

Contesting Gender Rights Over a Bowl of Tripe Soup: The Role of Shkembe Chorba as a Unifier of Classes and a Macho Symbol

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Raised in the last two decades of communist Bulgaria, I have no recollections of when I first tried tripe soup. It has always been around: spicy, steaming and pungent. *Shkembe chorba*¹ was never cooked at home. However, it was ubiquitous, offered all around the city by unpretentious, even by communist standards, specialized joints. These were places with reduced visibility: cigarette smoke and steam from the cauldrons would hang as a thick fog on cold days. There was also a sound cloud: music played on the radio on the wall, and chairs, dragged on the cement floor, made the background noise so high that people communicated with shouts.

Once in a while I ended up there — I loved the soup and these visits made me feel like an adult. I guess I found in *shkembedzhiynitsi*² some sort of freedom — a way to stick my tongue out to the suffocating society and imagine for a while that I am free to be different from what I am expected to be: a uniformed teenager with a hopeful gaze, steadily set on the horizon, because under communism only the sky is the limit. To that end, I preferred to be a garlic-reeking teenager. And I was not alone — many of my friends today recall frequenting *shkembedzhiynitsi* since secondary school. Growing up in the socially unified urban environment of communist Sofia, I associated tripe soup with specific social groups: weirdos and colourful personalities, workers and drunkards, bohemians and pariahs. But it never occurred to me it could have anything to do with gender.

So I clearly remember the shock, when I discovered that *shkembe chorba* might not be as gender-neutral as I thought. In 2004, I was on the road for a month in my capacity as travel-writer. One evening my male colleague and I entered a tiny restaurant in a tourist-free town in Central Turkey. Turks are Bulgarians' historical teachers in all things *ışkembe* and eating tripe soup in their country has always been a joy to the palate. When we realized they had it on the menu, we eagerly ordered. My colleague's portion arrived with the familiar shot of garlic and vinegar, mine without.

İşkembe çorbasi without garlic is like another dish. It is like ice cream that is not sweet. I asked for the spicy sauce. The two men in the restaurant did not understand English. They had been looking at me puzzled ever since I stepped in, and their bewilderment only grew. I tried in Bulgarian, as the shared rich gastronomic vocabulary, but that was to no avail. I tried sign language. They brought salt. Surprized that I was not understood — because when you are brought French fries without mayo, how difficult is to gather that you are asking for mayo? — I applied my drawing skills on a napkin. 'Aaaah, su-rum-sak!' exclaimed the two and stared

at me incredulously. They wouldn't have been more surprised if I had asked for strawberry syrup to add to my soup.

I realized that while they were already startled to see a woman entering their joint, my food choice challenged further their stereotypes. They had probably decided to scrap the garlic sauce in a kind attempt to adapt their 'male' food for me. My request must have been so incomprehensible because it was unexpected.

The incident stayed with me as an anecdote. I attributed it to the masculine dominance in contemporary Turkish culture. But then in a Bulgarian website I encountered the following quote:

The wife's castle, built of salads, stews and other half-foods has been destroyed. Clouds of garlic aromas announce a heavy adultery from the entrance hall. Her mother never told her that in men's world there is one great masterpiece. And it can be only cooked by other men. Tripe soup. Gay love is nothing, compared to one man preparing for another this hot and spicy enigma to slurp down [...] Women, women! How little you know of men! The makeup on their shirts, the lipstick on their underwear, another woman's Channel are all transient [...] But this repulsive to you 'soup' is a love for life. And your Waterloo. (Ilchevski, 2014)

Dismissing nonchalantly what I see as my inborn rights to enjoy garlicky tripe soup, peacefully coexisting with me feeling female, this quote raised the question what made Bulgarian men claim tripe soup as 'manly' food? What in this dish and the way we cook and eat it supported this claim? And what made it socially acceptable/possible? Acknowledging that food offers a peek into the 'kernel of the political relationships between sexes' (Cline 2000, p.3), one wonders if the situation reflects a change in gender perception in post-communist Bulgaria?

