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NUTRITIONAL AND HEALTH ASPECTS OF FOOD IN THE BALKANS



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NUTRITIONAL AND HEALTH ASPECTS OF FOOD IN THE BALKANS

Edited by

ALINA-IOANA GOSTIN
College of Food and Hospitality Management, University College Birmingham, Birmingham, United Kingdom

DIANA BOGUEVA
Curtin University Sustainability Policy Institute, Sydney, NSW, Australia

VLADIMIR KAKURINOV
Consulting and Training Center KEY, Macedonia

Series Editors

HUUB LELIEVELD

VESLEMØY ANDERSEN

VISHWESHWARAIAH PRAKASH

JAMUNA PRAKASH

BERND VAN DER MEULEN





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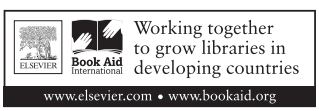
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Darja Sokolić
Croatian Agency for Agriculture and Food, Centre for Food Safety, Osijek, Croatia

Svetlana Stanišić
Faculty of Physical Education and Sports Management, Singidunum University, Belgrade, Serbia

Rodica Sturza
Faculty of Food Technology, Technical University of Moldova, Chisinau, Moldova

Ismail Hakki Tekiner
Nutrition and Dietetics Department, Health Sciences Faculty, İstanbul Sabahattin Zaim University, İstanbul, Turkey

Indrit Tila
Chef, Tirana, Albania; First "Vegan Conference" in Albania, Tirana, Albania

Iuliana Vintilă
Department of Food Science, Food Technology and Applied Biotechnology, University "Dunărea de Jos" of Galaţi, Galaţi, Romania

Kyriaki G. Zinoviadou
Department of Food Science and Technology, Perrotis College, Thessaloniki, Greece

Corina Aurelia Zugravu
University of Medicine and Pharmacy Carol Davila, Bucharest, Romania

Suzana Đorđević-Milošević
Environment and Sustainable Development Studies, Singidunum University, Belgrade, Serbia

Gordana Đurić
Faculty of Agriculture, University of Banja Luka, Banja Luka, Bosnia and Herzegovina

CHAPTER 19

Traditional Balkan foods: Future outlook

Ismail Hakki Tekiner
Nutrition and Dietetics Department, Health Sciences Faculty, İstanbul Sabahattin Zaim University, İstanbul, Turkey

19.1 Introduction

Ethnic diversity is one of the Balkan region's most characteristic features. Naturally, ethnic geography of the Balkans has led to interrelated rich traditional cuisines and to the formation of a unique and varied Balkan diet. Although often symbiotic, the cultures in the Balkans are diverse and fascinating. Living together in this region for centuries, people in the Balkans have created similar eating habits, food choices, and food related folklore traditions incorporating all the features of the region's nature, geographical biodiversity, and ecosystems (Bradatan, 2003; Stankov, 2002). However, globalization is nowadays changing the food systems and food choices at unprecedented levels, influencing all aspects of human life, and the Balkans are not excluded from this trend (Tekiner, 2020). Studies have revealed that the most important factors on food choice are sensory appeal, purchase convenience, health, and natural content, while the least important ones are familiarity and ethical concern (Antuono, 2016; Danforth, Crampton, & Allcock, 2019; Gurinović et al., 2016a; Milošević, Žeželj, Gorton, & Barjolle, 2012). At the present time, people consider traditional cuisines to be healthy (Sproesser et al., 2019). At the same time, the traditional eating habits and food choices add a new dimension to the traditional cuisines by bringing forth challenges (e.g., on nutrition, health, quality, safety, harmonization with international food regulations) for manufacturers, legal authorities, and regulators. Therefore, current efforts are being made to build knowledge platforms and/or databases that are able to effectively centralize information on traditional Balkan foods and thus act as valuable resources for multiple stakeholders (Antuono, 2016; Danforth et al., 2019; Gurinović et al., 2016a; Milošević et al., 2012).

19.2 Nutrition education and information for a healthy society

Since the beginning of the 21st century, factors such as food crises, environmental concerns, as well as movements aimed to improve transparency in the supply chain and to support local producers, as an opposition to food industrialization and globalization,

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have influenced consumer choices and changed food trends (Fernández-Ferrín, Calvo-Turrientes, Bande, Artaraz-Miñón, & Galan-Ladero, 2018). What we eat determines our national or ethnic identity (Bardone & Spalvēna, 2019). Each society has a diverse range of culinary, nutrition, eating, and drinking habits, and the cultural structure of the society mainly determines what these habits are (Özkan & Yetim, 2018). Among the foods consumed every day, traditional foods are essential for authenticating a national culture and can serve as vehicles of branding and marketing. Terms like "culinary nationalism" and "gastronationalism" are often used by countries to claim ownership and to provide institutional protection for their traditional foods. However, many of these foods are nowadays commodities "generated out of sustained commercial activity, state regulatory systems and international trade agreements." They are seen as "hybrid artefacts" whose price, source, trade, quality, and hygiene are regulated by national and international legislation (Bardone & Spalvēna, 2019).

