

PART VII:  
DEALING WITH FOOD IN  
INSTITUTIONS AND  
ORGANISATIONS WORKING  
WITH CULTURAL HERITAGE II



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## FOOD HERITAGE IN AN OPEN AIR MUSEUM CONTEXT: RESEARCH, REPRESENTATION AND INTERPRETATION

### A CASE STUDY OF THE HUNGARIAN OPEN AIR MUSEUM

#### ABSTRACT

This paper is about the research, representation and interpretation methods of the Hungarian Open Air Museum regarding food heritage. The museum applies several methods to mediate authentic information for a wide audience in an enjoyable way. Thus, food is part of reconstructed interiors in the museum houses, of thematic indoor exhibitions in the museum gallery spaces, of museum education programmes offered for different age groups, as well as being part of wellbeing and reintegration events, workshops of different kinds, and of publications and festivals. It can also be the central topic of our so-called ‘active venues’, which offer interactive experience in the museum buildings.

#### INTRODUCTION

In my paper<sup>1</sup> I aim to shed light on how food heritage is embedded in open air museum representation, and how research is conducted in order to realise an authentic display and interpretation in this context. For this, I rely on the experience gained at the Hungarian Open Air Museum, Szentendre.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Reference to this study: Zsuzsanna Nagyné Batári: Food Heritage in an Open Air Museum Context: Research, Representation and Interpretation. A case study of the Hungarian Open Air Museum. 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. 465–480.  
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2 The museum is called ‘Skanzen from Szentendre’. The name of this institution type derives from the Swedish Skansen, in Stockholm, which was the first open air museum of this kind.

An outdoor museum makes it possible to mediate food-related content in a uniquely complex way, which is not easily managed in other kinds of museums. There is a wide range of methods by which information can be represented in an outdoor museum environment, providing context, experience and learning opportunities. Food heritage representation includes the research and presentation of different food types, recipes, cooking practices, the utensils necessary for the preparation of dishes, the raw materials used, the storage of food and various ingredients, the daily routine of eating and the customs related thereto, as well as the regional and social varieties of all the above-mentioned aspects. Besides, the Hungarian Open Air Museum also recalls the interiors of grocery shops of the past, and there are also several places where visitors can eat – an inn, a tavern, a railway restaurant, and a coffee house – which are also important concerning food heritage, as their menus can be connected to food heritage research.

#### THE HUNGARIAN OPEN AIR MUSEUM

The Hungarian Open Air Museum<sup>3</sup> is the central open-air collection in Hungary. It is situated in the territory of the Danube-Ipoly National Park and it represents all folk architectural regions of the country, as well as the interior furnishings of the buildings in question. This was achieved thanks to the relocated or authentic replica/reconstructed buildings to the open-air museum setting, and the real objects collected in the settlements, during fieldwork. Originally, the exhibition periods, which are evoked in the interiors of the buildings, were set between the late 19th and the early 20th centuries, but in more recent times, the represented periods are closer to the present as they may display inter-war or post-World War II times, also. This change has been partly due to the age and memory range of the informants interviewed by the researchers.<sup>4</sup> Apart from this shift in representation, and in addition to architectural know-how, attention has also been directed towards ‘way of life’, and thus, storytelling, together with microhistory, have gained even more

3 Concerning the original concept of the Museum, see Kecskés, Péter, ed.: *Szabadtéri Néprajzi Múzeum Szentendrén* (‘Hungarian Open Air Museum in Szentendre’) (Szentendre: Szabadtéri Néprajzi Múzeum, 1989).

