

THE PLUM BRANDY FROM OAȘ LAND SYMBOL OF IDENTITY AND OF LOCAL SPECIFICITY

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Abstract: The plum brandy from Oaș Land is an identity, specific element, deeply rooted into geographical romanian realities. With its origins long lost in past time, the craft and art of obtaining the plum brandy are nowadays in danger to be lost against the background of socio-economic changes specific to globalization. In this context, the purpose of the present study is to highlight and briefly describe a traditional occupation (plum tree cultivation and obtaining plum brandy) that has endured and survived over time. The obtained

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results highlighted the main aspects regarding the culture of plums and the craft of obtaining traditional style plum brandy, in Gherța Mică Commune, Romania.

Key words: plum brandy, fruit trees, plums, draff, local plum brandy distilleries, Oaş Land, Gherța Mică

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INTRODUCTION

Romanian popular culture with its specific features of authenticity and originality is spread throughout the Romanian space. Each ethnographic area is distinguished by a series of specific ethnographic phenomena, marked by a great variety and diversity of forms, which bear the imprint of the zonal or local specificity, thus contributing to the strengthening of the element of identity (Ilieș et al., 2014; Stașac and Herman, 2014; Caciora et al., 2019). This is the case of "Oaş Land", a Romanian ethnographic area with ancient traditions and customs preserved from ancestors, with a whole range of popular culture values specific to both material and spiritual life, completing the unity of civilization and culture of the Romanian people (Herman and Wendt, 2011; Herman, 2012, Ile et al., 2022; Ilieș, 2006; Mușlea, 2004).

Traditional occupations are represented by all the economic and social activities that have defined a certain community over time, being passed down from one generation to another. Among these, special attention was paid to animal breeding and plant culture. Within the plant culture, the plum tree culture stood out, which in turn had special implications in the way of organizing space and time, in the development of the craft of obtaining plum brandy, the development of the trade with plum brandy. Therefore, this plum tree culture played a significant role in defining the cultural identity of the inhabitants Oaş Land, by sustainably capitalizing on the specific environment of Oaş Land. However, in the context of social and economic changes, plum tree culture and other related activities are facing a series of challenges, which require novel solutions to survive and integrate in a constantly changing environment.

The plum brandy or booze is an alcoholic beverage specific to areas specialized in the culture of fruit trees, especially plum trees. Although considered a national beverage, it is manufactured in many other countries under different namings, "Pálinka" in Hungary, "Slivovika" or "Rakia" in Bulgaria, Croatia, Serbia (Pomohaci et al., 2002).

„The booze is a traditional Romanian alcoholic drink obtained exclusively through the alcoholic fermentation and distillation of plums (various varieties), whole or crushed, or the juice obtained from plums, with or without pits" [Gov. Order 368, 2008, art. 3, alin 1]

In Romania, the best-known fruit-growing areas where plum brandz is produced are Turț, Pitesti, Văleni, Muscel, Pătârlagele, Bistrița, Zalău, Horezu a.s.o.

The first documentary mentions about the production of alcohol in the Romanian space dates back to 1332 in Transylvania (Godea 2005, p. 10), while

the first mentions about Turț, in Satu Mare County, was attested from 1570 (Pomohaci et al., 2002, p. 7 citing Cioltean, 1998).

Since ancient times, the geographical location has imposed favoritism and restrictions on the communities that developed at the foot of the Oaș Mountains. Thus, over time, migratory populations have avoided these less fertile and hard-to-access spaces, thus facilitating the development of highly original local communities. Among the elements of identity specific to the study area are the popular port, the music, the dance, the speech and last but not least the activities and occupations specific to the place, inherited and transmitted from generation to generation (Herman and Wendt, 2011; Herman and Gherman, 2017; Herman and Benchiș, 2016).

Currently, against the background of globalization, many of the identity elements specific to local communities are in danger of disappearing (Herman et al., 2016; Herman and Grama, 2018). This process is a natural one, being a result of adapting to the progress made by the current society, defined by global values, less connected to the specifics and local physical and geographical conditions.