A growing body of research on the stereotypes of 'masculine' and 'feminine' foods reveals how cultural frameworks entangle dishes and ingredients in complex sets of meanings. One component of these stereotypes is the dominant idea of what constitutes 'masculinity' and 'femininity'. Different researches showed how 'masculinity' is associated with physical strength, inability (and lack of obligation) to control desires, potential for aggressiveness, roughness, lack of care regarding looks/presentation, adventurousness, as opposed to the feminine fragility, obligation of composure, modesty, restraint, tendency to care for the looks, insecurity (see the seminal work of Helgeson 1994 on stereotypical perceptions of 'feminine'

and ‘masculine’; Driessen’s 1983 research on masculinity in rural Andalusia; Cavazza et al. 2015 on the gender-based stereotypes about food).

Another component is the general or circumstantial relation of particular foods with these popular gender stereotypes. For example, Twigg (1979), Fiddes (1991), and Rozin et al. (2012), amongst others, suggested a link between the stereotypical expectation of men to be strong, and the attributed manliness, to red meat due to its prominent nutrition qualities. The studies of Reitz (2007) on espresso and Hirsch (2016) on hummus showed that not only the qualities of certain foods, but also the methods of their supply and preparation, and their consumption practices help to create associations with genders.

Another barely researched side to food stereotypes concerns the sexes’ inclination to associate themselves with qualities, seen to befit the other gender in the traditional stereotypes — and the influence of this on the status of foods. An example of this, in a certain sense, is Meigs study of Hua in New Guinea, where she quotes women become like men by consuming what is considered ‘male’ food to obtain ‘male’ physical qualities (Meigs 1984, quoted in Counihan 2005, p.7).

In this article I bring these three components of the formation of food stereotypes together and use them as a theoretical framework, observing the dynamic relation between them. I acknowledge that the noted stereotypes are ‘fuzzy categories organized around prototypes’ (Helgeson 1994, p.659) and focus on their fluidity.

Most studies until now have examined what ‘masculinity’ of foods consists of (Driessen 1983, Twigg 1979). Others explored how the ‘masculinity’ of foods was done or undone (Reitz 2007, Hirsch 2016). In my research I look more into how such stereotypical relation fluctuates. Using the case study of tripe soup in Bulgaria, this research broadens the understanding of how the different relevant elements of the cultural framework work together to associate and disassociate foods and sexes.

This article analyses the developments in the gender-related perceptions of tripe-soup in Bulgaria since the end of the nineteenth century. Using close reading of historical sources, I follow the developments in the decades of communism and seek the roots of what seems to be a growing contestation between sexes over the gender status of *shkembe chorba*. Fiction and non-fiction writing and cookbooks from the period are used to build the historical perspective. The contemporary discourses are studied on the basis of online writings in Bulgarian, available at the time of this research³ on the Internet. 30 online publications out of the 100 most popular search results with the key word ‘tripe-soup’ proved to be relevant by discussing the status of the dish in a variation of ways: directly, or by descriptions, notes, offered contexts. They vary from (relatively popular) private blogs to national media (like bTV, e-vesting, Peak, Blitz.bg), the sites of chefs (Ivan Zvezdev), journalists and writers (Hristo

Kyosev, Milena Fuchedzhieva). Those dated are mostly posted between 2012 and 2017.

The study is grounded in the assumption that gender is contextual and relational (Julier and Lindenfeld 2005, p. 4). When subjecting the sources to close reading, my attention is on describing the ‘arena’, as grounded theorist Clarke (2009) termed it, and its evolution.

Like coffee, like hummus

Compared to other foods which are considered ‘manly’ in various cultural frameworks, tripe soup has good potential to symbolize what Barthes calls the ‘primitive force of nature’ (Barthes 1991, p. 113). It is made by a product on the verge between acceptance and aversion, calling for adventurousness. It is cooked and consumed mainly in restaurants, on the road, in rough places, which are clearly separated from domesticity. It is related to excessive drinking, and it is inelegant: it is spicy, reeking of garlic, and allegedly tastier when it is made of not particularly well-cleaned pieces of tripe.

