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FOOD HERITAGE: PARADIGM SHIFT IN THE IMPLEMENTATION PRACTICES OF THE 2003 UNESCO CONVENTION FOR THE SAFEGUARDING OF INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE

Abstract

This article explores the concept and governance of food heritage within the framework of UNESCO's 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage. The primary aim of this Convention is to preserve the heritage of supranational communities. From the beginning, there were typical heritages that were promoted by a member state as a kind of national identity, and although the professional evaluation body had, quite early on, reflected on the wording of the community/national character element in the nomination documents (the terms 'unique', 'special', 'individual', were included in the list of prohibited terms), the themes promoted in some cases have continued to reinforce this trend.

In recent years, national/regional identity foods have become more common in the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Although, based on the definition of the Convention, the nomination documents are not about the product or the individual food (beverages, for example), but about the customs and traditions of their preparation and consumption, it is still about food heritage, which has the same meaning as national character. Recently, there has also been a discussion about the definition of food heritage as a separate domain, because, at the moment, and based on current classifications, this heritage element can appear in several sites in the nomination documents.

In my article, I will outline how the type of food that defines the national character of a country becomes heritage – how it is formulated as being an aspect of communal

knowledge, practice, and form of expression. I will also introduce the concepts used in the Hungarikum system and the principles laid down in law in this regard.

Introduction and background

As the head[1] of the organisation responsible for the UNESCO 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Hungary, based, since 2009, at the Hungarian Open Air Museum in Szentendre, I have been able to get an overview of the operation of the Convention and the processes and procedures involved – from the first inscriptions stage, the listing process, the development of procedures and various concepts, to the refinement of evaluation criteria. I also have had the opportunity to attend numerous UNESCO meetings where the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage discussed the dossiers of heritage elements submitted for inscription by State Parties. I was personally involved in the debates and processes. I am familiar with the Hungarian practice in this context at close range, having participated in the establishment and the ongoing operation of the system in relation to Hungary, and by closely following the national processes and observing how an object or a tradition becomes recognised as heritage.[2]

Cultural heritage

Before delving into the concept of food heritage and examining its practices, I consider it necessary to reflect first of all on certain key aspects of the broader discourse on heritage. These considerations may provide a useful framework for

1 Reference to this study: Eszter Csonka-Takács: Food Heritage: Paradigm Shift in the Implementation Practices of the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage. In Anikó Báti and Patricia Lysaght (eds.): *Living Eating Habits, Revitalized Foodways and the Concepts of Tradition and Food Heritage*. Budapest: ELTE RCH Institute of Ethnology – Museum of Ethnography, 2025. pp. 95–115.
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2 The 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage focuses on community knowledge and practice, related objects, tools, sites, knowledge transfer, reinterpretation and community identity. The Convention defines different domains that express the themes and contexts of the intangible cultural heritage elements (oral traditions, performing arts, social rites and customs, natural knowledge, traditional crafts), which can be included in national inventories and from there in the representative list of the intangible cultural heritage of humanity.

gaining an understanding of the communication processes and the cultural phenomena associated with food heritage.

The concept of cultural heritage and its institutionalisation is the outcome of a complex, evolving process, shaped by the interwoven influences of historical, social, and economic phenomena. Cultural heritage does not exist in isolation; rather, it emerges from a socially constructed and institutionalised framework, underscoring its inherently artificial and mediated character. In contemporary discourse, heritage has become a readily-mobilisable and widely-applied notion, even though it remains inherently difficult to define it with precision.

Although the concept of heritage initially emerged in association with specific socio-cultural values – such as religious buildings – appreciation of it and its use were primarily framed within the logic of private ownership, rather than being understood as a shared, communal legacy. During the Renaissance, the notion that heritage should be visible, publicly appreciated, and accessible to all, had not yet taken root. The prevailing emphasis on private possession is reflected in the treatment of castles and monuments at that time, which were frequently left unprotected, and were often partially or entirely demolished, in order to make way for new constructions or to meet practical, material needs.

It was from the late 1960s onwards that the notion of a 'common heritage of humanity' began to gain prominence. This marked a significant paradigm shift, as, from that time, the understanding of heritage moved beyond the confines of private ownership into the public domain, thereby attracting international attention. A pivotal moment in this transformation was UNESCO's renowned international campaign to rescue the monuments of Egyptian Nubia, which were threatened by the rising waters of Lake Nasser. The meticulous dismantling and relocation of the Abu Simbel temples, block by block, became a powerful symbol of a new, globally-coordinated approach, to heritage preservation – one grounded in shared responsibility ideals and international cooperation.[3] From this point forward, heritage was increasingly framed as a collective legacy belonging to all of humanity.

