

# Savouring the Veiled Narratives of Banquet Menus

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## Abstract

*The study explores the semiotic significance of late 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Romanian banquet menus, transcending culinary functions to convey broader societal messages. By examining thirty menus from Romania and Austro-Hungarian Romanian-speaking Transylvania, predominantly sourced from newspapers, it reveals banquets as platforms for political and social expression. Written in Romanian or French, these menus serve as conduits for political opinions, declarations of friendship or enmity, and expressions of pride or despair. Intentionally published in newspapers, they reflect a society valuing freedom of speech and exhibit a discernible discursive character, treating food as intellectual nourishment. The coverage of banquets in newspapers offers glimpses into contemporaneous events and personalities, serving as historical documents shedding light on overlooked events and individuals. Through the examination of these menus' meanings, researchers gain insights into forgotten personalities and societal dynamics, illustrating the enduring cultural significance of food beyond mere sustenance.*

**Keywords:** *banquet menus, pre-war Romania, food and memory, zeitgeist, food as a platform*

## Introduction

A meal is a composite entity comprising cooked foods, their socially constructed tastes, and the protocols dictating how they should be consumed – a set of manners, codes, and labels (Barthes, 2008). However, food transcends its immediate sensory experience; it serves as a sign, revealing identity, terroir, and even a nation by triggering “imagined metonymies” associated with a particular culture (Sobral, 2019). While the symbolic power of food is often discussed in the context of diplomatic gatherings involving world leaders, this article contends that ordinary individuals also leverage food as a communicative tool. This view follows the idea put forward by Linda Morgan: “All commensality signals information to the individuals at table, including messages of status and symbolic kinship.” (2012: 146) It also takes into account the notion of food proposed by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1969) as being good to think with, which finds resonance in the examination of late 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Romanian banquet menus, which go beyond culinary considerations

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to convey broader statements and messages. This study aims to unravel the intricate semiotics associated with gastronomy by delving into menus that provide intellectual nourishment before satiating physical appetites.

### **Methodology**

Cookbooks, though informative about gender roles, economy, culture and other aspects of society, are prescriptive in nature and may not accurately depict what people truly cook and eat (Albala, 2012: 229-231). In contrast, banquet menus offer a unique window into the actual meals consumed, making them more credible sources. Their content and ceremonial nature reveal valuable insights into societal views, beliefs, and practices prevalent at a given time.

This essay meticulously examines thirty menus from banquets held in the Kingdom of Romania and Austro-Hungarian Romanian-speaking Transylvania during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Most of the analysed menus have been sourced from newspapers, with only two found in books, and a few foreign menus retrieved from the Internet. Today, many of them are collectibles, especially when signed by illustrious guests. These documents have been treated as artefacts and subjected to systematic review. A taxonomy has been constructed through successive rounds of coding, categorising menus based on a central theme, with connotations related to either entertainment or politics. The study does not focus on aspects of food such as seasonality, taste, complexity, price, class or status. While chronological order is not strictly adhered to, menus have been grouped based on their overarching message. Although not employing prosopography, the analysis of these menus collectively offers insights into the beliefs and attitudes of their authors.

### **History of the menu**

The term “menu” as defined by the 2009 edition of *New Larousse Gastronomique* was first officially used in 1718 “but the custom of making such a list is much older” being a “bill of fare of ceremonial meals [...] displayed on the wall and enabled kitchen staff, in particular, to follow the order in which dishes should be served”. While historical documentation of menus is scarce before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, instances such as the 879 BC Banquet Stela documenting Assurnasirpal’s feast (Mark, 2020) and the distribution of menus in Chinese Song dynasty restaurants during the 13<sup>th</sup> century (Gernet, 1962) offer glimpses into early festive culinary practices. The prevalence of menus in the Western world, primarily in written form, became more pronounced in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and evolved stylistically over time, mirroring changes in typography and culinary fashion.

Menus serve the dual purpose of conveying a restaurant’s standard offerings and providing information about special selections tailored for

specific events or guests, such as dinners or banquets honouring notable individuals, professional organisations, cultural entities, military units, and more. In the French culinary lexicon mentioned above, “menu” refers to a set meal with its composition determined collaboratively by the restaurant manager and the paying party, while *à la carte* encompasses the comprehensive list of dishes available daily on the premises. This research primarily focuses on the discursive nature of banquet menus.