Until the development of modern urban culture by the end of the nineteenth century, tripe was not widely consumed in Bulgaria. There was evidence that it was considered leftovers and was used mainly by the poor population — and not necessarily as food. Bulgarian writer Zahari Stoyanov (1985) described the poor population stretching animal stomachs on their windows instead of glass panes, which they could not afford. The autobiographical writing of another writer, Pavel Vezhinov suggests that the situation persisted in the countryside in the 1920s, when the guts and stomachs of cattle were nonchalantly discarded by butchers in the gutters. ‘We only had to find and catch them in time in the dirty, reeking water. We did that with iron hooks or just with hands.’ Vezhinov (1977, p. 231) recalls his playmates taking the catch home by buckets:

They didn’t eat it, of course, although I am not sure about that. Their mothers would boil it, mince it, and feed it to the hens. Never did I see again as strong and well-fed hens as those from my neighbourhood. Rancorous from the food, the local cocks grew martial.⁴

However, by the end of the nineteenth century tripe soup must have been on the rise in the bigger Bulgarian towns, where it was borrowed from Istanbul. The then capital of the Ottoman Empire occupied a special place in the hearts of Bulgarians. By the 1870s a significant, wealthy Bulgarian minority lived there and the city was a trendsetter. Bulgarians would call it ‘Tsarigrad’⁵, as if to legitimize certain emotional and cultural (and even territorial) claims. Istanbul’s deep influence on Bulgarian foodways is evident from the first known Bulgarian cookbook, composed of recipes ‘as they are cooked in Tsarigrad’ (Slaveykov, 1870). Ironizing the hedonistic

horizons of Bulgarians of those times, writer Karavelov listed drinking of rose *rakia*⁶ in Kazunluk, visiting of the public house of Mme Klain in Belgrade and eating *işkembe çorbası* in Istanbul as important landmarks in their cartography of pleasures (Karavelov 1973, first edition 1876, p. 3).

Even if Bulgaria gained independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1878, Istanbul's foodways were borrowed, and *shkembedzhiynitsi*, quite literally copied from the Turkish *işkembe salonu*, were omnipresent in Sofia between the World Wars (Tenev 1977). During communism they were not particularly valued and the centralized urban planning administration gradually marginalizes them, pushing them towards the outskirts of the town and associating them with railroad and bus stations, highways and industrial areas. However, through the entire century up to the 1990s tripe-soup was consumed mainly in *shkembedzhiynitsi*, some of them acquiring mythical status amongst the bohemian intelligentsia.

One of the reasons *shkembe chorba* was kept out of domestic kitchens was the laborious cleaning procedure of the tripe and the long cooking process. The stomach lining was usually subjected to manual scrubbing, involving industrial lime, and then was left cooking for hours, extruding strong and heavy aromas.⁷

Another reason was the popular conviction that tripe soup is the tastiest when it is cooked in large quantities — which allows for obtaining rich bouillon from a range of meat cuts. Former restaurant professionals recently recalled the popularity of this theory (Shkodrova 2014, p. 222). The connection between 'outside' and 'masculinity' as opposed to 'inside' and 'femininity' is well illustrated by other studied examples of gender-loaded foods, such as coffee (Reitz 2007, p. 11), hummus (Hirsch 2016), and hard alcohol (Driessen 1992).

Another trait of tripe-soup, which could be seen as 'manly', is its association with excessive drinking. As both old and contemporary sources suggest, Bulgarians consider it an excellent cure against hangovers. Some rate it amongst the three best means for recovery after heavy drinking, together with the juices of homemade sour cabbage and ayran⁸ (little.bg). One blogger even calls it 'the brother of beer' (Yaneva 2012). Hard alcohol and excessive drinking are often associated with manliness. As Driessen claimed, 'it is considered masculine to get drunk once in a while' (Driessen 1992, p. 129).

Yet another potentially 'manly' feature is the inelegancy of tripe soup, the 'improperness' of which has several aspects. Tripe is a controversial foodstuff in most European cultures. It is, as psychologist Rozin calls it, 'the trauma of tripe' (Rozin, 2018). In Bulgaria it has always been considered food that is either loved or adored, but leaves no one indifferent (Kyosev 2011, gozbata.com).

Its texture is also often found problematic. One popular joke, which dates at least from the 1970s, goes:

A customer stands before the cauldron with soup and waits for the cook to cut his meat. They chat, but suddenly the client notices that the cook has absentmindedly started chopping the kitchen towel. 'Yo, chef, why are you mincing this rag?' Startled, the cook looks at his hands and quickly shouts back: 'What? Do you want me to mince you a Persian carpet for 20 *stotinki*?'

