

# Food as a Unifier? Rural and Urban Food Festivals in Central Slovakia

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The paper focuses on food festivals in rural and urban localities in Central Slovakia. Food events and festivals are popular and spread all over the world as it is stressed in a lot of scholarly literature (e.g. Watson, Caldwell, *Eds.*, 2007; Timothy, 2016; Klein, Watson, 2016). They are celebrations of communities and their heritage, and expressions of their identity. They include gastronomy events presenting local culinary specialities, food trade fairs, wine and food tastings, farmers' markets or culinary competitions. The paper presents selected festivals in the Banská Bystrica Self-Governing Region. The main objective is to show the purpose, character and role of rural and urban food festivals with a special focus on heritage aspects and to identify their differences including the current political contexts.

*Key words:* food anthropology, rural and urban food festivals, heritage, Central Slovakia

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## Introduction

Food festivals are events dedicated to celebrating and showcasing various cuisines, culinary traditions, and food-related experiences. They are typically organised to promote local or regional specialities, cultural diversity, and/or the art of cooking. There are numerous food-related festivals and events throughout the world, such as farmers' and fish markets, food and wine tastings, food trade fairs, culinary competitions and shows, cooking demonstrations, cooking classes, food events at restaurants, ethnic cuisine events etc. (Getz, Robinson, 2014). The literature shows

that these events have experienced a rapid increase in recent decades worldwide – both in big cities as well as in small villages. They can celebrate either a particular ingredient, a single dish or culinary culture/cultures. Multiple scholars discussing food-related events employ a variety of terms such as “food events”, “culinary events”, or “gastronomic events”. These terms predominantly find application in the context of tourism advancement and are a subject of analysis within the field of tourism studies (Bessière, 1998; Hjalager, Richards, *Eds.*, 2002; Beer, 2008; Robinson, Clifford, 2012; Sánchez-Cañizares, López-Guzmán, 2012; Getz, Robinson, 2014; Timothy, Pena, 2016, etc.).

In this paper, the term “food festivals” will be employed as the focus of the paper is local food events in small villages and a city of Central Slovakia. These events are distinct in their orientation primarily on local communities rather than emphasising a tourist-centric approach. They revolve around specific themes, such as singular ingredients (for instance, potato, pumpkin, or plums) or specific dishes (e.g. *halušky* – traditional Slovak dish). The main goal of these food festivals is to provide attendees with opportunities to taste and compare simple local recipes and foods and to celebrate local heritage and community. Compared to food festivals, culinary and gastronomic festivals are more specific in their focus on the art and techniques of cooking. According to Britannica, gastronomy is defined as “the art of selecting, preparing, serving, and enjoying fine food. Gastronomy is grounded in relationships between food, culture, and tradition” (Britannica, 2000). This “art” has become a target of a growing number of tourists looking for unique gastronomic experiences of all kinds all over the world. Food festivals in this paper target primarily local residents and their relatives and do not address the questions of the culinary and gastronomy art.

The objective of this paper is to analyse the role and attributes of selected rural and urban food festivals in Central Slovakia (mainly in the Banská Bystrica Self-Governing Region). The analysis places particular emphasis on festivals that commemorate specific food item or recipes, exploring their interplay with the surrounding geographic location. A central theme underlying this exploration is the profound interconnection between these festivals and the domains of local economies and heritage preservation. This encompasses a range of research questions including the purpose and design of each festival and its relation to local economies and heritage, the nature of the featured food item/cuisine, as well as the array of associated cultural festivities and artistic performances that enrich the experience.

The research findings are based on ethnographic research conducted in selected localities of Central Slovakia during the period of 2022 to 2023. The investigation uses ethnographic methods, encompassing primarily participant observation, informal and semi-structured interviews, the application of visual anthropology methods and the analysis of printed and online sources. The key method involved my active participation in twelve food events, during which I made observations and took field notes. This approach enabled me to understand interactions, behaviours, and dynamics occurring during each festival. The observation was complemented

by one-to-one informal and semi-structured interviews with the festival organisers (usually the mayor and members of the jury), contestants, as well as visitors. Research questions were related to the purpose and design of each festival, the nature of the featured cuisine, and the festival's importance for the local community, its identity, visibility, and heritage.<sup>1</sup> Content analysis was an important part of methodology. Analysing documents, mainly online regional media coverage before and after each event, promotional materials and social media posts was useful for understanding how the event was perceived in various rural and urban contexts.

