

# Dining in Utopia: A Taste of the Bulgarian Black Sea Coast under Socialism

**Abstract:** This article explores the ways in which the Bulgarian socialist regime integrated a newly elaborated culture of food and drink into its promises for the “good life” and a utopian future. With a focus on Black Sea coast tourism, it argues that the development of more refined food and drink offerings and public dining venues played a dual role of shaping and serving a modern socialist citizenry. With tourism as a major engine of the Bulgarian economy, catering to Bulgarian, Bloc, and Western tourists meant that creating a gastronomic utopia by the sea was part and parcel of “building” and showcasing socialism. This was intimately tied to

bolstering state legitimacy through the provision of leisure and abundance, but also to a newly minted Bulgarian national cuisine. By the late 1970s and 1980s, however, the Black Sea tourist phenomenon both exhibited and exacerbated the problem of growing shortages and hence the deep crisis of the system, which collapsed in 1989.

**Keywords:** Bulgaria, socialism, tourism, consumption, national cuisine

I RECENTLY HAPPENED UPON A rather curious artifact from late socialist Bulgaria, an English-language travelogue and cookbook entitled *Bulgarian Temptations: 33 Illustrated Culinary Journeys with Recipes* (Markov 1981). Written by Bulgarian author and apparent food enthusiast Emil Markov, with German and French editions, the book was clearly produced for “Western” tourist consumption. In its foreword, Markov describes the extraordinary efforts behind its creation, namely his six-year “expedition” by land and by sea, funded by Balkanturist, the Bulgarian state tourist agency under socialism (3). Markov’s lush descriptions of food, wine, landscape, culture, and history are accompanied by recommendations drawn from a bounty of restaurants, from the more posh state-sponsored restaurants to out-of-the-way inns, open-air markets, or locals who could provide a good spread to those passing through. His intimate musings and recipes are interspersed with extravagantly staged photographs taken by “Vlado,” his companion on this culinary odyssey. Vlado’s images are quite remarkable, featuring tables laden with elegantly arranged dishes and bottles of wine, or more rustic offerings with picturesque backgrounds. Predating the now televised culinary excursions of the Food Network’s army of traveler-chefs and food connoisseurs, *Bulgarian Temptations* was indeed unusual for its time and place. It painted a picture of late socialist Bulgaria as a kind of culinary utopia, modern in its bounty and infrastructure

and yet an exotic cornucopia of unspoiled local color and flavor. But *Bulgarian Temptations* obscures as much as it reveals about the culinary landscape of late socialism, in and beyond tourist offerings.

Tourists and travelers inevitably evaluate the lands they explore—foreign or “native”—through food and drink. Ingredients, unique flavor combinations, recipes, arrangements, points of etiquette, and settings evoke some of the most vivid pleasures or anxieties in the travel experience. Food is one of the most elemental and intimate means of exploring the “other,” with both geographic and temporal implications. As Lucy Long (2004: 2) argues, one of the primary impulses of the tourist experiencing local cuisine is the search for authenticity, for a real encounter with the local, an entrée into “exotic” places and times. This, as many have argued, has been associated with “colonial” impulses to dominate, define, or “consume” other cultures (Mintz 1985). To be sure, travelers and tourists have long experienced and assessed the “other” through food and drink experiences that sated the desire for pleasure, but also shocked and awed. Tantalizing, but also repugnant, descriptions of “backward” food practices have colored the pages of travel literature on the Balkans, as part of the larger “Orient,” for centuries.<sup>1</sup>

But since the nineteenth century, Bulgarians have also penned their own travelogues as correctives to foreign images

of their reputed backwardness.<sup>2</sup> Bulgarian writers, as well as ethnographers, have been part of the more global project of mapping the contours of regional differences in food and drink. This cataloging of the ingredients of regional foodways, as in other contexts, provided the groundwork for the creation of a national cuisine.<sup>3</sup> And yet only in the postwar era, under socialism, did a range of cookbooks, magazine writings, and restaurant menus begin to codify and standardize Bulgarian cuisine for both foreign and domestic consumption. This happened in tandem with Bulgaria's emergence as a southerly tourist destination, initially solely for Eastern Bloc guests. By the late 1950 and 1960s, however, the Bulgarian tourist industry made concerted efforts to attract travelers from the West, especially to the golden sands of its Black Sea coast. Western tourists came in ever greater numbers in the 1960s and 1970s, no longer for a taste of the "Orient" but rather for a beach vacation and a glimpse of another world (and its food)—the communist East.

Balkanturist played a critical role in the process of shaping and representing Bulgarian foodways under socialism, for both foreign and local consumption. For the Bulgarian tourist industry, the creation and marketing of a leisure utopia, with the necessary culinary accouterments, was undoubtedly part and parcel of building and showcasing socialism. Bulgaria's Black Sea coast had the potential to epitomize—or perhaps even replace—that utopia, and not just for deserving Bulgarians and Bloc citizens, who were expected to become modern via participation in and consumption of the newly minted socialist "good life," but also for foreigners from East and West who came to bear witness to this slice of socialist paradise by the sea. In many respects, Balkanturist did a remarkable job of creating and marketing an extraordinary range of culinary experiences under socialism. This included the invention and embrace of a national cuisine that was tied to late socialist efforts at creating a utopian "good life." Notably this utopia went beyond the ever more sleek and modern "global" standards, which were increasingly hard to provide. Instead the tourist industry tapped into tourist desires for the "authentic" and local, which echoed a growing nostalgia for the past in the face of communist modernization. This turn to the national bolstered state efforts to divert or replace the promised communist utopia, which by the late 1970s seemed ever more distant, with a culinary dreamland of flavor and ambiance.