### **Social and historical context**

The 19<sup>th</sup> century marked a transformative period for Romania, a nation that had historically comprised separate regions – the largest being Moldova, Wallachia and Transylvania— the first two within and outside the Ottoman Empire’s influence, the last under the Hungarian and, later, Austro-Hungarian’s Empire domination. The aspiration for national unity gained momentum, leading to the unification of Moldova and Wallachia in 1859. Efforts to include Transylvania and other smaller Romanian-language regions under foreign rule, Bukovina and Bessarabia, intensified (Boia, 2022). By the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Romania emerged as a young independent monarchy undergoing rapid change, fuelled by significant social and political shifts (Hitchins, 2015). The era witnessed the convergence of liberal and conservative ideologies, activism within cultural elites, and a dynamic political landscape (see Queen Mary of Romania’s memoirs). Banquets and social events became platforms for expressing political and social sentiments. Newspapers played a crucial role in reporting on the activities of political parties, cultural elites, and other entities. Banquets, covered by journalists, provided insights into the lives of the middle class, reflecting culinary heritage and serving as mirrors of socio-demographic groups. These banquets, while not entirely private or public, acted as snapshots in time, revealing the names of notable attendees, their patriotic discourses, and the laudatory toasts exchanged.

Doctors and professors frequently found themselves the subjects of honour during retirement celebrations or upon receiving prestigious titles or new positions within local hospitals or universities. Trade unions, cooperatives, cultural associations, political parties, newspapers and various professional bodies organised events to pay tribute to leaders, commemorate anniversaries, and celebrate successful resolutions to conflicts. Newspaper articles offered uncritical coverage and thus provide valuable context and insights for today’s researchers.

The banquets *per se* serve as evidence of culinary heritage, but some of the menus crafted for private events also function as mirrors of specific socio-demographic groups or, at the very least, their hosts. The menus themselves became vehicles for expressing political opinions, declarations of friendship or enmity, and various other reflections. A good example would be the

nationalism-infused rhetoric of one Cluj-based professor or the apparently light-hearted war remembrance of one Moldavian military menu. By examining these banquets and their menus, researchers gain access to a slice of history that reflects the attitudes and reactions of normal individuals to the realities of their time, encompassing themes of war, political disillusionment, patriotism, nationalism, economic prosperity, professional pride, disenchantment, frustration, and a spectrum of other emotions.

In contrast, conventional menus of the time tended to be straightforward and descriptive. Most menus primarily listed the main ingredients and applied techniques such as “Foie gras en Bellevue” or paid homage to individuals, as exemplified by “Gateaux Boissier aux Pistaches,” created by Maison Capșa to honour its founder’s French mentor; wines were typically listed by vineyard and vintage, maintaining linguistic simplicity (all examples are taken from a May 1885 banquet menu of the Jockey Club). The British Colony in Bucharest celebrated Queen’s Victoria Jubilee in June 1897 with what seems to be a very simple and plainly phrased menu made of “soup, sterlet, roast beef, *vol-au-vent*, roast duck and chicken, salad, asparagus, ices, dessert, coffee”; they did have two wines and champagne, though. The Royal family of Romania had a clearly richer menu in 1890 on their visit to the recently annexed province of Dobrogea to launch the construction works of a bridge over the Danube; they dined on *caviar frais, consommé à la Royale, sturgeon, bécasse, fromage, dessert, old sherry, wine and champagne Pommery frappé* (Dinu, 2019). Royals are bound to keep it simple and neutral, so no embellishment on the wording here nor in other more important menus such as the British royal ones. Diana Spencer’s wedding to Charles, Prince of Wales, in 1981, offered a menu that was deliberately concise in French, the language of food and formality. Iconic historical menus, like those on the Titanic or from the Orient Express, lacked linguistic or semiotic nuances too and even contemporary examples, such as El Bulli’s farewell dinner in 2011, featuring a spectacular 49-course feast, employed a simple, functional, and descriptive menu language, reflecting the prevailing fashion of the time (Franklin and Johnson, 2019: 57, 166). While conventional menus may or may not convey much about people and their times, this article focuses on menus that go beyond mere descriptions of food, categorising them as either having or lacking entertainment value or political significance.