4 See K. Csilléry, Klára: ‘A szabadtéri múzeumok berendezési problémái’ (‘Problems of creating interiors in open air museums’), in Kecskés, Péter ed.: *Ház es Ember. A Szabadtéri Néprajzi Múzeum Közleményei 2.* (‘House and Man. The Annual Yearbook of the Hungarian Open Air Museum 2.’) (Szentendre: Szabadtéri Néprajzi Múzeum, 1984), 156; Nagyné Batári, Zsuzsanna: *An Exhibition is Born. Questions of Preparing Open Air Exhibitions Based on the Exhibition of the Northern Hungarian Village Regional Unit* (Szentendre: Szabadtéri Néprajzi Múzeum, 2014), 219.

significance in curatorial work. Ethnographers and historians research every story in connection with a building – its life, the family history of the owner, the stories of objects collected for the interior, and the community's most important stories. The microhistorical view helps us, at the Hungarian Open Air Museum, to show greater political and historical narratives from a personal aspect, which makes it easier for the visitor to understand significant events. Thus, besides the built and tangible heritage, the representation of intangible cultural heritage, and also the buildings' natural surroundings has become integral part of our work.

#### EXHIBITION METHODOLOGY

The museum consists of exhibition units representing the country's architectural macro and micro regions and territories outside the present-day Hungarian borders, where Hungarian populations live in diasporas due to emigration or the shift of borders during the country's history. So far, nine exhibition units have been realised, with homesteads (dwelling house, outbuildings, fences), communal buildings, sacred edifices, and, in addition, gardens and vineyards, the latter based on ethnobotanical research. The buildings are furnished with authentic objects characteristic of the exhibition period.

Different traditions and life moments can also be evoked in the houses, as an added content-layer, with the help of special objects (which may be ritualistic, simple or decorative in nature) and the rearrangement of the interiors. These situations can recall a moment of everyday life (e.g. washing up), or a holiday connected to the calendar year (e.g. Christmas Eve), or a moment from a person's main turning points in life (e.g. wedding). They may also represent a part of a working process (e.g. basket weaving) or a historic/traumatic event (e.g. population exchange and the resettlement of a family). Food is integral part of many of these life moments. All in all, the represented content is complex, and thus there are different kinds of interpretative tools which can assist the visitors in understanding what they see in the exhibitions.<sup>5</sup>

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5 See Nagyné Batári, Zsuzsanna: 'Situations in the Hungarian Open Air Museum', in Schlimmgen-Ehmke, Katharina ed., *Vorsichte Objekte! Neue Ansätze im Umgang mit originalen Einrichtungen in Freilichtmuseen* ('Handle with Care! A new approach to handling originals in open air museums') (Detmold: LWL Freilichtmuseum Detmold, 2007), 25–34.

The applied methods of interpretation<sup>6</sup> concerning the content in the museum buildings include indoor/thematic exhibitions, which are organised in the rooms of a museum building or in a gallery space, but there are also outdoor thematic exhibitions, consisting of both permanent and temporary displays, in the Hungarian Open Air Museum. We use living history<sup>7</sup> with actors acting out different scenes, based on storytelling, thus exploiting the stories collected and documented during research. 'Hands-on' elements are important for visitors, as they provide tactile information, and engage people's attention. In some of the museum interiors, audio or video material, or multimedia installations, complement the exhibition content and messages. Panels and texts can be placed either on the outside or in the inside of a museum house. However, the most popular form of learning stems from the knowledge transfer by the museum front-of-house staff, who tell the story of the exhibition. During festivals, or when hosting education programmes, the museum provides authentic content, and the staff have the opportunity to supply those participating with more detailed information using interactive means. Publications of different genres also help to spread the data that the museum staff have compiled in connection with a topic. Realistic and detailed interiors help visitors to understand how an environment was used, and for this the museum uses reconstructions of paper objects (e. g. wallpapers) and also food installations.

## FOOD HERITAGE

Food heritage is represented in many forms in the Hungarian Open Air Museum: in interiors, thematic indoor exhibitions, 'active venues', museum education programmes, thematic programme years (presented later), as well as in museum festivals, wellbeing and reintegration programmes, services and publications, and even in the gardens. For all of these representations, the background is provided by thorough research. The research process is complex and uses several sources – such as, for example, specialised bibliographies, newspapers, archival documents, photos, and videos – and documentation methods – photos, videos, interviews, or the collection of original food, for example cakes, bread, pretzels, etc.