We need new models or approaches that are able to help us better understand the factors that affect, positively and negatively, the general attitudes in the Balkans toward traditional foods and their consumption (Pieniak, Verbeke, Vanhonacker, Guerrero, & Hersleth, 2009). Nutritional education and information can subsequently be powerful factors in communicating quality and health characteristics of traditional Balkan foods and eating habits, having the potential to improve the safety and healthiness of Balkan societies. Promoting healthy diets through nutrition information and education, along with changes in the food systems and environments, and strengthening international collaboration with the involvement of all stakeholders are part of the commitments to action for improving nutrition globally that have been made in the Rome Declaration on Nutrition (FAO, 2016). Schools have gained significant attention as a specific setting for nutrition education over the past 20 years (WHO, 2004). Globally, WHO has recommended policies and programs for the adoption of healthy diets and physical activity in schools and has published a School Policy Framework entitled "Implementation of the WHO Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health" (WHO, 2008). Some campaigns such as "Let's Go Local" in Pohnpei, in the Federated States of Micronesia, have focused on promoting the value of local foods in conjunction with skills training to support local food production and increase consumption of specific cultivars and crops. This campaign model recommended by WHO could also be applied in the Balkans. In Europe, 20 countries including five from the Balkan region (i.e., Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, and Serbia) implemented in 2011–12 the Nutrition-Friendly Schools Initiative, which aims to provide a framework for curriculum development to promote nutrition and health in schools (Hawkes, 2013). Similarly, one of the six action areas of the United Nations (UN) Decade of Action on Nutrition 2016–25 guide is represented by the nutrition education and information for behavioral change. Under this area, several recommendations (see Box 19.1) were created to support countries, including those in the Balkans, to make the required policy changes (FAO & WHO, 2018).

BOX 19.1 Recommendations on nutrition education and information for behavioral change of the UN Decade of Action on Nutrition 2016–25 guide (FAO & WHO, 2018).

Recommendation 19: Implement nutrition education and information interventions based on national dietary guidelines and coherent policies related to food and diets, through improved school curricula, nutrition education in the health, agriculture and social protection services, community interventions and point-of-sale information, including labeling.

Recommendation 20: Build nutrition skills and capacity to undertake nutrition education activities, particularly for front line workers, social workers, agricultural extension personnel, teachers, and health professionals.

Recommendation 21: Conduct appropriate social marketing campaigns and lifestyle change communication programs to promote physical activity, dietary diversification, consumption of micronutrient-rich foods such as fruits and vegetables, including traditional local foods and taking into consideration cultural aspects, better child and maternal nutrition, appropriate care practices and adequate breastfeeding and complementary feeding, targeted and adapted for different audiences and stakeholders in the food system.

Another initiative, "the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT) Food" that connects partners from leading businesses, universities, and research centers across Europe, including those from the Balkan region, was established. Its major target is to make the food system more sustainable, healthier, and to be trusted by consumers. To date, EIT Food has performed many educational activities such as summer schools and online courses in master and doctoral programs for talented individuals willing to learn about food. All these programs may potentially enable the harmonization of the traditional foods in the Balkans with international food guidelines and rules (European Cluster Collaboration Platform, 2019).

19.3 The role governments can play in improving nutrition and health through harmonization

A broad spectrum of activities carried out in research, public health nutrition, the food industry, as well as for the elaboration and implementation of government policies require reliable data on the nutritional composition of foods. The expansion of the European Union (EU) and the concomitant increase in cross-border trade and cooperation have made harmonizing food composition data a more important issue than ever. Harmonization is not a technical issue only, but it also requires creating durable and sustainable databases and structures to keep the viability of the data (Egan, Fragodt, Raats, Hodgkins, & Lumbers, 2007). Governmental actors, such as policy makers, civil servants, parliament, and local authorities, play significant roles in improving nutrition

and health thorough harmonization; their main responsibilities are multifaceted, ranging from (1) developing policies related to food security, nutrition, health, and training; (2) making decisions on legislation for protecting and supporting the human right to adequate food; (3) developing national action plans for nutrition; (4) providing funding and support for capacity development; (5) strengthening capacity building; to (6) monitoring plans/procedures, their implementation, and outcomes for government accountability. Among these, lobby/advocacy for food and nutrition action plans are the prioritized strategies/activities on a short-term (Pavlovic et al., 2009a, 2009b).

