

# Spirit of Bosnia / Duh Bosne

An International, Interdisciplinary, Bilingual, Online Journal  
Međunarodni, interdisciplinarni, dvojezični, online časopis

## The Transformation of Traditional Foodways in the Bosnian American Community

William G. Lockwood and Ivonne R. Lockwood

It is now generally recognised that the food of an ethnic group is not the same as that of its homeland, but, rather, the result of creolisation, the long process whereby food and foodways are transformed in the new homeland. This is, of course, one aspect of the more general process of the cultural transformation of an immigrant culture to an ethnic culture. By far the majority of studies of ethnic food in America are of ethnic groups established during the period of mass immigration in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and they are, therefore, the result of multiple generations of development.

With one exception, no Bosnian American community existed in the United States prior to the Yugoslav civil war in the 1990s. The great waves of Bosnian refugees who arrived during and after the war offer an opportunity to observe the earliest stages of an ethnic cuisine in the making. This culinary study of a recently arrived American ethnic group will hopefully provide new insights on the importance, persistence, and malleability of traditional food and foodways. We will describe and analyze various processes in the creation of a Bosnian-American cuisine....

Bosnian restaurants tend to be of two types, those catering to fellow Bosnians and those primarily serving Bosnian food to the general public. The proprietors of either type were almost never restaurateurs in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The clientele of the former are almost exclusively men. They usually offer little other than *ćevapčići* and other grilled meat, coffee, and perhaps beer. Roasted lamb may be available on weekends. The social function of such establishments is more important than the food. They are a feature of the earlier days of the Bosnian community and have declined in number over time.

The greatest changes in Bosnian food are found in those Bosnian restaurants catering to a non-Bosnian clientele. The food is frequently a fanciful version of traditional Bosnian food, whatever the proprietor thinks will appeal to Americans. Thus, it is the public face of Bosnian food that is the least Bosnian. There has been a craze in New York City in the past few years for 'Bosnian hamburgers', by which is meant an over-sized *pljeskavica* usually filled with mozzarella cheese, served in *lepinje* and eaten like a sandwich. There is even in New York City a Bosnian food truck, the current trend in selling street food in American cities. Much more chicken is offered in Bosnian

American restaurants than would be in Bosnia. At least one restaurant has added Greek-style gyros to its menu. One has added Arabic hummus. Another, in a neighborhood shared with Albanians, has included 'Kosovski sudžuk.' While in Bosnia, *ćevapčići* are served only with *lepinje* and chopped onions, some restaurateurs in America will serve both *kajmak* and *ajvar*, as well, with a green salad on the side.

Turkish-style Bosnian coffee is still the norm, though now served in American coffee cups or demitasse instead of the tiny handleless cups (*findžani*) that were traditional. It is sometimes made in the traditional *djezva*, but now more often in a larger metal pot. Coffee is made repeatedly during the day. As one Bosnian from the St. Louis community stated, 'We have Turkish coffee maybe three to four times a day, but it's not like in the U.S. where you use coffee to wake up. We use coffee to socialize.' This last point is most important. When guests arrive, coffee is immediately made. It is served with sugar cubes on the saucer to be dipped or drunk through along with two or three pieces of sweet pastry, even if the coffee service is preliminary to the large meal.

Bosnian Americans prefer coffee imported from Bosnia, even though similar Turkish-style coffee from Turkey, the Middle East and America is more readily available. Tea is never drunk except herbal teas and them primarily for medicinal purposes. Coffee-houses are important nodes in the male communication network. They are particularly important soon after arrival but always less common in America than in Bosnia-Hercegovina, because American work schedules do not provide the leisure time to attend.

Bosnian food in America has changed and, no doubt, will continue to change. Yet at the same time, it has remained remarkably stable, at least in the private sector. To some extent, this is due to advances in international exchange and the entrepreneurial spirit of Bosnian Americans themselves, which has resulted in the ready availability of familiar cooking supplies that would not have been so available to earlier waves of immigrants. It is further facilitated by frequent visits back to Bosnia-Hercegovina. But resilience must be due in large part to a preference for their national cuisine and its symbolic importance as an emblem of the life they were torn from. Even after twenty years in America, most Bosnians eat Bosnian or Bosnian American food at every meal. There is still some substitution of ingredients particularly for those without access to Bosnian markets, but this occurs less often than with many earlier waves of immigrants.

William G. Lockwood and Ivonne R. Lockwood

Found in *The Return of Traditional Food*, Proceedings of the 19th International Ethnological Food Research Conference, Department of Arts and Cultural Studies. Lund University, Sweden. Editor Patricia Lysaght, Lund Studies in Arts and Cultural Studies, Lund University, Lund 2013

The preceding text is copyright of the author and/or translator and is licensed under a

---

Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License.