6 See Nagyné Batári, Zsuzsanna: 'Interpretation', in *An Exhibition is Born*, 245–390.

7 See Faár, Tamara: 'Ott lehetsz, ahol akarod! Élő történelem a múzeumban' ('You can be wherever you want! Living History in the Museum') (Szentendre: Szabadtéri Néprajzi Múzeum). <[https://mokk.skanzen.hu/admin/data/file/20200423/ott\\_lehetsz\\_ahol\\_akarod.pdf](https://mokk.skanzen.hu/admin/data/file/20200423/ott_lehetsz_ahol_akarod.pdf)> accessed 15 September 2024.

Why do we put such strong emphasis on research and representation of food? It is our aim to safeguard food heritage, as part of the complex heritage representation of the museum; in other words, we seek to display food heritage in such a way that visitors can actually see or experience the food types in the exhibition. We also aim to be authentic and complex in representation, as food is an integral part of life, as well as to mediate information and knowledge of past times for present-day visitors. We also seek to enhance reconnection with the past and with identity, as food is one of the most important triggers in this context by reason of its appearance, smell and taste. Food heritage is also important for fostering knowledge which contributes to a more sustainable form of living and to a healthy lifestyle; and we also strive to launch dialogue about issues which are important in the present, as well as to provide enjoyment.

## INTERPRETING FOOD HERITAGE

### Interiors

Food is indispensable when representing a full interior display. The functions of some of the objects on display cannot be understood in the absence of the food related to them: the food which was stored in them or which was prepared or served in them – in the case of a bread-rack, for example. Food complements the abovementioned life moments as details contribute to a more life-like, less sterile, and more dynamic environment. Food can be displayed in several forms, e.g. as food-models, which are mainly made from a special type of plastic. For this, the museum worked together with a special installation designer<sup>8</sup> (Fig. 1). At the beginning of the design process, the most important principles were laid down by the museum. First of all, object protection was a dominant factor: when planning to install plastic objects among the organic materials, we had to be aware of the risk of the evaporation of plastic ingredients, so the raw materials to be used were decided on. Then, as a next step, the designer asked to be supplied with the real food so that he could make the models for display. Thus, we had to provide the designer with the original food for the reconstruction. And that was a challenge in some cases. If the original food was still available, then an authentic copy could be prepared from it. If not, we had to have a reconstruction made on the basis of an existing photo or a

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8 <[www.maszkmester.hu](http://www.maszkmester.hu)> accessed 15 September 2024.

description of it. For example, in the case of a wedding cake from Novaj,<sup>9</sup> there was only one woman in the village, at the time the research was being carried out, who could bake it – she knew the recipe and she also had the know-how, and last, but not least, she also had an oven in which she could bake the big wedding cake.

Thus, every time we plan to introduce any type of food into the interior of a museum building, we have to know the answer to the following questions: what did it look like? Is there a photo of it available? What is/was its size? Is it possible to get it made? Is there anyone who knows the necessary materials involved, the tools or utensils required, and who has the knowledge, practice, and skills to make it? What texture is characteristic of it? What colour is it? Do we know the recipe? We applied this method in the case of the Northern Hungarian village regional unit,<sup>10</sup> and we had several loaves of bread, two cakes, sausages and many pretzels made and put on display.

However, sometimes only creativity is needed. For example, dried herbs can be put into the pantries, for, besides a visual effect, they also have a special kind of fragrance, which can help to make the interior more life-like. Real food is not acceptable because of the danger of attracting insects, or rodents, as they can cause harm to the objects on display. Traditionally linen bags were in widespread use for the storing of different kinds of products, such as lentils, beans or other dried products. Thus, in terms of visual representation, we only have to stuff these linen bags and tie the top. We can also put greaseproof paper onto ceramic jars, and tie them with strings, and, in this way, they can visually evoke different pots used for storing fat or jam. Another solution for a visual effect was achieved by using colour prints showing pickles, which were put into glass jars: in this case authenticity of appearance was also important.