There is little information available on the nutritional and health aspects of the traditional Balkan foods. Improvements in the national and international food and health regulations, including composition data, dietary assessments, and remedy approaches are therefore needed to make these products globally available. Based on the fact that the risk of diseases can be reduced by evidence-informed government nutrition policies, the Balkan governments need to transform the existing structures and systems to integrated systems by (1) involving all partners for a healthy, profitable, equitable, and sustainable systems; (2) providing sustained funding; (3) setting up special projects; (4) coordinating action across sectors; and (5) conducting health literacy surveillance. The Balkan governments must take steps to increase and support health literacy through National Health Literacy Demonstration Projects (NHLDPs) in order to accelerate progress in preventing and controlling noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) (WHO GCM/NCD, 2017). Studies conducted worldwide may serve as models for the Balkans. For instance, in 2008 the Government of China issued the policy paper on Health Literacy for Chinese Citizens—Basic Knowledge and Skills, and funded more than 40 million US dollars a year for the project; the national health literacy level among Chinese residents increased from 6.48% in 2008 to 9.79% in 2014 (WHO, 2019). Similarly, another large-scale study conducted with Taiwanese consumers has demonstrated the positive effects of promoting nutrition knowledge and diet adjustment, and provided suggestions to policy-makers (Pillai, Liang, Thwaites, Sharma, & Goldsmith, 2019). In addition to the mentioned NHLDPs, there have been some other activities in the field of specific capacity development to identify the needs and gaps in nutritional knowledge. The UN Standing Committee on Nutrition (UNSCN) regional networks already exist in the world, including Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, and Southern Africa. One of these networks active in the Balkan region is the Capacity Development Network in Nutrition in Central and Eastern Europe (CAPNUTRA), which is a network for capacity development in food and nutrition, organizer of nutritional trainings and of knowledge–transfer. The network has developed various nutritional tools such as the Food Composition Data Management (FCDM), the Balkan Food Platform, NutriRecQest, EuroFIR FoodBasket, and the Diet Assess and Plan (DAP) software that underpin food, nutrition, and public health research in the region (CAPNUTRA, 2016;

Gurinović et al., 2016b). For instance, the first online Serbian Food Composition Database (FCDB) comprising nutritional information on 1046 foods and 129 traditional and/or common Serbian composite dishes has been developed. This constituted the basis for building the regional FCBD—the Balkan Food Platform—to which other countries in the region have contributed (e.g., Macedonia, Croatia, Slovenia).

These applications represent innovative tools for capacity development in food and nutrition that have the potential of harmonizing the Balkan research infrastructure (RI) with European standards. A key element of the regional RI was the development of DAP—a sophisticated platform for standardized and harmonized food consumption data collection, nutrition planning, and comprehensive dietary intake assessment (Glibetic et al., 2011; Gurinović et al., 2016b, 2018a). The collection of harmonized and standardized food consumption data from national dietary surveys at the individual level is fundamental when assessing exposure to different nutritional and food safety risks, which is an integral part of the EFSA risk assessment process (Regulation (EC) No. 178/2002) (Glibetic et al., 2011; Gurinović et al., 2016b). Despite some shortcomings such as not being fully exploited to their potential or inconsistencies in coding, documentation on references, and incomplete information (about 65%) (Astley, 2018; Westenbrink et al., 2019), these platforms are already in use by the policy makers and the industry, providing them with valuable data. Moreover, the centralization and distribution of all these RIs require good organizational structures and efficient cooperation between different public and private partners (Snoek et al., 2018). In order to meet emerging public health nutrition challenges in the Balkan countries, the RIs and effective nutrition surveillance systems can play an important role to monitor public health and nutrition epidemiology in the region (Gurinović et al., 2018b).

19.4 Quality and safety considerations of the traditional Balkan foods for international food trade

Traditional foods from the Balkans can contribute to the development of the food market. However, the global availability and international trade of traditional Balkan foods are hampered because of the independent establishment of different laws and standards in each location. In the rapid pace of trade, it is essential to harmonize food requirements with international rules and regulations globally. Trade and food standards go hand in hand in ensuring sufficient food that is safe and nutritious to feed the growing world population (FAO & WTO, 2017). Not only can harmonization make trade more inclusive and less costly, it can also avoid unnecessary destruction of foods that are safe for consumption, and ultimately can provide incremental improvement in public health (FAO & WTO, 2017; Keener, Nicholson-Keener, & Koutchma, 2014).