In this context, the present study aims to highlight an element of local identity that not only managed to overcome the challenges induced by the phenomenon of globalization, but also adapted to the new conditions, becoming an image and symbol for the Oaș Land community.

Given that the culture of fruit trees, especially plums, is an ancient activity in the Oaș Land, as in the whole of Romania, a superior, sustainable exploitation of it is required. Thus, in addition to the consumption of fruits in various forms (fresh, dried, smoked, compote etc.) and obtaining alcohol following their fermentation and distillation, a reorientation, a capitalization through tourism is required.

Tourism is an activity specific to today's society (Caciora et al., 2023; Herman et al., 2020, 2023; Boc et al., 2022) which can evolve into a sustainable and superior form of capitalizing on plum tree culture and activities related to it. The ability of tourism to capitalize on the entire spectrum related to plum tree culture is derived from the unique and original elements given by: the landscapes with blooming plum trees in April; the richness and variety of the fruits reaching maturity in the month of August; the associative, family-type activities imposed by the fruit harvest in August and September; the processing of fruits in order to obtain the plum brandy in the months of October – November. From those presented, it is noted the existence of a continuous activity, throughout the whole year, activity that can be a factor of tourism animation. Among all these activities, the most spectacular in terms of novelty, mystery and good cheer seems to be the last stage, namely obtaining the plum brandy following a special craft that takes place in specially designed spaces called "Pălincii" which are the local plum brandy distilleries.

The local plum brandy distillery is an identity spatial presence in Țara Oașului, next to the church, mushroom shape dance area, household, school, a.s.o. Unlike the northern part of the Oaș Land (Cămârzana - Negrești-Oaș - Racșa), where the local plum brandy manufactories are smaller in size, in the western part, in the Turț - Gherța-Mică - Călinești - Oaș Depression Basin, they are large, serving the entire community. This aspect is explained on a historical scale, by the different socio-economic conditions between the two parts of Oaș

Land. Therefore, this economic gap is very visible at the spatial level nowadays and is reflected by the size of the houses and the grandeur of the popular port. It is no coincidence that it is said that in Negrești-Oaş, the exact time is given for the entire Oaş Land. From here all economic, social and spiritual customs, traditions, novelties and trends spread throughout the Oaş Depression.

DATA AND METHODS

Study Area

Gherța Mică commune is located in the southern part of Satu Mare county, on the eastern part of Oaş Land, in the homonymous depression, being crossed from north to south by the Valea Uliței stream, a right tributary of Tur River. From an orographic point of view, this space is a depression area flanked to the northeast by the Palna Hill, to the west by the Pusta-Heighi and Corni Hills, and to the south-east by the Turului Plain, a subunit of the Someșului Plain. From an administrative point of view, it borders the following territorial-administrative units: Turț (to the north), Cămărzana and Târșolt (to the east), Călinești Oaş and Livada (to the south) and Turulung (to the west) (Figure 1)

