

Cascavalul de Dobrogea (Dobrogea Kashkaval): A Local Identity Brand

Casangiu Siea Laetitia

Independent Researcher

Email: laetitia.casangiu@gmail.com

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Abstract

In the dowry chest of food products from Dobrogea (Romanian region), **Cașcavalul de Dobrogea [Dobrogea Kashkaval]** holds a place of honour as a local identity brand with a long tradition. Dobrogea's candidacy for the title of European Region of Gastronomy for the year 2029 underscores the growing attention to this subject from stakeholders across all levels of the economic and social structure. This study, which represents a continuation of research conducted during doctoral studies, aims to illustrate the characteristics of a centuries-old food product and the arguments for its registration as a Geographical Indication and therefore builds upon previous research while simultaneously representing a distinct effort that, combining theoretical and practical aspects, analyses a local traditional product highlighting its potential economic and social implications. The methodological approach of this study - involving a comparative analysis of historical, journalistic, and bibliographic sources - led to the conclusion that it is necessary to revive and develop the quality production of a cheese variety representative of the territory.

Keywords: Food, Food Industry, Traditional Food, Traditional Product, Pdo, Pgi, Stg, Gi, Stg

Introduction

Specialized literature on Dobrujan gastronomy has primarily focused on its historical, anthropological, and ethnographic aspects (Văduva, 2010; Mihăilescu, 2012) - as well as on traditional recipes, cultural practices, and gastronomic experiences, such as the "Multiculturalism and Traditional Gastronomy in Dobruja" project, which culminated in the publication of the volume "Gustul Dobrogei" [Taste of Dobruja] - but has not addressed the technical, economic, and legal aspects regarding the registration, protection, and valorization of local traditional food products.

The research I have conducted in recent years has focused on evaluating the level of awareness regarding the gastronomy of Dobrogea, identifying its identity brands (Casangiu, 2021, (a), (c)), and compiling an inventory of food products registered at national and European level (Casangiu, 2021, c). Furthermore, I have also highlighted the economic

opportunities offered by leveraging gastronomic potential as a driver for tourism development in general and of local gastronomic tourism in particular (Casangiu, 2021, (b), Mirea & Casangiu, 2022).

The conclusions of these studies, materialized through the publication of the doctoral thesis (Casangiu Siea, 2026), emphasized the necessity of creating an inventory of traditional Dobrogean food products as a starting point for designing a local development master plan focused on the area's gastronomic potential.

Dobrogea's candidacy for the title of European Region of Gastronomy for the year 2029 underscores the growing attention to this subject from stakeholders across all levels of the economic and social structure.

The present study, as well as the author's research on this topic, combining theoretical and practical aspects, analyses a local traditional product highlighting its potential economic and social implications and aims to address this gap and provide the information necessary for the potential preparation of a product registration dossier at both national and European levels.

Research Methods

The research is multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary, encompassing historical, economic, anthropological, and sociological perspectives. The research methodology is based on a comparative analysis of the literature from both a diachronic and synchronic perspective, synthesizing and structuring information.

Contents

National Registration as a Traditional Product

A traditional food product can be defined as a concentrated expression of the territory it originates from, reflecting both its natural and cultural resources. It is the result of work passed down through generations and carries within it the echo of history, encompassing not only production methods, raw materials, or taste, but an entire socio-cultural context (Barilaro, 2004). Over time, the particularities of daily life - such as difficult periods, seeking refuge in forests, epidemics, or various restrictions and obligations - failed to eradicate Romanian culinary tradition. Although the methods of preparing traditional dishes are well known, culinary customs have undergone continuous transformation and adaptation (Nistoreanu et al., 2020, p. 275).

According to the "Ghid de bune practici privind atestarea produselor tradiționale" [Good Practice Guidelines for the Certification of Traditional Products] published by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of Romania – General Directorate of Food Industry, a traditional product is defined as that "food product manufactured on national territory using local raw materials, which contains no food additives in its composition, features a traditional recipe, a traditional production and/or processing method, and a traditional technological process, distinguishing itself from other similar products belonging to the same category." The same Guide stipulates that, in order to be listed in the national register of traditional products, "the traditional product must be manufactured from local raw materials, present a traditional recipe specific to the processing location, thereby reflecting a traditional type of

production and/or processing, include manual processing operations within its production process, and demonstrate a traditional working method" (MADR, 2014, p. 2).