## The Path to Plenty

In the wake of the communist collapse, it is tempting to look back at this period as one of shortages, inefficiencies, inertia, and failures. It is true, of course, that command economies like

the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc faced major challenges in terms of producing, and especially distributing, adequate consumer goods, including food. In her well-known memoir *How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed*, Slavenka Drakulic (1993: 16) describes a "hundred-ways potato party" in the Bulgarian capital, Sofia, in the 1980s. Drakulic, a Yugoslav, was rather shocked by the shortages, which had compelled her Bulgarian friends to get creative in their use of spuds. Shortages and empty shelves were common by the 1980s, in part because of hoarding and pilfering. When supplies became scarce, Bulgarians, like the Soviets and their Eastern Bloc neighbors, famously "made do," procuring food through personal connections, black market networks, and real farm-to-table practices—like Grandma's fresh produce, which was cultivated in village plots, harvested, and canned for the winter (Brunnbauer and Taylor 2012: 503). In general, the citizens of socialist Eastern Europe did not go hungry.<sup>4</sup>

In fact, postwar Eastern Europe was able to feed its populations as never before. On the Soviet model, communist regimes collectivized agriculture and rapidly mechanized food production across the region. For Bulgaria, as for much of the region, these initiatives brought a dramatic increase in the standard of living for all but a small number of former elites (Cocheva 1965; Lampe 1986: 177, 192). State-subsidized food was an integral part of these socialist states' implicit "social contract" with their citizens (Cook 1993). Adequately feeding the new socialist man and woman was a state priority—in part, to optimize their labor performance—and Bulgarian scientists painstakingly tracked the rise in caloric intake, which they claimed exceeded daily requirements for all citizens by 1962 (Petrov et al. 1978: 7). Even Western observers were keenly aware that socialism as a system was feeding its populations more amply and evenly. As noted in a *Life* magazine story on Bulgaria from 1966, "There is more butter, a lot more butter, and it is spread more evenly" (Farmer 1966: 132).

Of course, the Bulgarian state was part of a much larger international socialist project to create a utopian future for the working classes of the Soviet Bloc. From the get-go this project entailed elaborate trade networks to feed and supply the socialist world, outside of purportedly predatory capitalist trade networks. Bulgaria became an important supplier of raw and processed food products to Eastern Bloc as well as global socialist trade networks. In a sense, a kind of self-contained, parallel socialist "global" food system emerged, albeit a porous one, which developed its own food chains with various global partners. If Bulgaria did not have many other consumer goods that could be traded on the Bloc and the world markets, its food and drink were widely desirable. But Bulgaria could also

offer its “socialist brothers” vacations at its lovely Black Sea shores. And of course leisure was as central as work to the communist model of creating a “new man”—whose capacity to work was as dependent on rest as on food. Socialist regimes were committed to providing state-subsidized leisure spaces and activities as an engine for regeneration (Gorsuch and Koenker 2006; Koenker 2013). Nowhere in the Eastern Bloc was tourism more central to the state economy than in Bulgaria (Ghodsee 2005).<sup>5</sup> For Bulgaria, tourism was a key bargaining chip in inter-Bloc trade, and hence a critical factor in “building socialism.”

The state tourism monopoly was formed as early as 1948 on the Soviet Intourist model. Later named Balkanturist, it was responsible for everything from hotels, restaurants, and spas to campsites and trails across Bulgaria. The memoirs of Petür Doichev, entitled *Zhivot, ot daden na turizma* (A life devoted to tourism), provide a fascinating view of the inner workings of the agency. Doichev was a longtime veteran of Balkanturist, working in a range of capacities, from chef and waiter to hotel director, on the Black Sea coast from its earliest days in 1948 until the bitter end of communism. He was working at the famous Palma Café in the Black Sea port city of Varna when it was nationalized by the state in 1944. Armed with knowledge and contacts within the Bulgarian culinary world, Doichev was intimately involved in the development of the tourist industry in and beyond Varna. Varna was the obvious choice for Balkanturist’s initial investments on the Black Sea, as it had been a favored tourist destination for the privileged few in the interwar period.<sup>6</sup> An assortment of small guest houses, cafés, restaurants, and jazz clubs appeared in the years between the world wars, providing at least a kernel of tourist infrastructure adjacent to Varna’s sandy beaches and calm and gradually deepening seas.

