The growing gastronomic movement in Macedonia



2013 Cheese Festival opening ceremonies in Bra Italy, honoring Balkan cheeses.



2013 Macedonian delegation for the Cheese Festival in Bra Italy

By Stephanie Georgieff

This past September, the ninth edition of Slow Food Cheese Festival in Bra, Italy had a timely theme. As the signs said, the "Ark of Taste docks at Cheese," and what a dock it was indeed. At first glance, the festival seemed to be a gastronomic lacto paradise. There were, at best probably several hundred different varieties of cheeses from all over Europe, the Balkans, Africa, the Americas and some parts of Asia. I never knew there were so many different, distinct ways to make my personal favorite fifth food group, but here, for the 250,000 attendees from all over the globe, we got to taste, smell, see and pair with wines, beers and ciders the worlds finest artisan and heirloom cheeses for a glorious long warm weekend in September. After I attended workshops and networked with the representatives of the Balkan Cheese Presidia's and American artisan producers, my appreciation for the global importance of Cheese has, well, transformed.

What was particularly heartwarming about the 2013 Cheese Festival was a focus on Balkan Cheeses through the newly launched ESSEDRA project. ESSEDRA is a joint effort between the United Nations Farm and Agricultural Organization, the European Union, Slow Food International and several Balkan nations. ESSEDRA (Environmentally Sustainable Socio-Economic Development of Rural Areas) works simultaneously in eight countries of the region

ESSEDRA works with local Slow Food Chapters in the partner nations to help map culinary and agricultural products. This effort will insure the products protection as these nations strive to meet and compete with modern standards of food production. I asked Slow Food ESSEDRA Financial Management officer Matteo Pizzi, why the Balkans as the first ever project of ESSEDRA? He replied that these nations, (Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Republic of Macedonia, Romania, Serbia and Turkey) are most at risk of losing their agricultural and culinary treasures through globalization. In these regions for various historical and political reasons, many traditions date back to Roman times, and it would be a catastrophe for biodiversity as well as local economies if they were lost due to the drive for standardization.

I was blessed to accompany the Macedonian delegation at Cheese 2013, and got to hear their reflections on the events of the festival. Professor Sonja Srbinovska of the Faculty of Agricultural Sciences and Food at the University of Skopje told me of the difficulties Macedonia's mostly independent rural dairy farmers face. She stated that nearly 72% of all dairy farms in Macedonia have five or less cows. If these dairy farmers were forced to compete with large EU subsidized dairies from other nations, it could spell the end of this way of life (a delicious one I might add.) Dr. Srbinovska said her tiny Republic of 2 million people did not have the money to lobby for allowances for the traditional cheese making traditions at The Hague. ESSEDRA provided for the joining of forces of many nations, formerly bitter enemies, to keep their shared but unique traditions and economic opportunities alive. This Balkan international cooperation is launching culinary tourism, an international market for value added products, bringing cultural pride, maintaining biodiversity and helping keep families on the land they have tended for centuries.

Slow Food Macedonia is one of the more organized ESSEDRA efforts with the Bitola Chapter taking the lead in researching products to be put on the Slow Food Ark of Taste. Macedonia was one of the first partners to nominate a list of 25 gastronomic treasures to Slow Food International's Foundation for Biodiversity Ark of Taste. Amongst the products on the Macedonian Ark nomination, there are items ranging from fish, to preserves, to the special honey made from the honey bee from the Mariovo region.



Open air market in Prilep Macedonia



Macedonian booth at Cheese 2013 featuring cheeses from the Mariovo region

During one of the workshops in Bra, all the ESSEDRA partners presented their special "endangered" cheeses for a tasting and discussion. Macedonia featured their Биено сирење Bieno Sirenje - Whipped cheese. This national treasure looks almost like bread. Bieno Sirenje is a dense cheese that is "whipped" during it's processing, giving it the airy appearance. The cheese is found in many dishes and has a very solid texture, enabling it to be grilled or put on a kabob. When I was visiting friends and relatives in Macedonia after the festival, I enjoyed many a meal with Bieno Sirenje, as I am a vegetarian, and my hosts happily accommodated my dietary restrictions with this savory delight.



Биено сирење Bieno Sirenje - whipped cheese

I will be leading a tour from May 11th through the 24th to the various gastronomic regions in Macedonia. A joint effort between Ambassador MAK and Sophia Services, "A Taste of Macedonia," will give ample opportunity to sample cheeses, wines, olives and regional dishes of our beloved ancestral homeland. On the tour, we will cook together, learn the techniques of how wines and cheeses are made the old world way, and enjoy many natural and cultural treasures. Many of the ESSEDRA products will be highlighted on the tour, so all tour participants will be helping to keep the artisan producers and farmers that create these rare delights economically sound. Please go to www.sophiaservices.ca for booking information. Help keep Macedonian food traditions alive, come and enjoy the bounty of our heritage.
I look forward to seeing you in May!

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