

## STREET FOOD – BETWEEN A NEW GASTRONOMIC EXPRESSION AND A GLOBAL SOCIAL PHENOMENON

Luminița PÎRVULESCU<sup>1</sup>, Tiberiu IANCU<sup>1</sup>, Mariana Ramona CIOLAC<sup>1</sup>, Tabita ADAMOV<sup>1</sup>, Claudia SÎRBULESCU<sup>1</sup>, Diana Nicoleta RABA<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Life Sciences "King Mihai I" from Timisoara, Faculty of Management and Rural Tourism, Timisoara, Romania

### RESEARCH ARTICLE

#### Abstract

*The concept of street food has evolved in recent decades from a simple form of fast food associated with public spaces to a complex expression of gastronomy and urban socio-cultural dynamics. Characterized by diversity and culinary innovation, street food simultaneously reflects the preservation of culinary heritage and adaptation to the modern lifestyle of cities.*

*This paper analyzes street food as a new form of gastronomic expression, highlighting how it manages to integrate local culinary tradition with contemporary trends. Thus, street food can be understood as an emerging phenomenon at the intersection of gastronomy, culture, and urban society, simultaneously reflecting the preservation of culinary traditions and adaptation to the globalized and modern lifestyle of cities.*

**Keywords:** street food, urban gastronomy, culinary tradition, social phenomenon

#Corresponding author: [diana.raba@usvt.ro](mailto:diana.raba@usvt.ro)

#### INTRODUCTION

Street food refers to food sold in public spaces such as streets, markets, fairs, or parks. It is usually prepared and served from mobile stands, carts, or specially equipped trucks and is designed to be eaten on the spot. Some of these dishes are traditional, while others have spread far beyond their area of origin. In general, street food falls into both the "finger food" and fast-food categories and is usually more affordable than meals served in restaurants. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Street\\_food](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Street_food); <https://www.bookbeat.com/ie/book/street-food-392555>)

Street food refers not only to food cooked and sold in public spaces, but also to an entire gastronomic ecosystem that operates at the pulse of cities. These dishes are designed to be affordable, quick, and easy to eat on the go, meeting the daily needs of urban residents. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Street\\_food](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Street_food);) )

However, street food goes beyond the realm of food itself, as it offers a complex experience that combines cultural, social, and sensory elements. An important factor in its popularity is the culinary dynamism it generates: street food encourages experimentation, unusual combinations of flavors, and the discovery of new dishes at affordable prices. (Aykaç E., Buyruk L., 2021; <https://www.bookbeat.com/ie/book/street-food-392555> )

The range of dishes available as street food varies from region to region and culture to culture in many countries around the world. Although in some societies eating on the street is considered impolite, many middle- and high-income consumers depend on the speed and low cost of street food for both their daily meals and the work opportunities it generates. (Aykaç E., Buyruk L., 2021; <https://www.bookbeat.com/ie/book/street-food-392555>)

In Europe, in Greek antiquity, fried small fish was a common street food, and numerous evidence of street vendors has been found at Pompeii. In ancient Rome, poor residents, without ovens in their homes, frequently consumed street food such as chickpea soup with bread. Medieval travelers mention that in Cairo people ate lamb kebabs and rice directly on the street, and in Renaissance Turkey, pieces of fried meat were sold, the Ottoman state being the first to officially regulate street food trade (1502). In the 19th century, street food ranged from nuts to gingerbread in Transylvania, to fried potatoes in Paris, or the variety of dishes sold on the streets of Victorian London. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Street\\_food](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Street_food); Kraig B., Taylor C., 2013)

On the American continent, Aztec markets sold corn drinks, dozens of types of tamales, and various insects or stews. In colonial Peru, although the Spanish introduced European foods, the general population continued to consume mostly traditional foods, such as grilled beef hearts sold on the street. In

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the American colonies, street vendors offered oysters, roasted corn, fruit, and sweets, with oysters remaining popular until they became expensive due to overfishing. In the 18th and 19th centuries, many African-American women earned their living by selling street food (cakes and nuts, biscuits, pralines, and other sweets), and the famous Cracker Jack snack also made its debut as a product sold on the street. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Street\\_food](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Street_food); Karsavuran Z., 2018)