The first substantial scholarly enquiries into heritage emerged in the 1980s. This era is often described as the time of 'heritage expansion' (extension patrimoniale) or the

3 <https://whc.unesco.org/en/convention/> accessed 16 April 2025; and Romagnoli, M.: 'Gastronomic heritage elements at UNESCO: Problems, reflections on and interpretations of a new heritage category', *International Journal of Intangible Heritage* 14 (2019), 159.

'everything-as-heritage' (tout-patrimonial) phase, during which virtually any object, site, or practice, could potentially attain heritage status through institutional mechanisms.[4]

In this broadened context, anything deemed worthy of preservation, protection, conservation, or transmission, could be designated as heritage. This led to the emergence of the concept of 'heritagization' (patrimonialisation), which refers, not merely to the object or tradition itself, but to the process through which it becomes recognised as heritage. Heritagization entails mechanisms of selection and exclusion, highlighting the sociopolitical dynamics that determine which elements of the past are valorised, and by which social groups.

As a constructed and evolving process, heritagization continuously adapts to new categories and values – most notably with a growing focus on intangible elements such as practices, skills, and expressions. It encompasses a wide range of meanings, from gastronomy understood as a living social tradition, to war heritage embodied in historical architecture and serving as a site of memory and as a warning against future violence.

The increasing prevalence of the term 'heritagization' can be attributed to the continuous expansion of the contemporary heritage movement, which has often been marked by top-down decision-making and, in some cases, excessive commodification. This is exemplified by the inclusion of both tangible and intangible cultural elements on UNESCO's internationally-recognised heritage lists, established under the framework of the 1972 Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage,[5] and the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Heritagization is thus understood as a dynamic process by which cultural – whether tangible or intangible – or natural phenomena acquire heritage status, and are consequently deemed worthy of being safeguarded by a particular community. In UNESCO's terminology, such communities are referred to as 'heritage bearers', who assume responsibility for the ongoing care, transmission, and the vitality of these practices or objects, thus ensuring their relevance and sustainability for future generations.

4 Romagnoli: 'Gastronomic heritage elements at UNESCO…', 159.

5 <https://whc.unesco.org/en/conventiontext/>; <https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention> accessed 16 April 2025.

The success of UNESCO's Nubian campaign led to the drafting of the World Heritage Convention, a foundational document that established a global commitment to the protection of cultural values deemed to be of universal importance. However, a sense of insufficiency soon followed the adoption of the 1972 Convention, revealing the need for a further international framework that would address the safeguarding of intangible cultural elements – a need that eventually culminated in the 2003 Convention.

In 1973, the Bolivian Minister of Foreign Affairs submitted a memorandum to the Director-General of UNESCO, urging the international community to take action against the exploitation and misappropriation of folklore – including traditional music, dance, and crafts. He proposed the establishment of an international mechanism for listing these cultural expressions in order to safeguard them from unauthorised use, particularly in contexts of commercial exploitation, exportation, and appropriation by third parties.[6]

Intangible cultural heritage (ICH) is fundamentally distinct from tangible heritage in several key respects. While tangible heritage emphasises physical authenticity and the criterion of 'Outstanding Universal Value' – a prerequisite for inscription on the World Heritage List – ICH is rooted in symbolic, emotional, and commemorative significance. The defining attributes of ICH are not fixed in material permanence or historical authenticity, but rather lie in its inherent dynamism, capacity for transformation, and the processes of recreation, transmission, promotion, and revitalisation, enacted by the communities that sustain it.

The 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage was established with the goal of preserving knowledge, skills, and expressive traditions that are transmitted from generation to generation, and which constitute the cultural identity of communities, groups, and individuals. The Convention also aims to design and implement safeguarding measures at local, national, and international levels. It was within this framework that the term 'intangible cultural heritage' (ICH) came into formal use.

In the Hungarian context, the concept of intangible cultural heritage is closely tied to its communal nature. It refers to practices and traditions whose core lies in knowledge acquired and performed within the framework of a given community.

6 Hafstein, Vladimar Tr.: *Making Intangible Heritage. El Condor Pasa and Other Stories from UNESCO* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), 27.

However, the role of the community extends beyond the transmission and revitalisation of such heritage; it also includes the regulation and supervision of its continuity. Thus, community members, collectively, determine the forms of innovation that are acceptable, the range of participants, methods of transmission, the rules of performance, and the modes of interpretation involved. This internal governance system ensures that the integrity of the tradition is preserved, even as it evolves over time.[7]

Intangible cultural heritage is best understood as a dynamic process – an ongoing practice through which individuals and communities continuously engage with, recognise, and reinterpret their own cultural expressions. It represents the most immediate and personal connection between a community (or individual) and a cultural phenomenon, as the community and its members themselves serve as the living bearers of the heritage. This is precisely why the development of the 2003 UNESCO Convention was among the most complex and the most debated undertakings in the history of international cultural policy. From its initial proposal to its final adoption, the process spanned three decades and gave rise to numerous conceptual and practical debates. Nevertheless, the Convention has become one of the most widely-embraced UNESCO instruments, both in terms of the number of ratifying states, and the volume of heritage elements inscribed on the Representative List within a relatively short timeframe.

