

PART III:

THE MANIFOLD MEANINGS
OF FOOD AND HERITAGE



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‘WHY ARE WE STUCK AT THE LEVEL OF GOMOLYA IN CHEESE-MAKING?’

THE CARPATHIAN BASIN DAIRY HERITAGE AND MODERN ARTISANAL CHEESE-MAKERS

ABSTRACT

In my study I review the main lines of the history of cheese-making in Hungary: the cheese-making of shepherds and peasants, the manorial cheese culture and the development of modern factory cheese production. I then describe how modern cheese-makers relate to this complex heritage: the process of modern tradition-creating, the usage of international recipes, and the interrelationship between heritage and economic considerations.

The production¹ of cheese is a long-established segment of agriculture and the food industry in many parts of Europe, especially among the ‘great cheese nations’² widely known for mature hard and soft cheeses. Related to this, the transformation of modern cheese-making in much of Europe has been a major subject of research, whether it be consideration of the transformation of economic practices,³ the functioning of various cooperative models with separate raw-material production

1 Reference to this study: Pál Géza Balogh: ‘Why are we stuck at the level of *gomolya* in cheese-making?’ The Carpathian Basin Dairy Heritage and Modern Artisanal Cheese-makers. 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. 219–227.

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2 A term used by some Hungarian cheesemakers usually to describe France, Switzerland, Germany and Italy.

3 Bonow, Madeleine and Rytönen, Paulina: ‘Small-scale Farm Dairies in Jämtland. Ancient Practices in Modern Forms’, in Lysaght, Patricia ed.: *The Return of Traditional Food. Proceedings of the 19th International Ethnological Food Research Conference* (Lund: Lund University, 2013), 81–93.

and dairy-processing methods,⁴ or the role of complex relations to tradition and heritage practices, origin protection schemes, and geographical indication systems in modern alternative food networks.⁵ In contrast, Heather Paxson examines artisanal cheese-making in the US in terms of the question of how to build a relationship with the landscape in a region where the sector has but a limited history, a process which she calls *reverse-engineering terroir*.⁶ In this paper, I will show how the modern Hungarian cheese-making sector relates to the complex historical heritage of the Carpathian Basin's dairy processing systems, and also the ways in which this heritage can be used to develop commercially-sustainable practices in the modern economy.

The history of dairy production and processing has been the subject of in-depth ethnographic research in terms of the economy and food in Hungary, with special attention being paid to the practices of the peasantry and the shepherds in this regard. In her most recent summary of the historical development of the issue, Eszter Kisbán describes the Carpathian Basin as a meeting point of several milk processing systems, which are geared towards the production of different products. As regards cheese, in addition to the rennet cheese-making method, the yoghurt-making system and the rennet-free, curdled milk system, are also present in the region. The most common type of cheese in the rennet cheese-making system is cheese made from sheep's milk using rennet, and this cheese is known as *gomolya* or *gömölye*. Its name varies from region to region, and it is consumed both fresh and mature. Sheep's milk cheese is often further processed and finally consumed in the form of mature curd cheese, which is also known by different names e.g. *liptói túró* ('liptó curd'), *érett túró* ('mature curd'), and *keserű túró* ('bitter curd'). At the same time, the product without rennet, which has the consistency of curd, is also called *gomolya* or *gömölye* in some places. Sometimes a distinction is made between the fresh *gomolya* and *sajt* ('cheese'), which is squeezed in vats, but the two names are

4 De Roest, Kees and Menghi, Alberto: 'Reconsidering "Traditional" Food: The Case of Parmigiano Reggiano Cheese', *Sociologia Ruralis* 40/4 (2000), 439–451; De Roest, Kees and Menghi, Alberto: 'Localisation Strategies in the Swiss Dairy Industry', *Sociologia Ruralis* 56/2 (2014), 136–156.

5 Grasseni, Christina: *The Heritage Arena. Reinventing Cheese in the Italian Alps* (New York/Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2016); Boissard, Pierre: *Camembert. A National Myth* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003).