In light of these aspects, the Balkan countries need technical support and assistance for harmonizing their food standards. As such, each Balkan government must

engage with the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the Codex Alimentarius Commission to adopt international food safety and security standards, and to participate more effectively in global food trade (FAO & WTO, 2017; Walls, Baker, Chirwa, & Hawkins, 2019). These measures can facilitate cross-border trade, as well as to enhance the quality and safety of the traditional Balkan foods, and thus play a crucial positive role in assuring food security. The domestic production of local and traditional foods along with the control of exports/imports and the improvement of consumer health in the Balkans are addressed in food safety reforms (FAO, 2018). According to FAO (2018), the burden of foodborne disease is still high in the Balkans, therefore the countries of the region need to improve their food safety control systems by aligning their national regulations with the international requirements. Harmonizing food safety policies has never been more important for delivering quality safe food in today's growing cross-border trade (Egan et al., 2007).

For domestic and international commercialization, producers are encouraged to register their agricultural products and foodstuffs within the EU quality schemes (i.e., Protected Designations of Origin, Protected Geographical Indications, Traditional Specialties Guaranteed, Mountain Products, and Product of Island Farming designations) established under the Regulation (EU) No. 1151/2012. Outputs expected to be achieved by implementing this regulation are as follows: (1) fair competition for farmers and producers and their products that have value-adding characteristics/attributes; (2) availability of reliable information to consumers on such products; (3) respect for intellectual property rights; and (4) respect for the integrity of the internal market. As a result, an increase in the diversity of agricultural production, in the incomes of farmers and producers, as well as increase in the recognition and credibility among consumers of registered products is expected. Using these designations will also help consumers make better informed choices (Albuquerque, Oliveira, & Costa, 2018).

In the Balkans, traditional foods have a positive image. Main drivers of their consumption have been identified. In addition to their content in natural ingredients, the consumption of traditional foods is driven by consumers' preferences for on-farm and small dairy products and their desire to promote foods of local or national origin (FOCUS-BALKANS, 2011). There are several nongovernmental initiatives aimed at protecting the gastronomic and traditional foods of the Balkan countries. One of these initiatives—"Environmentally Sustainable Socio-Economic Development of Rural Areas" (ESSEDRA)—was launched in 2012 and cofunded by the European Community (EC). The objective of the project was to support the process of integration of the Balkan countries in Europe, at the same time creating conditions for the preservation of their identity, which is manifested through their food diversity and artisanal foods (ESSEDRA, 2010). The main actor leading ESSEDRA is the Slow Food Movement—a social movement formed to combat the adverse impacts of globalization on the human life (Sağır, 2017). ESSEDRA is a passionate advocate for local and traditional food

products, including conventional farming. The initiative organizes public campaigns and local events, and tries to raise awareness on industrial agriculture, inadequate and unnecessary rules and regulations, and harmful policies that are being introduced in the Southeastern Europe as part of the EC accession process. Basically, ESSEDRA aims to activate the support mechanisms for traditional farmers and artisan producers that are offered by the EC through the harmonization process. The major mechanisms provided by the EC are direct and/or indirect financial and technical support. For instance, the current EC rural development policy 2014–20 offers measures to help with setting up and developing short food supply chains (SFSC) and local food systems through support for investment, training, the LEADER approach, and organization of producers. Among the main EC priorities for rural development set out in the Regulation (EC) No 1305/2013, the most relevant to the establishment of the SFSC and local markets are presented below (see Box 19.2) (EPRS, 2016).

The agro-food sector in the Balkans plays an important role in rural development and poverty reduction. The increasing demand for high quality and diverse agro-food products at global level also yields significant opportunities to raise both the level and quality of production in the Balkans' agro-food sector. More specifically, one of the drivers for sustainable development of the sector in the region is to "ensure national and international market access" and "to develop niche markets, in particular for organic and local products" (OECD, 2019). According to an EC analysis, it is necessary to support farmers to take part in quality schemes, organizations and producer groups, as well as to develop local markets and SFSC. The European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS) reported that on average about 15% of the

BOX 19.2 The most relevant priorities to the establishment of SFSC and local markets for the rural development in EC (EPRS, 2016).

- Knowledge transfer and information actions (Art. 14).
- Advisory services, farm management and farm relief services (Art. 15).
- Quality schemes for agricultural products and foodstuffs (Art. 16).
- Investments in physical assets (Art. 17).
- Farm and business development (Art. 19).
- Basic services and village reveal in rural areas (Art. 20).
- Setting up of producer groups and organizations.
- Animal welfare (Art. 33).
- Cooperation (Art. 35).
- The LEADER* approach (Art. 42–44).