### **Do play with your food**

Over a few decades, in the Romanian-speaking regions and especially Moldova, renowned for hosting a large number of writers, banquet menus ventured beyond traditional culinary descriptions to offer an engaging reading experience that goes beyond typical gastronomic delights. Some menus stand out for their entertainment value, devoid of any hidden agenda, designed solely to amuse. One such menu, dated 1912, from a trip to the village of

Bârnova by the Unirea Printing House Workers Society, humorously announces a “salad that is mixed but not soiled,” a “spritz made with wine as old as Gutenberg,” and a “nonpareil coffee.” [1] Another, composed in verse, from *Evenimentul* (1920), playfully describes dishes, such as this fish:

Then, spicy as a *bon mot*  
A fish in sauce *ravigot*  
Surely Cotnari wine will not miss, its gloss  
Allows the sturgeon to swim not only in sauce

On 3 January 1897, *Evenimentul* newspaper reported on a New Year’s Eve traditional party hosted by Professor Doctor Sculy, where guests were informed of unconventional dishes like “sarcoma liver *paté*”, “fresh human brains”, and *consommé* with hydatid parasites. The menu included humorous elements such as “souple” made with “liberal-conservative truffles” and a medical punch named “magnesium citrate”, ending with an “ideo ataxique” champagne affecting movement coordination. Another New Year’s Eve medical banquet in the previous year featured quinine, ricin oil, tar, and goose *à la* iodine, with mineral water replacing wine. The menu concluded with the doctor’s post-party diet recommendations.

In 1919, the Journalists Trade Union of Moldova offered a banquet with a “summary” menu containing “various news” as entrees, a *consommé* served with “less important pieces”, and a play on words with ham and eggs. The menu included “forbidden fruits”, “old wine from the current year”, “veritable ersatz coffee” and censored ice cream. Years later, the journalists of *Adevărul* rejoiced upon positively settling a conflict with one Toma Bazilescu dining on “Harpagon caviar”, probably referring to a rather small quantity, and a “republican mayo on a monarchic sturgeon” (*Dimineața*, 1933).

Engineers too displayed creativity in their menus. In 1889, Romanian alumni of a Zürich polytechnic school designed a menu featuring “fillet of bovine locomotive”, “geological bonbons”, “coffee from the chemistry lab”, “liqueurs for the sedimentary formation”, and “eruptive cognac” (*Românulu*, 1889). In 1911, Moldavian train engineers created a menu mirroring a project’s phases, from terrain study to reception (*Mișcarea*, 1911). Various other professional groups crafted amusing menus, such as the Social Sciences Group mentioning minorities, religion, and local administration in their banquet (*Opinia*, 1897). Naturalists celebrated 1922 New Year’s Eve with *hors d’oeuvres* spiked with essence of *Prunus* (brandy) and *Sus scrofa*, a wild boar dish that required a parenthesis to clarify the local saying about the arrogance of a sow in a tree. Traders celebrated with humour as well. A banquet honouring Mr Richard R. Tuffli featured “a little old brandy” paired with “collaborative olives”, “legally imported fish”, “syndicate member lamb steak”, and “wine spilt in 1916” (*Evenimentul*, 1920). A Cooperative banquet in 1883 proudly and

entertainingly displayed local ingredients and brands, showcasing crayfish, deer, rabbit, cognac, and wines. These menus reflect a rich tradition of wit, creativity, and camaraderie across various professional and social circles in Romania, blending culinary delights with humour and cultural references.

Military personnel also demonstrated their wit through creative and thematic menus. In 1909, a war-inspired menu was served at the Royal Court, featuring dishes such as "surveillance-ready soup", "fish shell from the arsenal waters", "bullets of the shrapnel" peas, frozen cannon fires, and "Ready!" coffee (Dinu, 2019). In March 1919, the 4<sup>th</sup> Queen Mary Roşiori Regiment had a lunch comprised of "Oituz-like liver *pâte*", lamb prepared like in the trenches, shrapnel-like peas with cheese, ice from the Carpathian Mountains and "English, not Turkish, coffee", while wine was Romanian and French, from the renowned Bordeaux region (Iorga and Iorga, 2015: 149).

