

FRUZZSINA ARKHELY

GASTRONOMY AS INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE: THE 'MILLER'S WAFER' TRADITION IN BORSODNÁDASD

ABSTRACT

In this article I discuss how the tradition of baking the 'Miller's Wafer' (*Molnárkalács*) was established in Borsodnádásd, a small town in Northern Hungary. The town's Metal Plate Works, a major industrial centre, significantly shaped the local community and its identity. After the factory's closure in 1990 local employment opportunities vanished, weakening the community's attachment to the town. The wafer-baking tradition, linked to the factory's history, was once widespread in Northern Hungary, but Borsodnádásd had the most surviving baking irons needed for wafer baking. By the early 2000s, only older generations practised the tradition. Local primary school teachers then proposed revitalising it as a means of fostering community spirit and to create value. This led to the establishment of the annual Festival of the Miller's Wafer, where community baking groups celebrate the tradition, and also to the creation of the House of the Miller's Wafer to produce the wafers. In 2012, Borsodnádásd's wafer-baking tradition was included in the National Inventory for Intangible Cultural Heritage, further boosting its development.

INTRODUCTION

The tradition of *Molnárkalács* from Borsodnádásd was included in Hungary's National Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2012, as an element of the living heritage of the village.¹ This Inventory currently includes 56 heritage elements and 11 'best practices'. Out of the 56 heritage elements, five are related to gastronomy:

1 Reference to this study: Arkhely Fruzzsina: Gastronomy as Intangible Cultural Heritage: the 'Miller's Wafer' Tradition in Borsodnádásd. 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. 481–491.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.61380/978-963-567-084-0-31>

Kunság mutton stew from Karcag in Central Hungary, *Molnárkalács* from Borsodnádásd in the north, plum-jam making from the Szatmár-Bereg region in the northeast of the country, fish soup in Baja in the south, and the tradition of growing and processing Hadház flat cabbage in eastern Hungary. In addition, there are several heritage elements listed that are closely tied to gastronomy, such as the 'Boldog rose' associated with the living tradition of weddings in Boldog, in northern Hungary, or the '*slambuc*', which forms part of the traditional knowledge of the shepherds of Hortobágy in the eastern part of the country.²

It is important to emphasise that according to the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, the focus is not on the food itself, but on the community practices related to the act of dining.³

The tradition of baking *Molnárkalács* is an exceptionally complex heritage element as it encompasses aspects of tangible, intangible, industrial, and gastronomic heritage. In Borsodnádásd, due to the lifestyle changes that occurred during the 20th century, knowledge of the method of baking wafers became limited to the older generation. The role of *Molnárkalács* in the local diet gradually diminished, and was replaced by various pastries and cakes. The younger generation no longer saw the relevance of *Molnárkalács* in meals, and it came to be regarded as a treat for the poor.⁴ Around the 2000s, thanks to the heritage preservation work of two teachers at the local primary school, the residents began to rediscover their village's heritage, and a conscious tradition-keeping effort was initiated under the leadership of local historian, Tibor Sági.

Borsodnádásd is located in Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén County in northern Hungary, one of the most disadvantaged regions of the country. In 1990, after the change of regime, the Borsodnádásd Metal Plate Works, which had been a source of livelihood and the foundation of the local population's identity, closed down, leading to significant social challenges for the residents. They wanted to solve the problems of the town by building on local values. The aim was to build a new identity based on

2 See more details: Intangible Cultural Heritage in Hungary <<https://szellemikulturalisorokseg.hu/index.php>> accessed 15 January 2025.

3 Carr, Gilly – Stig Sørensen, Marie Louise and Rose, Dacia Viejo: 'Food as Heritage', in Lightfoot, Emma – Liu, Xinyi and Dorian Q. Fuller, Xinyi eds.: *Far from the Hearth. Essays in Honour of Martin K. Jones* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge, McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, 2018), 145–151.

4 Nemcsik, Pál ed.: *Molnárkalács-sütés Borsodnádásdon* ('Molnárkalács baking in Borsodnádásd') (Borsodnádásd, 1960) (Hermann Ottó Museum, Ethnographic Repository, Inventory number: 2421).

local traditions. Local economic and intellectual leaders saw the promotion of the tradition of baking *Molnárkalács* as a way of boosting the town's economy and of rebuilding its local identity.

