

Slow in the Saxon Villages of Transylvania

_by Liz Houghton

In the Saxon villages of Transylvania life moves with the seasons and at the pace of the farm animals. It can feel medieval. Our tour was organised and guided by Jim Turnbull of Adept – a charitable foundation working to preserve this wonderful way of life. Adept were responsible for introducing Slow Food to Roumania, setting up the first convivium (there are now five), launching the first farmers' market in the country along the principles of Slow Food's Earth Markets and helping a number of producers attend Salone del Gusto in Turin in 2006 presenting their Saxon Villages Preserves Presidium.

We bounced and rattled along the potholed dirt roads deep into the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains. We arrived at a shepherds' summer camp on the high pastures and watched the sheep being milked. The milk is strained and rennet added to begin the cheesemaking process. The resulting curds are pressed down with heavy stones to get rid of excess moisture. Four or five different types of cheese are made: some, like cottage cheese, are flavoured with dill and need to be eaten right away, while another, with longer keeping properties, is wrapped in pine bark which imparts a subtle flavour and colour to the finished product.



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Then came lunch – a hearty meal of a variety of sheep's cheeses, a pork stew cooked in a three-legged pot over an open fire, cheese-stuffed polenta dumplings and finally wild plums and cherries from the woods – all washed down with liberal quantities of polinca (a potent home distilled fruit brandy) and homemade wine. We ate outside under the shade of a tree, in complete convivial peace with no traffic noise and only the sounds of the sheep, the dogs and the birds.



Another day we visited the local baker – a one-woman show (her husband helped occasionally by sprinkling a bit of flour here and there). The process is completely manual – no bread makers here – and jolly hard work. The dough which is started the previous night seemed quite wet and sticky so handling it into several large loaves required some skill. It was baked in a traditional wood-fired oven which needed to be lit several hours beforehand to bring it up to temperature. After two-and-a-half hours cooking the loaves come out quite black, but this outer crust is beaten off with a stout stick to leave a beautiful golden under-crust.

Our group stayed in the village houses and ate like kings. All the Saxon households are self-sufficient in food: they kill a chicken, goat, sheep or pig when it's needed and make a tasty meal from whatever is seasonally available in their garden. The village shop, when there was one, sold only jeans, washing powder and bottled water.

Housewives have a rich tradition of bottling and preserving any surplus from the garden, fields and woods. Pickles, chutneys and, best of all, wonderful jams are made. These have a much greater proportion of fruit to sugar than our commercial jams so the flavour is really special. We visited local craft workers using traditional hand tools to make barrels for wine and polinca, we watched charcoal being made deep in the

forest and on one very hot day we donned beekeeper suits to meet the local bees, followed by a tasting of several different honeys – some from the wildflower meadows, and some darker, strongly flavoured examples from the forest.

In the evening we would sit outside the village bar and watch the hay carts piled with hay and cows with their jingling bells come home. The courtyard gates of each homestead are opened in readiness and, as the herd moves slowly up the village street, the cows peel off into their own yards – without any human intervention, save for an old woman with a broom who encouraged the stragglers on their way.

Liz Houghton is the leader of Slow Food Berwick-upon-Tweed convivium

Fundatia ADEPT is a charity with strong links to the Slow Food Oxon convivium. It works in Southeastern Transylvania to try to preserve a unique culture by helping local people secure a future through sustainable agriculture, encouraging ancient crafts and skills, promoting ecotourism and nature conservation and marketing their food products locally through farmers' markets and to tourists. Recently, a group of farmers and butchers from the area were able to make a visit to Northumberland to share ideas and demonstrate techniques. Further information on the work of the foundation and food tours to the area is available from **Jim Turnbull**, 01844 352385 or www.fundatia-adept.org