Changes of Dietary Intake in the Romanian Rural Areas, 19 - 21 Centuries

by
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Abstract. In the sphere of civilization, defined by everything that belongs to the horizon of serving the material needs, comfort, security and utilitarian nature factors, food occupies an important place. The differences between the diets of our ancestors and those of today over which the industrial revolution, modern agriculture and food preparation seem to have important health implications. Treating doctors and nutritionists are becoming more convinced that the eating habits adopted in the last 100 years by western civilization, make a significant contribution to the increase frequency of heart disease, arterial hypertension, different forms of cancers and beyond. Starting from these aspects this article focuses on studying the consumption habits of rural people starting around the 1900s. We tried to find out what foods were eaten 100 years ago compared to what is consumed now.

Key words: dishes, food pyramid, rural inhabitants
JEL classification: R2, I31, N5

1 Introduction

What we eat today we know, but we hardly can realize the changes that occurs in the past 100 years. The only way to realize that is to compare today food with that consumed a century ago. If we examine a few works of the scribes who have dealt with this topic - physicians and ethnologists – and to cookbooks back from then we will surely marvel by the transformations undergone by Romanian society, viewed through the prism of diet.

One of the first researchers for the nutritional habits of the Romanian people was Dr. Gheorghe Crainiceanu who publish his first book, in 1895, entitled "Romanian Peasant Hygiene", in which he talks about food, among other things, and specially about “Diets from different regions accordingly with the seasons of the year” (Crăiniceanu, 1895). Farmers formed at those times the majority of the population and their situation was far from being prosperous, and a decade later, precisely this difficult life would lead to the outbreak of peasant uprisings from the early twentieth century, culminating with the revolt from 1907. Crainiceanu documents this difficult life, bringing testimonies of poverty, low living standards emphasising the impact on people’s health (Crăiniceanu, 1895).

2 The evolution of food consumption, among rural inhabitants, for the past one hundred years

Crainiceanu emphasises that polenta was the basic for nutrition in 1895, he reiterate that sometimes people were preparing polenta as much as three times a day. They eat polenta much more than bread, perhaps because, polenta was easier to do than bread. Wheat bread was a "choice" rather reserved for the holiday’s time. White wheat flour, so trivial to us today, was then much cherished - out of it people use to prepare products, like cakes, coils, which had significant spiritual endorsement (Crăiniceanu, 1895). Corn was consumed in insufficient quantity, sometimes in a degraded form and for that reason the rural population suffered from a disease called pellagra, which was widespread in Romania during that period. It has been found that the combination of eating insufficient corn quantity – in some cases degraded corn - accompanied by the insufficient food qualitative lead to early mortality, organic debility, lack of normal growth and inferior work production.
Gheorghe Iacob, a professor at Alexandru Ioan Cuza University from Iasi assert that the scientific research and analysis undertaken regard the Romanian peasant nutrition, have concluded the following: insufficient caloric intake; insufficient ratio of animal proteins; insufficient fats and carbohydrates; minerals insufficient, except calcium; vitamins A and D, not sufficient" (Iacob, 2014).

On the other hand, people from the countryside were eating, in that period, many ingredients that today Romanians consider to sound strange or newer heard of. Some of these ingredients worth mentioning: “ştir”, coltsfoot, beet leaves, buckwheat, millet, beans, hemp oil, “jufă” – a product derived from hemp seed.

The consumption for products of animal origin was low - fact attributed mostly due to fasting days respecting. But G. Crainiceanu states that peasants were selling their products of animal origin - such as poultry or butter – in order to have the means for buying things that they could not produce themselves in their household. For their own food they were satisfied with a lot of vegetable. Their meals consist of ever presented polenta with concoctions of leaves and fruit, rarely eggs, salted fish and meat (Crăiniceanu, 1895).

The vegetables were for the Romanian peasant "the most used and also the most pleasant “addition” besides bread or cornmeal that were eat every day". Kidney beans were been consumed especially during fasts in form of bean-pods or dry beans.