The selected localities are primarily situated in the Banská Bystrica district and comprise the following villages, presented in alphabetical order: Badín, Brusno, Hiadel', Kordíky, Kynceľová, Podlavice, Sásová, Slovenská Ľupča, Špania Dolina, Turecká and the village of Terchová in the Žilina District of Central Slovakia. The selection was done on the basis of these festivals' popularity and media coverage in the region. The urban locality is represented by the city of Banská Bystrica, the seat of the Banská Bystrica Self-Governing Region.

## Why Food festivals: A Theoretical Note

Food events and festivals have been studied by numerous scholars throughout the world and examined in diverse contexts related to celebrations of life, economy and commerce, tourism, heritage, sustainability, etc. They promote local cuisines and foodways, preparation practices, eating customs, food-associated culture and social relations (Timothy, Pena 2016: 148). They are usually connected with preservation and revitalisation of cultural heritage traditions, search for authenticity, promotion of rural values, empowering local people, rediscovering forgotten customs, strengthening of local identity and attracting visitors and tourists within the fast-developing gastronomy tourism (Kwiatkowski, Oklevik, Hjalager, Maristuen, 2019). According to Timothy and Pena (Timothy, Pena, 2016: 149–150), food festivals fulfil several purposes. The first purpose lies in stimulating the local economy by fostering entrepreneurial activities among residents. This can be achieved through the provision of a platform for local producers and artisans to showcase and sell their products (for instance handicrafts, honey, jams, herbs, nuts, wines, spirits, traditional gingerbread, confections, cakes, cheeses, and meat products – the author's observation). They can directly or indirectly increase food production and sales in local shops, restaurants and at farmers' markets. According to a number of surveys (e.g. the European Consumer Organisation – BEUC, 2013; New Food – Elementar UK, 2017)<sup>2</sup> and research (e.g. Etzi, Girondini, Massetti, Gallace, 2022; Knežević, Grbavac, Palfi,

1 Six to eight interviews were conducted in each studied locality.

2 <https://www.beuc.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2013-00043-01-e.pdf> (accessed October 7, 2023); Elementar 2017: <https://www.newfoodmagazine.com/news/42541/8-10-consumers-labelling> (accessed November 12, 2023).

2019), contemporary consumers place growing importance on knowing the origin of their food. They believe that food products of certain origin are safer, more environmentally friendly and of better quality. Increasingly, many consumers feel a duty to support local farmers and food industries. Food festivals are often a primary source of establishing personal connections between individual consumers and their food producers. The second purpose of food festivals is linked to the first one: food festivals frequently take place in marginalised and declining rural areas, wielding the potential to foster revitalisation and diversification of rural economies. This role is pivotal in enhancing the multi-functionality of rural areas, strengthening their overall resilience (e.g. Brouwer, Van der Heide, 2009; Wilson, 2010). The third purpose is related to the uniqueness of each place. In a landscape marked by competitive regional, national, and even global dynamics, individual localities aspire to show their distinct identity and prominence. In this context, food plays a pivotal role as a powerful tool for destination branding, effectively shaping a place's image. The fourth purpose of food festivals is rooted in the preservation and revitalisation of cultural heritage. With emphasis on culinary traditions, food festivals can catalyse feelings of local pride and patrimony, nurturing a sense of ancestral legacy. Collectively, these multifaceted intentions are evident within the contemporary Slovak culinary landscape though they are manifested differently in rural and urban settings as further research results demonstrate.

## Food Festivals in Central Slovakia

Food festivals have become one of the most important local events related to traditional culture and cultural heritage in Slovakia in the last two decades. The interest in food, cooking, baking and recipes has been connected with the increase of TV food programmes of domestic as well as foreign production, such as culinary shows and numerous culinary contests. Food related events and festivals have become an essential part of various (primarily) summer activities across the country. The main reason might be that food enjoys widespread public recognition as a positive and relatively non-confrontational phenomenon. In today's increasingly polarised Slovak society,<sup>3</sup> it stands as one of the few unifying elements.