Thus, food is an integral part of interiors displaying an everyday environment, but it is also important, when a tradition is recalled – in such cases, food is essential, as sometimes it is the only indicator of the special occasion we are displaying.

9 See Nagyné Batári, Zsuzsanna: 'A novaji nagykalács' ('The wedding cake in Novaj'), in Bali, János and Máté, György eds.: *Mézes-krémes. Néprajzi dolgozatok a falusi sütő- és főzőspecialistákról* ('Ethnographic essays on cooking-baking specialists in villages') (Budapest: ELTE BTK Néprajzi Intézet, 2009), 117–133.

10 Curator: Zsuzsanna Nagyné Batári, opened in 2010. See Nagyné Batári, Zsuzsanna: *Az Észak-magyarországi falu* ('The Northern Hungarian village regional unit') (Szentendre: Szabadtéri Néprajzi Múzeum, 2014).

## Thematic exhibitions

We can shift the focus to food in the confines of thematic indoor exhibitions, also. A fusion of a thematic and an interior exhibition can also be found in the Skanzen, in the dwelling house from Novaj, since here the furnished pantry is an interactive location – visitors can touch the objects to get a feel of the interior. The story of the house is about the house-owner's family who are preparing for the wedding of a relative. This means that they bake huge milk-loaves as presents for the couple to be married.<sup>11</sup> We documented the process of baking this special type of cake. The tradition was still alive at the time of the research (2004–2005), so real cakes were baked and we could replicate them with the help of food models. However, the topic of baking was elevated to a higher level in the museum representation, and we prepared an exhibition in the pantry about baking with baking forms, arranged in groups, complemented with a description of these baking utensils and a recipe from the period.

## Active venues

One of the most efficient ways to convey information is for museum visitors to come to the active venues. The main aim of these venues is to give visitors the possibility of a hands-on experience, to provide them with the option of trying out processes or to gather information from the activities of the museum staff operating in an entertaining way, in an authentic environment, and thereby engaging the visitors. The museum staff enliven activities relating to past time in a multi-sensory way with the help of demonstration objects.

There are different types of active venues. In the first type (ranging from the least to the most active) where an activity is presented, visitors are rather passive (e.g. in the watermill, they can touch types of flour or parts of the mill, but cannot operate it). In the second type, where demonstration objects are used in addition to museum objects, the visitors are allowed to touch and taste (e.g. herb representation or gingerbread baking). The third type is the most active one, where most of the objects are for demonstration purposes, and here the visitors are allowed to engage in the tasks even more actively (e.g. washing, weaving, pottery workshop, or candle-dipping).

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11 See Nagyné Batári: *Az Észak-magyarországi falu*, 35–42.



*Fig. 1. Part of a pantry, recalling 1963, with a food model of a loaf of bread and imitation pickles. Hungarian Open Air Museum. (Photo by Péter Deim)*



*Fig. 2. The active venue called 'Grandmother's Kitchen Secrets. Hungarian Open Air Museum. (Photo by Balázs Mohai)*

Several of these active venues are connected to food and gastronomy. The one entitled 'Grandmother's Kitchen Secrets' in the Western Transdanubian regional unit's house from Baglad (Fig. 2), the museum staff work in the kitchen and thus visitors have the possibility of seeing how the place was used. There is a special pantry, where the processing of different kinds of fruit, vegetables or herbs is going on, and where pickles, jams, syrups and compotes are prepared, and where visitors can taste them as well. There is a house from Filkeháza in the Northern Hungarian village regional unit, which is furnished with objects of demonstration and where museum staff cook different types of meals. These meals are always related to the thematic year of the museum and authentic recipes of past times follow this thematic direction. In the 'Witch's Brew', our colleagues process plants, as in the Museum grounds there are more than 120 herbs, which we collect and dry, and also demonstrate their use. In this venue, visitors can also taste herb teas and they are allowed to handle the herbs and to taste them as well.

