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The Geographical Dimension of Macedonian Traditional Cuisine

Marina Stojmirova¹

Goran Apostolovski

Julijana Petrovska

Abstract

Macedonian traditional cuisine represents an essential part of the country's intangible cultural heritage, deeply rooted in its geographical, climatic, and historical characteristics. This study explores the geographical dimension and gastronomic values of Macedonian cuisine through an analysis of the regional distribution of traditional dishes and protected products. A multi-method approach, combining literature review, field research, and surveys, was applied. Results indicate that natural–geographical factors, such as climate, relief, and soil structure, strongly influence local gastronomic identities. Moreover, the protection of local products through Protected Geographical Indications (PGI) and Protected Designations of Origin (PDO) contributes to cultural preservation and rural tourism development. Five key regions—Polog, Vardar, Eastern, Pelagonia, and Southwestern—exhibit distinct culinary profiles. The findings highlight that regional distribution reflects environmental, historical, and socio-economic dynamics shaping North Macedonia's cultural landscape.

Keywords: traditional cuisine, geographical distribution, gastronomic values, protected products, Macedonia

JEL Classification: Z32, R11, Q26

Introduction

Traditional cuisine is a core component of North Macedonia's national identity and cultural heritage. It reflects centuries of interaction between humans, natural resources, and historical processes (Karanfilovski, 2020). The country's diverse geography—from fertile plains to mountainous regions—has fostered distinct local gastronomic traditions.

The Republic of North Macedonia has over 30 traditional products listed in the national register of PGI and PDO (MAFWE, 2023). These designations preserve authenticity and quality while supporting rural development and gastronomic tourism.

Research Methodology

This study employed a multi-method approach comprising three main steps:

¹ **Marina Stojmirova, Msc., Goran Apostolovski, Msc., and Julijana Petrovska, Msc.,** Teaching Assistant at the University Skopje, Skopje, Republic of North Macedonia

1. **Literature Review:** Analysis of academic publications, national registers, official documents, and gastronomic studies to establish a theoretical framework for Macedonian cuisine and PGI/PDO products.
2. **Field Research:** Visits to five key regions—Polog, Vardar, Eastern, Pelagonia, and Southwestern—documenting culinary practices, production methods, and spatial distribution of dishes.
3. **Survey of Local Producers and Hospitality Entities:** A structured questionnaire was administered to 150 participants (March–May 2025) on traditional production, locally sourced ingredients, awareness of PGI/PDO certification, and the role of cuisine in tourism.

Data were analyzed using Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to visualize spatial distribution, regional specialization, and correlations between environmental conditions and culinary practices.

Historical Development of Macedonian Gastronomy

North Macedonia’s cuisine has evolved at the crossroads of Eastern and Western civilizations, facilitating the exchange of ingredients, spices, and techniques. Key characteristics include:

- **Antiquity:** Diets based on grains, legumes, fruits, vegetables, meat, and dairy; preservation through drying and smoking; baking and boiling as common cooking methods.
- **Ottoman Influence:** Integration of sweets (baklava, sheqerpare), dairy products, rice, spices (cinnamon, cloves, turmeric), and methods such as roasting, pickling, and marinating.
- **Balkan Influences:** Greek olive oil dishes, Serbian and Bulgarian meat preparations, pies, and legumes.
- **Slavic and Byzantine Influences:** Expansion of vegetable cultivation, fruit orchards, cheese, and wine production.

Traditional village dishes include *bakardan* (bean stew with meat), *pastirma with beans*, pies with greens, and *argatska supa* (harvest soup). Food is central to holidays and rituals, honoring ancestors and strengthening community solidarity (Britannica, 2025; Macedoniathegreat.gr, 2025).

Geographical distribution and typical gastronomy of Macedonian regions

The geographical diversity of North Macedonia — from fertile valleys and vineyards to high mountain pastures and lake regions — has shaped a rich and varied culinary landscape. Each region reflects its natural environment and cultural history through distinctive flavors and ingredients.

Region	Geography & Climate	Typical Dishes / Products	Protected Product / Status
Polog	Mountainous, temperate-continental	Tetovo Beans, Polog-style Sarma, Homemade Cheese	Tetovo Beans (PGI)
Vardar	Fertile plains, Mediterranean	Vranec Wine, Rakija, Fresh Vegetables, Fruits	Vranec Wine (PGI)
Eastern	Continental, agricultural plains	Kochani Rice, Melnichki Peppers, Traditional Stews	Kochani Rice (PDO)
Pelagonia	Largest plain, fertile soils	Pelagonia Ajvar, Homemade Pickles, Bitola Cheese, Baked Meat Dishes	Bitola Cheese (PGI)