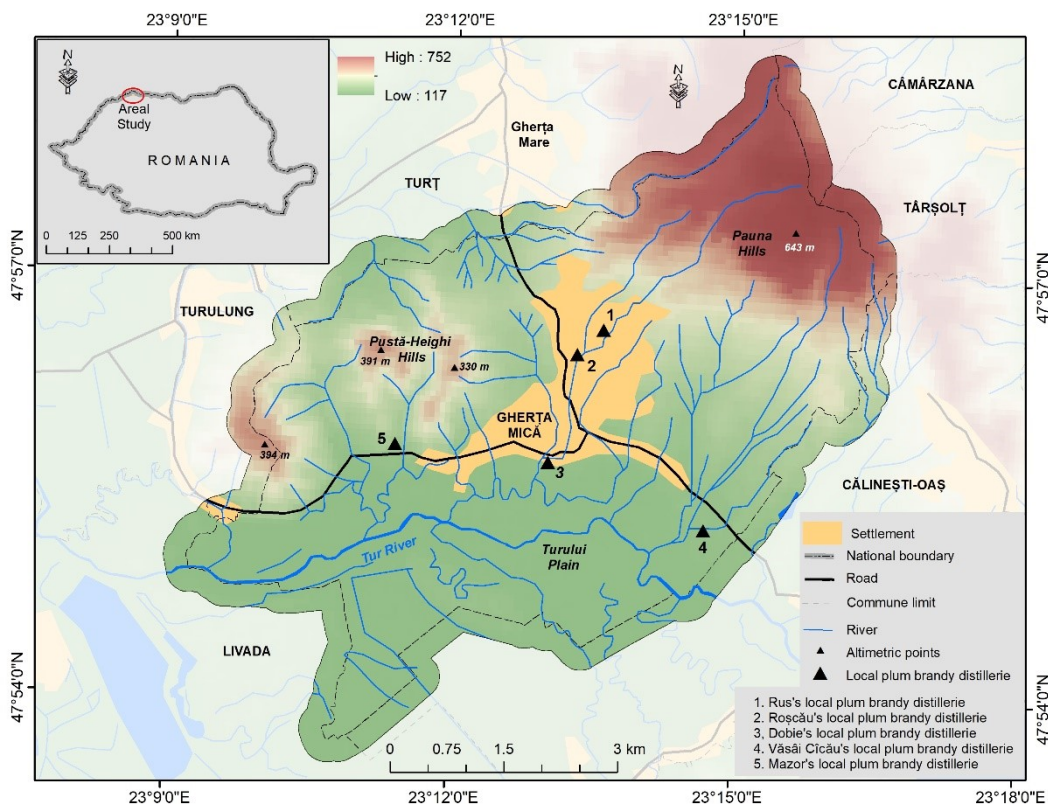


Figure 1. Areal study

Like any activity specific to the rural environment, the inhabitants of the Gherța Mică commune have always been concerned with various occupations within agricultural activities, but fruit growing and animal husbandry occupy a special place. The total area of the commune is 3885 hectares of which: arable

(1166 ha), pastures (1117 ha), vineyards and orchards (205 ha), forests (1102 ha), unproductive (22 ha), rivers, lakes, ponds (81 ha) and roads (192 ha). Gherța Mică has a population of 3,881 inhabitants, the majority being Romanians, totaling a percentage of 98.11%, alongside whom also live Roma (1.38%) and Hungarians (0.51%). From an administrative point of view Gherța Mică commune no longer has other villages belonging to it.

Data analysis

The present study represents the results of the research undertaken by documenting some books and articles from the specialized literature, to which the field interventions are added. The present study used the method of direct observation, the interview method (consulting the main actors involved, the owner of the local plum brandy distillery, the local population) and bibliographic documentation. This paper tries to capture, highlight and describe one of the most representative and much appreciated and loved (by some) local crafts specific to Oaș Land, namely the production of the plum brandy (booze), insisting on a case study, represented by Gherța Mică commune. After a preliminary description of the role and importance of the plum brandy in the life of the inhabitants of Oaș Land, the paper focus on the main steps taken until obtaining the finish product, starting with the planting of the fruit trees and here we referred in particular to the plum trees plantations, which offer the best quality of the plum brandy, then continuing with the stage of picking, fermentation and after that the transport and actual making of the plum brandy in the so-called "palincarii" (the local plum brandy distilleries). Here the main focus is oriented towards the process through which the draff (fermented plums) goes, until it reaches a liquid that is only good to be drink (the famous plum brandy). The software used for mapping the prospected objectives and drawing up figure 1 was ArcGis 10.6.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The physical and geographical conditions of the Gherța Mică commune are influencing factors represented by the bio-pedo-climatic favorability and restrictions imposed on this area, which led to the imposition of basic activities, namely animal breeding, plant-based agriculture and fruit growing. Within this last agricultural activity, special attention was paid to the plum tree culture.