Noting the resemblance of tripe with terrycloth, folklore also claims it is tastiest when cooked not entirely cleaned. The idea that a bit of dirt is what makes the taste great runs through numerous jokes. Some involve the sultan, others the Bulgarian monarch, but the plot remains the same. Hoping to learn the secret of a particularly good tripe soup, the sovereign accounts for the practice of his own chef before the knowledgeable cook. When he reaches the moment of scrubbing, the cook exclaims: 'Stop! Here is the mistake! Never wash the tripe too well!' Even if this claim is not entirely serious, it is found in Internet posts. One guide to *shkembedzhiynitsi* comments that the tripe soup at Hassan's place is so good, because it is 'slightly greasy and not too clean' (Taynite mesta ...).

The usual way of consuming tripe soup is also inelegant. Routinely served in metal bowls, it is spicy, hot and garlicky. It involves slurping, causes running noses and provides for long-lasting garlicky breath, which could obscure even a serious dab of 'Opium'.

Elegance is related to the idea of 'feminine', just as roughness is to 'masculine'. For example, the inelegant consumption of hummus — using broad movements with hands to wipe it from the plate with a piece of pita-bread, is found to be one of the considerations for women's abstention from eating hummus in Israeli *hummusiyot* (Hirsch 2016, p. 348).

The contradiction of tripe-soup consumption with popular standards of female elegance and attraction is identified by some contemporary sources. 'Every gal could eat a banana erotically but try slurping down tripe soup in a sexy way!', reads a joke on one of the popular websites for *vicove*¹⁰ (vicove.biz).

Another aspect, which can be seen as facilitating the idea of 'manliness' is the location of *shkembedzhiynitsi*. Since the 1960s they have been gradually moved out of the centres of cities to the rougher urban (and non-urban) zones, related to physical work and being on the road. The four online guides to the best tripe soup joints offer an interesting illustration of the cultural significance of this: the ways in which they choose to describe and name the locations of the restaurants, suggest a strong contemporary inclination to present tripe-soup eating as an adventurous, rough experience. Train and bus stations, factories, highways are often referenced to indicate the location. Instead of quoting the address, the publications cite the proximity to places such as graveyards, public lavatories, petrol stations, ports, train stations, police stations, 'the

Roma neighbourhood' (littlebg.com, Kyosev 2011, Nay-dobrite 2014).

All these aspects of *shkembe chorba*: its non-domestic history, its relation to excessive drinking of alcohol, the inelegance of preparation and consumption, the controversially aversive nature of its main ingredient and its relation to the rough side of life seem to ensure the perception of this food as 'manly'. Yet according to historical sources, my own recollections and contemporary evidence, until 1989 it was not perceived as such, or at least such perspective was rather subdued. Writer Tenev (1977, pp. 285-289) recalls that in the 1930s *shkembedzhynitsi* were trendy places, regularly visited by upper-class bohemians. The most popular *shkembedzhynitsa*, Damarche, 'opened as early as at four am and often at this hour there were found ladies in long gowns and men in tailcoats and tuxedos, who thought it was supremely chic to gulp down a bowl of *shkembe* after a ball'.

Did communism prevent, or facilitate the 'masculinisation' of *shkembe chorba*?

Communism modified this fashion. Several changes affected the status of tripe soup between 1944 and 1989. One of them was the radical social rearrangement, which eradicated the upper classes and their lifestyle and brought rapid urbanization. Between 1946 and 1995 the urban population grew from 24.7 to 64.8 percent (Yearly Statistics Book 1993, p. 47). The *shkembedzhynitsi*'s customers changed: the swelling working class replaced the upper-class bohemians, at least until a new upper middle class was formed within the new state in the 1960s. Notably, both the new working class and the intelligentsia of the communist state were comprised equally of both men and women.

Another change was caused by urban planning. In many cities the communist authorities developed ambitious plans to adapt the city centres to communist modernity. Old neighbourhoods were destroyed to make way for new public buildings and commercial zones were restructured to reflect the interests of the non-market economy (Shkodrova 2014, pp. 99-100). In this process many *shkembedzhynitsi* in the centres were closed and, without being specifically targeted, were practically marginalized. The state statistics did not keep a separate track of the number of the tripe soup joints, but in the 1970s did include an account of the eating places in *shkembedzhynitsi*: they dropped four times between 1970 and 1978: from 1952 establishments to 552.

The new political establishment had an ambivalent and controversial attitude towards tripe soup and *shkembedzhynitsi*. While it strove to build a culture which would come across as modern and non-Oriental, it had very simple tastes in food and *shkembe* remained on the menu for many of its representatives (Shkodrova 2014, pp. 245-251).