During a banquet on 1 September 1913, honouring Lt. Col. Raicovici, a respected military figure and storyteller, the menu reflected his troops' experiences during the Second Balkan War. Dishes included "anti-cholera cognac", "disinfectant brandy", fish roe salad, and charcuterie with Bulgarian names. Each item carried historical significance, connecting to lesser-known war sites and highlighting soldiers' experiences (*Evenimentul*, 1913). Similarly, a banquet for the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion of Hunters in Moldova during the same Balkan War structured its menu as a strategic battle. With dishes symbolising military actions, the menu included references to the Bulgarian river Iskar sturgeon, illusions of the enemy (*vol-au-vent* pastry compared to Bulgarian prime minister's dreams), and a counter-offensive with red meat. The dessert section simulated the attack, complete with a charlotte cake made using army crockery and a "comma-free compote", made of foraged Mirabelle plum, where ubiquitous worms are the commas. Military menus extended beyond battles to the cultural realm.

Intellectuals and cultural societies played with food and menus in their own ways. In 1885, Junimea, the famous leading cultural society, one which brought Moldavian writers and thinkers together under the motto "enters who wants to, stays who manages" sent a "summons" for its 22<sup>nd</sup> traditional lunch, emphasising the importance of drinking over eating. *Revista Nouă* literary magazine initiated a tradition in 1889, celebrating each year with a lunch for staff and contributors. The menu started with *hors d'oeuvres à la Hagi Tudose*, a Romanian Harpagon known to have asked the cat's tail to be cut, so cold would not enter the room. It continued with *potage julienne à la Trandafiloff*, an allusion to an 1844 political affair involving a Russian receiving an abusive mining concession from the Wallachian government. Other dishes held literary allusions, such as *Petit pates aux "legende costiniane"* and the *Parfait au café* or the "drunkard's repentance" champagne – all references to works that have been previously published by the magazine. Even in New York, an 1868 literary

dinner at Delmonico's, to honour Charles Dickens, featured creatively named dishes, connecting to famous authors known for their literary and culinary contributions – e.g. Fenimore Cooper, *Temple de la literature* and *file de boeuf à la Lucullus*, *creme d'asperges à la Dumas*, *timbales à la Dickens*, all references to authors famous for their gastronomic interest and culinary prowess (Franklin and Johnson, 2019: 166).

These menus show the diverse ways in which traders, military personnel and intellectuals used humour, creativity, and cultural references to enrich their dining experiences and commemorate significant events in history.

### **Talking politics at the dinner table**

In 1881, C.A. Rosetti's banquet celebrating his newspaper's 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary featured a menu subtly infused with patriotism. It deviates slightly from the norm, but it is still conventional, marginally bent to customise it for its guest of honour. Dishes such as *timbale de poulardes à la Rosetti* and beef fillet *à la Plevna* honoured the pivotal 1877 Battle of Plevna, symbolising Romania's independence from the Ottoman Empire. They were all washed down with Chateau Lafitte 1869 and champagne Roederer. The evening, hosted at Le Grand Hôtel du Boulevard or, according to other sources, at the National Theatre Bucharest, saw wife Maria Rosetti and other ladies dressed in national costumes, adding a cultural touch to the celebration (Cebuc 1969).

Dimitrie Butculescu, a prominent archaeologist and a highly regarded president of merchants and manufacturers, received several banquets in his honour. His menus cleverly blended professional pride with patriotic elements. The Liga Culturală's 1891 party showcased a harmonious mix of Carpathian brandy, Balkan mastic, Bulgarian cucumbers, Saxon ambrosia, Oriental coffee, and Moldova's foundational mythic beef, celebrating the diverse ethnicities coexisting in Romania; a two-verse folk stanza further emphasised the country's richness and timeless Romanian identity. In 1894, Butculescu elevated his menu (Jaklovsky, 1997) for another banquet, naming the soup a "pan-Romanian cooperative" and associating the beef fillet with the Dacian-Roman descent. The desire for national unity was symbolised by a side dish of Transylvanian potatoes, expressing the hope for the three regions to be united peacefully, as reflected in the "diplomatic peas". The chicken dish, titled "The Triumph of Plevna", featured Bukovina snipes on "emancipated polenta" signifying the unification of Bukovina with Romania, which eventually took place in 1918. This menu highlighted geographical representativity and unity, transcending political borders.

