

FOOD

Why Macedonia Is Becoming a Foodie Destination

BY CLAIRE VOLKMAN

October 21, 2016



Photo: Jane Josifovski

Macedonia's a country you've probably heard of in passing—one of those places in the Balkans that was once a part of Yugoslavia. A country that's often overlooked and passed over for the more alluring countries on the sparkling coast—like Croatia and Montenegro. It's a place that's spent most of its life stuck between war-torn countries (Serbia and Kosovo), making it hard for Western visitors to give it a chance. Which is heartbreaking, considering the landscapes are breathtakingly beautiful, the people are some of the world's most welcoming, and the food is some of Europe's most comforting. No matter where you go, every meal is made with passion and love—whether it's at a hole-in-the-wall in the middle of Skopje or the living room of a farmer in a local village. Not only that, the focus is

entirely on quality—which means everything is made from scratch without the additives and preservatives we’re so accustomed to in Western food.



Photo: Jane Josifovski

That’s why the cuisine of Macedonia fits so perfectly with Slow Food, an organization that was founded in the 1980s by Carlo Petrini. The nonprofit was created to preserve and highlight regional and local cuisine all around the world. The objectives are simple, to encourage sustainability and farming, promote local businesses, celebrate heritage, and educate consumers on the harms of pesticides and fast food. The organization may be relatively new, but the concept certainly isn’t—especially in a country like Macedonia.

“When you talk about Slow Food, you talk about the normal life of a common person in Macedonia. It doesn’t represent just the food, but also the lives of the people who live here and their passion for tradition,” said Tefik Tefikoski, the founder of the Macedonian chapter of Slow Food and owner of Hotel Tutto in Janche.



Photo: Jane Josifovski

Tefik, or Tutto as most call him, grew up in the Mavrovo region of Macedonia, one that's known for its cheese and vegetable production. At home, he learned to cook the same recipes his mother and his grandmother grew up on. Dishes like ajvar—a slow-roasted red pepper dip, which is stirred and simmered for eight hours—were a common staple at home. For him, slow food was nothing more than just his life and his childhood, not a mission. It wasn't until he left to work in Italy at 21, something many young people do in a place of such staggering unemployment, that he realized how special the cuisine of home was.

“Twenty years of work experience in Italy was huge for me. In 2006, I returned to my birthplace and truly felt and appreciated its untouched beauty and the special cuisine. Thankfully, the time abroad gave me the experience I needed to open a hotel, get into alternative tourism, and found a Slow Food chapter in my village of Janche,” Tutto said.



Photo: Jane Josifovski

Luckily for him, it was easy to convince the Italians he worked with that the cuisine of his homeland was special. He simply cooked the dishes he grew up on, like pindjur (a relish made from tomatoes, eggplant, garlic, salt, and pepper) and kifli (flaky pastries) and served them to his friends. When he came back, he brought many of his Italian comrades to visit so they could see where the food they loved so much came from.

It was the bond he made with one Italian that really gave him the push to open a Slow Food chapter in Janche. The first product he took to Italy during the annual meeting was his family's sheep cheese, which is semi-hard and just slightly salty. The overwhelmingly positive feedback he received helped further tailor his passion for promoting the country, his village, and the fresh bounty of the area. Soon, he was convincing other local farmers and food producers in the country, like Naco Jovcevski—an organic beekeeper and honey producer in the village of Dihovo—to join the movement.



Photo: Jane Josifovski

“It was an easy sell for me. I’ve always found it important to showcase the biodiversity of our honeybees (*Apis mellifera macedonica*) and preserve the traditional ways of beekeeping (in traditional old-style beehives made from trees, which is called Trmka). As part of the movement, we’re able to organize workshops, local honey tastings, and honey sales both nationally and internationally,” Naco said.

Jane Josifovski, founder of Macedonia Experience (a Balkan-based land tour operator) and freelance guide for Intrepid Travel, is appreciative to the Slow Food movement for bringing more awareness to Macedonia cuisine, but also wants people to know that it’s really just a label—this type of lifestyle has been prevalent in the republic for as long as its been around.



Photo: Jane Josifovski

“This style and concept of organic farming and small-scale food production has always been here. We’ve been doing it for years, far beyond the 10 years that the movement has been recognized for here. I think Slow Food is more about emphasizing the local impact, keeping the money here in Macedonia,” Josifovski said.

To understand the cuisine of Macedonia, you need to understand its heritage, which is almost wholeheartedly influenced by Turkey. For centuries during the Turkish occupation, the Macedonians and Turks remained separate—with the locals in the mountains and the Turks in the cities. However, as the climate shifted and more jobs became available in the urban areas, the mountain people (or Macedonians) made their way to the cities—which led to a shift in cultural identity and, inevitably, the cuisine.



Photo: Jane Josifovski

“Both cultures, their food especially, started to adapt and influence each other. Macedonians, who are predominately Christian, started adding pork to the traditional Turkish dishes since pigs were plentiful. The influence may be heavily Turkish, but our cuisine has evolved into something special on its own,” Josifovski said.