Region	Geography & Climate	Typical Dishes / Products	Protected Product / Status
Southwestern	Mountainous, lakes, tourism areas	Ohrid Trout, Macedonian Tava, Homemade Pies, Local Honey & Preserves	Ohrid Trout (EU Protected species)

Table 1. Regional Profiles

National Dish / Product	Region	Protection Status	Description / Significance
Tavče-gravče	Tetovo / Southern Macedonia	–	Baked beans in a clay pot, traditional festive dish
Pastrmajlija	Veles / Tikveš	–	Flatbread topped with meat and cheese
Bitola Cow Cheese	Bitola / Pelagonia	PDO	Cheese used in pies and salads
Tikveš Wine	Tikveš / Central Macedonia	PGI	Wine for gastronomy and cultural tourism
Štip Wine	Štip / Eastern Macedonia	PGI	Promotes wine tourism
Roast Lamb	Šar Mountain / Polog	–	Typical mountain meat dish
Mekici	Šar Mountain	–	Fried dough pastries with honey or cheese
Baklava	Skopje & Eastern Macedonia	–	Ottoman-origin dessert adapted locally
Fruit Compotes & Pastries	Prespa / Pelagonia	–	Seasonal fruit-based desserts

Table 2. National Dishes and Regional Specialties

No	Dish Name	Description	Region / Origin
1	Tavche Gravche	Traditional bean stew baked in an earthenware pot; considered the national dish.	Nationwide (especially Tetovo)
2	Pastrmajlija	Savory flatbread topped with seasoned meat.	Shtip, Veles, Sveti Nikole
3	Ajvar	Roasted red pepper spread, used as a condiment or appetizer.	Throughout Macedonia
4	Pindjur	Relish made from roasted peppers, eggplants, and tomatoes.	Central and Eastern Macedonia
5	Zelnik	Layered pastry with cheese, cabbage, or leeks; a winter specialty.	Nationwide
6	Makalo	Garlic-based dip, sometimes with roasted peppers or eggplant.	Western and Central Macedonia
7	Kachamak (Bakrdanik)	Cornmeal dish with potatoes and cheese; mountain comfort food.	Mavrovo, Krushevo

№	Dish Name	Description	Region / Origin
8	Sarma and Polneti Piperki	Cabbage rolls and stuffed peppers with meat and rice.	All regions
9	Gjomeze	Layered pastry baked in a clay pot and served with yogurt.	Ohrid, Struga
10	Selsko Meso	Pork and mushroom stew with smoked meat and wine.	Central Macedonia
11	Lutenica	Spicy spread made from peppers and tomatoes.	Nationwide
12	Tarator	Cold yogurt soup with cucumber and garlic.	Summer dish, nationwide
13	Banica	Pastry filled with cheese, eggs, or spinach.	Skopje, Veles
14	Maznici and Pitulici	Fried dough pastries, sweet or savory.	Nationwide
15	Shopska Salad	Fresh salad with tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, onions, and white cheese.	Nationwide
16	Turli Tava	Mixed vegetable and meat casserole, slow-cooked.	Southern Macedonia
17	Kukurek	Traditional pasta or grain-based dish.	Mountain and rural areas
18	Lapa	Thick wheat or corn porridge; rustic peasant dish.	Western Macedonia
19	Vrtena Pita	Rolled pastry filled with cheese or meat.	Bitola, Prilep
20	Topenica	Baked layered pastry, often with cheese.	Central Macedonia
21	Matenica	Pastry similar to zelnik, filled with cheese or greens.	Central and Eastern regions
22	Dzhimirinki (Chvarki)	Fried pork rinds, crunchy and savory snack.	Rural areas
23	Jogurtlitava	Traditional yogurt-based baked dish.	Rural Macedonia

Table 3. Traditional Macedonian Dishes



Figure 1. Macedonian cuisine (<https://patokolusvetot.mk/mapa-so-tradicionalni-jadenja-vo-site-gradovi-na-makedonija/>)