The sale of street food has a history dating back thousands of years in China and became established during the Tang dynasty. Although initially intended for the poor, even rich families sent their servants to buy such dishes. Today, street food remains an essential part of Chinese cuisine and attracts many tourists. Through the Chinese diaspora, this type of cuisine has strongly influenced other regions of Asia, laying the foundations for street food culture in much of Southeast Asia. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Street\\_food](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Street_food); Kraig B., Taylor C., 2013)

In ancient India, the Arthashastra mentioned food vendors and regulated the trade in rice, meat, and alcoholic beverages. Even in Delhi, kings visited kebab vendors, a tradition that continues today. During the colonial period, fusion street food developed, adapted to British tastes. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Street\\_food](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Street_food); Kraig B., Taylor C., 2013)

In Java, Indonesia, street vendors have existed for centuries, being depicted in bas-reliefs from the 9th century and mentioned in inscriptions from the 14th century. During the Dutch colonial period, dishes such as satay and dawet appeared. Today, street food is sold from carts and bicycles, and rapid urbanization has stimulated the expansion of this culture, especially in Jakarta, Bandung, and Surabaya. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Street\\_food](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Street_food))

## MATERIAL AND METHOD

The study examines aspects such as the origin and evolution of the street food phenomenon, its impact on consumer behavior, its importance in the development of gastronomic tourism, and its contribution to the revaluation of local culinary heritage. It also analyzes the aesthetic, sensory, and culinary innovation dimensions specific to this type of gastronomy, as well as the role of street food as a space for social and cultural interaction. In this context, the authors consulted an extensive bibliography, including scientific publications and specialized websites, using a methodology

that combines classic research methods - documentation, analysis, and synthesis of information - with the formulation of conclusions based on the data collected.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Street food is based on quick, tasty, and affordable dishes made with ingredients that ensure flavor and authenticity. Most of the time, ingredients are cooked completely or partially in advance to allow for quick service: in Asia, soups and side dishes are prepared ahead of time; in America, burger meat is cooked before busy periods, and hot dogs, after boiling, are kept at a constant temperature for immediate service. In Turkey, kebabs are continuously roasted on skewers over a fire so that they are ready to serve at any time. (<https://vstreetfood.com/ro/10-most-popular-types-of-street-food-in-the-world/>)

Europe and Asia stand out for the diversity and authenticity of their street food offerings. In Europe, destinations such as Istanbul, Barcelona, and London attract tourists with local and international dishes: *kebabs* and *baklava* in Istanbul, *tapas* and *paella* in Barcelona, and *fish and chips* and multicultural specialties in London. In Asia, cities such as Bangkok, Tokyo, and Hanoi are renowned for their distinctive street food: *pad thai* and *som tam* in Bangkok, *sushi* and *ramen* in Tokyo, and *Vietnamese pho* or *bánh mì* in Hanoi. (<https://www.lancom.ro/articol/mancare-stradala-ghid-complet-al-deliciilor-culinare-urbane-324>)

**Ramen**, introduced to Japan by Chinese immigrants in the early 20th century, emerged as street food for Chinese workers and students in the Yokohama neighborhood. In the period after World War II, ramen became extremely popular, and as Japan's economy recovered, ramen went from being a street food to an essential part of the urban diet, developing numerous regional variations. There are four main types of ramen, each with unique characteristics and specific ingredients. (<https://edelicios.net/2024/09/24/ramen-de-la-street-food-la-preparat-gourmet-afla-povestea/>)

**Shoyu ramen** is one of the oldest and most popular types of ramen. Its soup is based on soy sauce, has a light brown color, and the taste is balanced and slightly salty. It is often served with thin noodles, pork, green onions, and a boiled egg. **Tonkotsu Ramen** is specific to the Kyushu region and is notable for its thick, milky soup, obtained by boiling pork bones for many hours. The texture is rich and the taste is very intense. It is served with thin, straight

noodles and simple ingredients such as green onions and seaweed. **Miso Ramen** is a dish originating in Hokkaido. The soup contains miso paste (fermented soybeans), which gives it a slightly sweet flavor. It is a thicker ramen and is often served with wavy noodles, fried vegetables, meat, and sometimes butter for extra creaminess. (<https://salutethepig.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/The-Book-of-Ramen.pdf>; <https://edelicios.net/2024/09/24/ramen-de-la-street-food-la-preparat-gourmet-afla-povestea/>)