* LEADER ("Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale"—Links between rural development actions) is a local development method whereby local actors are involved in the design and implementation of strategies, decision-making and resource allocation for the development of local areas.

farms in the EC deliver more than 50% of their production directly to consumers. The share of farms that make direct sales to consumers is approximately 25% in Greece, 19% in Slovakia, and 18% Romania. Two surveys conducted in 2011 and 2016 by the Eurobarometer indicated that 90% of European consumers agreed that there are benefits to buying products from a local farm, and 80% of consumers stressed the importance of "strengthening the farmer's role in the food chain" (EPRS, 2016). Harmonization and standardization of the traditional Balkan foods can prompt international trade that can be done through individual and collective direct sales, and through local and international partnerships. The Balkans are dependent on agriculture for rural development, as the share of the total rural population is over 50% in Bosnia and Herzegovina, over 40% in Albania and Macedonia, over 30% in Serbia, and over 20% in Turkey and Montenegro. In addition, the employment rate in agriculture is over 50% in Bosnia and Herzegovina, almost 20% in Albania, Macedonia, and Montenegro, and around 9% in Turkey. Various actions and collaborations between governments, public and private institutions, and other stakeholders are needed in the Balkan region for rural development, social protection, trade, and harmonization of food quality and safety regulations (FAO, 2018; HLPF, 2017; IFAD, 2014). On the other hand, the Balkan governments have no tradition of constructive engagement with NGOs, and this hinders the support mechanisms made available by the EC. The ability of the agro-food sector in the Balkans to tap into regional and global markets requires policy consideration in several areas, including agricultural policies and programs, sanitary measures, and education and innovation systems (OECD, 2019).

19.5 Concluding remarks

From this chapter, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- The Balkan region is an area rich in traditional foods whose nutritional and hygienic status must be considered if these are to be marketed on a large scale.
- Globalization shifts the traditional foods from "products without commercial activity, regulatory systems and international trade agreements" to "regulated commodities based on national, European and international legislations." The outcomes of this transformation are the reduction of negative impacts of preventable diet-related noncommunicable diseases and the consumption of much more healthier foods throughout life.
- The Balkans need sustainable models and approaches in nutrition education and information to encourage positive nutrition behavior and help build healthy societies.
- The Balkan countries should strengthen their food systems governance and build a network of alliances with the agro-food sector, nonprofit organizations, academia,

food and health professionals, stakeholders, policy-makers, and social campaign makers all across the EU and the world.
- Balkan governments should make significant effort to harmonize local nutrition and food regulations with international law and regulations.
- Policymakers should take appropriate measures in national governance systems that encourage the promotion of traditional Balkan foods on regional and global markets.

Everything considered, the future of the Balkan diet and its nutritional and health aspects look bright and ready to face new challenges. The success rate will depend on the region future activities orientation in response to the needs of the EU, the world, and the Balkans itself.

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NUTRITIONAL AND HEALTH ASPECTS OF FOOD IN THE BALKANS

ELSEVIER TRADITIONAL AND ETHNIC FOOD SERIES

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Provides an analysis of traditional food from the Balkans.

Nutritional and Health Aspects of Food in the Balkans introduces and analyzes traditional foods from the Balkans. Beginning with the eating habits in Balkans, this book unfolds the history of use, origin, compositions and preparation, ingredient origin, nutritional aspects, and the effects on health for various foods and food products of the region. Nutritional and Health Aspects of Food in the Balkans also addresses local and international regulations and provides suggestions on how to harmonize these regulations to promote global availability of these foods.

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About the Editors

Dr. Dipl. Eng. Alina-Ioana Gostin, originally from Romania, is a lecturer at College of Food, University College Birmingham, UK, teaching in the areas of Food Science and Technology, Food Safety, Diet and Nutrition. Dr Gostin's research interests focus on technologies that improve quality and safety of foods. She is also the director of the Ambassador Programme of the Global Harmonization Initiative (GHI).

Dr. Diana Bogueva, originally from Bulgaria, is an Adjunct Postdoctoral Fellow with Curtin University Australia. She has a varied interest in food consumption issues related to global consequences of human nutritional habits, especially global meat consumption, behavioural and attitudinal change, climatic stability of food, world hunger, human health and environmental sustainability and food harmonization.

Dr. Vladimir Kakurinov is a Full Professor in Food Microbiology and Food Quality and Safety. He worked at the Faculty of Agricultural Sciences and Food, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University and the Veterinary Medicine Faculty at St. Kliment Ohridski University, both in Macedonia. Now, he is founder and Executive Director of Consulting and Training Centre KEY dealing with international projects.

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