Another interesting change was that the very low prices in *shkembedzhynitsi* attracted political pariahs, who sometimes literally survived on tripe soup. Dissident writer Georgi Markov wrote of a friend, who for political reasons was forced to exist with no financial means, who found salvation in the cheap and nutritious *shkembe chorba*, which he ate three times a day for two months in a row (Markov 1980). Such cases became quickly known to the small society of Sofia and added charm to *shkembedzhynitsi* in the eyes of the intellectual elite, many representatives of which opposed the oppressive system and its provincial spirit, even if they were pampered by it. Painters, writers and other intellectuals recall the tripe soup joints as alternative places of freedom (Bern 2011, Krusteva 2008).

This freedom-related perception strengthened the already existent idea of *shkembedzhynitsi* as places where real, rough, slightly dangerous and colourful life was taking place. To the intellectuals, the lure of political trespassing was added to the charms of social transgression. The latter seems to be quite similar to the 'persistent cross-cultural story of the seduction of the streets among denizens of bourgeois parlours', which Ray (2018, p.90) observed regarding street food in India.

In Bulgaria an entire generation was raised with this idea. Not only men, but also women ventured to seek their small cultural and social rebellions on the border of the accepted, which *shkembedzhynitsi* represented. The analysed online publications show evidence of this. In one of them the journalist and writer Milena Fuchedzhieva transports her experience from Sofia in the 1980s to contemporary Los Angeles:

I recalled that in the Mexican market in downtown LA a joint prepared delicious menudo, i.e., tripe soup. With no delay I called my friends, with whom we had partied the previous night, and we rushed towards the tripe. (Fuchedzhieva 2007)

The communist concept of feminism must have played a role in the process. The regime employed the entire active female population and aimed at obliterating the different types of gendered work. As Markov (1978) noted, it often even tried to ignore the physiological differences between sexes. Concerning the history of tripe soup in Bulgaria, this meant that both male and female cooks prepared it, and both male and female customers consumed it, as women were quite equally represented in both the groups who comprised the *shkembedzhynitsi*'s regular visitors: workers and intellectuals.

The claim that only men prepare tripe soup is historically untrue. Contrary evidence is apparent in the online publications. One author claims that she herself cooked tripe soup in a professional kitchen, after learning the method from another experienced female cook. 'She always prepared *shkembe* for the personnel, cooked in a giant cauldron', and according to the recollections of the

author, was ‘washing’ it just like dirty linen before cutting it into the pot (Shkembe chorba, 2015).

Towards unifying the classes and dividing the sexes

In the post-communist liminality after 1989, social pressure on women to be employed ceased. However, inertia, economic pressure and other factors preserved the parity between men and women on the labour market (The Worlds’ Women 2015, p. 91).

In this period one event affected significantly the status of the tripe soup: the introduction of cleaned, semi-prepared tripe, which is now available in the supermarkets frozen or vacuum packed, of local or foreign origin. As contemporary sources suggest, this innovation facilitated the rapid domestication of the dish. From dirty, stinky and laborious, domestic cooking of tripe-soup became possible ‘in 5 minutes’ (Shkembe chorba in 5 minutes).¹¹ As the case studies of hummus (Hirsch 2016, p. 345) and coffee (Reitz 2007, p. 11) suggest, such domestication has been responsible for weakening or neutralizing the perceived ‘masculinity’ of foods.

Another change, which is of importance to the process, is that from 1989 more and more restaurants started adding tripe soup to their menu, allowing its consumption to take place in an environment less rough than the one of *shkembedzhiynitsi*.

The current discourse on masculinity and femininity, transpiring around the gender association of tripe soup, reveals significant controversies around its status and suggests that it is being renegotiated. At least two dispositions are in place. One of them appears to hold to the cultural heritage of the previous decades, restraining from charging the dish with (explicit) gender bias. The other is expressed in contestations for power between genders over the right to see *shkembe chorba* as ‘manly’.

A variety of publications are associated with the first of these dispositions, which frame tripe soup as a unifier of the nation. ‘There is hardly anyone, who would refuse a warm tripe soup. I am sure it is prepared in every Bulgarian family,’ announces a female blogger (Shkembe chorba with milk). Another culinary site presents the *shkembe chorba* as eaten ‘by 90% of the population’ (Shkembe chorba – classic). The celebrated chef Ivan Zvezdev (2013) similarly declares the dish ‘the most loved by Bulgarians soup’. Journalist Kyosev (2011) is even more extreme, stating that ‘before tripe soup, we are all equal!’