**Shio Ramen.** Shio, which means "salt" in Japanese, is the lightest of the ramen varieties and is popular in coastal regions. The soup is clear and lightly salted, made from a mixture of chicken or pork bones, and is usually served with thin noodles and fresh vegetables (<https://salutethepig.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/The-Book-of-Ramen.pdf>)



Figure 1

**Tacos** is a traditional Mexican dish consisting of a small corn or wheat tortilla covered with filling. There are a variety of fillings, such as beef, pork, chicken, seafood, beans, cheese, and seasoned with various condiments, such as salsa, guacamole, or sour cream, and vegetables, such as lettuce, cilantro, onion, tomato, and chili peppers. Tacos can be contrasted with similar dishes such as *burritos*, which are much larger and rolled rather than folded; *taquitos*, which are rolled and fried; or *chalupas/tostadas*, in which the tortilla is fried before being filled. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taco>)

**Quesadilla** is a Mexican dish consisting of two tortillas filled with cheese and, occasionally, meat, spices, or other ingredients, then cooked on a griddle or in a pan. Although corn tortillas are traditionally used, the recipe can also be adapted to flour tortillas. In central and southern Mexico, a quesadilla is round and usually filled with Oaxaca cheese. The most common filling is cheese, but others can also be used, such as cooked vegetables, pumpkin flowers, and various types of cooked meat: beef or pork, chicharron (a dish made from fried pork belly or fried pork rinds), chicken tinga (a dish made from chopped and boiled chicken, covered with a spicy, aromatic sauce).

Quesadillas are often served with green or red salsa and guacamole. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quesadilla>)

**Gyros** is a Greek dish made from meat cooked on a vertical rotisserie, then sliced and placed in a flatbread (*pita*) along with other ingredients such as tomatoes, onions, French fries, and tzatziki sauce. It is similar to Turkish döner kebab or Middle Eastern shawarma, but is distinguished by pork as the main ingredient and tzatziki sauce. The vertical grill with stacked meat and the process of slicing it while cooking was developed in Bursa in the 19th century during the Ottoman Empire. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gyros>)

**Kebab** is a Middle Eastern culinary dish consisting of minced/cut meat cooked on a spit or grill, sometimes accompanied by vegetables or spices. Although the dish is usually cooked on a skewer over an open fire, some types of kebab are baked in a pan or prepared as a stew, such as Tas kebab. The traditional meat for kebab is most often lamb, but regional recipes may include beef, goat, chicken, fish, or even pork (depending on specific religious prohibitions). (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/kebab>)

Although in English the terms "*kebab*" or "*shish-kebab*" can sometimes refer to any small pieces of meat cooked on skewers, kebab is mainly associated with a variety of meat dishes originating in Persia and Anatolia. The recipe spread throughout the world with the influence of Muslim culture. The Maghrebi traveler Ibn Battuta noted that kebab was served in the royal houses of the Delhi Sultanate (1206–1526), but also eaten by ordinary people for breakfast, along with *naan* (flatbread, usually baked in an oven or fried). Over time, kebab dishes have been adapted and integrated with local cooking styles, from the popular fast food Doner kebab to various types of Shish kebab, including Satays from Southeast Asia. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kebab>)

**Hamburger** is a sandwich consisting of a bun cut in half, containing a meat patty, usually beef, and topped with various ingredients such as vegetables (lettuce, tomatoes, onions, pickles) and sauces (ketchup, mustard, mayonnaise). Originating in Hamburg, Germany, this dish has become a global symbol of fast food, while also being adapted into gourmet versions. Hamburgers are often associated with fast food restaurants, and there are numerous regional and international variations of this dish. Multinational chains such as McDonald's and Burger King have turned

burgers into iconic products, with the Big Mac and Whopper becoming symbols of American culture worldwide. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hamburger>)

**Hot dog** is a dish consisting of a sausage cooked on the grill, steamed, or boiled, served in a partially sliced bun. The term can also refer to the sausage itself, which is usually a wiener (Vienna sausage) or a frankfurter (a type of smoked sausage originating in Germany). The name of the sausage is often associated with the entire dish. The preparation and toppings for hot dogs vary around the world. The most common include mustard, ketchup, onions in tomato sauce, and cheese sauce, but sauerkraut, chopped onions, jalapeños, chili, grated cheese, coleslaw, bacon, or olives can also be added. Popular variations include *Corn dogs* and *Pigs in a blanket*. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hot\\_dog](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hot_dog))