The Convention's underlying philosophy, along with its principles of operation, criteria, and implementation mechanisms – particularly as enacted by the Evaluation Body and the Intergovernmental Committee – places significant emphasis on communities, whether defined as groups or individuals. These operational frameworks explicitly recognise the central role of communities in identifying, maintaining, and transmitting intangible cultural heritage, and they actively encourage community participation in all stages of safeguarding efforts. Notably, however, the Convention and its accompanying Operational Directives refrain from offering a precise definition of 'community', thereby leaving its interpretation open to contextual adaptation.

Among the State Parties, approaches to interpreting intangible cultural heritage, and implementing safeguarding measures, exhibit considerable variation. Similarly, the modalities of involving communities in heritage management reflect a wide

7 Csonka-Takács, Eszter: 'Intangible Cultural Heritage Communities in the Network of the Skanzen Hungarian Open Air Museum', *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica* 61/2 (2016), 431–439.

diversity – characteristic of the very nature of intangible cultural heritage itself. While the Convention provides a set of guiding principles, recommendations, and responsibilities, it leaves the practical methods of implementation largely to the discretion of each State Party. This flexibility allows for context-sensitive safeguarding strategies, but it also results in differing degrees and forms of community engagement across national contexts.

The role of communities in the implementation of the Convention raises critical questions concerning the objectives pursued by states through their participation in UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) programme. To what extent can involvement in the programme be regarded as a tool for national self-representation, an instrument of the cultural heritage industry, or a resource for the development of cultural tourism? Examination of the international lists established by the Convention – particularly the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity – can provide valuable insights into these issues. Certain tendencies become apparent when analysing the types of heritage elements inscribed. As Keszei observes: 'in terms of heritage context, the scope ranges from small communities, through national and ethnic minorities or regional cultural variants, to elements regarded as part of the national cultural canon.'[8]

A distinctive feature of the Representative List is that nominations must include the free, prior, and informed consent of the communities concerned. This is enshrined in one of the five key criteria for inscription, and must be substantiated in the nomination dossier, through formal declarations and descriptions of the consultation process. A significant reform in recent years has refined this requirement: standardised community consent forms, previously permissible, have been replaced by individually-crafted personal statements that demonstrate the declarant's genuine commitment to the safeguarding of the heritage element. This shift raises complex questions about the feasibility and authenticity of obtaining such consent from an entire nation, or even from all practitioners of a tradition deemed to represent national identity.

In theory, the active relationship between communities and heritage elements is a prerequisite for inscription on the international lists. Indeed, this principle inverts the traditional approach to heritage preservation: rather than identifying 'heritage sites' and subsequently assigning communities to manage them, the process begins

8 Keszei, András: 'A megfoghatatlan nyomában' ('In search of the intangible'), *EFI Communicationes 16 (2003), 15.*

with recognising the communities themselves as the primary custodians of intangible heritage. The heritage element is thus understood, not as an isolated object of preservation, but as being embedded within the living practices of the communities who sustain it.

As such, a critical factor in the implementation of the Convention is the method by which State Parties select heritage elements for nomination. This selection process reflects the broader structure of heritage governance at the national level, including the organisation of relationships with heritage-bearing communities and the strategic orientation of national heritage policy. The extent to which communities are meaningfully involved in the selection and safeguarding process, ultimately influences both the legitimacy and sustainability of the heritage system as a whole.

In several countries, the development of national intangible cultural heritage inventories is overseen by representatives of professional institutions, commissioned by the relevant ministries. These experts – often identical to the members of the national intangible cultural heritage committee – prepare studies that resemble entries in an ethnographic encyclopedia. These studies, not only describe the heritage elements in detail, but also identify the associated communities. It is a common practice for ethnographic and folk-art institutions to serve as primary data sources and providers of background material during this process.

In contrast, some European states have adopted a more direct, community-oriented approach to the implementation of the Convention. In such cases, civil society organisations themselves may act as key actors in safeguarding measures. There are also isolated examples where the widest possible public participation is encouraged – for instance, platforms that allow any individual to submit heritage nominations via online portals, or mechanisms through which communities can directly propose elements representing their own heritage, are provided. However, such inclusive approaches remain the exception rather than the norm in most European states.

The predominant trend is one of official, state-administered governance of intangible heritage, often characterised by a bureaucratic, top-down approach. In many instances, the operational structures lack continuous and meaningful engagement with the communities concerned, as well as with local experts and civil society organisations. This results in a situation wherein heritage is primarily interpreted and defined at the national level, and communities are only subsequently integrated into the process. This inversion reflects the persistence of a heritage-management

model whereby the element is first identified and categorised by institutions, and only then is a community assigned to it or recognised as its bearer.