The potential for transgression of social borders, offered by *shkembe chorba*, is particularly admired by some authors. ‘It is eaten with equal gusto by bankers and deputies, by teachers and writers, by drivers and workers’, announces Kyosev. Ilchevski (2014) similarly states:

I know a pack of lawyers, bankers, accountants, policemen, musicians, administrators and other freely employed people, who search the town, rush from

one place with *shkembe* on the menu to the other and trade discoveries like spies on enemy’s territory.

Another publication conveys the same message by describing the range of cars, found in front of a *shkembedzhiynitsa*: from old Soviet classics to the brands symbolic for the nouveau riche: ‘Moskviches, Trabants, Mercedes, luxurious Jeeps’ (littlebg.com).

However, while many publications enthusiastically and explicitly mention tripe soup as a unifier of classes, professional groups or political wings, they omit mention of the sexes.

At the same time, the idea of *shkembe chorba* as a dish both cooked and consumed exclusively by men is seemingly under construction. While culinary blogs by amateur male cooks are quite exceptional in Bulgaria, one of the prominently featured recipes for tripe soup is presented by a father and his two sons. (Shkembe chorba in 5 minutes).

Furthermore, the exclusivity of the rituals relating to tripe soup is strengthened by their association with other male-dominated fields of public life, such as politics and football:

The *shkembe* fans argue over its preparation methods with the same passion, with which politicians defend their self-stirred up mess. (...) Of *shkembe*-chefs one speaks with such garlicky-peppery outflows, as he would discuss football stars on the stadium (Ilchevski 2014).

Also, in post-communist commentary there is a sarcastic tone to discussion surrounding women’s relationship to tripe soup. One of the published online jokes builds what apparently is seen as oxymoron: ‘This morning I passed by a *shkembe* eatery and the queue of women was enormous!’ (vizove.biz).

Women, just as much as men, appear to be divided over the status of tripe soup and some of them actively strengthen the stereotypical gender division. Some explicitly pronounce it to be ‘the favourite dish of many men’ (Stoyanova 2012), others express their disliking for it: ‘We, the ladies, do not particularly like this soup, we prefer chicken or potato cream soup, believe me’ (Yaneva 2012).

But there are also quite radical claims of women’s rights over tripe soup. One post is challengingly titled ‘Tripe soup for every woman’. Its female author praises the ‘detoxing’ and hangover healing powers of *shkembe chorba* and makes a claim that the division runs not between sexes, but between ‘cool’ and ‘uncool’. She quotes a line from the lyrics of a popular song by Upsurt, which reads ‘Only barracudas hate tripe and beer’ (Yaneva 2012). This attitude is shared by many authors both male and female. Kyosev (2011) in the same vein writes:

We should just note that the soul of a non-eater of tripe soup is dried and shrunken, his virtuous pose of sobriety is a cover for some nameless and disgusting practice, I hope Steinbeck will forgive me.¹²

Such claims may be read in the light of less explicit commentary, where women write of tripe soup as their

favourite dish and praise its powers to heal a hangover. Some of these women, quite exceptionally, also present it as a family meal, explicitly commenting on the children ‘who wouldn’t eat the tripe itself, but liked very much the rest’ (Angelova 2014).

A contest with a slightly different dynamic seems to be playing out over who has the authority to cook tripe soup, fuelled mostly by the growing tendency to cook *shkembe chorba* at home. There, on the one hand, women seem to feel more certain in their rights, as they claim authority over cooking a soup that their partner or friends like. ‘Every real lady needs to know how to cook tripe-soup!’, as the title of one article reads (Stoyanova 2012).

On the other hand, here too men appear to claim authority. Sometimes it is directly expressed, like in the quote from Ilchevski cited previously, about this being ‘your Waterloo’. Other examples consist of recipes written by men which claim ultimate authority over how tripe soup should be cooked — emphasizing the elements, that appear to be associated with ‘manliness’ and dismissing others, that might be interpreted as frivolous femininity. ‘I’ve been reading recipes and I could no longer stand it. Tripe with yogurt and eggs. And with flour and other rubbish. First let’s make clear when tripe soup is eaten in our lands. WHEN A CALF IS BEING SLAUGHTERED’, reads a recipe by Angelov (n.d.). In the same strong language, he dismisses the domestication of tripe-soup cooking: if not in restaurants, it needs to take place in a cauldron and on a real wood fire. The cooking period is measured in ‘one cigarette time’, the salt comes in ‘handfuls’, and the tripe is chopped with a chopper on a beech block.

