SIPPING FOREIGN TASTES: TRAVELLERS' ACCOUNTS ABOUT BEVERAGES ENCOUNTERED IN THE ROMANIAN PRINCIPALITIES IN THE XVIITH TO THE XIXTH CENTURIES

Virginia PETRICĂ
"Ovidius" University of Constanţa
Iuliana DAVID
"Ovidius" University Constanţa

Abstract: *The article focuses on the encounter with the Other from the perspective of the consumed drinks in the Romanian Principalities in the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. International beverages—such as coffee, wine, or spirits—gain distinctive iconic meanings in association to the local spatiality, according to their use in private or public spaces. They are charged with cultural, religious, and economic implications and become polymorphous markers of taste. The analysis relies on criticism in mentalities, food studies, spatial studies, semiotics of food and drinks, and reveals the plurivalent connections established between taste and a space matrix which reunites and transfigures Oriental and Occidental influences.*

Keywords: *coffee, wine, wormwood wine, identity, travellers, the Other, spatiality.*

Travel writers' stories configure kaleidoscopic cartographies of the spaces they cross, embedding mostly visual, but also auditory, kinaesthetic, olfactory or gustatory aspects. Michel de Certeau considers that "every story is a travel story—a travel practice" (115) and draws attention to the fact that the sum of the micro-stories related to a certain space confer its polyvalence (125). Out of the multitude of aspects approached by travellers in their accounts regarding the territories of the Romanian Principalities in the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, this article deals with issues regarding the gustatory spatiality, with focus on the local drinks. The analysis traces the roles of beverages within the private and the public spaces, as markers of hospitability and sociability.

When entering unknown territories, travellers often discovered large discrepancies between what Henri Lefebvre coined as perceived space, conceived space, lived space (33). The conceived space bears the burden of prejudices and stereotypes, which tend to shadow their perception of the real space. For instance, the British traveller Florence Berger depicts Bucharest in 1876 as a strange spatial melange which reunites both Oriental and Occidental influences, a melting pot of tastes and customs. She points out not only that here one can consume a global diversity of drinks—such as *braga*, sherbet, beer or Bordeaux wine—but she also associates the beverages stereotypically to ethnic and religious groups: Bulgarians, Muslims, Germans, French. The categorization goes even further, including specific social classes: beer is depicted as an iconic identity beverage for the German students, and *petit Bordeaux* for the Parisian bourgeoisie (Berger 35–6). She transfers the rigid pattern of stereotypical judgement to the perceived space, which shadows the polyvalence of a land situated at the crossroads of empires and on the versatile border between the western and the eastern worlds.

Out of the above-mentioned beverages, *braga* is associated with the Bulgarians. This is, in fact, what the Ottomans called *boza*, a name indicating its main ingredient: millet. They have spread this beverage throughout the Ottoman-conquered territories. In the seventeenth century, Petru Bogdan Bakšić mentions it as a beverage obtained from millet (204). In the late eighteenth-century, Baron of Campenhausen notices that it is common in Moldavia (54). The sour refreshing drink is prepared especially from millet or rye flour, and drunk especially

BDD-A26213 © 2017 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:45:23 UTC)

during the hot summer days. The beverage is also recorded in the nineteenth-century: the French traveller François Recordon remarks that people of the working class, especially in the cities, consume a kind of thick millet beer, which is called *braga*, and which he finds disgusting in taste and appearance and (41). The beverage appears, thus, as a marker of social differentiation, particularly enjoyed by the poor people for its nourishing qualities.

Another drink which functions as an iconic sign associated with the lower layers of the society is brandy. In the nineteenth century, the British journalist Beatty-Kingston notes that peasants drink brandy in their leisure time (2:61). Drinks are markers of social differences even as regards the spaces of consumption. The French traveller Xavier Kieffer points out that, in Bucharest, towards the end of the nineteenth century, the representatives of the bourgeoisie prefer the coffee and cigars in the coffeehouses, while the ordinary men socialize in taverns and drink brandy or wormwood wine (40). In opposition to alcohol, coffee is an invigorating beverage, favouring lucidity and energy. As Tom Standage emphasizes, "coffee promoted clarity of thought, making it the ideal drink for scientists, businessmen, and philosophers" (4). Brandy, on the other hand, since it has a high content of alcohol, leads quickly to drunkenness and an altered state of mind.