The new tourist agency was first put to the test in the summer of 1948, tasked with welcoming eight hundred tourists to Varna from socialist Czechoslovakia. The vacations were apparently compensation for the postwar nationalization of a number of Czech-owned factories. Needless to say, with only two hotels, one restaurant, and one café, Balkanturist was hard-pressed to house and feed even this modest group of visitors when they arrived by train that summer (Doichev 1994: 10). As detailed by Doichev, he and his comrades commandeered a large number of horse- and donkey-drawn carts as well as Soviet flatbed military trucks to transport the guests and the needed supplies to a prearranged network of private homes. The host families were provided with the extra food, bedding, and supplies needed to board the foreign guests in this time of serious shortages. The Czech tourists were served simple “mixed salads” and *rakia* (plum brandy) in the homes

of these local families, and fed in small, old-style local restaurants. Fortunately they had not arrived with high expectations, so the Bulgarians’ modest hospitality seemed to suffice (20).

Over the course of the next year, Doichev and his fellow “apostles of tourism” worked as “volunteers” after-hours to build a new hotel and restaurant on the sands of the Varna city beach. By the next summer, the Hotel Roza was up and running, with the Chernomorets (Black Sea) restaurant, overseen by chef Mitko Iordanov, a patriarch of Bulgaria’s modest culinary scene (27). Over the next decade, the Roza provided Black Sea vacations to Czechs and Slovaks, as well as Poles, East Germans, Soviets, and other Bloc citizens, offering chef-prepared cuisine along with other amenities. It was not until 1952 that Bulgarians also began to stay at the Roza, although some presumably had found accommodations elsewhere in the intervening years. Emil Markov, for example, notes in *Bulgarian Temptations* that he had “not missed a Varna summer since 1948.” Varna, in his description, beckoned visitors with its “clear water, in which there were no sea weeds, no sharks, no prickly inhabitants of the sea, no poisonous fishes,” as well as its nearby mineral springs, its dense forests, and of course its “gastronomic variety”—from roasted lamb to baked mussels, ice cream with apricots, and tastings in local wine cellars (Markov 1981: 216–17). The diversity of restaurants and culinary experiences that Markov describes in his 1981 book were still to come, but even in the early days, Balkanturist endeavored to provide a feast for the senses for local and foreign tourist consumption.

## Building Socialism by the Sea

In the decades following the completion of the Hotel Roza, Balkanturist coordinated the dramatic transformation of large stretches of the Black Sea coast, in concert with the transformation of Bulgaria as a whole. The communist state’s first five-year plan (1948–53) mapped out an extensive expansion of hotels, restaurants, cafés, and entertainment venues, offering the latest amenities. In the following five-year plans, a network of elaborate resort complexes mushroomed up and down the coast, most notably Druzhba (Friendship), Zlatni Piaschi (Golden Sands), Slünchev Briag (Sunny Beach), and Albena. This required a momentous effort of mobilization of various segments of the population just to put the basic infrastructure in place, from volunteer youth brigades to the Bulgarian Army, which played an important role in hotel construction (Doichev 1994: 67–68). Bulgarian tourist industry officials proudly charted the details of this development as measurable “socialist achievement,” for which quotas could be set, met, and surpassed. In a sense, the creation of this infrastructure for leisure fit well into

the socialist model of privileging production—even though it was focused on venues of consumption. For the directors of Balkanturist, it was easy to enumerate the number of new beds, rooms, seats in restaurants, and even portions of food served. The five-year plan, for example, called for the construction of forty-one hotels and fifty restaurants, primarily on the coast, with a goal to serve 96,573,000 portions by 1953 (Shkodrova 2014: 152).

In Bulgaria, as elsewhere in the Eastern Bloc, state-directed expansion of leisure and other consumer experiences, many related to food and drink, fulfilled a variety of socialist imperatives.<sup>7</sup> Once the basic needs of the population were met in the immediate postwar period, such states were able to look for ways to fulfill the more ambitious utopian promise of the “good life,” as indicative of progress toward a communist utopian future. In a sense, the promise of “bread” and indeed plenty, a kind of upward mobility for workers, had always undergirded the socialist project (Fitzpatrick 2008: 11). After Stalin consolidated power, this mobility took the form of extending what were essentially “bourgeois” forms of luxury to new socialist elites, but also, when possible, to the working masses (Fitzpatrick 1999; Gronow 2003). By the early 1930s, the Stalinist regime recast luxury products like food items, along with their accoutrements and etiquette, as part of the “good life” that could and should be available to every deserving socialist citizen (Fitzpatrick 1999: 55). In a sense, the more abstract utopian visions of revolutionary Russia began to take a decidedly material—and explicitly culinary—shape under Stalin. The grandiose vision of tables laden with food was famously propagated by Stalin’s commissar of provisions, Anastas Mikoyan, coupled with the imperative to modernize or “civilize” the rapidly urbanizing peasant masses (Geist 2012; Fitzpatrick 1999: 15–16). The realization of such visions was delayed by the necessary sacrifices of World War II and the painful postwar recovery, a period in which the communists’ power was spread and consolidated across Eastern Europe. Postwar recovery coincided with the death of Stalin, both providing impetus to an ever-greater “consumer turn.” As Khrushchev repudiated Stalin’s crimes, efforts to reform the system also brought revolt and even revolution to the region. Regimes began to offer and tout material comforts as proof of (or substitute for) socialist progress and as a basis for legitimacy that appealed to the newly educated, urbanized populations across the region (Bren and Neuburger 2012: 8; Znepolski 2008: 253).