In Slovakia, food events can be classified from at least two distinct perspectives. In terms of their origin, we can recognise the following:

1. Food festivals tied to traditional celebratory occasions that are intricately linked with annual customs and rituals (such as Christmas, New Year's Eve, carnival period, Easter, Halloween and a local festivity called *hody* – the annual event on

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3 According to a number of opinion polls, Slovakia (from political parties to families) has been in recent decades divided across numerous topics: relationship to Russia, vaccination, migration, LGBTI+, gender, human rights including women's rights. These topics divide many families – food is one of the few topics that is safe to discuss.

the day of the consecration of the church). They primarily cater to local residents, although urban Christmas markets also draw tourists and visitors from wider regions or even other countries,

2. Food festivals associated with other, more invented and commercially developed events that “celebrate a particular food item and connect it to a specific location” (Timothy, Pena 2016: 149).

Both types of festivals celebrate communities and contribute to identity building. They are usually organised and funded by local governments, local businessmen, farmers and wine-producers, non-governmental organisations and volunteer organisations. They are always co-created with local actors, using participatory approaches, which means that local people are actively involved in a number of activities connected with the organisation of a festival and a variety of performances. This paper focuses on the second perspective of food festivals categorisation in Slovakia and it reflects their distinction based on the place of realisation. We can simply define them as:

1. Rural food events and festivals,
2. Urban food festivals.

Roles and objectives of rural and urban food festivals are rather distinct and so are their target attendees. Rural food festivals frequently revolve around heritage themes, drawing in local inhabitants and their relatives from cities. In contrast, urban food festivals embrace a broader spectrum, welcoming urban residents, food enthusiasts, gourmards, individuals with specific dietary preferences, those inclined toward organic fare, and tourists alike. This paper delves into the analysis of these distinct categories – rural and urban food events.

## **Rural Food Festivals in the Banská Bystrica Self-Governing Region: How Did it All**

Research conducted in selected villages of Central Slovakia shows that food festivals are rooted in food items and ingredients that held significant roles in traditional local cuisine and indigenous recipes. These ingredients include pasta, potatoes, cabbage, cucumbers, pumpkins, onions, apples, plums, blueberries, bacon, and sheep cheese. Typically, rural food events manifest as harvest celebrations, characterized by their seasonal nature, aligning with the period of respective food item harvests. These occasions serve as a commemoration of gratitude to the Earth – a prevailing trait among most rural food festivals.

Across all studied localities, the primary audience consisted of local residents and their kin, often hailing from urban settings, who use the opportunity to revisit their birthplace and reunite with family members. The food event offers a chance to gather with relatives at least once a year, providing a platform to introduce younger generations to the rural environment and share the legacy of personal heritage (Timothy, Pena, 2016: 151).

None of the local rural events prioritized the primary aim of drawing in external tourists. However, all these events received online promotion through various social media channels, as well as in local and regional newsletters. As a result of this promotional effort, they occasionally garnered interest from nearby urban areas, attracting visitors seeking a day's retreat in the countryside and an opportunity to enjoy traditional culinary delights.

The distinguishing and unifying element among the majority of rural food events in Central Slovakia is their central focus: a culinary competition centred around a traditional recipe or a specific food item, governed by stipulated regulations mandatory for all participating teams. These regulations are invariably made available ahead of the competition on the respective village websites and featured in local and regional newspapers.

Advanced registration is mandatory for all participating teams. The regulations encompass the requisite ingredients to be employed, the precise commencement and conclusion times of the contest, and the procedure for sampling, consuming, and assessing the final creations. A panel of judges consistently supervises adherence to these regulations, sampling each final product and subsequently rendering their verdict. The competition teams are responsible for procuring all food items and ingredients. Typically, the local municipality extends support by furnishing essential amenities such as sheltered spaces, tables, water supply, and specialised cooking equipment. This equipment might comprise gas stoves or more commonly, wood-based cookers. On occasion, the municipality also provides aprons for the cooks partaking in the event.

The beginning of local cooking contests in Central Slovakia traces back to the inaugural cooking competition held in the village of Turecká (located in the Banská Bystrica District) in 1995. Once a prominent ski resort during the socialist era, Turecká faced a period of decline shortly after 1989 due to wild privatisation and the subsequent collapse of its ski facilities.

