



Gastrodiplomacy Spotlight: The Roma

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Abstract

The Roma are an incredibly diverse group of people found mostly in Eastern and Central Europe. Most people in communities where Roma populations are prevalent have preconceived notions about Roma culture and look down on this highly-persecuted group of people. Gastrodiplomacy can be a perfect way for people to have a more positive, human experience interacting with the Roma.

The Roma people, more commonly referred to as Gypsies, are a large minority population throughout Eastern Europe and around the world – in fact, they are the most widely-dispersed nation of people in the world. Today, the Roma population in Hungary, like in other countries of Eastern and Central Europe, has a disproportionately high unemployment rate of over 70% – this has sparked the Hungarian Ministry of Labour to consider a new category of “Gypsy” within the division of labor. The Roma are the main victims of the skinhead movement, which peaked in popularity in the 1990s, and they are widely-marginalized throughout the country. According to a poll taken in 1994, only 15% of Hungarians would want to have a Roma as a neighbor^[1]. One group in Hungary is trying to change our society’s perception of Roma people through the power of food.

Romani Platni is a restaurant in Budapest, Hungary that serves traditional Roma food prepared by Roma community members themselves. More than that, it is a place to discuss Roma issues and experience a new side of their culture. The restaurant is funded by the Open Society Foundations through the Romani Platni Anti-Discrimination Group, a local gastrodiplomacy organization that fights for Roma rights. The main goal of the restaurant is to dispel misconceptions and prejudices that are prevalent in Eastern Europe through exposure to food in the Roma community. Their dinner menus are posted on their blog and their Facebook page, and they require reservations at romaniplatni@gmail.com^[2].

The Romani Platni Anti-Discrimination Group hopes that their restaurant will be a breeding ground for cultural education as visitors get to know Roma customs through a new lens. They believe that both major, world-saving decisions, and small, intimate gatherings all belong around the dinner table. Romani Platni is a place for interacting face-to-face with the Roma, sharing in their traditions and culture right alongside them. The restaurant is also at the cutting edge of women’s rights, employing only Roma women in the kitchen to give them a chance to make a difference in their community that they would not be able to make otherwise.^[3]

In 2013, Romani Platni won an award from SozialMarie, an organization that encourages innovative non-profits, networking between social projects, and that gives donations to projects that are growing in order to give them an extra boost. Out of about 2000 submissions, Romani Platni was awarded a 1000 euro prize for their expansion of prejudice-reducing concepts^[4].

Gastrodiplomacy can be used to facilitate trade and diplomatic relations between countries, but it can also be extremely beneficial in bringing communities together. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Roma have been treated exceedingly poorly, but with the work of the Romani Platni Anti-Discrimination Group, people can learn to leave their outdated prejudices behind in order to create tighter communities and leave better social values for the next generation.

[1] Cordell, Karl. *Ethnicity and Democratization in the New Europe*. London: Routledge, 1999. Print.

[2] Bejegyzések. “About Us.” Romani Platni. Blogspot.com. Web. 01 June 2014.

[3] “Romani Platni.” Facebook.com. 13 Mar. 2012. Web. 1 June 2014.

[4] “Winners 2013.” SozialMarie. Web. 01 June 2014.