food, when the nation's food was seasonal, regional, and traditional". I was completely amazed to discover the variety and richness of the food throughout my own country. How could I have reached adulthood without having known about (much less tasted) *South Carolina Pee Dee Fish Stew*, or *cider plum pudding*? How was it possible that I didn't really even know about my country's regional traditional dishes? Kurlansky explains that after the creation of the national highway system, technological improvements in refrigerated transportation, and mass production, America's entire sense of consumer identity changed. Traditional dishes that take ages to cook were out-competed by cheaper, industrialized foods. Seasonal fruits and vegetables were shipped in and shipped out of every corner of the country, and you no longer had to wait for summer to eat tomatoes.

When older Americans tell my generation that they can remember seasonal foods (a time when oranges in the winter were so special that they were given as Christmas presents) and that they weren't available year-round, my generation is likely to respond, "What? Why? Did the supermarket run out?"



The fact is, no one my age in America knows what 'seasonal' actually means. I live in Sibiu, and it was here for the first time in my life that I experienced myself what it means: fruits and berries in the high summer, cherries in the late summer (as well as the difference between sweet and sour cherries), eggplant until October, cucumbers starting in May, and some pumpkins and squash in the winter. In Romania, my neighbours have given me vegetables they canned in the summer so they have paprika and cauliflower in the winter, and frozen roasted eggplants for *zacusca* too. In America, very few people have any idea at all where their food even comes from, and no one would save it until winter.

Still, while everyone here knows that the local farmer's market has better tomatoes than their international 'super' counterparts, the local farmers can't compete with the variety, selection, and price. Besides, even if the tomatoes aren't as good from the supermarket, it would mean making another trip to the local market and who has time for that? But this is exactly what must be done in order to ensure that the local farmer's market is still there in ten years.

When massive supermarkets and multiple chainstores come into town, many small businesses fail, and this is the same story everywhere. When I was in the US over Christmas, I read in a local paper that a small coffee shop had gone out of business after 15 years, to be replaced by a chain shop for medical marijuana. There was a large public

outcry, but when the owner was asked what she thought, she said that people shouldn't be upset; if you don't patronize your favourite small businesses, they disappear.

This is precisely my fear for Romania. People say that I exaggerate when I tell them this, but then, they don't know what it's like to have a plastic hamburger as their national dish... yet. Because my country is relatively young, living in a quaint medieval city like Sibiu is a wondrous thing. With the rich old architecture, cobblestone streets, and historical museums, for me it is really like a movie because it is so totally foreign. But if I go outside of the city centre just two kilometers, it feels exactly like home: Real, Carrefour, and Kaufland are all in a row, with KFC, McDonald's and a gas station standing at the gates.

These giant concrete boxes with paved sidewalks and massive parking lots also have a small housing development with identical houses directly across the street. Change the names of those box stores to Costco, Walmart and Kroger, and I could be anywhere in America (if you find this hard to believe, do a Google image search for 'suburb').

The bottom line is that it is easy to forget traditions when so many options are literally on the table. But here is fair warning that you should not forget. You don't want your grandchildren to have never heard of *sarmale* until they read it in a book. You might laugh and say "that's impossible", but I would remind you that the busiest McDonald's

store in the world isn't in New York, it's in Europe. Munich to be exact (apparently, their motto "Ich liebe es" = "I'm lovin' it" is really true). And it isn't just food; it is also easy for Germans to forget about their local cafés and traditional café culture in the bright glow of Starbucks, McDonald's McCafe, and the San Francisco Coffee Company. So when I say that it is possible, it is because I know it from my own country, from seeing my country's companies in other countries, and from the Fortune 500 figures: Walmart is no. 2 (no. 1 for six of the last ten years), Kroger no. 22, and Costco no. 24.

And it is staggering to realize that these changes to the day-to-day consumer's lifestyles weren't effected over the course of millennia or even centuries; these are fundamental changes that have occurred in less than one person's lifetime (less than 70 years).

Still, the situation is not futile. In 2000, in an effort to protect its traditional small-town character, the US city of Arcata, California, enacted a municipal "Committee on Democracy and Corporations". Its main goal was to "research and present to the [City] Council options for controlling the growth of "pattern restaurants" in the community [...] and to provide advice on ways to foster sustained locally-owned businesses". The result was that two years later, legislation (Ordinance No. 1333) was passed limiting the number of chain restaurants in the city to nine (see cityofarcata.org).

I try, therefore, as a matter of principle not to go to American chains when I am abroad. I would much rather have bowls of tripe soup in my new medieval city. And for the moment, everybody in Sibiu still knows where to find it. But with a brand new KFC and McDonald's in town (the second one here) it is easy to overlook this local family restaurant. In fact, I would love to tell you its name, but I seem to have forgotten it.





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