But such consumer pleasures and practices were also a continued part of the making of modern citizens in Eastern Europe. Like the Soviet Union, Bulgaria was engaged in its own explicit “civilizing” or “disciplining” mission, in which food and

drink played an important role. A variety of Bulgarian state-directed actors were involved in an engineered transition from “backward” peasant modes of producing and consuming to modern varieties, as outlined in an array of new cookbooks, articles in women’s magazines, and other “how-to” guides like the “household encyclopedia” *Kniga za vseki den i vseki dom* (The book for every day and every house).<sup>8</sup> Women were most often targeted, with an avalanche of sources that featured elaborate descriptions of how to set a table, pour wine, and prepare thousands of new dishes—*chorba* (soup), *giuvech* (thick stew), *kebabche* (meatballs), and *banitsa* (filo and cheese pastry). Such sources, many of them created by women, schooled women on the etiquette of serving visitors, what kinds of pots and pans they should keep in their cupboards, and how to prepare an array of cocktails and what to serve them with (Bankov 1973: 715–16). Bulgaria had inherited the Soviet program of “liberating” women from household labor, in part through the creation of “communal or public eateries” as well as new household technologies. Indeed there were concerted efforts to provide new household appliances and also build a slew of public cafeterias, restaurants, and cafés. The images and advice on the pages of these sources, however, seemed to heighten expectations for the creation of *domestic* utopias.<sup>9</sup>

But utopia was by no means confined to domestic spaces. If anything, its public display was even more critical. Balkanturist was in charge of creating public spaces in which food culture would both shape a modern socialist citizenry and provide them with the pleasures of the approaching utopian future. It was not just food, of course, but a variety of new “tourist” experiences that created opportunities for “civilizing” Bulgarians and their Bloc neighbors to exhibit “modern” behavior (Scarboro 2011: 172–256; Koenker 2013: 282). Food and drink offerings and public consumption venues were a central concern of Balkanturist, which presided over the explosive expansion of hotels and restaurants along the coast in the 1950s and 1960s to cater to droves of Bloc visitors—literati and glitterati, cosmonauts and diplomats, and regular citizens who patronized the glimmering new hotels, bars, casinos, cafés, and restaurants dotting the long Bulgarian coastline. As tourism became the focus and fuel for economic growth in Bulgaria, in a very real sense it was integral to the building of socialism.

## Under Western Eyes

Balkanturist’s promotion and management of the Bulgarian and Bloc tourist experience under socialism unfolded under the gaze of, or in the ongoing encounter with, the Western tourist. By the 1960s, the easing of Cold War tensions and the gradual resumption of East-West trade led to a rapidly growing



flood of Westerners who crossed the now permeable Iron Curtain to see communism for themselves. According to Balkanturist, the number of foreign visitors rose to 1 million in 1965, and to 3 million by 1972 (Sübev 1986: 11).<sup>10</sup> Admittedly, the bulk of tourists who traveled to Bulgaria continued to be from the Bloc, for whom Bulgaria was significantly more affordable and accessible, but in 1970, for example, there were some 17,668 American, 50,106 British, and 49,278 French visitors (compared to 154,071 Soviets, 393,443 Czechs, and 115,415 Poles).<sup>11</sup> With this mix of Bloc and Western visitors, a complex East-West encounter inevitably unfolded within the environs of Bulgarian Black Sea resorts.

Many Western observers marveled at the “free East-West mixing,” in which the Bulgarian coast played the role of a “co-existence bazaar” (Hoffman 1970: 10; Calic 1964: 156). Foreign visitors congregated and interacted with the requisite social lubricants—Bulgarian food, drink, and cigarettes (Neuburger 2013). This transnational sociability was by no means a diversion from socialism; in fact, its origins and goals were intertwined with socialist rationales and objectives. First, foreigners served as a kind of attraction for Bulgarian and other Bloc onlookers. In a sense, their very presence was proof of “socialist progress,”

that socialist Bulgaria was attracting visitors from far and wide. The more the better, as tourist dollars spent on Bulgarian goods and services, like food and wine, contributed to the larger project of building socialism.<sup>12</sup> Official reports tracked and trumpeted their growing numbers and positive reviews as evidence of industry success. Tourists were also welcomed to bear witness, to see, taste, and extol Bulgarian “socialist progress” (Komisia za razkrivane 2014: 470). Their presence was not without risks, however. The Bulgarian State Security (or secret police) saw Westerners as possible agents for the spread of anticommunist sentiment or “bourgeoisie” immorality (198). At the same time the secret police were preoccupied with the judgments and complaints made by foreigners, who were actively observing and judging Bulgarian standards of housing, food, and other amenities. As they tracked foreign dissatisfaction in various periods, they urged Balkanturist to improve its offerings and service, given the “political effect” of international tourism (475). Complaints about the food selection and service plagued Bulgarian tourism from the early years.

Still the 1960s and early 1970s were in many respects the honeymoon years for Black Sea coast tourism, with Western travelogues and travel pieces in the *New York Times* and other



FIGURE 1: A pastry shop overlooking the sea at the Druzhba resort, south of Varna.

SOURCE: RASHEV AND BOLGAR 1968: 27.

publications touting Bulgaria as both beautiful and inexpensive (Kalette 1970: 24). Far from complaining about bad service or low-quality goods, travel writers were enamored by the country's "sophisticated seaside," its layered history, its "magnificent beaches," and its range of accommodations and restaurants. While Balkanturist's gleaming amenities were presented as modern enough to meet global standards, they also pointedly catered to Westerners' taste for the exotic.