6 Paxson, Heather: *The Life of Cheese: Crafting Food and Value in America* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2013); Paxson, Heather: 'Locating Value in Artisan Cheese: Reverse Engineering Terroir for New World Landscapes', *American Anthropologist* 92/3 (2010), 444–457.

not clearly separated. The same methods of processing sheep's milk are also applied to cow's milk, to varying degrees, from region to region.⁷

The second layer, which has greatly influenced Hungarian cheese culture, is livestock breeding and dairy processing on manorial estates. Livestock and dairy culture on these estates greatly influenced the adoption of different animal breeds, the spread of dairy animals in general, the spread of professional, scientific knowledge of animal husbandry, and the development of agricultural science and higher agricultural education and training.⁸ Cheese-makers from Western European countries were often brought in to the manorial estates in Hungary in order to adapt local dairy practices to domestic conditions, thus laying the foundations for a professionalising of dairy culture with which the later food industry often shows historical continuity.⁹ In addition, the influence of churches and monastic orders was a decisive factor in Hungarian cheese culture.¹⁰

The third dominant layer was the activity of the emerging food industry, which grew out of the activities of the manorial estates and also relied on raw materials bought from the peasantry through the dairy cooperatives. The cheeses that became established in the food industry were also local adaptations of European cheeses, and these defined consumer culture and consumer demand for a long time. The cheeses in question included the product of the Magyaróvár Dairy Experimental Station, the *moson megyei csemege* ('Moson County delicacy') or *ilmici* cheese,¹¹ the Emmental cheese in Csénye-Újmajor, the Rokfort cheese on the estate of Prince Montenuovo in Némethbóly, and the local versions of the Romadur cheese on the Kisbér Stud Farm.¹² In the second half of the 20th century, Hungarian *Trappist cheese* started to dominate the food industry, following a government decision in

7 Kisbán, Eszter: 'Táplálkozáskultúra' ('Food Culture'), in Paládi-Kovács, Attila eds.: *Magyar néprajz nyolc kötetben IV. Életmód* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1997), 816–830.

8 On the issue of breeding, which is also linked to the development of animal breeding, milk production and milk processing, see Gaál, László: 'A szimentáli fajta egy évszázada Magyarországon, 1850–1950' ('A century of the Simmental breed in Hungary, 1850–1950'), *Agrártörténeti Szemle* 15/1–2 (1973), 550–570; Király István: 'A bonyhádi tájfajta szarvasmarha kialakulása' ('The development of the Bonyhád local variety of cattle'), *Agrártörténeti Szemle* 7/4 (1965), 550–570; Surányi, Béla: 'A lapály szarvasmarha tenyésztése Magyarországon az I. világháborúig' ('The breeding of Lapály cattle in Hungary until World War I'), *Agrártörténeti Szemle* 24/3–4 (1982), 388–427.

9 Balatonyi, Mihály and Szakály, Sándor: 'Tejipar' ('Dairy Industry'), in Síki, Jenő and Tóth-Zsiga, István eds.: *A magyar élelmiszeripar története* (Budapest: Mezőgazda Kiadó, 1997), 297–322.

10 Paládi-Kovács, Attila: 'A magyarországi állattartó kultúra korszakai' ('The Eras of Livestock Culture in Hungary') (Budapest: MTA Néprajzi Kutatóintézet, 1993), 140–141.

11 Balatonyi and Szakály: 'Tejipar', 303.

12 Balatonyi and Szakály: 'Tejipar', 305.

1941, made on purely economic grounds, to produce ‘a single type of semi-hard cheese of Trappist character’ from at least 60% of the total quantity of milk produced in Hungary. This decision has continued to play a crucial role in shaping consumer demand for Trappist cheese to the present time.¹³

In 1948, the Hungarian dairy industry, like other industries, was nationalised. The dairy cooperative system was eliminated, and many smaller factories were closed and replaced by state-owned dairy companies based on county borders. Cooperatives, and integrated backyard farming, and state farms, were then the main contributors to milk production.¹⁴ The success of Trappist cheese persisted throughout the socialist era, but new industrial dairy products like bulk cheese also started to appear.¹⁵

A common topic of modern Hungarian public discussions about cheese-making, often the subject of spirited debate, is its relationship to the historical cheese-culture of the Carpathian Basin, and its use and adaptation to current conditions. During fieldwork which I conducted in Hungary,¹⁶ I observed an intense process of tradition-creation, in relation to cheese-making, that has not yet been completed. Currently, a phase of path-finding is in progress: already established individual cheese-making practices have begun to interact with each other in the discursive space, while many are still in the process of shaping their own practices. Several, often conflicting narratives, are competing, each aiming to create a modern Hungarian cheese-culture based on the traditions of the Carpathian Basin. This is less motivated by consumer expectations than by the development of just personal curiosity and interest. While the producers are constantly searching for what meets their own individual needs, they are also continually looking at the question of marketability. Their primary concern, which is also intricately connected to the representation of the interests of the Hungarian cheese-making community, is how cheese-making in Hungary should be characterised and perceived – in other words, which typical products should represent Hungarian cheese culture, what standard quality-

13 Ungváry, Krisztián: *A Horthy-rendszer és antiszemitizmusának mérlege. Diszkrimináció és társadalompolitika Magyarországon 1919–1944* ('The balance of the Horthy regime and its anti-Semitism. Discrimination and Social Politics in Hungary 1919–1944') (Budapest: Jelenkor Kiadó, 2016), 397.