This form of engaging with the past can be derived from presentist ideas characteristic of our time, which involve a present-centred perspective and a selective interpretation of the past.⁵ Thus, in the expanded present, the gap between the experiential space and the horizon of expectations has deepened, resulting in the formation of a new historical order characterised by a strong present-centredness. Through the key concepts of memory, commemoration and heritage, people try to find their past and their relationship with history, and through these, their place and identity in the rapidly-changing circumstances of the present.⁶ Based on François Hartog's work, we can conclude that heritage is to be understood in conjunction with memory, and that together they define identity. Thus, it is an identity that must be searched for, uncovered, preserved, and often rediscovered.⁷

With the critique of modernisation, the turn towards the past and the search by individuals and communities for a place in the world has intensified. As a result, the concept of cultural heritage has become one that helps people to define their sense of self. Heritage and memory are beginning to play a defining role in shaping identity. The identity of individuals and groups is a constantly evolving process, often shaped through conscious activity. In the identity crisis caused by globalisation and modernisation, local communities strive to assemble and, often using fictional elements, to justify their own sense of identity.⁸

The scent or taste of a particular dish can evoke memories that may also have a nostalgic effect. Tastes and smells often carry memories of home and childhood. Through the recall of memories, foods can contribute to the strengthening of identity and to a sense of social belonging.⁹ The preparation and consumption of

5 Lowenthal, David: 'Az örökség megteremtés' ('Creating a heritage'), in Erdősi, Péter and Sonkoly, Gábor eds.: *A kulturális örökség* ('The Cultural Heritage') (Atelier booklet 7) (Atelier, Budapest: L'Harmattan Press, 2014), 463–493.

6 Hartog, François: *A történetiség rendjei. Prezentizmus és időtapasztalat*. ('The orders of historicity. Presentism and the experience of time') (Budapest: L'Harmattan, 2006), 120–121.

7 Hartog, François: *Örökség és történelem: az örökség ideje* ('Heritage and history: the time of heritage'), *Regio* 11/4 (2000), 4.

8 Siikala, Anna-Leena: 'Etnikus hagyományok és átalakuló társadalmak' ('Ethnic traditions and changing societies') Csonka-Takács, Eszter ed.: *EFI Communicationes* 6, (European Folklore Institute, Budapest, 1998), 7.

9 Carr, Stig Sørensen, Viejo Rose: 'Food as Heritage', 145.

food, in the context of heritage, is about more than just providing nourishment. Both can be viewed as human activities that carry social, cultural, and symbolic significance, and they can also define an individual's identity.¹⁰

THE SPREAD OF WAFER BAKING IN HUNGARY

Both the origin of *Molnárkalács* and its naming remain uncertain. There are various narratives about the origin of this confectionary and its name. The most widespread, and the one most accepted by the community, is that the miller's wife would offer miller's bread to the farmers waiting for their grain to be milled.¹¹ Sources suggest that the making of wafers was a known and widespread practice in Hungary from the 16th century onwards. Germany or Austria may have played a mediating role in its spreading in Hungary.¹² It was among the upper social classes that this type of confectionery was most popular. According to various recipe books and inventories, the technique of baking wafers was already known in the 16th and 17th centuries in Hungary, not only among the nobility but also among patricians and craftsmen, and it gradually made its way to the lower sections of society.¹³ Peasant culture is characterised by the fact that, as soon as material resources and the level of education allow, cultural patterns of a superior social class are rapidly followed.¹⁴ While the consumption of wafers quickly disappeared from the habits of the upper classes, it persisted for a long time among the rural population, since the poorest people had no problem in obtaining the basic ingredients (flour, salt and water) needed to make the wafers.¹⁵ In addition to the most basic ingredients, wealthier families usually added fat, butter, milk, sugar or perhaps even some flavouring to the dough.¹⁶

10 Carr, Stig Sørensen, Viejo Rose: 'Food as Heritage', 150.

11 Interview with Beáta Vass, a teacher at Borsodnádásd's Móra Ferenc Primary School, conducted on July 14–15, 2017, by Eszter Csonka-Takács ('Property of the Department of Intangible Cultural Heritage, Open Air Ethnographic Museum – Konkam Studio).

12 Chikány, Judit: "'Hoztunk mink ostyákat, tarkát, fehéréket'" ('Az ostyasütés gyakorlata és alkalmai a 16. századtól napjainkig') ('We brought you wafers, wafers with white wafers') ('The practice and occasions of wafer baking from the 16th century to the present day') *Studia Caroliensia* (2010), 219 (Journal of Károli Gáspár Reformed University).