European and Turkish influence aside, what makes the tomatoes so juicy, the lamb so tender, and the peppers so crisp is entirely due to the republic’s climate and diverse geography. Macedonia is a mostly mountainous country influenced by different climates, from the valleys of the south to the peaks of the southwest region, or the lakeside area of Ohrid and Prespa. This alone is one of the main reasons why the country can produce such a wide range of fruits, vegetables, and grains. But that’s just one piece of the puzzle. The other comes from the fact that farmers here rarely use pesticides or additives. In fact, their farms have always been organic, mainly due to the lack of understanding of modern farming.



Photo: Jane Josifovski

“While the world is still intensely seeking to bring back organic food in gastronomy, the rural areas of Macedonia and the households here have been doing this for decades. This ‘old school’ concept gives our agricultural products the full flavor. It makes every vegetable and fruit juicier, the meat fresher and more tender. Some of our dishes may not be pretty—but they’re tasty and healthy,” Goran Mickoski, owner of the homestay and restaurant Plevna in Kuratica, said with a laugh.



Photo: Jane Josifovski

For visitors looking to experience this gastronomic scene firsthand, [Intrepid's food tour](#) is a great place to start. Launched in June of this year, the tour takes people to these off-the-beaten-path villages, into locals' homes and family-run restaurants, and gives them a chance

to authentically enjoy the food that makes the area so special. Josifovski, who pioneered the partnership and created the entire program, can already see the impact the tour is having on the locals, like Goran, Tutto, and Naco. Not only that, he can see a shift in the people who join the tours, most who come from Western countries (like Australia, the U.S., Canada, and the U.K.). For him, most people come with no expectations, but leave completely and utterly changed.



Photo: Jane Josifovski

“The obsession with the fast taste of life and the obsession with work is one priority in the Western world. On the other side, in our world, it’s not the main thing. People have more time to spend on the simple pleasures of life here. That’s one big difference with our cultures and our mind-sets. People don’t work all the time, so they have time to prepare the slow food dishes—like ajvar,” Josifovski said.

However, there’s a shift happening with the mind-set of the locals in the urban areas of Macedonia, which is both a blessing and a curse for the economically challenged country. The unemployment rate, which sits at 25 percent now, is steadily decreasing as new companies make their way to the republic. More jobs mean more money, which is imperative for many locals, but it also means less time will be spent on preserving traditions, and ultimately, preparing the food that’s made the country so special. Josifovski, who lives in the capital city of Skopje, can already see the change.



Photo: Jane Josifovski

“Downtown, for example, you can buy already prepared food and it’s a new wave of fast food. It’s practically garbage,” he said with a smirk. “But people are eating it because the lifestyle is quickly changing.” Luckily, though, this Western notion of fast food and TV dinners hasn’t spread past the urban areas—leaving the small villages still relatively untouched by the change, at least for now.



Photo: Jane Josifovski

“The love and passion for preparing our ancestors’ dishes, like roasted pork with Macedonian paprika, makalo [creamy garlic dip], or spinach börek, probably won’t change—at least for a while. There will always be someone at home to produce food and bring the family together over cooking—whether it’s the grandmother, mother, wife, or daughter,” Josifovski said.



Photo: Jane Josifovski

Here, a few must-visit spots.

Chardak

Located in the bohemian neighborhood of Debar in Skopje, Chardak is one of those restaurants that's alive with live music and the sound of local laughter nearly every night of the week. Not a place often visited by tourists, the menu is traditional Macedonian.

Kamin Chamo

If you want to dine where the locals do, go to Kamin Chamo, a popular lunch spot for the working crowd. Serving traditional and home-cooked dishes, like tripe soup and veal tongue and ajvar, you won't find a better taste of the country. As a note, the restaurant closes at 6:00 p.m., so try to get there for a late lunch.

Hotel Tutto

Boasting one of the most beautiful 180-degree views of the lush mountains and red-tiled roofs of Mavrovo National Park, Hotel Tutto also has ample outdoor seating so you can enjoy the view while you eat. The best part? The owner, Tutto, often hosts cooking classes with the mushrooms and vegetables he grows outside of the property. Whatever you do, try the sheep's cheese (made from his family's sheep) and the ajvar, which is a family-honored recipe.

Dalga

In the heart of Ohrid, Macedonia's most popular tourist destination, is Dalga, one of the city's best seafood restaurants. Located right on the lake, you get incredible views of the neighboring Mount Petrino and Mount Galicica while you nosh on some of the Ohrid's freshest seafood dishes, like trout soup, fried belvica (small, indigenous fish) and a hearty spread of makalo, the creamy garlic dip that you'll never want to share.

Stobi Winery

One of Macedonia's largest wineries, Stobi produces some of the area's crispiest whites and richest reds. Locals love the refreshing Muscat Ottonel and the hearty Cabernet Sauvignon. Not only is the winery open for tours and tastings, they also have a fully functioning restaurant that serves some of the area's most well-known cuisine, like spicy dips, house-cured prosciutto, and an assortment of cheeses.