Some travellers discuss the varieties of brandy encountered in the Romanian Principalities, such as "raki" (the Romanian *rachiu*) and "tsouica" (the Romanian *ţuica*). The difference regards the ingredients: thus, the former is usually obtained from the distillation of wine, cereals, or fruits, while the latter is obtained by the fermentation and distillation of plums or other fruits. The types of brandy also differ in terms of commercialization. The French Thibault Lefebvre mentions that most of the brandy distilled from cereals is destined to trade, while the plum brandy is preserved in the households: women serve plum brandy to guests, and in the families of peasants and wealthy workers this beverage is consumed as an aperitif (Lefebvre 264). In the system of food sequences which compose a menu, spirits have an initial position, as appetizers, triggering hunger and high spirits.

Regardless of their names, the various types of brandy are strong alcoholic drinks. Reay Tannahill indicates that the term "alcohol" reminds of the Arabic *al-kohl* which initially designated the black powder used for the make-up of the eye-lids, and then was used to name the extraction of a pure liquid essence (243–4). Such beverages, alchemically obtained by the reunited powers of the water and the fire, were considered to have important healing powers. Reay Tannahill shows that the distilled wine was "at first regarded as a medicine and known as *aqua vitae* ('water of life'), a name immortalized in *eau de vie, akvavit, vodka,* and the Gaelic *uisge beatha* (abbreviated to *uisge*, which was then corrupted into 'whisky')," and the German *Brandewine* which became the English *brandy* (244). Travellers record hypostases of brandy as a medicine in the Romanian Principalities. The nineteenth-century French Théodore Margot notices that brandy is the peasants' favourite beverage, which they also use therapeutically for indigestion (328). Spirits function, thus, dichotomically, both as causes of disorders and as traditional remedies.

Wormwood wine is another beverage with medical usage. The mid-nineteenth-century French doctor Joseph Caillat remarks that the local boyars consume it as a remedy for intermittent fever (523). This drink, frequently encountered in the Romanian space, but not very much enjoyed, is only wine enriched with the wormwood bitterness, unlike absinthe—the beverage of the late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Parisian bohemian elite, which has a high alcoholic content and is made of wormwood, anise, and other aromatic herbs. Wormwood wine is reluctantly tasted and rarely appreciated. In the nineteenth-century, the French Stanislas Bellanger remarks that wormwood grows in abundance in Wallachia and Moldavia and the inhabitants of these territories use it to make their favourite summer beverage, which he considers strong and nauseous (1: 116). The peculiar bitterness confers, however, special properties to the local beverage, which harmonizes to the specific needs of

BDD-A26213 © 2017 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:45:23 UTC)

the geographic spatial matrix. The therapeutic antibacterial and antiparasitic virtues of wormwood, scientifically proven nowadays, make it appropriate for the hot climate.

Few travellers enjoy wormwood wine; in the late eighteenth century, Baron of Campenhausen considers it excellent and notes that it is exported yearly to Russia (106). Eugène Léger, a nineteenth-century French doctor, cannot understand how the inhabitants of Wallachia like this beverage and even dedicate an entire holiday to the wormwood wine: the 1st of May, considered in the old times the beginning of spring. On this day, wormwood wine should be drunk in order to provide health during the year, and a bunch of wormwood is worn at the buttonhole (Léger 461–2). The plant fulfils, thus, an apotropaic role. The day is celebrated by outdoor feasts, usually picnics, during which wormwood wine is plentiful. However, the traveller finds this wine extremely bitter and impossible to consume.

While wormwood wine is a local drink which travellers do not appreciate, the varieties of simple wine in the Romanian Principalities are generally acclaimed. In the nineteenth-century, Johann Daniel Ferdinand Neigebaur highly appreciates the Wallachian and Moldavian wine and enumerates some of the most famous vineyards, such as Odobești and Cotnari in Moldavia and Drăgășani in Wallachia (11). He traces a cartography of space according to the taste filter. Charles Boner, a British journalist, in his accounts about Transylvania in 1865, dedicates a whole chapter to *Wine and Politics.* He prizes wine in metaphorical terms and acknowledges its importance as an article of trade, but also "as a source of joy, as an exhilarating power, as a restorer of energy and a mighty gladdener of the human heart" (161). His cartography of space is interconnected to that of taste, as he notices that the "noble qualities" of the Transylvanian wine would not be the same without the harmonious alternation of mountain and hills and their good exposure to the sunlight. At the same time, the local geography prevents a better popularization and commercialization of wine and other products, because Transylvania is "locked in all sides by mountain and forest" (166). The political factors, which include the absence of governmental interest, also contribute to the lack of fame of the Transylvanian wines. An intricate network of geographical, political, economic and social factors influence, thus, the fate of a beverage.