Such exotic restaurant experiences were not always Bulgarian in nature. For example, permanently lodged on the sands of the Sunny Beach resort was a famous pirate ship restaurant-bar, featuring young Bulgarian servers dressed in pirate attire.<sup>13</sup> Another example described by a British visitor was the Kolibite (Indian Village) at the Golden Sands resort.

This is a complex of thatched huts, set among running streams, so completely Amazonian that one is surprised that there are no crocodiles. In some of the tree tops there are platforms with tables for dinner among the branches...Adjoining it is the Gorski Kat (A Place in the Woods), a spacious hunting lodge in wood and bamboo, the tables and benches carved out of logs. Trees are growing in the centre, their summits disappearing through the roof. (Haskell 1966: 131, 132)

The tastes and smells of local cuisine were embedded in a set of sensual experiences—extravagant décor, music, and other entertainment.

Foreign visitors were particularly drawn, however, to the carefully curated Bulgarian folk-themed restaurants, with their "national" cuisine. As one British traveler noted, meals were served in "folk restaurants which have seized, sterilized and served up palatable dollops of old Bulgarian ways, from fire-walking to dancing bears" (Gardiner 1976: 163). These "sanitized" folk restaurants were a central, and widely popular, "authentic" Bulgarian experience, enjoyed by Bulgarians and foreigners alike. A Bulgarian-produced guidebook described the Kosharite (Sheepfold) restaurant at the Golden Sands resort:

[T]he shepherd, picturesquely clad, plays away on his sweet-voiced pipe. The restaurant is tastefully arranged with a feeling for local colour, the chairs are covered with furs, the wooden seats with colourful spreads, the lampshades are made from fine stretched leather. A whole ram is being roasted on a spit in the huge fireplace, while *banitsas* (cheese pastry) are baked in the oven. The *kourban*, the roast meat, *somna-sirene* (cheese baked in an earthen jug) are all specialties associated with life in the



FIGURE 2: Exterior view of the "Fregata" circa 1970s.

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FIGURE 3: The deck of the famous “Fregata” (Frigate) restaurant at the Sunny Beach resort on the southern Black Sea coast.

SOURCE: RASHEV AND BOLGAR 1968: 41.

Bulgarian countryside and especially with sheep breeding. The dances are pantomimes inspired by the life, loves and joys of Bulgarian shepherds. In the Tsiganski Tabor (Gypsy Encampment) night club nearby, Gypsy music and dancing go on until late at night. (Jordanov and Nikolov 1966: 88)

The same resort was also graced by the Vodenitsa (Watermill) restaurant, which, as British traveler Arnold Haskell described in his 1966 travelogue, served “Bulgarian specialties such as *Vreteno*, a grilled pork fillet with the delicious oven hot loaves, *pitka* and the thyme scented condiment *choubritsa*” (132). In such venues, the “Bulgarian” food heightened the sense of authenticity.

Balkanturist nonetheless went to great lengths to create standardized, recognizable, and consistent “Bulgarian national” menus, codifying and in a sense “inventing” a national cuisine in the process. They invented, for example, one of the most well-known “Bulgarian” dishes today—the *shopska salata*, containing tomatoes, cucumbers, onion, and grated feta, which is

still commonly reproduced in former Bloc states. This local take on a “Greek salad” featured the most commonly consumed salad ingredients, but the grated feta was certainly a more refined innovation. For Balkanturist, the green, white, and red colors of the food—mimicking the Bulgarian flag—were an added bonus (Detchev 2010).

Although Balkanturist played an important role in codifying, shaping, and disseminating a “Bulgarian” national cuisine in this period, the agency was not alone in the effort. In 1978 a cookbook entitled *Bŭlgarska natsionalna kuhnia* (Bulgarian national cuisine) was published, which represented a clear shift from past socialist-era cookbooks with more general titles like *Modern Cuisine* or *Our Cuisine*. This volume, which claimed to be “more than a normal how-to cookbook,” provided a detailed lineage for the various influences, ingredients, and dishes that were deemed “Bulgarian.” As a precursor to its efforts, its authors detailed a 1972 meeting organized in the Bulgarian city of Plovdiv by the Ministry of Internal Trade and the





FIGURE 4: The “Büchva” (Barrel) restaurant, Sunny Beach circa 1970s.

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FIGURE 5: A shopska salata.

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Cooperative Union of Cooks from fourteen different culinary institutes. In two days the participants prepared some sixty dishes, with the goal of “reviving” the “rational heritage” of Bulgarian traditional foods and integrating them into “communal” (or public) food offerings, like cafeterias and restaurants (Petrov et al. 1978: 8). Thousands of recipes were assembled in the pages of *Bŭlgarska natsionalna kukhnia*, establishing a newly minted national cuisine.