Cabbage was "the abundance of the house" being eaten fresh, sour or pickled as the cucumbers. Greens were a delight and a substituted for other foodstuffs. An important role was owned, such it does today, by potato which had a significant weight in the diet. For dress dishes it has been use then, as now: onions, leeks, peppers, parsley, horseradish, garlic, dill, lovage and vinegar.

The meat was a food of feast in the rural area. The preferred meet of the rural inhabitant was chicken and pork. They also eat lamb meet, beef and venison. In those times people liked to consume fish since being the only animal protein that was admitted in some days during fasting. Milk and its derivatives have traditionally been crucial foodstuffs in the Romanians nutrition such as: buttermilk, sour milk, cream, cheese, curd, butter - all of which are preferred by all the Romanian people.

In the book „Din bucătăria țăranului român “, written by Mihai Lupescu, there are described enough dishes made from lousy remains, from cheap and meager ingredients, such as (Lupescu, et al., 2000):

- „Geandra” also now as the food of the poorest people. It was customary more in the mountainous region of Upper Moldova;
- „Poșirca” is a porridge made of fermented summer fruits - from which was obtained “tuică”- which is eaten with polenta;
- „Şuşoiu” has a very simple recipe: in hot water the farmers put bread finely chopped, salt and cheese; poor people were doing this recipe with no cheese;
- „Titirim cu apă rece” is made from cold polenta crumbs and water from bowl.

Lupescu says that after the 1900s the differences between village and city started to decline gradually, a process that continues today. In that period had begun to be introduced in the diet of the Romanian peasant so called exotic products which were procured from towns or from stalls (Lupescu, et al., 2000).

It was mention that after 1900s farmer’s use in theirs diet spices such as:

- Bay leaves;
- Allspice which is put in the sausage;
- Pepper;
- Cinnamon;
- Olives;
- Lemons and oranges.

Lupescu stated that not every farmer could afford these spices consumption, only wealthy people or those who journeyed to cities could afford to buy those things (Lupescu, et al., 2000).

In the author’s opinion most peasants consume simple products, largely cheap vegetables and cereals, because meat and dairy products were not available to everyone and anytime. Cream cheese was too expensive to be eaten in ordinary days, as shown in the statement: "The people eat it on holidays and Sundays", roasted
poultry, appears almost as a luxury food, tasted only on special occasions.

Lupescu gives the example of "Găinii umplute", which was considered the choicest peasant food; this dish was usually prepared at large gatherings or when loved ones return at home after long travels.

The author makes reference to a few foods that were considered ordinary which today no longer make part of the diet, such as (Stânescu, 2013), (Popovici, 2010):

“Cobelcii, colbecii, melcii” which were eaten boiled or roasted. They were often used in Teleorman as shown in Lupescu stories; “Scoicile” - People from Teleorman County used to consume this dish.

Over hundreds of pages in a language with slightly archaic fragrance, full of rare words - that today are obsolete because meals, objects or habits bearing that name went out of our lives – the book written by Mihai Lupescu is a real treasure – one of the most precious history documents, of ours domestic life, that we have. The diet of people from city’s didn’t differed much from that of the peasants; in comparison with peasants, the people from city’s use to buy much of the food, and if they had a modest income, they use to purchase less meat and more fish - because fish was cheaper than today – which they added to the daily menu which contained also food from plant origin.

Gradually, especially in the wealthier strata of cities had appear a new type of housewife and a new kitchen. Girls’ schools teach cooking courses with teachers that have diplomas corresponding to the subject profile. During this time a number of books where published on the subject of food: in 1929, Dr. S. Comşa publish „Buna menajeră " or “Carte de bucate”. This book, in the 1900 editions have over 1000 recipes specific to Romanian kitchen and many dishes with Western influences (Comşa, 1929).

It was an endeavour that, viewed from an overall perspective, was part of an intense and comprehensive process: Europeanization of Romania. In the first decades of the twentieth century, globalization was still away, but the separation from East and the advance to West was a very active cultural phenomena, reflected very intense by the transformation of Romanian dishes, alongside fashion, architecture and fine arts. These issues were highlighted by Alexandru Chelici in the article "Gastronomy at the beginning of the 20th century" (Chielici, 1999).