Many travellers comment upon the fact that the quality of wine is affected by the improper conditions of storage and processing. Baron of Campenhausen draws attention to the fact that the unhealthy methods of preservation of the wines in cellars have negative effects on their quality (123). In the same regard, a nineteenth-century Austrian traveller, Wilhelm Hamm, considers that the Moldavian wine is so neglectfully prepared that it cannot be preserved for more than a year and should be drunk as it is still young (21). The relationship between humans and the generosity of nature seems to be improperly balanced. In this regard, Thibault Lefebvre considers that the Wallachian wines are not renowned because the inhabitants of this country do not know how to help nature, and do not take care of the vineyards which have the aspect of virgin forests (287-88). Travellers' accounts reveal the paradox of an abundant space, which offers innumerable natural resources, which are not capitalized enough.

An ancient beverage, a stimulus of conviviality, wine has been adapted to the specific spatial, cultural, economic, and religious needs. As concerns antiquity, Tom Standage remarks that "wine was the lifeblood of the Roman and Greek Mediterranean civilizations" (3), as a major economic article of trade, but also an indispensable catalyst of the feasts. In the modern French space, according to Roland Barthes, wine becomes a "totem-drink" which connotes leisure (58–61). In the Romanian Principalities, wine reunites a polyvalent symbolism, as it acts as a significant marker of hospitality, but also circumscribes ritual and religious implications. François Recordon mentions a custom involving wine in a post-funeral ritual: the deceased is exhumed after three years and the bones are washed with wine (72). Wine has

BDD-A26213 © 2017 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:45:23 UTC)

the role of ablution, of purification within this post-liminal rite. The plurivalence of this beverage is mirrored in the accounts regarding the rites of passage.

As regards marriage, François Recordon gives the example of wine usage during the church ceremony, when the bride and the groom drink wine alternatively from the same goblet and share a piece of bread (69). Arnold van Gennep considers that the rite of sharing food and drinks is a rite of incorporation (165). In this case, wine and bread represent the Holy Eucharist, which confirms the sacred union. Wine is also omnipresent during the nuptial feast, where friends and relatives, and even passers-by, are invited to drink and eat together. Commensality, as a rite of incorporation, ensures the aggregation of the spouses in their new families. Wine is, in this stage, a sign endowed with social and Christian religious connotations, as it ensures hospitality and reminds of the miracles that Jesus had made at the wedding in Cana of Galilee.

Wine is a marker of hospitality at all the levels of the society. Certeau, Girard, and Mayol remark "the cultural function of wine: it is the symbolic antisadness element, the festive face of the meal" (90). In the Romanian Principalities, travellers appreciate commensality, but sometimes complain about the great quantities of wine they have to consume as guests. Paul of Aleppo, the seventeenth-century Syrian archdeacon, points out that, at Matei Basarab's Court, in Wallachia, everyone has to empty the goblets with wine when toasts are made (122). Besides their social connotations, toasts also involve a sense of belonging, and function as ritual gestures. Paul Manning, discussing the semiotics of drink and drinking, emphasizes that "the relationship between speaking and drinking is also a mutually constituting *reflexive* one: a drink can only become a 'toast' through the regimenting metasemiotic effect of words, but the performative effect promised by those words only becomes fulfilled when the toast is actually drunk" (2). The act of emptying the goblets is, thus, meant to consecrate the wishes, and is integrated into a sequence of patterns that everyone should comply with, otherwise it becomes useless.

Coffee is another landmark of hospitality and socialization. The ritual for receiving guests in the private space of the upper classes includes coffee, confiture and tobacco. François Recordon remarks that the Wallachians have taken over from the Turks the custom of receiving guests with coffee, tobacco, and sweetmeat (86). He notices that coffee in the boyards' houses is usually served without sugar and should be savoured slowly, while smoking (Recordon 87). Many western travellers do not particularly enjoy the specificity of the eastern coffee, served with sediments and without sugar and milk. Others, such as the French traveller Albert de Burton, considers that one can adapt and even like this variant of coffee (42). Wilhelm Hamm is so fascinated by the preparation of Turkish coffee at an inn that he offers plenty of details about the process: the finely-ground young brown powder is covered by boiled water and the foamy drink is ready. The traveller finds the drink extremely tasty (81). Regardless of the differences in the manner of serving, coffee represents, worldwide, a symbol of socialization both in private and public spaces.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, travellers describe the function of coffeehouses as urban focal points. In the city port of Galaţi, the French lady traveller Adèle Hommaire de Hell comments upon the fact that the social role of the coffeehouses is combined with the economic functions, as commercial contracts are concluded here (Hell, 360). Coffee is a pretext for exchanging news and meeting people. Introduced to Europe from the Middle East, as Tom Standage remarks, in the Age of Reason, "coffeehouse discussions led to the establishment of the scientific societies, the founding of the newspapers, the establishments of financial institutions, and provided fertile ground for revolutionary thought, particularly in France" (4–5). Coffee can be consumed not only in coffeehouses but also in garden restaurants. In the promenade places of nineteenth-century Bucharest, the British