13 Nagybakay, Péter: 'Címeres ostyasütővasak a Magyar Nemzeti Múzeumban a 15–16. századból' ('Waffle irons in the Hungarian National Museum from the 15th–16th centuries'), *Folia Archaeologica* XXXIX (1988), 197.

14 Verebélyi, Kincső: *Nép, Ipar, Művészet* ('People, Industry, Art') (Debrecen: Debreceni Egyetemi Kiadó, 2019), 121.

15 Nagybakay: *Címeres ostyasütővasak a Magyar Nemzeti Múzeumban a 15–16. századból*, 197.

16 Sági, Tibor: *Molnárkalács sütővasak Borsodnádásdon és környékén* ('Molnárkalács baking irons in and around Borsodnádásdon') (Borsodnádásd: The Municipality of Borsodnádásd, 2008), 7.

Wafers, as a side dish, were mainly a garnish, a 'delicacy' for the wealthier sections of society.¹⁷

After its expansion in peasant households, *Molnárkalács* was not consumed as an everyday dish, but rather as a festive rarity, eaten on major holidays, such as Christmas, New Year and Easter. Wafer-baking irons were found in most households in areas where the iron needed to make them was available. Peasant women living near foundries and ironworks specialised in the production of *molnar* cakes as a cottage industry. Most sources mention the towns of Eger, Gyöngyös, Ózd and Mezőkövesd in northern Hungary, in this connection. But the tradition of baking wafers was not confined to the North Hungarian region as it was known from the villages along the Ipoly river, in the Mátra region, and even in Somogy county, in the west and south of Hungary. During the 19th century, wafers became an important type of pastry in the diet of rural farming communities generally.¹⁸

THE HERITAGE OF BORSODNÁDASD

As mentioned above, the tradition of baking the Miller's Wafer was known in many settlements of Hungary, yet it is listed as the heritage of Borsodnádásd. This can be explained, among other things, by the fact that, thanks to the operation of the Metal Plate Works of Borsodnádásd, a subsidiary of the Ózd Factory, sufficient raw material (platinum, scrap pig-iron), know-how and tooling capacity, for the production of the baking irons, was available. This gave Borsodnádásd an advantage in the subsequent process of reviving the tradition. In addition to the smithy, the workers at the Metal Plate Works also made their own baking irons in their own homes, as a kind of a side job. The makers and consumers of the wafers included almost all sections of society, from the wealthier peasant farmers, through smallholders, to the labourers who worked in the factory in addition to doing their own agricultural work.¹⁹ Lifestyle changes during the 20th century limited knowledge of the waffle-making process to the older generation.

17 Bódi, Erzsébet: 'Molnárkalács a felvidéki magyarok táplálkozási kultúrájában' ('Molnárkalács in the food culture of the Hungarians of Upper Hungary [Slovakia]'), in Halász, Péter ed.: *A Duna menti népek hagyományos műveltsége* ('The traditional culture of the Danube peoples') (Budapest: Közművelődési Információs Vállalat, 1991), 409.

18 Bódi, Erzsébet: 'A Kind of Cake ("molnárkalács") in the Hungarian Popular Culture' *Etnographica et folkloristica Carpathica* 4 (1985), 76–77.

19 Sági: *Molnárkalács sütővasak Borsodnádásdon és környékén*, 5.

After the political transition, a large proportion of people working in industry were affected by unemployment and the situation in Borsodnádásdon was no different. In 1990, the Metal Plate Works factory, which was considered to be outdated, closed down, and the factory workers had to find new goals and sources of livelihood almost overnight. The closure of the factory meant the loss of a job that provided a daily living for the employees. As a consequence, their identity as workers linked to the factory was shaken, but so was their identity as local residents. The metal plate factory was not only a workplace for the workers, but it also defined virtually every aspect of their lives. The norms that prevailed inside the factory, were also valid outside the factory walls, and the workers formed a factory community outside of the factory gates.²⁰

In this situation, it was of key importance for the settlement and its inhabitants that new identities and new practices be developed in order to ensure the survival of a settlement that was losing its function, and of a community that was losing its frame of daily life. It was then that the need to construct a new identity emerged. In order to fill the gap left by the closure of the factory and the decline of the village, the inhabitants turned to reviving the tradition of baking the Miller's Wafer.