While some men try to disassociate tripe soup from its domestication, some women similarly try to remove some of its connection to ‘manliness’. ‘I don’t drink, but I adore tripe soup’, remarks a woman in a comment under a post for a tripe soup recipe (Lussy 2014).

Conclusion

This case study shows that tripe soup has always been a strong divider in Bulgaria — a dish that is loved or hated. For a long time, the division ran primarily between social groups: poor versus rich, urban versus rural, pariahs and workers versus the burger culture of the middle class. But today these divisions have almost vanished and *shkembe chorba* is seen as unifying social classes. However, replacing the old divide there appears to be a new one, one between the sexes. A (contested) trend is under way to turn tripe soup from a symbol of social marginalization into a symbol of macho power.

Current research outlines the different components that are involved in the construction of gender(ed) food stereotypes. One is the perception of what constitutes masculinity and femininity in general: what are their ‘ingredients’, to use the term of Cavazza et al. 2015. Another is how foods are seen to represent these ‘ingredients’. But as gender is not something that one is,

but something that one does (West and Zimmerman 1987, quoted by Hirsch 2016,

342), the inclination of sexes to associate or disassociate themselves from these sex signifiers also plays a role.

This case study provides excellent illustrations how the ‘manliness’ of a dish, associated with many ‘ingredients’ denoting masculinity, remained muted due to fashion, ideology, economic circumstances and similar social motivators. Probyn (2000) and Hirsch (2016) argued that consuming food is never merely expressive of our social identities; it may also participate in the construction of identity, by playing at being other than ourselves (Hirsch, 2016, p. 339). Ray similarly observed middle-class Indian women’s consumption of paan and tobacco as a ‘marker of both female autonomy and of courtesan sensuality’ (Ray, 2018, p. 96).

In this case study the fluctuations in the gender status of tripe soup reflect shifts in the acceptability of women’s association with ‘masculine’, rather than changes in the perceptions of what constitutes ‘feminine’ or ‘masculine’. Bulgarian women, those gaining emancipation between the two world wars, and those ‘Amazonian’ ones raised in the communist ideology, as well as men in these periods, seem to have minded less about being associated with masculinity than the post-communist Bulgarian society, which rejected the values of communism and faced a new (and unhurried) discussion on the relationship between sexes.

Both this study and previous studies on gendered foods suggest that of the three components listed above, the stereotypical perception of ‘manly’ or ‘feminine’ is conservative and has been preserved for centuries. It is the actual foods, the method of their production, the practice of their consumption, and the acceptance of a degree of masculinity as part of the female identity, that seem to be more dynamic and the cause of fluctuations in the symbolism of gendered foods.

Indeed, the battle between domesticating the *tripe soup* in Bulgaria, or leaving it as an adventurous experience, the contest to frame it as exclusively manly or as unifying the sexes is in fact a part of the public debate on gender after the end of communism.

About the author

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Notes

1. The Bulgarian name of tripe soup, deriving from the Turkish *işkembe çorbası*.
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2. The popular name for the Bulgarian tripe-soup joints.
3. September 2017–January 2018.
4. Here and further the translation from Bulgarian sources to English is mine.
5. The city of the tsar.
6. A type of hard spirit drink, made via distillation from grapes, plums or other fruit, or, in the exceptional quoted case — from the petals of Bulgarian oil roses.
7. This is a popular claim, which also can be found in some of the researched online publications. It is also formulated by the celebrity chef Zvezdev (2013).
8. Ayran is a salty drink made of cold water and yogurt, quite resembling the Indian lassi.
9. Bulgarian currency, currently equivalent to about 0.1 euro.
10. Vicove is a popular genre of jokes, which are disseminated mostly orally. It flourished under communism, when jokes with explicit or implicit political connotation were exchanged at most informal social gatherings in great numbers. Vicove continued to live after the end of communism, now often distributed in written form via internet.
11. The claim concerning how easy it is now to make tripe soup at home runs through most of the culinary advice analysed for this article.
12. Kyosev has borrowed the sentence from John Steinbeck's *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*, 1941 (Penguin Books).

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