BDD-A26213 © 2017 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:45:23 UTC)

traveller William Wilkinson remarks that many people enjoy coffee, ice cream and various refreshments. Coffee is, thus, an important marker of leisure and socialization.

A beverage with similar connotations, extremely popular in European countries such as Russia and Great Britain, black tea does not play a central role in the social life the nineteenth century, in comparison with Turkish coffee. Johann Daniel Ferdinand Neigebaur remarks that coffeehouses serve especially coffee, and rarely tea and wine (8), while the Swiss traveller Carol Guébhart notes that the representatives of the upper class in Galați have evening reunions where they play cards and enjoy tea, coffee, and confiture (186). As it is a luxury article, tea is usually consumed by the higher hierarchy.

Punch is another article of import, experienced as a curiosity by the representatives of the elites, but not commonly spread in the Romanian Principalities. In the eighteenth-century Andreas Wolf notices that punch is a fashionable drink in Moldavia, appreciated especially by the young men of the upper classes, who have borrowed the recipe from Russian officers (264). The political circumstances (the armed conflict between the Russians and the Ottomans) have favoured the introduction of a new beverage.

Beer is another drink of minor importance in the Romanian Principalities until the mid-nineteenth century. A beverage with ancient tradition, beer represented one of the first forms of alcoholic drinks, obtained from the fermentation of cereals. Tom Standage points out that, in the ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt, beer and bread were not only a form of nourishment, but also a method of payment of the wages and rations of the inhabitants of the first cities (3). Over the time, beer has developed to a larger extent in the northern countries, where vineyards could not grow because of insufficient sunlight. In the Romanian Principalities, although the first productions of local beer are recorded in eighteenth-century Transylvania and Bukovina, beer becomes popular only after the mid-nineteenth century.

In the seventeenth-century, David Frölich notices that the people in these territories commonly drink wine, and do not master the knowledge of the production of good beer, and their beer is tasteless, unfiltered and, thus, unhealthy (46). In the nineteenth-century, Johann Daniel Ferdinand Neigebaur observes that, in Iași and Bucharest, the production of beer is quite good, and many boyars have establishments in this field, as they need yeast for their brandy distilleries**.** He remarks that, generally, not much beer is consumed, as happens in all the wine-producing countries (316–7). Beer appears to have a lower importance in the Romanian territories, after wine and brandy.

Travellers' accounts regarding drinks in the Romanian Principalities between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries configure a map on which wine, wormwood wine, brandy, and coffee function as markers of taste and space with multiple cultural, social, political, religious, and economic implications. Each drink plays different functions in the complex system of food consumption: wormwood wine has ritual and therapeutic implications; wine has polyvalent roles for all the rites de passage, religious holidays, or feasts; brandy is the symbol of socialization for the lower classes; while coffee connotes hospitality and leisure. The integration of certain foreign elements (such as coffee or beer) and the particular development of local ones (such as wormwood wine or brandy) reveal complex processes of appropriation, transformation and adaptation, according to their relation to a space dominated by a strong western-eastern polarization.

Works cited

Aleppo, Paul of. *The Travels of Macarius, Patriarch of Antioch*: *Written by His Attendant Archdeacon, Paul of Aleppo in Arabic*. Vol. 1, 2. Trans. F. C. Belfour. London: A. J. Valpy, Red Lion Court, 1836.