We want to turn this into a complex issue, a brand, to make it part of the future of Borsodnádásd, in every sense, in dress, even in attitude. Apart from the fact that this has financial implications, the income for the municipality is a very important ideology, a cohesive force, a new identity for the municipality, which was the Metal Plate Works founded in 1864, but unfortunately it collapsed in ruins in the early 90s, and we are now trying to revive it, to transform the love of iron from the Metal Plate Works into the love of baking iron²¹ (Krisztián Kormos, Mayor of Borsodnádásd; English translation by the author).

Around the 2000s, the inhabitants began to rediscover the heritage of their village and began a conscious effort to create a tradition under the leadership of a local historian named Tibor Sági. Their work aimed at boosting the town's economy, at creating jobs, and at rebuilding local identity. They worked on the basis that the rediscovery of local tradition could help to stop the impoverishment and depopulation of the settlement. According to Mihály Hoppál, respect for local traditions creates a sense of local identity, which aims to give individuals a sense of belonging to their immediate environment, so that they may well see themselves as

20 Murányi, István: 'A munkások lokális identitásának jellemzői Borsodnádásdon' ('The characteristics of the local identity of workers in Borsodnádásdon'), *Korall* 49 (2012), 106–107.

21 Interview with Krisztián Kormos, Mayor of Borsodnádásd, 14–15 July 2017, by Csonka-Takács, Eszter (Directorate of Intangible Cultural Heritage – Konkam Studio).

proud members of the community. A strong community can also contribute to the development of a settlement, as local traditions are usually associated with a strong sense of identity. Therefore, one of the aims of building a strong local sense of heritage is to strengthen the community, which in turn contributes to the development of the municipality.²²

The *Molnárkalács* Festival, established in 2008, can be seen as a milestone in the tradition-making of *Molnárkalács*-baking. In the nomination form it is stated that the city's leadership, 'recognising the community-building and identity-forming role inherent in the tradition of baking *Molnárkalács*, has organised the festival every year since 2008.'²³ However, the example of Borsodnádásd is not unique in the creation of this kind of heritage. In many cases, the leaders of local communities try to turn a tradition, a building, or a local cuisine, into a cultural heritage form, a kind of product, in order to boost local cultural tourism and profit.²⁴ Tourism could be one of the possible ways of socially exploiting heritage.²⁵ In many cases, the aim of this type of festival is to develop the area in question and its settlements. In the short term, they can become promotional, money-generating events, with a conscious intention to do so. The slogan used in this context is 'localism', highlighting the importance of local traditions.²⁶

The Miller's Wafer Festival provides an opportunity for community participation, involving members of the community in the tradition. In the process of constructing the tradition, the aim has been to create a united community of tradition keepers. Anyone in the village can form a group. Under a tent, baking groups bake wafers all day long for visitors to the festival, who can taste the wafers made according to different recipes and flavours, for free. As well as the baking demonstrations, the stage will host performances by local and regional folk art and traditional groups, throughout the day, and every year star guests are invited to entertain festival-goers.

22 Hoppál, Mihály: 'Hagyomány és identitás' ('Tradition and identity'), in Csonka-Takács, Eszter ed.: *Tanulmányok a Szellemi Kulturális Örökség Megőrzéséről*, ('Studies on the Preservation of Intellectual Cultural Heritage') (Budapest: European Folklore Institute, 2008), 13.

23 Nomination Data Sheet, which is part of the heritage element documentation: SZKÖ/11-2012.

24 Hoppál, Mihály: 'A szellemi kulturális örökség megőrzése' ('Preserving intangible cultural heritage'), in Hoppál, Mihály ed.: *Folklór és emlékezet*. ('Folklore and memory') (Budapest: European Folklore Institute, 2011), 117.

25 Husz, Mária: 'A kulturális örökségpoltika paradoxonjairól' ('On the paradoxes of cultural heritage policy') *Tudásmenedzsment* 15/1 (2014) 47–48.

26 Pusztai, Bertalan: *Megalkotott hagyományok és falusi turizmus. A pusztamérgesi eset* ('Established traditions and rural tourism. The case of Pusztamérges') (Szeged: University of Szeged, Department of Ethnography, 2003), 20.