### Museum education programmes

Food and gastronomy also permeate the museum's education programmes. These food aspects are offered for different age groups. In a food-related programme about baking bread, participants learn about the mill (for milling the grain), the tools of grain production, the utensils for bread baking, and finally they bake bread themselves (Fig. 3). The programme reflects on how to achieve a healthy diet, one step along the road to which is achieved by baking bread that does not contain any additives.<sup>12</sup> These programmes are also available for students living with disabilities.

### Wellbeing programmes

Wellbeing programmes – reintegration programmes included – have food as an integral part of their structure. In the programme designed for people living with dementia, the reminiscence sessions always include food, as it is one of the most important triggers that can activate the participants' memories (Fig. 4). During these programmes, the environment helps with the recall of people's long-term memories

<sup>12</sup> <<https://skanzen.hu/hu/Dokumentumok/dokumentumok-alrovat/Mindennapi%20kenyer%C3%BCnk>> accessed 7 September 2024.

as they engage in an activity which enhances their fine motoric skills – participants eat or drink some characteristic foods of the period they are transferred back to.<sup>13</sup>

In one of the reintegration programmes designed for homeless people, participants bake bread, an activity which helps them to feel comforted, and one which also develops skills related to everyday life and practice.

## FESTIVALS AND THEMATIC PROGRAMMES

Food is an important part of festival programmes at the museum, and on these occasions active venues work in harmony with the festival topic. Visitors can learn about the already-prepared dishes and their history, e.g. during the Easter Festival, special emphasis is put on the food which is traditionally consecrated at the holiday, and a food-consecration event is held in the Roman Catholic Church from Óbudavár at the Hungarian Open Air Museum. Food is at the centre of our Festival of New Wine and Geese on St. Marttin's Day (11 November), during which other related traditions are also represented.

'Thematic years' – such as the 'Thematic Year of the Mill' (Fig. 5) – focus on highlighted topics. Within the confines of these, everything is harmonised and organised around a central idea. Thus, interiors may be altered, publications are written, special thematic indoor exhibitions are prepared, living history dialogues are written, and active venues change in accordance with the topic in question. Thematic years help in the placing of emphasis on issues relevant to society, and, as a means of interpretation, help people to understand more about rural culture.

## Services

The cultural heritage of folk cuisine appears in the services sections of the Hungarian Open Air Museum as well. In the menu of the Korzó Coffee House from Marosvásárhely (Târgu Mureş, Romania) (Fig. 6), the cold buffet consists of cakes and cold dishes which are rooted in original recipes. The staff in the museum's restaurant prepared all the recipes which the curator had researched, and baked all the cakes in order to discover which could be adapted to today's visitor demands.

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13 About the programmes, see <<https://magyarmuzeumok.hu/cikk/multidezo-interju-a-skanzen-dijnyertes-demencia-programjarol>> accessed 7 September 2024.



*Fig. 3. A museum education programme about bread-baking. Hungarian Open Air Museum. (Photo by Gábor Tokodi)*



*Fig. 4. In the events organised for people living with dementia, eating and drinking are an integral part of the programme. Hungarian Open Air Museum. (Photo by Gábor Tokodi)*

The same happened with the cold meats and salads, and a group of curators and managers decided upon which kinds of food to accept into the everyday menu of the coffee house.

In the museum, we also teach interested participants about the culinary practices of past times. In the Heritage Workshop series, programmes are offered in which the participants get an all-day long complex programme, including one dedicated to cooking and baking. In one workshop we show them how an oven should be used and they can also prepare related traditional food. There is also a programme focusing on wedding cakes. In connection with the ‘Year of the Mills’, a workshop was planned based on dishes prepared from different grains: soup, main course, and dessert, also. This knowledge does not only strengthen ties with the past and one’s identity, but also offers knowledge about a more sustainable way of life as the dishes are prepared from seasonal produce, grown locally, and easy to cook/bake, and which are also healthy from a dietary point of view.