Such a model, while administratively efficient, risks weakening the foundational principle of the 2003 Convention – namely, that communities are the originators and active agents of intangible cultural heritage. Without a basis of sustained participatory mechanisms, the safeguarding process may lose authenticity and diminish community ownership over the heritage concerned.

The 2003 UNESCO Convention provides an international, legally-binding framework for the identification, safeguarding, and promotion of intangible cultural heritage. Rather than establishing a fixed or exclusive categorisation of heritage elements, the Convention's list of domains serves as a flexible guide for the delineation of broad areas of heritage expression. Within this framework, virtually any phenomenon may be subject to patrimonialisation, provided it is sufficiently codified and contextually validated. Consequently, elements that were once excluded from traditional notions of heritage have, increasingly, become incorporated into heritage discourses. Since 2005, culinary practices and food-related knowledge have also been recognised as legitimate forms of intangible cultural heritage, initiating an ongoing, and often competitive, process among nations to inscribe their gastronomic traditions on UNESCO's Representative List.

Culinary practices as Intangible Cultural Heritage

Food heritage encompasses a wide array of knowledge, skills, and practices that communities identify as part of their collective cultural legacy. This includes not only specific dishes, recipes, and ingredients, but also the tools used in food preparation, agricultural methods, and the customs and rituals associated with food production, consumption, and communal dining. The domain of food heritage reflects complex socio-cultural systems and embedded historical narratives, linking everyday culinary practices to broader questions of identity, memory, sustainability, and belonging.

More specifically, food heritage refers to the traditional culinary knowledge, techniques, and food-related customs that are transmitted across generations within a given cultural or regional context. These practices embody not only material elements – such as ingredients or utensils – but also intangible dimensions, such as

symbolism, ritual, and communal meaning. They offer insight into a society's environmental adaptation, its historical experiences, and its social values.

As previously mentioned, cultural heritage does not exist as an autonomous or self-evident entity; it is inherently shaped by processes of social recognition, institutional validation, and political representation. Food heritage, therefore, must be understood as a socially- and an historically-constructed category – one that acquires meaning only through the roles and functions assigned to it within particular cultural, political or economic contexts. It is not an inherent or essential trait of a given food practice that renders it 'heritage', but rather the community's recognition of it as such, often facilitated and formalised by institutional mechanisms.

The first UNESCO Member States to propose their culinary traditions for inscription on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity were primarily those where gastronomy already functioned as a significant component of cultural tourism – particularly in regions associated with the widely-celebrated, albeit often generalised and stereotyped Mediterranean cuisine. Given the novelty of food as a recognised heritage category and the predominantly top-down nature of the nomination process, many of the early culinary nominations – submitted prior to 2010 – were rejected by UNESCO's expert bodies during the evaluation phase. These initial submissions often relied on an essentialist and exceptionalist narrative, framing the proposed food traditions as unique, globally superior, and emblematic of national identity. Such approaches echoed the conceptual framework and evaluative criteria of the 1972 World Heritage Convention – particularly the emphasis on authenticity and outstanding universal value – rather than aligning with the community-centered, processual ethos of the 2003 Convention.[9]

The first food-related nominations that underwent evaluation by UNESCO did, indeed, provoke extensive debates, and exposed several critical tensions within the discourse and operationalisation of intangible cultural heritage. These early cases introduced culinary traditions that had previously remained outside of the purview of formal heritage protection, thereby triggering new conceptual and institutional developments. They also catalysed discussions regarding the appropriate methodologies for assessing intangible gastronomic practices, the politics of representation involved in nomination processes, and the potential

9 Romagnoli: 'Gastronomic heritage elements at UNESCO…', 164

instrumentalisation of food heritage in the service of national branding or economic objectives.

Several gastronomic heritage elements that became focal points of these debates exemplify the complexities and evolving interpretations associated with the heritage-making process. These include:

Mexican Traditional Cuisine (2010): Mexican cuisine was one of the first gastronomic elements to be inscribed on the Representative List. Its inclusion sparked debates about the cultural significance of food, particularly around the question: 'What does it mean to treat a cuisine as heritage?' Mexican cuisine, particularly in a regional context, emphasises food production, the cultivation of corn, chili, and beans, as well as traditional cooking techniques and tools, all of which are part of community practices.

French Gastronomic Meal (2010): The inclusion of the French gastronomic meal on the ICH list also generated considerable debate, as the nomination extended beyond food itself to include the social practices, dining rituals, and traditions associated with meals. French cuisine has long been a key element of the country's cultural identity, and its inclusion can be interpreted as a matter of national pride.