The story says that in 1995, Svaťo, the proprietor of a local pub, along with several cottage owners, were discussing the problem of how to revitalise the village. Various brainstorming sessions aimed at finding innovative strategies for the village's resurgence ultimately revealed a common thread: patrons were departing from the pub to relish homemade *bryndzové halušky*,<sup>4</sup> with some attributing the best ones to their own spouses. This revelation sparked an idea in Svaťo's mind – to initiate a competition centred around cooking the finest *halušky*. Consequently, in June 1995, the Krčma u Maka pub announced the commencement of the 1<sup>st</sup> World Championship in cooking and consuming *bryndzové halušky* (-iba-, 1995: 5). The response was unexpected – both competitive teams and visitors exhibited an overwhelming interest.

Following the initial triumph of this first informal event, 1996 witnessed not only the enthusiastic participation of local and regional *halušky* teams but also drew teams from diverse corners of Europe such as Great Britain, Czech Republic,

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4 Halušky is considered a Slovak traditional national food. It includes potato-based dumplings with bryndza – a special sheep cheese product – and bacon.





Figure 1. World Championship in Cooking and Eating *Halušky*, Terchová. Photo: A. Bitušíková, May 2023.

Hungary, and Poland. Steering the organization of the event was the newly established Civic Association “*Halušky Turecká*”, a collaboration between the pioneers of the concept and the local municipality. With this, the village of Turecká regained its prominence, though for a different reason – now known not for skiing, but for its esteemed *halušky* competition. Roughly thirty to forty teams engaged in the contest each year, attracting around five thousand attendees. This continued until 2011, when a dispute arose between the principal organiser (Civic Association *Halušky Turecká*) and the local government regarding the event’s timing, aiming to shift it from May to either July or August to boost visitor turnout. This discord marked the conclusion of their partnership, prompting the civic association to join forces with the local government in the village of Terchová – a locality within the Žilina District, recognised as the birthplace of Juraj Jánošík, a 17<sup>th</sup>-century national hero akin to Robin Hood. The selection of this new venue proved fitting, as Terchová embodied the archetypal Slovak village image and was intertwined with the legend of Juraj Jánošík. Thus, the inception of the new World Championship in *Halušky* Cooking and Eating seamlessly complemented the transition to the fresh location. The village also serves as a positive example of sustainable practices, with the organisers actively communicating and practising waste separation. Furthermore, the event’s organisers demonstrate their commitment by donating the financial proceeds to the non-governmental organisation “Úsmev ako dar” (Smile as a Gift) –



Figure 2. World Championship in Cooking and Eating Halušky, Terchová. Photo: A. Bitušíková, May 2023.

an organisation dedicated to supporting children and families facing various risks and challenges.<sup>5</sup>

The amusing duel between the potential twin world championships in *halušky* cooking and eating eventually found its resolution through a compromise. Since 2011, the World Championship in Halušky Cooking and Eating has found its venue in the village of Terchová. Yet, Turecká refused to surrender. Choosing to maintain the authentic tradition in its original form, rather than involving the Civic Association Halušky Turecká, the local administration undertook the responsibility of organising both the Slovak and European Championships in Halušky Cooking and Eating. As the visitor in 2023 expressed: “Turecká had the first *halušky* championship, no one can take it from us”. The rivalry persists, though it barely bothers the visitors. Both *halušky*-themed “championship-style” events continue to attract thousands of attendees, promising a plethora of entertainment.

Amidst this “*halušky* battle” waged between the two contending localities, it remains important to emphasise that the inaugural competitive food event took root in the village of Turecká back in 1995. This pioneering effort served as a fountain of inspiration, inciting a number of similar food competitions across numerous villages

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.usmev.sk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/About\\_Smile\\_as\\_a\\_Gift.pdf](https://www.usmev.sk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/About_Smile_as_a_Gift.pdf) (accessed October 10, 2023)



in Central Slovakia. It emerged as a catalyst for local administrations keen on nurturing local identity and fostering community cohesion by leveraging indigenous culinary traditions. Over the ensuing decades, the model of food contests disseminated across a multitude of villages in Central Slovakia and beyond.