14 Balatonyi and Szakály: 'Tejipar', 312–319.

15 Balatonyi and Szakály: 'Tejipar', 312–319.

16 My fieldwork had three wider geographic locations: Budapest, the capital; the Balaton Uplands, a touristic region, and Baranya County, a peripheral region. I also conducted several interviews with important actors of the Hungarian Cheese sector in other parts of the country.

measures should be implemented, and what collective economic and developmental policies should be established based on this?

For modern contemporary Hungarian cheesemakers, a very wide range of global recipes is potentially available. Thanks to the spread of the internet, language barriers are no longer a hindrance, and the necessary inoculants for making basically any chosen international cheese, are relatively easy to acquire. In contrast, a continuous, multi-generational Hungarian cheese culture is mostly lacking. Furthermore, some cheese-makers are playing a very conscious role in the formation of the contemporary Hungarian cheese scene. One of them has also assumed a significant role in education, thereby having a substantial influence on modern contemporary Hungarian cheese-culture as a whole. This player has gathered knowledge about dairy processing specifically from shepherds and elderly peasants in Hungary and Transylvania, and he also wishes to directly link the present situation with the past of dairy processing in the Carpathian Basin. Another key participant has aimed at summarising the available historical data on cheese-making, and, in particular, on milk processing in Hungary, and to use the data in question in his work as a contemporary modern cheesemaker. A third important player has contemplated the notion of processing and presenting the traditions of Hungarian milk-processing in the form of a museum on the farm's premises, as an addition to its own economic practice.

There is no agreement on what is *traditional* or *local* in the recipe-set for cheese in Hungary. A significant number of cheesemakers do not address this issue at all, but rather shape their products based solely on their own creative needs and matching market demands, and according to their limited knowledge-base, technical skills, and practical knowledge. Those who are already actively participating in the process of creating tradition, by means of ideological debates and in the negotiation of narratives, are already reacting to this situation: 'I can count on two hands the number of people who ... think anything about it' (said a man in Hajdú-Bihar County, 2022). The debate is constrained by limited knowledge, and the lack of accessible, popular works on cheese history in the public domain – the readily available domestic literature is mostly focused on technical details. Almost no one who takes a position on the issue has a firm position, and there are many questions – often involving the researcher:

But what I don't understand is why this is the case – but perhaps the ethnographer can answer this – why is there such a huge difference? Why are

we stuck at the level of *gomolya* in cheese-making? Why did we not progress further? [...] To this day, it is a customer's tradition. So here in the village I cannot sell a mouldy cheese (a man in Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok County, 2019).

As we have seen above, the processing of cow's milk in the cheese-culture of the Carpathian Basin was basically characterised by the production of simple, sour dairy products e.g. *aludttej* ('curdled milk'), *tejföl* ('sour cream'), and *túró* ('curd cheese'). The dominant, genuine cheese-culture was based on the processing of sheep's milk, and originally the name, *gomolya*, was used to cover these various fresh and mature cheeses. There is a common belief that there is no strong tradition of cheese in the domestic production- and consumption-culture of Hungary, especially not of the mature cheeses that many people view as standards, similar to those of Western Europe. This lack of tradition, as perceived by cheesemakers, also leaves the future uncertain for many:

But no, cheese making is not that traditional here. It's not like [my father did it, my grandfather did it], and it just doesn't progress. And we [...] so I don't know, for instance, what do we start with, or will the children do it? Will it continue? Will it be something that goes back forty years? Or will it just stop at some point and then that's it? Nobody knows (a woman in Pest County, 2022).