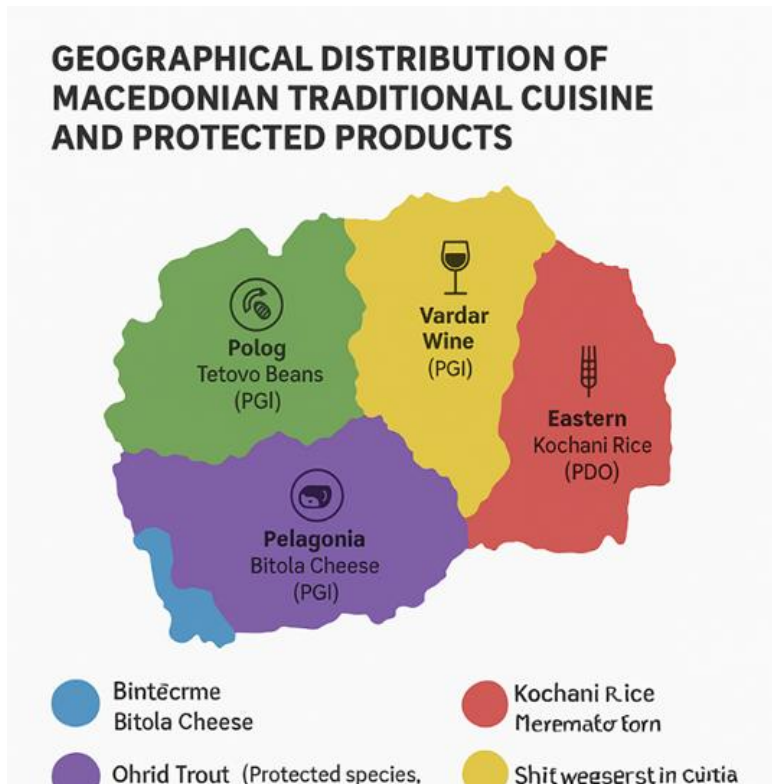


Figure 1. Geographical distribution and typical gastronomy of Macedonian regions

Overall, the geographical distribution of Macedonian cuisine reveals how climate, relief, and local resources shape regional gastronomic identities, creating a mosaic of flavors that represent the cultural unity in diversity of the country.

Cultural and Culinary Landscape of North Macedonia: Traditional Dishes and Protected Products

Macedonian cuisine is a vibrant tapestry of flavors, reflecting the country's rich history and diverse cultural influences. Rooted in the Mediterranean and Balkan culinary traditions, it showcases a variety of dishes that are both regionally distinct and nationally cherished. The integration of local ingredients and traditional cooking methods not only defines the Macedonian palate but also plays a crucial role in preserving cultural heritage and promoting sustainable rural development.

Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) and Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) Products

North Macedonia has established legal frameworks to protect its traditional agricultural and food products through PDO and PGI designations. These protections ensure the authenticity and quality of products linked to specific regions and traditional methods of production (<https://www.cabidigitallibrary.org>).

Notable PDO and PGI products include:

- **Bitolsko Krawjo Sirenje (PDO)** – A cow's milk cheese from the Bitola region, renowned for its unique flavor and production methods (<https://seerural.org>).
- **Tikveš Wine (PGI)** – Wines produced in the Tikveš region, known for their distinctive taste and quality (<https://seerural.org>).

- **Štip Wine (PGI)** – Wines from the Štip area, contributing to the country's rich viticultural heritage (<https://seerural.org>).

Macedonian cuisine offers a rich tapestry of flavors, deeply rooted in the country's history and cultural diversity. The protection of traditional food products through PDO and PGI designations plays a vital role in preserving these culinary traditions and promoting sustainable development in rural areas. By supporting and celebrating these authentic products, North Macedonia not only safeguards its gastronomic heritage but also enhances its cultural identity on the global stage.

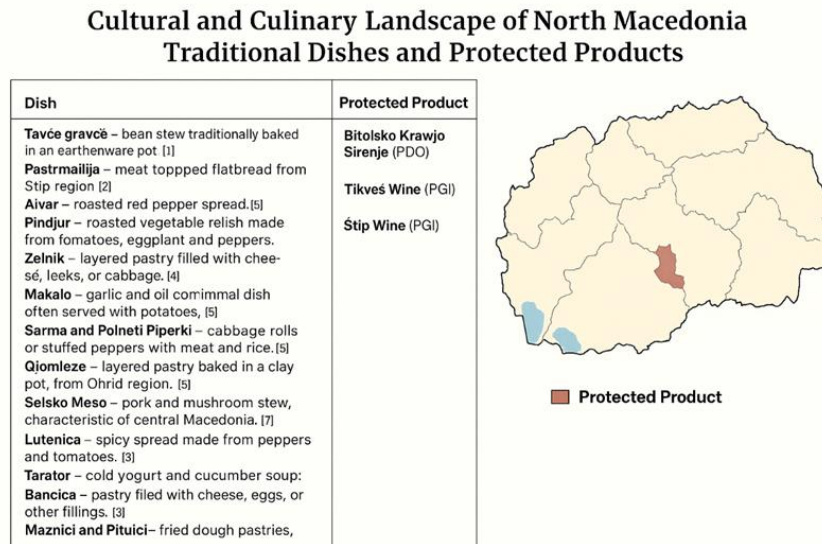


Figure 2 .Cultural and Culinary Landscape of North Macedonia: Traditional Dishes and Protected Products

Economic and Tourism Significance

Economic Value

- Restaurant Market (2024): USD 4.1 billion, projected USD 7.7 billion by 2033 (CAGR 7.3%) (Growth Market Reports).
- Household Food Expenditure: 41.25% spend 150–300 euros/month on food (PMC, 2021).
- Agriculture Contribution: Provides raw materials for food industry; limited by wages and technology (eprints.ugd.edu.mk).