BDD-A26213 © 2017 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:45:23 UTC)

Bakšić, Petru Bogdan. In *Călători străini despre Ţările Române*. Gen. eds. Maria Holban, M. M. Alexandrescu-Dersca Bulgaru, Paul Cernovodeanu. Vol. 5. Bucureşti: Editura Ştiinţifică, 1973. 194–270.
Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Trans. Annette Lavers. New York: The Noonday Press, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1991.
Beatty–Kingston, William. *A Wanderer's Note*. Vol. II. London: Chapman and Hall, 1888.
Bellanger, Stanislas. *Le Kéroutza; voyage en Moldo-Valache*. Tome première. Paris: Librairie française et étrangère, 1846.
von Berg, Carl Heinrich Edmund. *Aus dem Osten der österreichischen Monarchie: Ein Lebensbild von Land und Leuten von Edmund Frhrn. von Berg.* Dresden: G. Schönfeld, 1860.
Berger, Florence K. *A Winter in the City of Pleasure; or, Life on the Lower Danube*. London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1877.
Boner, Charles. *Transylvania: Its Products and its People.* London: Longmans, Greene, Reader, and Dyer, 1865.
de Burton, Albert. *Ten Months' Tour in the East*. London: F. Bowyer Kitto, 1870.
Caillat, Joseph. In *Călători străini despre Ţările Române în secolul al XIX-lea.* Gen. ed. Daniela Buşă. Vol. 6. Bucureşti: Editura Academiei Române, 2010. 511–44.
Campenhausen, Pierce Balthasar, Freiherr von. *Travels Through Several Provinces of the Russian Empire; With an Historical Account of the Zaprog Cossacks, and of Bessarabia, Moldavia, Wallachia, and the Crimea*. London: Printed for Richard Phillips by J.G. Barnard, 1808.
Certeau, Michel de. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Trans. Steven Rendall. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: U of California P, 1984.
Certeau, Michel de, Luce Girard, and Pierre Mayol. *The Practice of Everyday Life.* Vol. 2. *Living and Cooking.* Trans. Timothy J. Tomasik. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1998.
Frölich, David. In *Călători străini despre Ţările Române*. Gen. eds. Maria Holban, M. M. Alexandrescu-Dersca Bulgaru, Paul Cernovodeanu. Vol. 5. Bucureşti: Editura Ştiinţifică, 1973. 43–54.
Van Gennep, Arnold. *The Rites of Passage*. Trans. M. B. Vizedom and G. L.Caffee. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960.
Guébhart, Carol. In *Călători străini despre Ţările Române în secolul al XIX-lea.* Gen. ed. Paul Cernovodeanu, Daniela Buşă. Vol. 4. Bucureşti: Editura Academiei Române, 2007. 175–198.
Hamm, Wilhelm. *Südöstliche Steppen und Städte, nach eigener Anschauung geschildert*. Frankfurt am Main: Gauerländer, 1862.
Hell, Adèle Hommaire de. *À travers le monde. La vie orientale – La vie créole.* Versailles: E. Aubert, 1870.
Hiltebrandt, Conrad Jacob. *Dreifache Schwedische Gesandtschaftereise nach Siebenbürgen, der Ukraine und Constantinopel (1656-1658).* Ed. Franz Babinger. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1937.
Kieffer, Xavier. *Esquisse d'un voyage en Roumanie*. Altkirch: J. Boehrer, 1873.
Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space.* Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. Oxford: Blackwell, 1991.
Lefebvre, Thibault. *Études diplomatiques et économiques sur la Valachie*. 2nd ed. Paris: Guillaumin et C^{ie}, 1858.
Léger, Eugène. In *Călători străini despre Ţările Române în secolul al XIX-lea.* Gen. ed. Daniela Buşă. Vol. 7. Bucureşti: Editura Academiei Române, 2012. 436–63.
Manning, Paul. *The Semiotics of Drink and Drinking*. London and New York: Continuum, 2012.

BDD-A26213 © 2017 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:45:23 UTC)

Margot, Théodore. In *Călători străini despre Ţările Române în secolul al XIX-lea.* Gen. ed. Daniela Buşă. Vol. 7. Bucureşti: Editura Academiei Române, 2012. 321–40.
Neigebaur, Johann Daniel Ferdinand. *Beschreibung der Moldau und Walachei*. Leipzig: Verlag von Bernh, 1848.
Recordon, François. *Lettres sur la Valachie.* Paris: Leconte et Durey, 1821.
Standage, Tom. *A History of the World in 6 Glasses*. New York: Walker & Company, 2005.
Tannahill, Reay. *Food in History*. Second edition. New York: Three Rivers Press, 1988.
Wilkinson, William. *An Account of the Principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia.* London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1820.
Wolf, Andreas. *Beiträge zu einer statistisch-historischen Beschreibung des Fürstenthums Moldau.* Vol. 1. Hermannstadt: Hochmeister, 1805.

BDD-A26213 © 2017 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:45:23 UTC)