Mediterranean Diet (2010): The nomination of the Mediterranean diet also sparked controversy, as it was jointly submitted by several countries, including Greece, Italy, Spain, and Morocco. The question arose as to what extent a diet could be considered 'heritage', and how regional differences in eating habits could be reconciled under a common international heritage designation. Defining the 'Mediterraneanness' of the diet, and the competition between countries over this representation, also created conflicts.

These early gastronomic nominations highlighted the challenges that the ICH system faced, especially concerning the definition of food heritage and the role of communities in this process. UNESCO had to confront the situation about how to manage the evolution of foods and eating practices, and to determine the cultural significance of specific dishes in an increasingly globalised world. These nominations paved the way for new directions, as gastronomy had, up to then, played a less prominent role in the international cultural protection system then in operation.

These elements not only faced resistance in the earlier phase when they were ultimately not included on the list, but also later on. The nomination dossiers were reviewed during the 5th session of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, held in Nairobi in 2010. Upon examining the working documents from the session, it is clear that various concerns and questions were raised, and sharp debates occurred during the discussions.

Here is a quote from the debate on traditional French meals:

> '1. The delegation of Japan sought clarification with regard to the publication of the Michelin Guide, which, since 2008, had been published for restaurants in Japan, with four French restaurants achieving 3-star status, and asked whether these restaurants would be covered by the nominated intangible cultural heritage. The delegation also sought clarification regarding the use of the (UNESCO-ICH) emblem for these types of restaurants.
>
> 2. Responding to the question by Japan, the French delegation explained that the text of the French nomination clearly specifies that the community concerned was the entire French population, with the meal being an important aspect of national culture wherever they found themselves. Moreover, the nomination file contained all the information sought by Japan, including the consent of the communities concerned, subscribed by more than 100 organisations or associations.'

Quote from the Mediterranean Diet debate:

> "1. Mediterranean diet submitted jointly by Spain, Greece, Italy and Morocco. On behalf of a number of organisations and entities in Crete, a letter was addressed to the Director-General from the President of the Chamber of Commerce of Heraklion [Greece] asserting that there was no dietary culture common to the Mediterranean, which was instead a region of different religions, diverse cultures and varied characteristics. The organisations stated that the idea of a 'Mediterranean diet' was a very recent one derived first from medical studies and later promoted by commercial interests. Emphasising that while there were products common to certain parts of the Mediterranean, their cultural meanings were vastly different. The organisations suggested that its inscription would not promote respect for cultural diversity based on equality and mutual respect.
>
> 2. Referring to the letter read out by the Secretariat on the Mediterranean diet, the Greek delegation informed the Committee that the letter had been drafted by a private body from Crete and that it had only recently been informed, wishing to know when the letter had arrived at the Secretariat, and why it was not communicated to all Members. The delegation believed that the letter was a product of a misunderstanding as Cretan people were sensitive about keeping

> their local diet as intact as possible, and did not wish to be associated with other habits, which in itself proved the active desire to protect their habits that were part of the Mediterranean diet as a whole. Moreover, Cretan people were anxious about the potential commercialisation of food products."[10]

In response to the effects of globalisation, the patrimonialisation of such 'endangered' elements of intangible cultural heritage could provide a solution, or at least create a theoretical foundation for this phenomenon. One of the main risks is that countries may propose nomination dossiers related to gastronomy where cultural heritage serves as a nostalgic reminder of the past and local practices, as a mode of contrast to the globalised. Without necessarily intending to do so, states might also foster a kind of gastronomic social awareness, and UNESCO, as a cultural mediator and promoter of universal expression, can function as a shared forum for discussion on this international and communal stage through the 2003 Convention and its Lists.[11]

The patrimonialisation of gastronomic heritage enhances communities' self-esteem and serves as a powerful tool for attracting tourists, but above all, it represents activation. While the initiators and proponents of heritage-building processes can indeed be members of civil society, the submission of any ICH element to UNESCO is ultimately carried out by member states, thus making it a process often driven by political goals aimed at enhancing the country's reputation through the promotion of gastro-diplomacy. Thus, every ICH activation follows a specific process of selection, construction, proposal, and activation, validated through political support.

The text of the 2003 UNESCO Convention did not explicitly mention food heritage or similar terms that would describe this type of heritage. At best, it makes reference to 'food security', as part of the Inclusive social development inherent in the questions of the new nomination form, but the term is not clearly defined within the context of the Convention.