The scope of food competitions within the Banská Bystrica Self-Governing Region has expanded so extensively that this study can only delve into a subset of rural food festivals within the area. The basis of these culinary contests is rooted in local narratives closely intertwined with age-old agricultural practices and traditional dishes. The primary goal is to showcase the pivotal role that local gastronomic heritage plays in strengthening local and regional identity, fostering a sense of unity, and enriching the authenticity of a place. Many of these events and competitions found their genesis in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

The following overview provides a glimpse into a diverse array of rural food events hosted across the region. Its intention is not to provide an exhaustive account of each competition but rather to underscore the sheer scope and prevalence of rural food contests within the region.<sup>6</sup>

The chronological calendar of food festivals within the Banská Bystrica Self-Governing Region follows in the footsteps of the renowned Turecká *halušky* contest, which first emerged in 1995. This cultural and culinary tradition found its continuation in May 1999 with the inception of the *Čipkárskô* festival in the village of Brusno. The genesis of the *Čipkárskô* festival can be traced back to history where lace-traders, traversing the landscapes of Europe, peddled their wares – laces. Embedded within their nomadic lifestyle was the innovative practice of preparing a rich soup known as *čipkárskô*. “Our ancestors developed an innovative soup recipe that must be remembered and celebrated in our community” (man – contestant). This soup, a blend of meats, vegetables, and pasta ingredients, was a testament to culinary ingenuity. This tradition saw the orchestration of culinary artistry on mobile platforms, as these soups were masterfully cooked within special cookers perched upon horse-drawn wagons. The festival is very popular and usually attracts about 25 competing teams (with a record of 34 teams in 2009), each of them having a special team name (often a funny one). In the first years of the contest, there were mainly contestants from older generations; however, recently, half of the participants have been less than 30 years old, which shows that the festival is attractive also to younger generation.

The transformational power of the *Čipkárskô* festival became evident as it inspired other villages to use the attractiveness of their indigenous gastronomic treasures. These villages recognised the potential to stimulate their local identities and foster a sense of community by championing their distinctive culinary offerings. This movement

6 The list of rural food festivals is built chronologically based on the date/month of their organisation. It demonstrates only selected examples of such festivals as there are numerous other similar events being organised all over Central Slovakia. The selection was based on the popularity of events and their regional media coverage.



Figure 3. The Štiarc Festival in Špania Dolina. Photo: A. Bitušíková, July 2022.

initiated a series of food competitions that have been woven into the cultural fabric of the region since the late 1990s. Predominantly held during the summer months, these gastronomic shows are usually tied to the rhythm of the harvest season. One such illustrious event is the “Štiarc” competition, a celebration rooted in the heritage of the former mining village of Špania Dolina. This contest pays homage to the legacy of miners through the recreation of a time-honored soup recipe. “The Štiarc contest is a special day for us. It reminds us of the hard life of our ancestors. We do not want to forget our heritage. The Štiarc competition is a celebration of our community based on old mining traditions” (woman – contestant and co-organiser).

The *Sásovská uhorka* (The Sásová Cucumber) festival in Sásová builds on a 150 year old tradition of growing high quality cucumbers called Sásová cucumbers that were famously sought after at Banská Bystrica vegetable markets since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The cold cucumber soup is one of the specialities offered to visitors. In order to celebrate the unity of the community, one of the locals composed a “Sásová cucumber anthem” that is sung at the beginning of the festival each year.

The other summer festivals include *Fizolňový deň* in Kynceľová (The Beans Day in Kynceľová); *Hlobánska fučka* v Badíne (The Mashed Potatoes Day in Badín); *Súťaž vo varení pirohov* in Hronsek (The Pirogas’ Day in Hronsek); or *Čučoriedkový deň* in Telgárt (The Blueberries Day in Telgárt). All these food events demonstrate similar features: they target local residents, they focus on a particular dish considered



Figure 4. Food festival Na Badínskych vrškach – Hlobánska fučka in Badín. Photo: A. Bitušíková, July 2023.

traditional by the local community, and they create a platform for unifying the local community through a non-controversial social item such as food. As one participant in Badín expressed: “This is one of the few occasions where we meet as a family and do not argue about politics.” The other participant in Špania Dolina declared a similar idea: “It is a real pleasure to be together and have fun in times of such a negative atmosphere in society”. These quotes show the power of food as a unifying factor within various social groups including families.