The first Bulgarian-language cookbooks had appeared in the nineteenth century, but the efforts to define a *national* cuisine began only slowly in the 1920s and 1930s. In part this was because cuisine in Eastern Europe tended to map onto the borders of empire rather than nation. In Bulgaria as elsewhere in the former Ottoman Empire, food was strongly inflected by “Oriental” flavors and techniques, as was quite clear in the names and terms for foods and preparation techniques. Since the nineteenth century, Balkan elites had attempted in various ways to disentangle their new states and emergent nations from “remnants” of the Ottoman past (Neuburger 2004). But as “Oriental” food had so strongly influenced high cuisine in the region, it was generally redefined as national—Bulgarian, Macedonian, Serbian, or Greek, for example. This was in part a reaction to the influx of “European” influences into the Balkans, which drove a search for culinary “authenticity,” a recasting of these Ottoman preparations, in some cases with “European” ingredients and technologies.<sup>14</sup>

The nation-building process in and beyond cuisine intensified in the twentieth century, with the communist regime (perhaps ironically) playing a critical role. While in certain respects communist states subverted overt nationalism, they had selectively used a kind of nationalism—conflating the nation and the people, promoting self-determination of peoples, and using Lenin’s famous dictum “national in form, socialist in content.” Indeed, socialist modernizing projects were inseparable in many respects from the process of building coherent “nations” out of the larger region’s patchwork of cultures (Slezkine 1994; Martin 2001). The creation and promotion of national cuisines was one of many aspects of this process, which gained momentum by the 1970s (Jacobs 2015; Bracewell 2012). Under late socialism, regimes across the region channeled nationalism—in tandem with new consumer offerings—to placate the masses and bolster their own legitimacy. In Bulgaria a state-directed search for origins allowed for the embrace of “progressive” elements of the past, and cookbooks served as important agents of nation-building.

Notably, this occurred in the same period in which “ethnic revival” generated a proliferation of ethno-national cookbooks in the West (Gabaccia 1998). In both East and West, the

renaissance in ethnic foods was embedded in the new consumer opportunities of the 1970s, which provoked a search for more and better variety, sensation, and consumer experience. On both sides of the Iron Curtain, the search for origins was coupled with a surge in consumer demand for the “authentic”—as constructed and problematic as that notion is—in the ethno-national foods of “others.” At the same time, while in the West ethnic revival was accompanied by civil rights movements, in the East the process was driven more by the state, although this did not preclude the broad participation of scholars, artists, citizens, and of course cooks. Still, for Bulgaria in particular, and to varying degrees across the socialist world, the “approach of ripe communism” and the “good life” was ensconced in decidedly national flavors. A modern nation, even a socialist one, required a well-defined modern national cuisine that could be served up to domestic and foreign visitors apparently hungry for the experience.

## Sunset in the East?

In the 1970s and 1980s, as the number of visitors to the Bulgarian Black Sea coast continued to climb unabated, problems, too, began to escalate. As Doichev (1994: 60–61) points out, as early as 1970, the industry was overextended and understaffed, and intermittent shortages made it difficult to provision the hotels and restaurants. Expansion continued at a breakneck pace, with Balkanturist even employing a Bulgarian army division as construction workers to increase the offerings at its new southernmost and largest resort complex, Sunny Beach. By 1975 Sunny Beach had mushroomed to encompass 106 hotels and enough restaurants to feed 25,000 people at a time (70). And yet despite such efforts, it became difficult for Bulgaria to attract Western visitors of means. When they came, they did not find the facilities up to their standards—and they usually did not return.

Although tourist hotels were a priority for provisioning, Balkanturist was faced with a growing number of foreign complaints about inefficiency, slow service, and the perennial lack of variety in food and drink (Shkodrova 2014: 160). There had always been a divide between the facilities and services enjoyed by Western tourists and those offered to most local and Bloc tourists (the party elite aside). East Germans often complained, for example, that their Western counterparts had ocean views, while they were relegated to less luxurious, non-beachfront accommodations (Doichev 1994: 53). This situation was compounded in the mid-1970s by the development of the Interhotel system, a small string of elite hotels for Westerners, which were given priority with regard to quality

supplies, like wine and food. This actually increased shortages at other resort hotels, especially as supplies began to tighten (Shkodrova 2014: 163). To further exacerbate the problem, intermittent shortages grew in intensity in Bulgaria during the 1970s and 1980s, precisely when visitors were coming with rising expectations. In certain respects, it was not that the Bulgarian Black Sea coast had changed so dramatically—at least not for the worse—but rather that it had not changed enough. At the same time, competition had increased abroad, as tourism continued to develop in other southern European destinations like Yugoslavia, Spain, and Italy, slowing demand for Bulgarian resorts among Western clients (Doichev 1994: 143).

This spurred Balkanturist to redouble its efforts to market the Black Sea coast to foreigners, with culinary pleasure as an important selling point. Images of food and wine and a variety of restaurants, bars, casinos, and cafés peppered the pages of foreign-language pamphlets, magazines like *Bulgaria Today*, and guidebooks on the Black Sea coast, which were distributed abroad. In the mid-1970s, Emil Markov set off on his six-year food expedition across the country to gather material for *Bulgarian Temptations*. Vlado accompanied him, working his magic from behind the lens of his camera, arranging elaborate tableaux of local food from across Bulgaria with regionally appropriate staged backgrounds. One such tableau from the Black Sea coast region depicts a small inlet near Sozopol with a picturesque fishing boat in the background slightly out of focus bobbing on blue waters. In the foreground a table beckons with a white tablecloth, two bottles of white wine, and nine platters of intricately arranged fish and vegetable delicacies, carefully lined up and artfully mounded for visual effect. A plethora of unusual dishes appear in recipes and images—“Fish Plakiya with Walnuts,” “Shahlik of Wild Boar,” and “Milk



FIGURE 6: The Restaurant “Dobrudzha” in the resort Albena, circa 1980s.  
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Kebab of Lamb.” For Markov, there are no shortages, of course, only abundance and variety, a decidedly utopian vision of Bulgaria’s late socialist gastronomy.