Tourism Value

- Tourist Arrivals (Aug 2025): 226,179 visitors (Trading Economics).
- Food Tourism: Traditional dishes increasingly attract international tourists (Academia).
- Culinary Tourism: Strong potential for rural and urban gastronomic experiences (czasopisma.ukw.edu.pl).

Sector/Aspect	Economic (%)	Tourism (%)
Agriculture & Local Production	35	5
Restaurants & Hospitality	30	7

Sector/Aspect	Economic (%)	Tourism (%)
Export & Specialty Products	20	3
Entrepreneurship & Startups	15	2
Gastronomic Experience	0	9
Cultural Heritage & Branding	0	8

Table 4. Economic and Tourism Contribution of Macedonian Cuisine

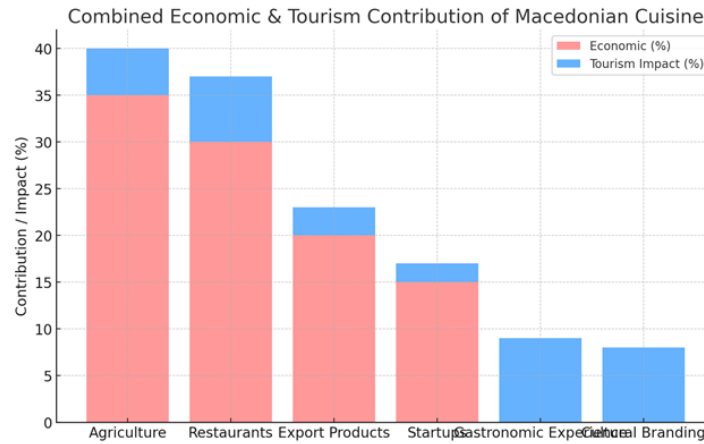


Diagram 1. Economic and Tourism Contribution of Macedonian Cuisine

Discussion

Macedonian cuisine represents a dynamic fusion of geography, culture, and socio-economic context. The regional diversity of dishes mirrors the country's varied landscapes, agricultural resources, and historical interactions with neighboring cultures. Each region has developed its own culinary identity, rooted in local ingredients, preparation methods, and festive customs.

As noted by Popovska and Dimitrievski (2021), the implementation of Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) and Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) systems has encouraged the preservation of traditional products while promoting sustainable rural development. These systems not only protect the authenticity and reputation of Macedonian foods but also strengthen the link between local production, cultural identity, and tourism.

Furthermore, gastronomy plays an increasingly important role in cultural and eco-tourism, where traditional dishes and locally produced foods are becoming symbols of national heritage and regional branding (Mitrevska, 2024). The integration of culinary heritage into tourism development strategies enhances rural livelihoods and promotes the recognition of Macedonian gastronomy in the global culinary scene.

Conclusion

Macedonian traditional cuisine stands as a vibrant cultural expression, deeply rooted in the country's diverse territorial, historical, and natural characteristics. Each region of North Macedonia reflects a distinct gastronomic identity shaped by local ingredients, climate, and centuries-old culinary practices passed down through generations. The national dishes — from *tavče gravče* and *pastrmajlija* to *ajvar*, *zelnik*, and *turli*

tava — represent not only the flavors of everyday life but also the stories of people, migration, and cultural exchange that have shaped the Macedonian identity.

The implementation of protection systems such as the Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) and Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) plays a crucial role in safeguarding the authenticity, quality, and origin of local products like *Bitolsko krawjo sirenje*, *Galički kaškaval*, and *Tikveš wine*. These systems contribute to preserving traditional production methods while encouraging innovation and competitiveness within rural economies.

Furthermore, the promotion of these culinary traditions through gastronomic tourism enhances the visibility of local regions, strengthens rural livelihoods, and contributes to sustainable development. Culinary festivals, wine routes, and local food markets serve as cultural ambassadors, linking food with identity, tradition, and community pride.

In essence, Macedonian cuisine is not merely a collection of dishes — it is a living cultural landscape that connects nature, history, and people. Its preservation and promotion through integrated cultural, economic, and tourism policies are vital for maintaining the nation's heritage and ensuring that its authentic flavors continue to thrive on both national and global stages.

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