

Chapter 26

Politics and Identity of Ukrainian Cheese: Crossroads of Authenticity and Identity

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ABSTRACT

Way before Russian-Ukrainian War started in 2014 there were ‘Cheese Wars’, a cold war-type economical conflict between Russia and Ukraine which foreshadowed an existential threat for the whole country in the microcosm of then-booming cheese industry of Ukraine. After dissolution of the Soviet Union the industry had to shift to European standards and since 1998 it entered a new, blooming and exciting phase. Even now, at the height of war, Ukrainian cheese industry manages to thrive. From mass market cheeses snacks made with unique innovative technology inspired by NASA to large plants managing manufacture under enemy’s fire; not excluding artisan cheese of rich and unique tradition, Ukraine has a lot to offer when it comes to cheese. A lot of the topics covered were never properly covered in English and will be presented in this chapter for the first time in English, serving as an introduction to Ukraine and its cheeses for international readership.

INTRODUCTION

The time period characterized in the history of Ukraine by the Russian-Ukrainian War is a decade (2014-2024) of uncertainty, which started with annexation of Crimea, but is also a decade of self-discovery and rediscovery. Among the unparalleled social changes, questions of identity and shedding the post-Soviet shell in any sense of the word, as well as any walk of life becomes an important, crucial task of political and social curriculum. In that case, agriculture, which is historically associated with

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Ukrainian economy and culinary achievements, becomes a great point of contemplation and deliberation in international political communication.

Way before the Russian-Ukrainian War started in 2014 there were ‘Cheese Wars’, a cold war-type economical conflict between Russia and Ukraine which foreshadowed an existential threat for the whole country in the microcosm of the then-booming cheese industry of Ukraine. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union the industry had to shift to European standards and since 1998 it entered a new, blooming and exciting phase. Even now, at the height of war, the Ukrainian cheese industry manages to thrive. From mass market cheese snacks made with unique innovative technology inspired by NASA to large plants managing manufacture under enemy’s fire; not excluding artisan cheese of rich and unique tradition, Ukraine has a lot to offer when it comes to cheese. The chapter will showcase a lot of unique struggles and cases of how innovative, international and resourceful the cheese industry could be in a developing country trying its best.

Dairy and cheese are historically common agriculture businesses in Ukraine, however a shade of Soviet and Russian influences over that matter are something that is really hard to overcome and pinpoint in the global landscape. It is vital and important to do that nevertheless and it is inevitably obvious that in Ukraine cheese tourism is a political activity.

Background

Ukraine is full of places, for which cheese production is traditional and has centuries worth of documented cheese traditions. Just one example is Novhorod-Siverskyi, a city in Chernihiv Oblast, where cheese traditions could be traced at least to the XVI century, namely the year 1033. (Novhorod-Siverskyi, n.d.). Novhorod-Siverskyi is not yet big on cheese tourism, but it might be, considering rising trends of Ukrainian cheese tourism. Semi-hard and fresh cheeses are traditionally popular in Ukraine, but overall development of the cheese market in Ukraine in 2012-2022 streamlined the processes and made assortment of cheeses, as well as consumption rates and interests much wider. (Chernova, 2022a).

The lack of literature and concrete data from the Soviet period of Ukrainian cheese production (1929-1991) is attributed by leading Ukrainian cheese expert to reckless lack of archiving and deliberate sabotage of tradition. (Chernova, 2022b). Yet, still a high point is attributed to Zakarpattia Oblast’s cheese variety Stanislav (now Frankish), which was exhibited in 1960 at an exhibition in Marseille, France. (Chernova, 2022b).

Historically, cheese production in Ukraine is closely associated with Zakarpattia Oblast, situated in the Carpathian mountains. As with many mountain regions around the world, cheese production is connected to a rich culture of shepherdry. (Koruna, 2024). Zakarpattia oblast is often called ‘Cheese Capital of Ukraine’, ‘The Cheese Place’, a trendsetter of the cheese industry. (ProKarpaty, n.d.; Literati, 2019; Mediatsentr UzhNU, 2019; Seeds, 2019; Koruna, 2024; Torchyn, 2024). It often houses rather large events like ‘Milk River’ (Molochna rika) cheese festival which was held in the Stuzhytsia village of the Velikoberezhna district of the Zakarpattia Oblast in July of 2011. (RIO, 2011). Other popular events attracting tourists include Bryndza Festival in Rakhiv, as well as National Cheese Festival in Kyiv, hosting annual Ukraine Cheese Awards. (Taste of the Ukrainian Carpathians, 2021; Vidviday, 2022).

Overall, Zakarpattia Oblast (part of Ukraine closely associated with Transcarpathian mountains) was the main route of cheese tourism in Ukraine pre-2014. 100 km travel plan was available as far as 2012, which prompted tourists both nationally and internationally to visit cheese locations in 5 different districts of Zakarpattia Oblast and included three different events and seven dairy farms and cheese production

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