There is discussion and uncertainty among modern cheesemakers in Hungary about which aspects of cheese culture are to be considered *traditional* and *local*. As more information about the history of cheese is uncovered, the uncertainty increases, leading cheesemakers to realise that the categories of local and global, traditional and modern, cannot be strictly separated, and it is also becoming evident that complex processes of appropriation and adaptation are to be found in the history of cheese in Hungary. When the connection to networks over local areas becomes apparent even behind the most traditionally-regarded recipes, these concepts are also significantly transformed and refined in producer narratives. The complex historical processes of passing on and adopting become increasingly familiar to cheesemakers, causing them to question what types of cheese they should now make:

But there is so much passing on [...] from one to another. It's a good one to take over. He doesn't mind whether it's Swabian or not. He wants to earn a living. Right? I think so. And if he steals something good, he steals the idea, the concept, he doesn't give a fuck. There are transitions. In my opinion (a male in Hajdú-Bihar County, 2022).

So there are also people who find a way to market their products under the label of *tradition* who are experimenting with various European hard and semi-hard cheeses, but are guided more by their own creative needs, life history, and professional ambitions, than by 'tradition.' This is how a cheese-maker, who is actively involved in researching the history of cheese understands the worth of the historical process:

So, that specific cheese. Why there? Why did it turn out like that? Or why [...] why has it lasted for centuries, for millennia? So few people, see, so few people understand the importance of why it is like that. So I don't make a [...] I don't make a mountain cheese in the lowlands. I can do the technique [...] but clearly, the maturing, the... the feed is also in the milk, in the cheese. (a male in Hajdú-Bihar County, 2022).

Thus, the adaptation of the technique to the landscape environment becomes more important than the traditional nature of the product, and traditional recipes are appreciated for their connection with the landscape – in fact, for their traditional *ecological knowledge* that can be adapted to the present. On the one hand, this trend is justified by the concept of a perceived fusion of local and global elements, while on the other, another narrative, a particular view of history, arises. According to this narrative, local dairy systems in Hungary simply have not had the time to develop the complex, mature cheese-cultures that have evolved in the major cheese-producing countries elsewhere in Europe, and it is now time to move on from this path, after the socialist era, which was perceived in this context as a very negative, fragmented period.

Along with the intentional creation of tradition, a spontaneous tradition-building process has taken place, the origins of which are very difficult to untangle. On the domestic palette, it is evident that the most common type of cheese at the present time is the simple, curdled fresh cow's cheese, usually sold as *gomolya*. Sheep farming and sheep's milk cheese is only a very minor feature of modern cheese-making, due to the complexity of farming technology, the different kinds of ecological conditions, and the low milk yield, as well as varying tastes. Contemporary *gomolya* is an adaptation of the historical cheese culture of the past to modern conditions. However, because of its familiar name, modern '*gomolya*' still carries a sense of tradition and authenticity, which also serves as a marketing brand. Some cheese-makers are protesting against what they see as ignorance and others as deliberate falsification in relation to modern *gomolya*, but this no longer affects the widespread use of the name throughout the country. Many of them are explicitly aware that consumers are looking for fresh cheeses under the name *gomolya* and, although they

are aware of the different meaning of the historic word, they have adapted to the change in meaning in response to market expectations.

Another important aspect in relation to cheese-making is marketability, which, especially for those selling to the high-end gastronomy sector, shifts the sales range towards aged cheeses and hence towards the worldwide recipe collection. It is also common to see attempts to adapt products with protected designations of origin, such as *camembert* and *brie*, but these are often further developed according to the cheesemakers' own ideas and local conditions, often resulting in completely unique cheeses. These adaptations often mark the difference, the next stage of the adaptation-process (as in the dairy adaptations of the early 20th century) with fancy names, which are currently individual inventions – brands associated with the individual producer. So far, in one instance – that of *Balaton cheese* – there has been an attempt to create a recipe that encompasses the landscape and unites several producers, but this has only been established in the repertoire of one cheesemaker.

On the one hand, the issue is an ideological one, between tradition and localism and globalism, while on the other, it also has a significant market aspect: it is not enough for a product to be ideologically suitable; its marketability is also a major concern. However, the two are also interconnected: it is possible to develop a product that aligns with the cheese-makers' perspective and, which, at the same time, with the right marketing, that can be sold. The motivation for the process of creating tradition is only slightly based on the national image as a set of values, but the ecological drive and local preference – the preference for recipes better suited to the location and derived from the local ecological environment – are much stronger. The concept of *tradition* is strongly intertwined in the narratives with the notion of *localism*, which includes seeking products that fit into the natural environment and landscape. The *traditional* label is not a major marketing tool in the promotion of cheeses in Hungary today and it is very rarely used in product communication.

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