The autumn festivities are closely connected with the abundance of vegetable and fruit offerings, showcasing the bounties of the season such as potatoes, onions, grapes, apples, plums, and chestnuts. Among the renowned competitions are the *Slivková paráda* held in Špania Dolina, celebrated for its plum jam and plum spirit (*slivovitz*) contest, and the *Jablková chuť Hontu po Ladziansky* in Ladzany, an event dedicated to savouring the apple tastes of the Hont Region. Additionally, the *Hiadlovský krumplovník* in Hiadeľ stands as a captivating potato contest, while the *Podlavická cibulačka* in Podlavice engages participants in an onion contest. In Sebechleby, the *Oberačka po sebechlebsky* is a vibrant grape harvesting event, and the *Gaštanové slávnosti* in Modrý Kameň is an exuberant celebration of chestnuts. All these events emphasise tradition, heritage, and local identity as their main features.

The foundation of these food festivals is firmly rooted in traditional edibles and recipes, which predominantly gravitate toward vegetarian fare. This inclination can be traced back to the culinary heritage of Slovakia, where until the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the culinary landscape was predominantly characterised by pasta and plant-based dishes (Stoličná 2007: 101–105).





Figure 5. Food festival Na Badínských vrškach – Hlobánska fučka in Badín. Photo: A. Bitušíková, July 2023.

Breaking the pattern, one of the noteworthy exceptions lies in the Hiadlovsky Farm of Slovenská Lupča. Since its inception in 1992, this farm has taken the initiative to spotlight local cheese and meat produce, notably focusing on beef. This farm offers a number of tasting events each year and a fresh perspective in a landscape dominated by traditional vegetarian delights. The primary focus of these farm events is on food, presented as local, safe, environmentally friendly, sustainable, and tasty, with the aim of attracting new customers. Heritage aspects are not a primary objective.

Transitioning into the winter months, a number of culinary happenings remain rooted in age-old traditions, particularly the “pig-slaughter” ceremonies (*zabíjačka*) that signalise the approaching Christmas festivities. Originally intimate family affairs, some villages have transformed these rituals into grand pre-Christmas spectacles. The result is a captivating display of pork-centric products stemming from the slaughter, including cabbage soup with succulent cuts, sausages, rice sausages, and other traditional meat products. Notably, the UNESCO World Heritage-listed Vlkolíneč has been a pioneer in orchestrating such events, joined by the equally popular gathering at Zbojská *salaš* in Polhorská Polhora (since 2010). “*Zabíjačka* (pig slaughter) at Zbojská connects tradition with new pork recipes and lots of entertainment. It builds on heritage, but it is also about the present and the future (a cook).”

An emblematic tradition of the season is the “*studeno*” competition in Kordíky, where participants compete in preparing the most exquisite meat jelly – *studeno* or *huspenina*. This event has emerged as a cherished winter tradition within the local milieu, spotlighting the role of pork in regional gastronomy. The event is not



Figure 6. Food festival Na Badínskych vřškach – Hlobánska fučka in Badín. Photo: A. Bitušíková, July 2023.

regionally broadly recognised, but rather popular within a small local community, mainly as an event of fun and entertainment, not as a heritage-related event.

All food contests are woven into a tapestry of numerous cultural performances. The contests usually take 2–3 hours from the beginning to the final jury announcement. Cultural performances connected to the event often start before the food contest and end late at night. In the initial segment of the event, the spotlight shines on folklore ensembles, captivating the audience with traditional performances that add a rich layer of heritage to the occasion. Towards the evening, the entertainment takes a contemporary turn. Popular singers and musical groups take the stage, often paving the way for discos or dance parties.

The role played by the local municipality in these cultural festivities is significant as it is this local support that usually organises and funds all these cultural performances for the enjoyment of both residents and visitors alike.

Rural food events and festivals attract a large number of visitors – mainly from villages and their neighbourhood, but also from nearby towns and cities. These events, originally founded to showcase the significance of food heritage and foster a sense of local identity, have in recent years (in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century) experienced a notable transformation. Alongside their original purpose, they have increasingly become a platform for nationalistic and neo-fascist politicians that use these events for their presentation in their stands, offering food and promotional items. This evolving trend is evident as such politicians seize the opportunity to exhibit themselves through the medium of these events. The process by which these figures secure stand permits is often entwined with local municipalities. Often, the



allocation of these permits is intertwined with the mayor's affiliations or preference to a specific political party. It is clear that even events centred around food celebration can be co-opted for political ends. The nuanced interplay between culture, identity, and political manoeuvring underscores the multifaceted nature of such gatherings.