While the feasibility of registering gastronomic cultures with UNESCO has been proven, and UNESCO has acknowledged that food heritage is an expression of cultural identity within communities, it remains difficult to understand which communities are encompassed by the inscribed element, how these social groups practise this intangible cultural expression, and in what ways the inscribed ICH manifests itself. Furthermore, it is unclear how this heritage is renewed and passed on to future generations. How can something be preserved when its definition or

10 <https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/ITH-10-5.COM-CONF.202-6-EN.pdf> accessed 16 April 2025.
11 Romagnoli: 'Gastronomic heritage elements at UNESCO…', 167.

boundaries are so vague? From a scientific perspective, further research, fieldwork, and reflection are needed to shed light on this vagueness. Interestingly, from the perspective of communities, we observe how they have begun to identify food in terms of heritage – in the way it is produced and consumed – even if these communities are not necessarily aware of what intangible heritage is or if they are unfamiliar with the patrimonialisation process.

The acceptance of this new category accelerated and encouraged state parties to present their gastronomy to UNESCO, triggering a 'domino effect' in the submission of gastronomic nomination dossiers. Today, the gastronomic inscriptions include Japanese *washoku*, Korean *kimchi*, Armenian *lavash*, as well as Arabic and Turkish coffee. Additionally, noteworthy also are the countries aiming to inscribe their national cuisine (such as Peruvian cuisine), or a characteristic national dish (like the French *baguette*), or cross-border foods (for example, couscous proposed by the Maghreb countries).

The heritage element 'Knowledge of the light rum masters', submitted by Cuba, sparked a major debate during the 2022 session of the Intergovernmental Committee. According to the Evaluation Body, the submission did not meet 3 out of the 5 necessary criteria required for inscription, and thus, it recommended the referral of the nomination to the submitting state for resubmission in a new procedural period. Questions arose right from the first criterion, which is intended to support the claim that the proposed element does, indeed, constitute intangible cultural heritage.

Quote from the draft decision:

'R1: [12] "The element is identified as a cultural expression and identifying factor for the Cuban nation. However, the file focuses on light rum as a product, and there is insufficient explanation on the element's social functions and cultural meanings. In addition, the file does not provide detailed information about the knowledge and skills associated with the process of making light rum, or about the oral traditions, social practices and knowledge, and practices concerning nature and how they are transmitted from one generation to another. The file explains that the element's bearers and practitioners are organised in a guild-type community, and that the movement involves five women and nine men from different levels. However, there is limited information about the wider community associated with the element, such

12 R1–R3: Inscription on the Representative List – Criteria: <https://ich.unesco.org/en/procedure-of-inscription-00809> accessed 14 April 2025.

as the groups or individuals involved in the production or consumption of the rum. Given the insufficient information on the social functions and cultural meanings of the element, the transmission of the element, and the descriptions of the bearers and practitioners involved, the file does not satisfy criterion R1.

R2: The nomination file indicated that inscription of the element would enhance its visibility at the national and local levels. However, there is insufficient information about how these outcomes will be achieved. The file also explains that the inscription of the element will encourage the diffusion of traditional values of Cuban light rum culture, and also responsible consumption of alcoholic beverages, without detailed elaboration on these aspects.

R3: The file provides brief information on proposed safeguarding measures, without providing detailed descriptions. Various proposed measures appear to promote the light rum as a product, to regulate and control commercial rights concerning light-rum producers, to regulate the rum production process and to restrict access to new producers, also through the establishment of a uniqueness and originality mark. These measures do not focus on safeguarding the viability of the element and its social functions and cultural meanings. Although the element involves the commercial production and sale of light rum, there was no information about how the State Party will monitor possible unintended consequences of the inscription, and mitigate the risks of over-commercialisation. While the file explains that light rum masters were organised into work groups and involved in the implementation of proposed measures, this appears to be a very small community of practitioners and there is insufficient information to determine if the wider community associated with the element has a role in the safeguarding of the element, and how they were involved in the development and implementation of the proposed safeguarding measures."

Finally, the Committee

> "Encourages the State Party, when submitting nomination files in the future, to focus on the social and cultural function of the element and to describe the practice and the technique related to the element, and to avoid placing attention only on the associated product."

Following a prolonged debate, during which the submitting state had multiple opportunities to speak and to argue intensely in response to the identified shortcomings (the delegation was led by the ambassador of Cuba's permanent

delegation to UNESCO), the committee ultimately agreed to amend the draft decision in order to include the element on the representative list. The Committee also modified the end of the draft decision as follows, to state that it:

> "Encourages the State Party, when safeguarding the element to focus on the social and cultural functions of the element."[13]

As can be seen, the above-mentioned initial nominations related to food heritage, discuss cuisine, diet, and eating habits, while later on, the focus of the nominations shifts to specific types of food considered characteristic. What remains unchanged is the territorial designation: each gastronomic heritage element continues to be associated with countries or regions. Practically, the food heritage of a local community or a smaller area does not appear on the representative list. This is particularly interesting in light of the list's other thematic elements. It is very common for a custom, craft tradition, or knowledge related to nature, to be linked to a well-defined locality (specific town, region, or smaller area) or a defined community.