The cultivation of plum trees in Gherța Mică has a long tradition, plums being appreciated for their fruits, which are used in various ways, from fresh consumption to the production of dried plums, jams and plum brandy. The supreme and the most sustainable form of capitalizing the harvests is the plum brandy, the "visiting card of the Oaș Land inhabitants". Wherever they travel around the world, the famous plum liqueur can often be found in the luggage of the Oaș Land inhabitant, which can often "open" new horizons, strengthen friendships and directly or indirectly lead to the promotion of this product across borders.

Since ancient times, the craft of producing natural plum brandy has been a major concern for the people of Gherța Mică, who have constantly perfected their production techniques in order to obtain a product of the best quality. The pride and vanity of putting on the table and honoring those who step on the threshold of their homes, with a plum brandy of the best quality, naturally

matured in oak barrels with mulberry tree staves, which also gives it a slightly yellowish color, has started over time and a competition among inhabitants of Oaş Land. The competition has an ongoing character, aiming at the selection of: plum varieties; of saplings; of the way of planting and care; the picking and selection of the fruits, the storage vessels of the draff; choosing the best local plum brandy distilleries with the best boilers to get the best plum brandy.

Plum tree cultivation

A popular saying says that "he who does not plant a tree, does not dig a well, does not build a house, does not start a family and does not have a child" is not considered an accomplished person.

In this spirit, fruit growing is the basic occupational in Gherța Mică, where plum trees predominate, along with apples, pears and walnuts. Why do plum tree orchards predominate? It is a question that finds its answer very easily and quickly when you enter the house of an inhabitant from Gherța Mică. No sooner have you entered the house than they sit you down at the table and quickly fill you up with a glass of plum brandy and something to eat, such as a plate of bacon, sheep's or cow's cheese, onions and sausage. You can't walk out of the house without been greeted by the host.

Until it reaches the finished product, the plum brandy involves several stages, a long and arduous process, which starts with the planting of the trees (plums), their maintenance, picking, storage and then its production (distillation) of the plum brandy.

The planting of fruit trees (plums, in our case) usually takes place after a preliminary preparation of the soil, fertilizing it with manure from animal farms, especially in autumn at the end of October or spring at the end of March and the beginning of April, respecting the standard spacing of four meters per row and five meters between rows for easier maintenance.

The picking of plums was usually done by a group, made up of family members and relatives, one by one, until the plums from everyone present were picked up.

The preparation for the picking of plums (fruits) was and is still being done since the summer. The wooden tubs (who still own them) are taken outside to the street or in the yard and turned upside down, then they are filled with water to swell so that the juice from the plums does not flow when they start to ferment. The hoops are also checked and tightened (beated) so that they do not fall, and the unsuitable ones are replaced with new ones, as well as the damaged staves.

At first, the plums were stored in large pits dug in the ground and buried, lined with yellow clay to prevent from seeping into the ground, later in wooden tubs, and nowadays in plastic barrels, of course protected from the sun's rays and of rains.

However, the craftsmen claim that for storing plums, the best are oak barrels, which lend extremely subtle aromas to plum brandy, and for preservation and aging, it must be left for at least five years in mulberry barrels, from which it lends a yellowish color.

The quality of the plum brandy also depends on the quality of the plums (Figure 2). The most famous areas for the cultivation of plum trees or fruit trees in Gherța Mică are: Dumbrava, Cioncășele, Susanii, Merii Popii areas.



Figure 2. Aspects of plum trees cultivation

The process of obtaining the plum brandy has its secret depending on the area, ethnographic region, etc. and has been passed down from generation to generation until today.

In a first stage, after the plums have been picked and stored, their fermentation is expected, usually between two to six weeks after picking, after which the resulting draff must be boiled, when the fermentation of the plums is at its maximum. From this moment the draff must be taken to the local plum brandy distilleries.