## Urban Food festivals in Central Slovakia: The Banská Bystrica Case

While rural food festivals primarily stand as tributes to identity and heritage, built on food contests showcasing traditional recipes prepared from local ingredients, their urban culinary counterparts may take on a distinct flavour. They often focus on introducing novel cuisines and flavours, serving as mirrors to new lifestyles and contemporary eating trends. In the city of Banská Bystrica,<sup>7</sup> the most popular festivities of this kind are *Vinšpacírka* – a popular wine tasting event, *Days of the City* with a large open-air food area offering various cuisines, *Slovak Food Truck Fest* (a streetfood festival), *Beerfest* with beer tasting, and *Radvanský jarmok* (The Radvaň Fair) – the fair with a history since 1655 (enlisted on the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Slovakia).<sup>8</sup> Yet, the most popular urban food festival in Banská Bystrica is a spring and autumn festival called *Otváranie Bánoša* (Opening of Bánoš) and *Zatváranie Bánoša* (Closing of Bánoš). Bánoš is a hill in Banská Bystrica where a Secondary Vocational School Pod Bánošom is situated.<sup>9</sup> The school is very active in teaching modern and sustainable ways of farming, bee-keeping and rural management. It was the head-master of the school who initiated the idea of a farm food festival in the city. The timing of the festival in spring and autumn have been synonymous with the opening and closing of the farming season with the aim of presenting good quality food from primary producers from Central Slovakia. The festival started in 2012 and since 2013 it has been growing and has become the most visited food event in the city with thousands of visitors each year. It provides an opportunity to promote local producers of farm products and is a platform to give them an initial access to the market (Hjalager, Kwiatkowski, 2018). The growing number of visitors each year makes it obvious that local farm products are becoming increasingly popular, and many urban people are willing to pay more for products grown or bred locally and in a more sustainable way. Informal interviews with festival visitors revealed that they were eager to learn about local producers and sought 'their producer'. This confirms a trend that has been rising globally over the last 20 years. According to the New Oxford American Dictionary in 2007, the word *locavore* was

7 Banská Bystrica is the main city of Central Slovakia and the seat of the Self-Governing Region (the largest of eight self-governing regions in Slovakia) with a population of 75 thousand inhabitants.

8 The Radvaň Fair is the most popular event in the city, however, it is mainly handicraft oriented and food is only a side target of the fair; more Bitušiková, 2020.

9 <https://en.sosbanbb.sk/o-skole/kto-sme/> (accessed October 25, 2023)

proclaimed the word of the year. *Locavores* are the people who prefer buying food products from local farmers instead of the supermarkets (Cockrall-King, 2012: 78). Michael Pollan says that instead of a question asked in the 20<sup>th</sup> century “What are we going to have for dinner?”, many people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century ask “Where does this dinner come from?” (Pollan, 2007, quoted in Cockrall-King, 2012: 79). The raising awareness of the need to look for local food solutions in the global climate change times has been seen also in the growing number of farm food shops and online services in urban environments (including Banská Bystrica). The heritage aspect with the focus on identity building seems to be less important in urban food events and social contexts than in rural food events.

The majority of food festivals in Banská Bystrica are prominently located within the central square,<sup>10</sup> although exceptions arise with the spring and autumn festivals hosted on the hill of Bánoš. These vibrant events, orchestrated by the local government in close collaboration with neighbouring businesses, are co-created through partnerships with a multitude of stakeholders, including non-governmental organisations and cultural entities. While the festivities embrace a diverse range of musical performances, it is noteworthy that traditional folklore assumes a relatively diminished role compared to its prominence in rural localities.

