

# Balkan Culinary Wars I: In a Ruthless Fight over a Greasy Snack

First published by Balkan Travellers, Sofia, 2009



*A dozen modifications of the same dish are at the bottom of a deep culinary dispute on the Balkans. The Bulgarian banitsa, the Serbian gibanica, the Greek pita, the Macedonian maznik and the Bosnian-Turkish börek are in constant competition over the hearts and stomachs of millions of heavy dough snack fans*

Not long ago, I went into a snack bar in central Sofia with a friend. We were the only customers and as soon as we approached the counter, the bored saleswomen greeted us:

“Would you like a banitsa or a börek?”

Because in Bulgaria the börek is not filled with meat as it is in Bosnia and Turkey, but rather – similarly to banitsa, it is made of phyllo sheets and cheese, I decided to clear up the confusion with the terms.

“And what exactly is the difference?” I asked.

The saleswoman looked at me, cheerfully, and said:

“There is no difference!”

“Then why ask?” – that was the first question that came to mind. But before I could utter it, it occurred to me that there was another, much more interesting conundrum at hand:

“Then how do you tell them apart?”

The cheerfulness in the saleswoman’s eyes turned into genuine regret. She had the expression of a mother who has just discovered that her child doesn’t know the alphabet at the end of the first grade and she was quick to disclose, very loudly, a fact that was apparently a secret only to me:

“Well, one is turned over, isn’t it!” she explained condescendingly.

“That’s good!” I noted. “So, when you run out of börek, you turn some banitsa over and then you have a bit of both again!”

My sense of humour was either not welcome or entirely missed, as it led to an explanation about how the whole thing was like with sweets – how in fact they are all sweets, made out of dough.

This conversation testifies not only for the complete chaos in culinary terminology on the Balkans but also for the reason for it – the similarity between the different cuisines of the people in the region. This proverbial similarity makes people ignore the differences. And Bacchus, without a doubt, is like the Devil – in the details.

In Turkey, whose cuisine supplied all the Balkan nations with inspiration, the börek is especially honoured – one is assured of that upon seeing the sign on the unique International Börek Centre in Istanbul. The word is used in reference to an assortment of stuffed phyllo pastries. The water börek, su böregi, is prepared by boiling the phyllo sheets before stuffing and baking them. Parsley is often added to the cheese and it seems that Turks are the most creative when it comes to vegetable stuffing. They use aubergines, nettle, zucchini and many spices, with which the rest of the Balkan countries traditionally have not had the courage and patience to experiment. Despite that, all the varieties are all called börek, and the type of stuffing is added as clarification.

Beside the water börek, other popular versions include the cigarette börek, sigara böregi –it has the shape of a cigar, and the triangular püf böregi.

The classic Bulgarian banitsa is made from pastry sheets of various thickness, sprinkled with yogurt and oil, wrapped around a stuffing made of cheese and eggs.

There are some variations, such as adding leek or spinach, or even cabbage or rice. They are still called banitsa, though rarely one can encounter names such as luchnik[ital], derived from the Bulgarian word for ‘onion’, and zelnik – from ‘cabbage’. A definite exception is the sweet banitsa with pumpkin and walnuts, known as tikvenik – from the word tikva, or ‘pumpkin’.

The introduction of mass eateries throughout Bulgaria dramatically simplified the traditional banitsa recipe by leaving out one of the four ingredients. The eggs were done away with (except,

sometimes, they are used in the phyllo preparation) and the feta cheese got substituted with cottage cheese.

The introduction of pre-made multi-sheet pastry confused things even more and any phyllo pastry stuffed with anything started going by the name of banitsa, as long as it wasn't croissant-shaped. It is difficult to say what the word börek stands for in Bulgaria, as each and every baker has an opinion on the issue. There are even internet forums, where confused people ask about the difference between banitsa and börek, without getting a proper answer. The consensus is that the börek is "richer."

The traditional Serbian dish is the gibanica. It is very similar to the Bulgarian banitsa – the phyllo sheets are prepared with eggs, the traditional stuffing consists of feta cheese, though it could also be made with onion, potatoes or spinach.

In Serbia, the word börek stands for a special pastry, the sheets of which are hand-made through tossing them up in the air. The stuffing could consist of meat, vegetables, leek or anything that one might also put in a Bulgarian banitsa.

A popular version is the round börek from Niš. Apparently, it has a history spanning over five centuries— approximately since the Ottoman Empire's conquest of the Balkans.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina the börek is very popular, but the word is used only in reference to phyllo stuffed with ground meat. Even though the bakeries, known as pekara, offer many kinds of pastries, they all have distinctive names – krompirusa for potato-stuffed pastry, zeljanica and sirnica for pastries stuffed with cabbage and cheese respectively.