## Publications

Needless to say, all the results of the research carried out by the museum staff (whether it is applied or basic research) are mediated to a wider audience with the help of publications. These are varied in genre, and, in addition to collections of essays, annual yearbooks, guides and conference volumes, we offer content in the language of popular science. One such type is the collection of recipes: we have a booklet about Jewish cuisine,<sup>14</sup> a recipe collection for lamb dishes,<sup>15</sup> a piece on railway restaurants,<sup>16</sup> and a booklet on grains and recipes complemented with dietary tips.<sup>17</sup> It is more and more important to be able to relate to the visitors of today, to offer knowledge which can lead to a sustainable livelihood, and which can be utilised in people’s everyday life.

14 Szőke, Judit: *A kóser konyha. The kosher kitchen* (Szentendre: Szabadtéri Néprajzi Múzeum, 2010) (Bilingual).

15 Sári, Zsolt: *Bárány. Konyhai kalandok Európában / Lamb. Gastronomic adventures in Europe* (Szentendre: Szabadtéri Néprajzi Múzeum, 2014) (Bilingual).

16 Sári, Zsolt: *A rest / The Railway Restaurant* (Szentendre: Szabadtéri Néprajzi Múzeum, 2011). (Bilingual).

17 Nagyné Batári, Zsuzsanna: *Örlemények az egészségért / Ground grains for health* (Szentendre: Szabadtéri Néprajzi Múzeum, 2023) (Bilingual).



*Fig. 5. The thematic year of the mill included the renovation of mills and the emphasising of ground grains in food heritage. Hungarian Open Air Museum. (Photo by Gábor Tokodi)*



*Fig. 6. The Korzó Coffee House in the Transylvanian building complex. Hungarian Open Air Museum. (Photo by Gábor Tokodi)*

## Gardens

While carrying out our research, we work together with a horticulturist, who accompanies the ethnographer on fieldwork, and examines the natural environment, the gardens, plants, trees and flowers, records their local names, use, and functions. Apart from that, if it is possible, seeds and seedlings are collected and plants are grown in the museum for the exhibition gardens. Garden plans are made on the basis of the research material provided by the museum staff, and thus the museum safeguards and represents the natural cultural heritage of the represented region also.

## Fun Spot for Kids

There are different methods of interpretation in museum practice, based on visitor demands and the composition of an audience. We, at the Hungarian Open Air Museum, have always targeted, among others, the families arriving with children of different ages, as individual visitors. Based on edutainment, intergenerational and family learning, the importance of physical activities, the mediation of knowledge in an enjoyable way, and the provision of authentic content, there is a complex project with exhibitions, products, services, as well as locations designed for the young, called 'Children's Skanzen'.<sup>18</sup> As a result, we have a specific playground, a small shop, two storybooks, and a locale for trying out costumes, among other activities, for children. In this project, we have elements that are related to the topic of food. The first is the 'Magic Barn', where enlarged objects recall the most significant elements of the laid table: the bread, sausage, knife, and the milk jug. In all installations, the related tools and utensils and work processes can be seen with the help of models and animations, and non-IT interactives. This approach helps younger children to understand how food-preparation processes worked.

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18 See Nagyné Batári, Zsuzsanna and Horváth, Anita: 'Gyerek Skanzen – Gyerek Múzeum: Módszertani fejlesztések és elméleti kérdések a gyerekeknek szóló múzeumi élményelemekkel kapcsolatban' ('Methodological developments and theoretical issues in connection with museum experiences offered for children'), in Bereczki, Ibolya and Sári, Zsolt eds.: *Ház és Ember* 28–29 (Szentendre: Szabadtéri Néprajzi Múzeum, 2017), 61–74.

## CONCLUSION

In the research, representation and interpretation work of the Hungarian Open Air Museum, food is a central topic: the environment, the tools and utensils and the processes of cooking and baking, are represented in the museum, and are connected to all buildings. We also exploit the recipes, build on the memories and associations related to food, and also mediate knowledge in connection with rural/folk/middle-class gastronomy. The most important principles are: authentic, exhibition-related content, with which we also aim to foster a sustainable lifestyle.

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