The 1891 Democratic-Radical Party banquet at the Traian Hotel in Iași featured a tradition of crafting menus with humorous political innuendos. Even in the face of a snow blizzard hindering attendance, the event was a

success, with “succulent and copious” food. The journalist dispatched by *Lupta* newspaper to cover it explains that:

every cutlery set had a list of dishes, written as in previous years, with foods and drinks metamorphosed into epithets bearing political innuendos *du jour*; this habit of writing the menu in a humorous, ironic way is traditional and will remain traditional at all our parties, the wit and intelligent joke shall not be eliminated ever from the bosom of the radical party (no page number)

The witty menu showcased dishes like “aperitif lymph Koch style” (honouring the German microbiologist), charcuterie linked to cultural league Junimea, and pastries representing “old decrepit men from the Senate”. Opposition figures were humorously referenced in a rabbit dish with a “governmental mushroom sauce” while the “ministerial arrogance” appeared as turkey stuffing. The menu concluded with restored cake *à la Lecomte*, recalling a French architect invited by King Charles I to recondition monuments in Romania. Drinks included “irredentist champagne”, vintage wines, and “Triple Alliance liquors”. Another notable menu, from 1921, honouring Prof. Julien Suchaire, featured champagne *du la Victoire* and “vins crus Verdun-Mărășești”, evoking memories of recent WWI battles. A similar trend was observed in the menus of the Indian Independence Night in 1947 and its 2017 follow-up, with dishes named *à l’Indienne*, *Délices à l’Hindustan*, *Poulard Soufflé Independence*, and *Vacherin de Pêches Liberation* (Franklin and Johnson, 2019: 83).

In 1893, Alexandru Roman, a Romanian professor working in Hungary, marked his 30<sup>th</sup> teaching anniversary with a banquet. Serving as a Romanian professor at the Budapest University, a founder of the Romanian Literary Society (later the Romanian Academy), and a deputy in the Budapest Parliament from 1865 to 1888, Roman faced political persecution for advocating Romanian rights in Transylvania under the Austro-Hungarian dual leadership. *Tribuna Sibiului* dispatched a reporter to document the banquet, revealing a Romanian national sentiment despite the customary toast to “our glorious monarch Franz Josef I.” Comparatively, the 1920 Hampstead Communist Party First Annual Party menu in Great Britain omitted a toast to the King, instead quoting Lord Byron with “the Toscin of the Soul, the Dinner Bell” (Franklin and Johnson, 2019: 76, typo in original). Anti-monarchy sentiments can be found in a Dublin banquet exhibiting Irish nationalist sentiments, evident in menu items like *mort à la reine*, Irish stew, “deviled anything”, “hearty chokes”, “dynamite” and “bitter beer”, reflecting discontent with Queen Victoria (*Dublin Daily Express*, 1883). Returning to the Romanian banquet in Hungary, *Tribuna Sibiului* reported guests being greeted with “Wake up, Romanian”, the Romanian national anthem dubbed by the newspaper “our strong Marseillaise”; a jubilee album and portrait were presented to the professor, with congratulations and speeches. The journalist admits to taking the liberty



to write down the menu to satisfy “the curiosity of the gentile female readers”, usually not invited to this type of function. The menu itself lacked ironic or political references, resembling a classic French end-of-century dinner, but two Hungarian words caught the eye, *Magyarádi* and *Sashegyi*, later in-depth research revealing that they refer to wine made of the regional *cadarcă* grape variety.