And yet *Bulgarian Temptations* was more than just a cookbook. It reads like a lively and descriptive travelogue and guidebook with local recommendations. It offers insights into the scale and shape of the local food industry and scene, as in this excerpt on the southern Black Sea coast:

The cuisine of Slunchev Bryag [Sunny Beach] also has other advantages. It avails itself of the culinary experience of the whole of the Southern Black Sea coast (the fish dishes of the ancient coastal towns of Pomorie and Sozopol, and the meat dishes of the Strandja Uplands) and at the same time, the experience and labour, of the stream of cooks, technologists [sic], barmen and waiters—about two thousand professionals in the culinary art. No matter how strange it may seem, the choice of a place to eat is also made difficult because of the number of restaurants to be found: more than 50 restaurants, 25 folkstyle restaurants, snack bars, pavilions, and if you have to decide which you prefer—European or Bulgarian national cuisine—then the choice becomes more complicated. That is why I am going to tell you my preferences. First of all the Magoura Restaurant, where Yanko Dobrev is the principal chef. (Markov 1981: 65)

His aside “No matter how strange it may seem” is perhaps telling, but in essence he provides the reader with what seems to be an astounding quantity and quality of local food sources and dining venues.

In addition, Markov bestows upon Bulgarian cuisine a kind of pedigree, outlining its regional features while assuming and mandating its status as a bona fide *national* cuisine. It is no accident that the collection was published in 1981, the widely commemorated 1,300th anniversary of the founding of the first Bulgarian state in 681 by Proto-Bulgar tribes. Markov reaches further back than 1,300 years in his search for the origins of “Bulgarian” food, echoing the history of Bulgarian cuisine as outlined in national cookbooks of the late 1970s. He claims, in fact, that the “Bulgarian culinary art and the echo of its history have come down to us from the Thracians,” that is, from the fifth century BC, well before Bulgars (a Turkic tribe) or Slavs inhabited the region (Markov 1981: 24). And yet, according to Markov the Thracians left their culinary mark on the historical region of Thrace, which encompassed southern Bulgaria, including the Black Sea coast region. As he notes about the Black Sea town of Sozopol:

The merry temperament of the Thracians of old with their lifeloving god Dionysus and the cult of the Miletan colonists for exquisite cooking are typical features of the Sozopolites today. What is more, in this town there has always been more wine than fish—the transparent aromatic Misket, and chiefly the “fair wine,” the rosy Pamid juice, which pleases lovers of white and red wines. Even when fishermen cook their soup on the shore, they prefer this wine to brandy. (50)

Whether the ancient Thracian temperament was passed on to the Slavs is a matter of speculation, or perhaps imagination. But it is interesting that Markov openly embraced the epicurean and bacchanalian spirit of Dionysus, which in a certain sense melded well with the promises of the utopian “good life”—even as it clashed with continued criticism of bourgeois excess.

Significantly, while *Bulgarian Temptations* contributes to the project of defining a national cuisine, it provides a very fluid, even hybrid, concept of the Bulgarian nation. Markov embraces and gathers the threads of “Bulgarian” regional difference and strands of the distant glorious past, which was very much in sync with official nation-building projects of all kinds. At the same time, the anti-Ottoman rhetoric that infused Bulgarian communist discourse in this period is virtually absent from Markov’s culinary odyssey. Instead, he paints a layered and nuanced picture of Bulgaria and its cuisine, recognizing and embracing hybrid regional influences, including the “Oriental” (Markov 1981: 22, 28). As he notes, “Balkan cuisine became an interesting mixture of a variety of dishes from Antiquity and oriental ones, to which should be added the gradual influence of Vienna and Paris” (24). His embrace of the “Oriental” in the national culinary canon runs counter to official discourse in the period, but dovetails with similar pronouncements in the Bulgarian language (Petrov et al. 1978: 4). As official nationalism increasingly sought purity in the name of progress, and “remnants” of the Ottoman past were under attack as retrograde, culinary sources—for foreign or domestic consumption—provided an important counter-narrative. While they certainly coded most regional foods as “Bulgarian,” they also recognized that “Oriental” culinary influences were critical to the depth and appeal of Bulgarian food.


Finally, in a fascinating alternative to Bulgaria’s gleaming resort-city restaurants, Markov gives particular attention to the simple and the local. He highlights small-scale guest houses, local markets, homemade fare, and grilling over an open fire on the beach. In anticipation of the locavore trend, he curates an off-the-beaten-track experience, offering alternatives to the gargantuan, and increasingly inadequate, rust-belt resort cities that had risen out the sands of the Black Sea coast. In the midst of a crumbling and manufactured utopia, glimmers of a new way of seeing and tasting Bulgaria emerge on the pages of *Bulgarian Temptations*. Although Markov does not repudiate the modern restaurants that were emblematic of socialist “progress,” his culinary utopia is clearly rooted in the past, the small-scale, the locally sourced, and the homemade. Indeed, he embraced a more expansive food culture that extended outside of, and in many cases in spite of, “socialist progress.”