The local plum brandy distilleries

The local plum brandy distilleries is an identity spatial element in Oaș Land, alongside the church, mushroom shape dance area, household, school, etc. Unlike the northern part of the Oaș Land (Cămârzana-Negrești-Oaș - Racșa), where the local plum brandy distilleries are smaller in size, in the western part, in the Turț - Gherța-Mică - Călinești-Oaș Depression, they are large, serving the entire community. This aspect is explained on a historical scale, by the different socio-economic conditions between the two parts of Oaș Land. Therefore, this economic gap is very visible at the spatial level and at the present time and is reflected by the size of the houses and the grandeur of the popular port. It is no coincidence that it is said that in Negrești-Oaș, the exact time is given in the Oaș Land. From here, all economic, social and spiritual customs, traditions, novelties and trends spread throughout the depression.

As a related activity to fruit growing, the local plum brandy distilleries are the traditional distilleries made up of copper boilers (99% purity), large combustion chambers, coolers to which are added the large storage containers for the draff.

In Gherța Mică commune, over time there have been several local plum brandy distilleries, among which we mention: Bozga's, Dobie's, Mazor's, Roscă's,

Rus's, Văsâi Cîcău's local plum brandy distilleries, which we will detail in the following. Continuing the tradition, these distilleries follow its course and purpose, being under the tutelage of his son Bura Marcel, who lovingly and responsibly carries on this craft that he inherited from his father and grandfather.

Bura Marcel's local plum brandy distillery operates in Gherța Mică and is open to all residents, but also to the residents of the surrounding communes who want to produce on their own and in the traditional way the famous plum brandy of which they are proud all over the world "Oaş Land plum brandy".

The local plum brandy distillery is over 100 years old; it was received as a dowry by Căcău Vasile from his father-in-law Ștrango Vasile, and Marcel Bura inherited it from his father Cîcău Vasile. Although at the beginning it operated on the Valea Uliței that runs through the center of the commune, it was relocated by Bura Marcel to the Main Street in the area of the fuel supply point, also owned by him.

Currently it works with three boilers, two for boiling the draff and obtaining "vodka", one of 400 l, the other of 350 l, and the third for the final distillation of the "vodka" and obtain the plum brandy through the second boiling of 220 l (Figure 3).

The process of manufacturing the plum brandy involves the following operations: transporting and depositing the draff in the local plum brandy distillery building; wood supply; charging the two boilers with draff; sticking the lid to the boiler; collection of "vodka"; collection of the plum brandy etc.

The transport and deposition of the draff is done in larger barrels, newer in those of plastic, located in the building of the local plum brandy distillery and can be done by the owner (the one who is going to make the plum brandy) or if not, for a fee by the owner of the plum brandy.



Figure 3. The interior of Bura Marcel's local plum brandy distillery

In addition to the quality of the plums, the wood used for the fire and, of course, the water specific to the place used in the process of boiling and finishing the plum brandy are also important in order to obtain a quality product. The woods used for distilling the plum brandy should be hard

essence usually beech, sessile, ashtree, etc., which also make a lot of embers, maintaining the burning for a longer time, compared to softwood, for example.

The two boilers are then loaded with draff for the first distillation through a chute that leads from the basin to the boiler. Next, the boiler lid is glued with clay mixed with wheat flour so that it does not crack, as well as the tube that takes the steam to the cooler.

The draff is boiled for about two hours, two and a half hours until the alcohol vapors rise through the lid, pass through that tube, which at the bottom is suddenly cooled, in the so-called cooler, turning by condensation into a liquid, called "vodka" or "vodka". Cooler water is pumped continuously from a well drilled at a depth of 100 meters.