The hot dog, originally brought over from Germany, quickly gained popularity in the United States, becoming a working-class street food. Over time, it has become a symbol of American culture, closely associated with baseball games. Although particularly linked to New York and its culinary traditions, the hot dog spread throughout the US during the 20th century. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hot\\_dog](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hot_dog); <https://www.hot-dog.org/sites/default/files/pdf/Hotdog-Facts-Figures-Folklore-Brochure.pdf>)



**Figure 2**

**10 won bread**, also called *10 won waffle* or *Sibwonppang*, is a street food that dates back to 2019 and is a bread or waffle shaped like a South Korean 10 won coin that contains cheese. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/10\\_won\\_bread](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/10_won_bread)) This dish consists of an oversized bread, served hot and fresh, usually from stalls or small shops, which resembles the popular Korean snack "fish bread" filled with red bean paste in flavor, but in this case the filling is made of sour cream, sugar, and mozzarella cheese. (<https://10wontips.blogspot.com/2023/06/new-food-snack-10-won-bread.html>)

**Mochi** is a Japanese rice dessert made from mochigome (a type of short-grain sticky rice) to which water, sugar, or cornstarch may be added. After the rice is steamed, it is pounded into a smooth paste and then molded into various shapes. In Japan, mochi is

traditionally made during a ceremony called Mochitsuki. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mochi>)

Mochi and its preparation are closely linked to Japanese traditions, reflecting the importance of rice and its role in Shinto rituals, where it is used to thank the gods for the harvest. In ancient Japan, mochi was considered a sacred food, believed to house a divine presence and eaten to bring health and good luck. Although enjoyed year-round today, mochi continues to be associated with numerous festivals and seasonal events, particularly Japanese New Year celebrations. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mochi>; <https://www.byfood.com/blog/travel-tips/the-beginners-guide-to-mochi>)

**Nian Gao** is a sticky cake-like dessert that was traditionally offered to the Kitchen God so that, with his mouth "stuck shut," he would not speak negatively about the family in front of the Jade Emperor. Almost every family prepares or buys it for Chinese New Year. Originally from China, Nian Gao spread to Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka, influencing local rice-based cakes. All variations of these desserts use sticky rice turned into a paste, shaped according to the recipe. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nian\\_gao](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nian_gao); <https://thewoksoflife.com/nian-gao-recipe/>)

**Stroopwafel** is a classic Dutch dessert consisting of two thin layers of sweet dough joined together with a filling of cinnamon-flavored caramel syrup. According to Dutch culinary tradition, the first stroopwafels were made in Gouda in the late 18th or early 19th century by bakers who reused leftover dough and crumbs, sweetening them with syrup. Stroopwafel is famous for the way it is served with a hot drink; it is placed on the rim of a cup, and the steam heats the waffle and softens the syrup inside. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stroopwafel>; <https://www.britannica.com/topic/stroopwafel>)

**Pancakes**, also known as hotcakes or flapjacks, are round and often thin desserts made from a starchy batter that may contain eggs, milk, and butter. The shape and texture of pancakes vary around the world: in England, pancakes are thin and unleavened, similar to French crêpes; in Scotland and North America, leavening agents are used to make thick, fluffy pancakes. The Breton crêpe is a thin pancake, cooked on both sides to achieve a delicate and fine surface, while the Southeast European version, *palatschinke*, is a thin pancake fried on both sides, filled with jam, cream cheese, chocolate, nuts, or other sweet and savory ingredients. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pancake>)

## CONCLUSIONS

Street food is an authentic expression of urban culture, as traditional and ethnic dishes reveal the specific characteristics and identity of a city. Both locals and tourists are attracted to street food for its accessibility and diversity, but also for the direct and authentic culinary experience it offers in the midst of everyday life.

Street food is valued as a gastronomic product with potential appeal in tourist offerings. Street food has become an element of interest for tourists in many major destinations and is increasingly used as a tool for promoting tourism. In addition, for many cities, street food has become a defining element of local identity. It functions as a cultural calling card, attracting tourists interested in exploring the culinary authenticity of the place and contributing to the economic and social vitality of urban communities.

Street food has gone beyond its status as mere street food, becoming an international phenomenon, appreciated for its authenticity, speed, and the multisensory experience it offers. In the context of globalization, this concept reflects both the preservation of local traditions and adaptation to external cultural influences.

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