## Paradise Lost?

Under socialism, the pursuit of a communist utopia was inseparable from efforts to create a kind of gastronomic paradise. In a certain sense, Bulgaria’s Black Sea coast had the potential to epitomize that paradise. Its dramatic postwar transformation from wild, snake-infested sands to resort cities in steel, concrete, and glass—complete with a bounty of modern and themed restaurants—was remarkable in many regards. It showed the possibility of socialism to transform landscapes and offer large numbers of foreign and domestic visitors modern avenues for leisure and pleasure that transcended Cold War ideologies. Tourist offerings, including food and drink, were an important engine of the Bulgarian economy, while playing a role in engineering a transition from peasant “backwardness” to modern socialist modes of living and consuming. The Bulgarian state was able to bolster its legitimacy through the abundance of food and drink in and beyond tourist venues, as part of a complex of new consumer opportunities. From cookbooks and appliances to new restaurants, shifts and new possibilities in food culture were certainly part of what was framed as “socialist progress” behind the Iron Curtain. Bulgaria’s Black Sea resorts offered increasingly elaborate culinary experiences to both Bloc and foreign citizens, who bore witness to socialist-generated pleasure and plenty.

In the last decade of the period, Bulgarian state actors still insisted that a communist utopia was right around the corner, as mounting food (and other) shortages forced a scramble to sustain a visible and edible “good life” in the here and now. Providing Western tourist hotels with precious food resources exacerbated such shortages. At the same time, the increasingly critical Western tourist gaze laid bare the inability of the system to keep up with their rising standards and expectations. Late twentieth-century Western abundance and wealth drove the rapid growth of desires for flavorful and exotic food experiences at home and abroad. But food tourism seems to have also blossomed under state socialism, as in the case of the Bulgarian Black Sea coast, as part of the larger utopian project of creating and projecting the image of the “socialist good life.” And such efforts were not the colossal failure that is so often assumed. On the contrary, the building of a tourist industry and the beginnings of food tourism under socialism were rather remarkable. Indeed, in Bulgaria (and elsewhere in the region) there is a palpable nostalgia for many aspects of the socialist past since the collapse of the system in 1989. The forms and flavors of food from this past (along with state-paid Black Sea vacations) play an important role in such sentiments. Since 1989 Bulgarian food and Black Sea tourism have



radically changed in ways that are both encouraging and deeply marred by commercial excess. Abundance and choice prevail, as do imported foods, new supermarkets, and large Black Sea resorts. And yet Bulgarians continue to seek out and provide the hungry traveler with alternative, local food experiences and culinary utopias—like those on the pages of *Bulgarian Temptations*. 

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## NOTES

- 1 In the modern period, there is a distinct tradition of Westerners going "east," including to the Balkan region, and providing deeply sensory musings on food and drink that shocked and titillated audiences back home. There is a rich secondary literature analyzing the Westerners traveling east, though food and drink are rarely looked at in depth. See, for example, Todorova (1997). A notable exception is the coverage of food and drink in travel writing on nineteenth-century southeastern Europe in Jezemik (2003: 47–55, 147–70).
- 2 Several Bulgarian collections exist of such writings from the pre-1878 Bulgaria Revival period, though analysis is rather thin and does not deal with issues surrounding consumption. See, for example, Giurova (1969).
- 3 On Indian cuisine, see Appadurai (1988).
- 4 Here I have in mind postwar Eastern Europe, while I recognize the horrors of forced famine in the Soviet Ukraine. See, for example, Hryn (2009).
- 5 If one looks outside the Bloc, socialist Yugoslavia had an even more developed tourist economy, which can be explained by its relative openness to the West, but also by its beautiful Adriatic Sea coast. On Yugoslav tourism, see, for example, Grandits and Taylor (2010).
- 6 See, for example, descriptions of summers spent at such residences in Firkatian (2008: 95, 286–87).
- 7 For a more general survey of issues related to consumption under socialism see Bren and Neuburger (2012: 3–16).
- 8 See Bankov (1973). See also the primary women's magazine, *Zhenata Dnes* [Woman today], and cookbooks like Sotirov (1959).
- 9 I am indebted to Wendy Bracewell (2012) for this insight pertaining to Yugoslavia. As she also notes, the same thing could also apply to the West in this period.

10 While this was a far lower number than socialist Yugoslavia's reported 2.6 million tourists in 1965 and 8.4 million in 1985, it was still impressive given Bulgaria's size and resources (Turncock 1997: 45).

11 *Turizm* [Tourism] (Sofia, 1979), 11.

12 On the role of tourism in the Cold War rivalry, see Gorsuch and Koenker (2006: 11–12). See also (Komisia za razkrivane 2014: 198, 470).

13 For images of this restaurant, see Rashev and Bolgar (1968: 41, 65).

14 See Laudan (2015: 325) on this process in France and elsewhere.

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