The draff from the first boiler, is stirred automatically through a gear that does not allow the draff to be overburned, previously this process was done manually. At the beginning of the boiling of the draff, the "vodka" that flows for the first time has a fairly high alcohol concentration, about 40-50%, so that in the middle of the boiling it decreases in strength by half (20-25%), and towards the end boils to reach somewhere around 10%. All the "vodka" from the first boil is collected in a single container, where it adds up to a strength of 15-25%.

After each boiling of the draff, the cauldron is washed and cleaned so that it does not stick to the side walls and bottom, as this would lead to the smoking of the plum brandy.

The "vodka" collected from the first boiling (which locally is called "tistulaș") will be introduced into the third cauldron, where a new boiling (redistillation or return) follows. A gentler fire will be needed, because a stronger fire could lead to the explosion (destruction) of the boiler. During this stage, stirring is no longer necessary because the liquid does not stick to the cauldron.

When the firstly distilled liquid, called "tistulas" boils it follows the same route described in the first phase of the distillation, a liquid with a very high alcohol content (around 80% or even more) will flow, which in the local term is called "rasalău" or "rasalit", being taken separately and used by the locals for rubbing, in case of rheumatism. Toward the end of boiling, the distilled liquid is more often checked to measure its alcohol content. Checking the alcohol content is done by throwing a glass of liquid on the hot lid of the boiler and setting it on fire with a match, and if it stops burning, the process stops because it no longer contains alcohol. These last drops of liquid are called "coada" and have few uses, they can even be thrown away.

At the end, after collecting the liquid resulting from the second distillation, follows the preparation of the real plum brandy. As mentioned here, the quality of the plum brandy will depend on the quality of the local water, to which we must also add the skill of the one who prepares it (the "heteș"). It is considered a quality plum brandy that preserves the aroma of the fruit (plum in our case), has a strength of about 52 degrees and forms those bubbles, which persist for as long as possible, when it is stirred in the bottle or poured into glasses.

The person responsible for the entire process, from the beginning to the end, of obtaining the plum brandy is called "heteș". When the owner loads his finished product - the plum brandy - into the barrels and goes home satisfied, not before paying his fee to the owner of the local plum brandy distillery and to the "heteș".

In addition to all these stages of the distillation process, that moment is also a good opportunity to socialize, to troubleshoot some memories or adventures, some more difficult than others, and to prepare specific traditional dishes: potatoes on the embers, chicken in embers, bacon grilled on a stick over the fire and, of course, the tasting of the plum brandy just out of the cooler.

The path to perfecting the true plum brandy does not end at the local plum brandy manufactory. This is brought home and stored, ideally in oak (*Quercus cerris*), acacia, etc. barrels, which will give it that yellowish color over time, which also increases its appreciation.

The maturation period lasts about a year, after which it is removed from the barrel and drawn into bottles or demijohns with corks. Usually only in the second year does the plum brandy reach its full maturity. Then four markers can be established for quality: 1. taste and strength, 2. perfume, 3. aroma and fruitiness, 4. color and finesse (Godea I., 2005).

CONCLUSIONS

The plum brandy is a result of man's coexistence with nature, in a given geographical space and which imposed some favors and restrictions on him at the same time. It is used for own consumption, as well as for commercial purposes (sale or in the form of gifts, souvenirs).

The plum brandy was, it is and will always remain an artisanal product of infinite local, regional, provincial and national variety. It is a Romanian national asset (Godea I., 2005).

For the inhabitants of Gherța Mică, the plum brandy is somewhat of a local symbol, being present in everyone's life from birth to death, both in moments of joy and sadness. It is no coincidence that it can be considered as a local pride (a true local brand) that could be promoted both nationally and internationally. A strong alternative can also represent tourism, considering that it is a booming activity that has the ability to capitalize on new spaces, objects and geographical facts. As the plum tree culture and obtaining the plum brandy provide some action (animation) throughout the whole year and a commensurate souvenir we recommend tourism as an alternative measure in the preservation and continuation of these ancestral occupations. Thus, a better promotion of this traditional product could attract tourists to the area, with effects in the development and support of the local economy.

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