Currently, there are 611 heritage elements on the representative list. If we filter for the term 'food' in the search system of the lists, which appears in the nomination file, we find 52 elements on the list. If we further refine the search and look among the keywords, we get the following results: 15 elements are listed under the term 'food', 59 under 'food customs', 80 are related to 'food preparation', 2 are listed under 'food processing', and 1 under 'food production'.[14]

It is important to note, that some elements on the Representative List containing the above-mentioned search terms, were not originally inscribed as 'food heritage'. However, practices such as food preparation or ritual food consumption (e.g., in the context of pastoralism or various folk customs) are part of the heritage practices included in these elements.

The UNESCO ICH Secretariat developed the keyword system because, with support from the Netherlands, they created an interactive interface capable of linking all the heritage elements on the lists through keywords. This allows us to quickly see, for example, which topics are associated with the term 'food' and specifically which nominations, countries, and additional keywords are related to it.

13 <https://ich.unesco.org/en/decisions/17.COM/7.B.5> accessed 14 April 2025.
14 <https://ich.unesco.org/en/lists> accessed 14 April 2025.

The conceptual, visual and interactive navigation made possible through the UNESCO 'Dive into Intangible Cultural Heritage' project, demonstrates the thematic interconnectedness between all the elements inscribed and their relation to nature or to viability threats.

The latest initiative by UNESCO is to produce a food atlas in response to the processes and discussions engaged in so far: "The 'International Food Atlas'[15] and a digital platform to safeguard, promote and transmit foodways to future generations. This project, funded by Saudi Arabia, aims to highlight the diversity of food practices as living heritage and their links to sustainable development, by sharing examples of safeguarding from communities and countries around the world. It should be available by the end of 2026."[16] The purpose of the Atlas is precisely to reinforce the original aim of the Convention: that is, that intangible cultural heritage is not a product, not a commodity, but a cultural expression, a form of communal knowledge and expression.

Concerning the Hungarian practice, we can say that in nearly twenty years since our accession to the Convention in 2006, a system of implementing has emerged in Hungary. A body was established for the handling of the heritage issues and the Ministry commissioned the Hungarian Open Air Museum as a background institution, entrusting it with the coordination of the professional tasks, and, furthermore, a system for the identification, review, and the registration of intangible cultural heritage in Hungary, was launched.

The Hungarian practice has, from the start, striven to follow the philosophy of the Convention concerning the participating communities. The bearer communities, which create, maintain, and mediate their heritage, and recognise it as their own, prepare the nomination documentation themselves, as they seek to have their element inscribed on the Hungarian National Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage.

Today, there are 5 food-related heritage elements on the Hungarian National Inventory, all of which belong to larger or smaller local communities.[17] Throughout

15 <https://ich.unesco.org/en/projects/international-food-atlas-and-digital-platform-for-safeguarding-promoting-and-transmitting-foodways-to-future-generations-00505?projectID=00505> accessed 14 April 2025.

16 Lucia Iglesias Kuntz (UNESCO):<https://courier.unesco.org/en/articles/food-and-intangible-heritage-flavourful-relationship> accessed 14 April 2025.

17 'The Tradition of Kunság Mutton Stew in Karcag, 2009'; 'The Tradition of Miller's Cake in Borsodnádasd, 2012'; 'The Tradition of Plum Jam Making in Szatmár-Bereg, 2013'; 'The Living Tradition of Bajai Fish Soup Preparation, 2021'; 'The Tradition of Growing and Processing Hadházi

the submission process, we engage in extensive consultations with the communities involved, during which it is often necessary to repeatedly emphasise that they should avoid using expressions that imply uniqueness. The Evaluation Body also highlights this same issue year after year in its reports concerning the dossiers submitted for the UNESCO list.[18]

Gastronomy in the Hungarikum system

The final version of the Hungarikum Act, defining the existence of national values and Hungarikums in Hungary, was determined in 2012.[19] It is a multi-level, bottom-up system that gradually builds upwards. The definition of national values is as follows:

> National values are all intellectual and material, natural, and communal assets or products accumulated and preserved throughout our nation's history and recent past, which are linked to Hungarian creative activities, production culture, knowledge, traditions, landscapes, and wildlife. They hold significant importance from a national perspective and are recognised by our nation – or at least the population of a specific region – as characteristic and well-known elements of Hungarian identity. They significantly enhance our reputation, increase our recognition within the European Union and globally, and contribute to the formation and strengthening of national belonging and Hungarian identity in new generations. In summary, national values encompass tangible and intangible, natural, and communal assets that are of fundamental importance to Hungary. A crucial aspect is that they must be recognised as characteristic and well-known by at least the population of a specific region, ultimately elevating Hungary's international reputation.