After the Second World War, in Romania, food continued to be precarious. The causes were: drought, shortages of 1946-1947, industrialization and rapid urbanization by moving 55% of the population to cities as stated in an editorial of the newspaper “Adevărul”. From now, potatoes were complementing the dish system based on corn and wheat. Only after 1940, corn flour consumption decreases in favour of wheat flour. At the same time, consumption of meat and dairy products increases, which led to eliminating of pellagra cases (Adevarul.ro, 2011).

Varga mentions that Romanians nutrition begin to improve in the 60s and 70s (Varga, 2011). Mihaela Bilic made a comparison between current eating habits of Romanians and those from 30-40 years ago. "In the 70s and 80s, the peoples were eating healthier because almost everything was cooked in house using less processed food ingredients. Everyday life was different. People had time to eat at home, with family, all three daily meals” (Bilic, 2013).

Despite past monotonous diet, experts argue that the variety of today’s products can be harmful. "Opening to the west civilization facilitate access, to the Romanian market, of unhealthy foods - junk food or fast food - and also to artificial processed food. Gheorghe Mencinicopschi noted that currently, into store shelves across the country, there are many products which are harmful to the body”.

After 1990 people began taking into consideration the issue of healthy eating. In order to meet the problem, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) propose in 1992 the Food Pyramid. The pyramid recommends eating a minimum number of portions from each food base category (Figure number 1) (Harvard School of Public Health, 2015).
If we analyse what we found and what this pyramid recommend we will see that there has been a real evolution in the improvement for the quality of food consumed. The 1900s found that the peasants were big consumers of cereal products (mostly corn), some vegetables, fruit and meat. Today they consume all major cereals (with very high emphasis on wheat), eat vegetables, especially those obtained in their own garden, as well as meat. It has been improved the variety of products that a person consumes daily, which had effects in a more complete coverage of the body needs, to maintain healthy.

If around 1900s farmers had access to products that were part of a maximum of 3 basic categories now they have real access to all of basic foods categories. The only problem then and now is the lack of money.

Rural population, in 2012, spent on food each month only 16% of their income, according to data provided by the National Institute of Statistics, which emphasizes self-consumption (INS, 2013). Household income per person in rural areas was ~ 700 lei per month. By way of comparison, in the employee’s households, this consumption component represent 25% of the monthly income of ~ 900 lei per persona (Gandul.info, 2013).

3 Conclusions

Based on these considerations and statistical data, we can formulate a set of observations and conclusions:

- Given that over 78% of the active population were rural residents, the image on livelihoods was dominated by the data concerning rural life. It is as clear as possible that the agrarian reform from 1921 resulted in raising the living standard of the peasantry for the old Kingdom and from the...
Romanian provinces that have re-integrated themselves in Romania. Despite the difficulties caused by the reform, economic recovery, economic crisis, in interbelic Romania peasant lived better than the peasant before the First World War.

- On villages, the standard of living was determined by the size owned property. In 1930, nearly 30% of the properties were under 5 hectares, half of which was less than 3 ha. Which means-from the perspective of statistics-that almost a third of the President have a modest living, and half of it where at the limit of subsistence.

- If we do a comparison between European countries and Romania about consumption of Basic Products (interbelic years) we will see that Romanians ate cereal, milk and cheese in limits close to developed countries. The only main difference observed was that in those times Romanians were outclassed on meat on a scale (1: 3) and sugar on a scale (1: 5).

- The diet of rural inhabitants was influenced by the size of their property. Those who had up to 5 hectares they lived modestly. They were eating well only Sunday and on holidays after Christmas. Often they preferred to sell their birds, animals and other products in order to get money rather than to consume them in the household.

If we go back to the purpose of this article, that of making a comparison between eating habits of rural people from 1900s to those of now, we can say that the transformations occurred in this area reflect the course of the world in this hundred years. Sometimes peoples have regrets regarding this changes – they regret that they lost connection with their roots, but this it is not necessary a bad thing in our opinion. Regarding food it is a known impression that people eat healthy in the past but as show in this research it is not the case - not everything that our ancestors used for nutrition was really good and healthy.

We know today more than they knew about food and knowledge should help us to discern and to keep what is worth keeping.

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