Based on the success of the Miller's Wafer Festivals and the increasing number of visitors every year, the Municipality, and the Association for the Future of Borsodnádásd, opened the Miller's Wafer House in 2015. The baking machine for the production of the wafers was made in the Ziegler manufactory in Zsámbék, a town in Pest County.²⁷ The machine has a total of twenty-four moulds with different patterns on them. These include mushrooms, a deer, a couple, a small railway, and other designs typical of the village. The designs were developed by the locals, but the engraving was done in the manufactory in Zsámbék. These different designs feature alternatively on one side of the iron and the logo of the Miller's Wafer product on the other. There are two types of packaging used for the wafers – one is the less expensive foil version and the other, which is more expensive, is a paper box. The wafers produced by the Miller's Wafer House are mostly sold in two flavours – vanilla and cinnamon – but the producers also try to surprise customers with special flavours for a particular holiday – for example, at Christmas they have produced gingerbread flavoured wafers, and they also have treated all of the residents of the village with gingerbread-flavoured wafers wrapped in a gift box.²⁸ The sale of *Molnárkalács* in this form helps to introduce the folk tradition to a wider audience, while also creating jobs in the village and generating revenue for the city.

The recognition of the economic, particularly the tourism-related, potential of heritage is not a new concept. The economic sector, referred to as the heritage industry by Gregory Ashworth and John Tunbridge, has emerged in an increasing number of small Hungarian settlements, and, in many cases, it has become a key element in local development. Social and economic organisations managing heritage, as well as the leadership of individual settlements, are aware of its impact on the local economy. Therefore, part of the investments made locally are specifically focused on heritage-related projects, which are the result of deliberate strategies. Tourism built around heritage offers local economic development opportunities, creating marketable products or job opportunities as part of this process.²⁹

27 Katona, Franciska Dorina: 'A molnárkalács borsodnádásdi hagyományának szerepe a turizmus fejlődésében' ('The role of the Molnárkalács tradition in the development of tourism in Borsodnádásd'), in Tánzos, Tamás and Csugány, Julianna eds.: *Kari Tudományos Diákköri Konferencia, Tanulmánykötet* (Eger: Eszterházy Károly Főiskola Liceum Kiadó, 2016), 24.

28 Interview with Sági, Tibor Head of the Local History Collection, 14–15 July 2017, by Csonka-Takács, Eszter (Property of the Directorate of Intangible Cultural Heritage – Konkam Studio).

29 Graham, Brian – Ashworth, G.J. and Tunbridge, J.E.: 'Az örökség a gazdaságfejlesztési stratégiában' ('Heritage in the economic development strategy'), in Erdősi, Péter and Sonkoly, Gábor eds.: *A kulturális örökség* ('Cultural heritage') (Budapest: L'Harmattan, 2004), 394.

SUMMARY

As I have discussed in this article, the tradition of baking *Molnárkalács* was known in several Hungarian settlements, yet it appears on the National Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage as part of Borsodnádásd's heritage. Currently, there are just a few settlements in Hungary where the tradition of wafer baking has survived as a living tradition. Generally, we can say that the tradition of wafer baking spread in areas (primarily industrial centres) where it was easy to acquire waffle irons. Over the centuries, various local, distinctive versions of the tradition and the methods of making the waffle irons, developed.

In Borsodnádásd, apart from the presence of the Metal Plate Factory, the conscious tradition-building work that took place in the settlement is undoubtedly significant. Thanks to the heritage-preserving processes, the custom of wafer baking has become a defining spiritual heritage of local identity.

Thanks to conscious tradition-building efforts, the baking of the Miller's Wafer has become a beloved tradition in Borsodnádásd village. The Miller's Wafer Festival was created, leading to the formation of more baking groups. Over time, more individuals and families have acquired unique baking irons, proving that this tradition is integral to local identity. These irons are not just practical wafer-baking tools but they also have evolved into symbols of value and respect for tradition. No longer stored away, they have become prestige objects. The growing appreciation of the tradition, bolstered by media coverage, has improved the self-esteem of the people of Borsodnádásd. The creation of the Miller's Wafers House has also helped to boost the town's economy.

It is important to ensure that, alongside the community-building and identity-strengthening roles of the newly-widespread heritage element, economic interests do not take undue precedence or overshadow the preservation of tradition. In the case of food-related heritage elements, there is often a risk that, driven by economic interests, the tradition could become commercialised or take on a festival-like nature. It is crucial that the focus remains on community practice, rather than being primarily directed towards area and urban development. This is because increasing attention, and associated economic and tourism potential, can sometimes undermine the interests of the community and tradition preservation.

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