In 1896, a Moldavian newspaper celebrated its fourth year with a banquet exemplifying satirical journalism. Featuring twelve dishes and five drinks, the menu cleverly referenced prominent figures, associating soft roe fish salad with Lascăr Catargiu, aged President of the Conservative Party and former War ministry. The *consommé*, served with “gugoase din Program” (i.e. “lies” in Romanian), humorously alluded to political deceit. The turkey steak represented “arrogant Lahovary”, another Conservative politician, while “liberal elections” influenced the fine peas dish. The ice cream was “frozen like Junimea’s hopes” and the global occult was associated with the *timbale à la financière*. Desserts featured universally “dried fruits in all political parties”, while the 1848 vintage wine symbolised the revered revolutionary generation. Noteworthy was the mention of chef “*maître* Irimia Spiridon” along with the musicians that provided entertainment (*Evenimentul*, 1896).

The focal point of this investigation is a menu from a banquet hosted by I. Paul in celebration of his appointment as a professor at the University of Cluj-Napoca in 1919, a significant year marked by recent political events. Published in *Evenimentul*, the menu commences with Clemenceau brandy, named after the French politician associated with Hungary’s territorial concessions, including the cession of Transylvania to Romania. The longstanding Romanian-Hungarian feud over Transylvania culminated in its unification with Romania on December 1, 1918. Paraphrasing Jane Austen, it is a truth universally acknowledged that *țuică* or brandy goes well with olives, so the menu proceeds with “olives from the peace olive branch.” The subsequent culinary offerings like ham, demi-lune radishes, etc. symbolise historical events, such as Bela Kuhn’s Bolshevik regime in Hungary and his troops entering Romania, the Romanian army’s short and decisive intervention, and the partial ceding of Banat to Romania after the end of the World War I. Noteworthy items include “clean Romanian language beef tongue, undeformed by Hungarian”, lion cubs with Bulgarian vegetables (a linguistic pun), and “Tisza tiger on a spit.” The dessert is associated with a poem written by patriot poet George Cosbuc while the “freedom fruits” represent Woodrow Wilson’s influence in transferring Transylvania from Hungary to Romania. Beverages include “requisition wine *à la Tokay*” and Enver bey Turkish coffee, referencing Enver Paşa’s role in the Ottoman Empire and its alliance with Germany. The menu concludes with a postscript verse urging the consumption of food and drink while being oblivious to the surroundings, with a request to

write from Kolozswar (Cluj-Napoca), underscoring the anti-Hungarian sentiment and the menu's manifestation of intense nationalism.

### **Castigat ridendo mores**

The organisation of social gatherings, particularly during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries Romania, provided an avenue for members of the middle class to articulate their concerns and viewpoints. The banquet menus from these events acted as entertainment or served as instruments for conveying messages, transcending their culinary function to encapsulate beliefs, attitudes, opinions, and societal reactions. Crafted in Romanian or frequently in mistake-ridden French, part of them served as conduits for political opinions, declarations of friendship or enmity, and expressions of pride or despair.

Tailored for specific audiences, the publication of these menus in newspapers acknowledges their intentional public nature, reflecting a society that valued freedom of speech. The menus with explicit political statements exhibit a discernible discursive character, treating food as intellectual nourishment before being consumed physically. These menus conceal political and cultural motifs in plain sight, demonstrating how food can serve as a transformative medium, revealing social dynamics and metaphorically representing notions of nationhood and identity.

As personal events, the coverage of banquets in newspapers offers glimpses into the intersection of private and public life. The menus reference contemporaneous events, public figures, organisations, and noteworthy news relevant to the hosts and guests. While some menus comprise light-hearted *mots d'esprit* easily forgotten, others employ sarcasm to convey their messages. A subset of these menus serves as historical documents, shedding light on events often overlooked by mainstream historical accounts. By examining the semiotics of these banquets, researchers gain insights into forgotten personalities, their lives, and their societal impact. These menus provide a voice to individuals, act as memory support and as a form of restitution. It is evident that these witty menus, even after more than a century, are not static representations but rather living *tableaux*. They remain fresh and engaging, illustrating that food transcends mere sustenance and encompasses a broader cultural significance.

### **Notes**

[1] All quotations from Romanian are translated by the author unless stated otherwise.

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