In Greece the word börek is used in reference to small pastries. The cheese and egg variety is called tiropita (tiro means 'cheese') and the spinach one – spanakopita. Another version is the bougatsa, called Μπουγάτσα in Greek – in it, the phyllo sheets are not wrapped around but rather laid out horizontally, with the stuffing spread between them, like lasagna, and then baked. Other varieties are sweet – with a vanilla and egg cream, with cheese and with minced meat.

The bougatsa – whose name is related to the Bulgarian word pogacha and the Turkish boğaç, meaning a round loaf of bread, originated in the Thessaloniki region. Today, it is still sold there and in two other places in Greece – in Heraklion on Crete and in Kania. It is said that Armenian refugees from Asia Minor brought it to Heraklion.

*P.S. In Bulgaria, this dish is also called banitsa! Actually, in Bulgaria anything can be called banitsa – even the country itself. When media report on a redistribution of power between politicians, they metaphorically claim that the latter are "splitting the banitsa."*

# The man who loved American tripe: a Bulgarian story

Published by Latitude News, Boston, 2014

American tripe, he says, is the "Mercedes" of tripe.

"It is so white, so neat, so well cleaned and tasty." He speaks of it with warmth, with almost patriotic pride. Despite the fact he's Bulgarian.

61-year old Todor Traychev started his career as a pop singer in the 1980s, when Bulgaria was still under the spell of Russian socialism. Then, together with his wife, he was performing Nashville-style country music.

Today his entire life, including his music, is built on another American export: beef offal.

The United States has been the world's biggest exporter of offal (the insides of animals) for over a decade. According to the US Department of Agriculture offal is primarily used to make hot dogs, sausages and dog food. But supply significantly outstrips demand among American consumers.

American variety meats, as they are euphemistically known, are "more highly valued," according to the USDA, in foreign markets. China and South Korea are enthusiastic consumers of American tripe.

And so, until January 1 2007, was Bulgaria.

Since Bulgaria joined the European Union (EU), offal products imported from outside the EU are subject to quotas. Only a small quantity can come in at a lower duty rate. The rest becomes impossibly expensive. Good bye American tripe!

But even if it's not on sale any more in this southeastern European country, it certainly has not been forgotten.

Mariana and Todor Traychev were music stars in 1970s and the 1980s. But then they suddenly emigrated to the States. "It was for personal reasons," explains the singer today. There was another incentive too. Their country music, Traychev explains, was seen by the socialist government as dangerously Western.

In 1994, after spending a number of years in San Francisco, Todor Traychev returned to Bulgaria.

He came home without his wife but with 15 containers – or 300 tons – of American tripe "It was the quality and the price of this product in the States that gave me the idea," he says.



Bulgarians are dedicated consumers of tripe. They eat it in stews, in gelatin but most of all in shkembe chorba – a garlicky, spicy and vinegary soup. It is widely considered to be the mother of all cures for hangovers.

Traychev's business was launched at an open air concert entitled "Country Music and Garlic" in Bulgaria's capital, Sofia. The shkembe chorba was handed out to the crowds in bread bowls. It was an immediate success.

American tripe caused a revolution in Bulgaria's tripe industry. "When the customs officers opened the containers," remembers Traychev, "they couldn't believe their eyes. They had never seen tripe so neat, white and clean." Hygienic standards went up. New technology was introduced.

Today, Traychev has factories processing tripe for distribution to supermarkets around Bulgaria.

But he misses his American tripe. "It is the best one," he says, "I am so sorry it is not being imported anymore."

And he continues to be grateful. "It was with the income from my tripe business that I recorded the "Country and Garlic" CD as well as my daughter Teodora's solo releases and our duet album "I want to paint a portrait of you." It's all my golden songs, sung with a new voice and with new emotion".

Todor Traychev says his dream is to open a restaurant, a restaurant with country music, American beer and tripe. To some this combination may sound a bit bizarre. But to him it simply brings together all things nice and American.

His "Hot Toddy", the Bulgarian way.



Albena Shkodrova's background is in political journalism in Bulgarian and international media – amongst them RFE-Radio Liberty, Foreign Policy-Bulgaria, IWPR – London, and the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, of which she was head of the Bulgarian office.

Since 2004 Albena Shkodrova works as a travel-writer. She established the website BalkanTravellers.com and co-authored the book Hidden Treasures of Bulgaria (Collibri, 2006).

Since 2008 she is also the chief editor of Bacchus – a magazine on food, wine and travelling, published by EconoMedia. The magazine, which is an authority amongst gourmet and wine connoisseurs in Bulgaria, has also the reputation of an excellent reader and regularly publishes articles on history, anthropology, philosophy of wine and food, exploring Bulgarian and European food heritage.

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