Although the objective of this paper did not express the aspects of sustainability at food festivals, it is important to mention it especially when comparing urban and rural settings. In the context of sustainability, Banská Bystrica's city festivals have demonstrated commendable commitment to waste management. Incorporating recycling initiatives and the adoption of biodegradable, ecologically-friendly plates and cutlery has progressively evolved into a standardised practice. Notably, in contrast to rural culinary gatherings, urban events have remained relatively protected from any presence of right-wing neofascist political groups. This can be attributed to the fact that these parties predominantly draw their support from rural and small-town constituencies, a phenomenon that has not manifested itself within the urban festival landscape.

## Conclusions

The study centred around rural and urban food festivals in Central Slovakia, with a particular focus on the Banská Bystrica Self-Governing Region. The investigation was based on ethnographic research within selected villages and the city of Banská Bystrica.

The study drew inspiration from the work of Timothy and Pena (2016), who outlined a typology of food events that was adapted to the Slovak context. The research findings highlighted that the majority of rural food festivals revolved around

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10 The Slovak National Uprising Square.

the concept of competitive cooking and the consumption of traditional meals. These events were grounded in the idea of preserving and revitalising cultural heritage. It appears that by emphasising culinary traditions, food festivals tended to catalyse feelings of local pride and patrimony, nurturing a sense of ancestral legacy. Participants engaged in preparing and tasting these meals, whether crafted from old recipes or a particular food item. This trend can be traced back to 1995 when the inaugural World Championship in Halušky Cooking playfully emerged in the village of Turecká. Over time, what began as a joke evolved into a significant food festival, sparking inspiration in numerous other villages to host similar events. While these gatherings might have possessed less ambitious scopes, their overarching aim was to foster unity and identity within local communities. They sought to reinforce the sense of common heritage, local identity and solidarity, and strengthening the community by utilising the least contentious common denominator – food.

Food and foodways are the most important part of human survival, they are a way of social interactions and communication, cognition, material objects and behaviour (Timothy, 2016: 1). In this context, food festivals in Central Slovakia mirror these dimensions as they effectively minimise societal polarisation, recently driven mainly by political discord between liberal (pro-democratic) and conservative (encompassing populist, ultra-conservative, nationalistic, or neo-fascist) actors. Remarkably, even families harbouring divergent political viewpoints can unite for a day of a food festival as a number of respondents expressed.

Rural food festivals in Central Slovakia showcase a rich tapestry of traditions also through numerous folklore performances and other cultural showcases. These gatherings, primarily attended by local residents and their relatives from neighbouring cities, play a pivotal role in fortifying the bonds within local communities. Nonetheless, certain challenges persist, such as the exploitation of these events by neo-fascist political groups.

Contrastingly, urban food festivals in the city of Banská Bystrica have evolved as a blend of culinary experiences, encompassing a spectrum of diverse cuisines and emerging dietary trends, including farm-to-table delights, locally sourced products, or vegetarian options. Their primary objective is to contribute to presenting food diversity, supporting local economies, and attracting visitors from various settings and regions. Unlike their rural counterparts, these festivals usually avoid the competitive aspect, placing less emphasis on heritage. Instead, they offer an array of food practices and cultural performances that extend beyond folklore traditions. They attract not only local inhabitants but also visitors from a broader geographic region, making them important places for interaction and communication.

The presented urban food festivals exhibited a commitment to ecological consciousness and sustainability, evident in their waste management strategies and the incorporation of biodegradable plates and utensils. Their significance extended beyond cultural enrichment, embracing also robust economic dimensions by providing an arena for local and regional entrepreneurs to showcase and market their products. In celebrating various culinary cultures and artistic expressions, these

urban food festivals became reflective showcases of the diversity inherently ingrained within most urban centres.

Food festivals frequently find themselves under the analytical lens of culinary tourism in literature. However, within the scope of this article, the focus shifted towards smaller-scale food events, which seem to have less impact on tourism and are more locally or regionally oriented. As highlighted by Albala, they primarily provide communities with opportunities to meet and interact, creating a bond between participants (Albala, 2015, quoted in Ossowska et al., 2023). This facet was particularly evident in the context of small rural food festivals.

As emphasised by some scholars (e.g., Folgado-Fernández, Di-Clemente, Hernández-Mogollón, 2019, Hjalager, Kwiatkowski, 2018), the terrain of comprehensive research into the smaller-scale food festivals, specifically pertaining to their role in local and regional development, remains fertile for exploration. This study marked the first endeavour to contextualise the subject within the framework of Slovak food festivals.

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