The term 'Hungarikum' is conceptually somewhat more specific. The concept and definition of a Hungarikum indicate that it is a special and characteristic Hungarian product. The law defines it as a unique, top-quality achievement representative of Hungary. It is also important that a Hungarikum holds exceptional value for Hungary

Flat Cabbage, 2024': <http://szellemikulturalisorokseg.hu/index0_en.php?name=en_f22_elements> accessed 16 April 2025.

18 Report of the Evaluation Body: 'The use of inappropriate language is a recurring issue with the preparation of nomination files. Offences include the use of words such as *originality*, *authenticity*, *unique, alien, or purity* that may imply the freezing of an element; or the use of statements that suggest exclusivity or ownership of an element. These types of language and statements are not consistent with the spirit of the Convention and should not be included in the drafting of nomination files.'

19 2012. évi XXX. törvény magyar nemzeti értékekről és a hungarikumokról <https://www.hungarikum.hu> accessed 16 April 2025.

and is internationally recognised as a distinctive Hungarian attribute. The Hungarian Hungarikum Committee puts it this way: 'when foreigners see a Hungarikum, they should immediately associate it with Hungary'. During the process of preparing this law, in which I was involved, a Hungaricum was also described as 'Hungary's showcase'. What would we put in Hungary's showcase?

This perspective should also apply when considering gastronomic Hungarikums. Within the Hungarikum system, value repositories have been established. The process starts at the local level, making it a movement where everyone can pay attention to their own values, collect what they find significant, and make these values visible by creating value repositories and submitting them for listing. There are municipal and county-level value repositories, and Hungarian value repository committees have also been established beyond Hungary's borders.

The Hungarian Value Repository and the Hungarikum lists are collections where these values are gathered. The Hungarikum pyramid illustrates how this system is structured. Items can only be proposed from the bottom up. If something is to become a Hungarikum, it must first be included in a local, sectoral, or cross-border value repository, and then progress, step by step, through the hierarchy. Various committees have been established at each level, each with its own responsibilities.

After its first meeting, the main Hungarikum Committee saw the necessity for the formation of specialised subcommittees, as the issue of Hungarikums and Hungarian values covers a vast array of topics. It is essential to involve experts to evaluate the incoming nominations, which span a wide range of national values. A crucial criterion is that anyone can submit a nomination – there is no requirement for affiliation with a community or a direct connection to the proposed value. This differs from the process of researching intangible cultural heritage. Here, anyone can submit anything they consider important from the perspective of the national value repository or the municipal value repository. These committees are structured hierarchically, and nominations move upwards through the different levels. The final decision is always formally made by the Ministry of Agriculture. Once an item is added to the Hungarikum list, it receives permission to use a trademarked logo as a certification. From that point on, Hungarikums can use this trademarked logo as a symbol of recognition.

I examined the Hungarikum list available on the Hungarikum Committee's website to identify elements specifically related to gastronomy. This list is quite insightful and

it includes items such as Csabai sausage, Gyulai sausage, Kalocsa spice paprika, Herz salami (associated with Szeged), Hungarian acacia honey (primarily harvested from the acacia forests of the Great Hungarian Plain), Makó onion, Debreceni double sausage, Szeged spice paprika, and Szentes paprika. The Pick winter salami, a factory-made product, is also linked to Szeged. These items are part of the Hungarikum Collection under the category of agriculture and the food industry.[20]

There is another category dedicated to tourism and hospitality, which includes elements that are significant for Hungary's hospitality sector and tourism – whether as events or culinary experiences. Unlike the previous category, this one does not focus on raw products but rather on processed foods. The first dish added to the Hungarikum list in this category was Karcag-style mutton stew, followed by Baja-style fish soup, then Tisza-style fish soup, and finally, Hungarian goulash.

We can see that these gastronomic elements have become iconic and emblematic. They represent traditions that are essentially culinary traditions. Once part of everyday life in Hungary, they have, through various processes, risen to prominence and become symbols. This is a fascinating transformation demonstrating that local traditions can evolve into national symbols and eventually gain global recognition.

Hungarikums are precisely those Hungarian values that are internationally recognised and intrinsically associated with Hungary. They symbolise Hungarian identity, demonstrating how something rooted in local culture can acquire global significance. Gastronomy, in this sense, can serve as a national symbol.

Conclusion

In general, both in Hungary and abroad, we see that countries are most often identified by their food – it is the first thing about a country that comes to mind. Food is also the most accessible cultural element, whether we travel to a country or experience it wherever we are. It is interesting to note that gastronomy and cuisine are among the most effective ways of making a culture or country widely known. This is exemplified by the UNESCO list itself, where an increasing number of national gastronomic specialties are being recognised.

20 Csonka-Takács, Eszter: 'Gasztronómiai örökségünk az Alföldön' ('Gastronomic heritage in the Great Plain'), in Silling, Léda ed.: *Az alföld. Petőfi 200* (Szabadka: Szekeres László Foundation, 2024), 243–253.

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