Regarding **the timeframe necessary** for a product to become traditional, there are several definitions that vary across sources. According to the European Commission, a traditional product is primarily one with proven use on the market for a duration that allows its transmission across generations; this period must be at least 30 years. Once this aspect is clarified, focus shifts to its historical and geographical characteristics (European Commission, 2012). In a report from 2005, Eurofir (European Food Information Resource) considers that this type of product must adhere to a procedure established before World War II and possess specific characteristics that distinguish it from other similar products in the same category, such as through the use of traditional ingredients (raw materials), a traditional composition, or a traditional production method (Weichselbaum et al., 2005).

According to Order No. 151/09.07.2021 of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development regarding the registration of established recipes, as well as the certification of food products obtained in compliance with established recipes, an established recipe contains "a list of raw materials, ingredients, proportions, and technological process necessary to obtain a specific food product, the use of which is proven to date prior to the year 1975."

In other European countries, such as Italy, according to Ministerial Decree No. 350 of September 8, 1999, a traditional product is obtained through processing, preservation, and aging methods uniformly practiced over a period of at least 25 years.

European Registration as a Geographical Indication

At European level, product names are protected to highlight their distinct characteristics linked to both their geographical origin and traditional production techniques and practices. A product can receive "Geographical Indication" (GI) status if it is closely tied to the area where it is produced. This recognition enables consumers to identify authentic products more easily and fosters trust in their quality, while simultaneously enhancing their promotion by producers. For products already recognized as geographical indications and for those currently under evaluation, there are dedicated geographical indication registers containing details regarding both geographical specifications and production requirements for each product:

- **eAmbrosia** is a register created for food and agricultural products, wines, spirit drinks, and aromatized wines;
- **GIview**, a register dedicated to all protected geographical indications across the European Union.

The regulatory framework at the European Union level is established by (EU) Regulation 2024/1143 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 April 2024, on geographical indications for wine, spirit drinks, and agricultural products, as well as guaranteed traditional specialities and optional quality terms for agricultural products. Its aim is to protect and promote geographical indications and traditional specialities, emphasizing the link between a product, its origin and traditional production methods. This regulation seeks to simplify and harmonize existing rules, strengthen the protection of registered names, and facilitate their recognition by consumers. Furthermore, the legislative act supports producers in marketing

authentic products and contributes to the development of rural areas by leveraging agri-food heritage.

Comparing the two systems - registration in Romania as a traditional product versus European registration as a Geographical Indication - the higher degree of protection at the European level points toward recommending the registration of **Cașcaval de Dobrogea** as a geographical indication. Because a PDO (Protected Designation of Origin) product requires a very strict link to a specific geographical area - with all stages (production, processing, and preparation) taking place within that area, and the product's characteristics being due exclusively or primarily to the local natural environment and human factors - in this case, registration as a PGI (Protected Geographical Indication) product may be considered, which requires a more flexible link to that region (it is enough for at least one stage of production to take place within the designated area, the product maintaining a reputation, quality, or specific characteristic associated with its geographical origin).

Products protected as geographical indications mostly originated many years ago within a precarious economic framework, even one of poverty, where food was essential for basic survival. Over time, however, these products acquired a powerful symbolic significance, embodying a combination of "quality, territory, history, teachings, community, taste [...]" Their recognition as PDO and PGI did not merely add economic value to the product, but gave it meaning, reorganizing the relationship between food and society" (Rosati, 2026, p. 21).

Cașcavalul de Dobrogea – a long tradition

A fundamental testimony regarding the importance of sheep raising in the territory of present-day Dobrogea can be observed in a metope of the Tropaeum Traiani Triumphal Monument at Adamclisi, where the silhouettes of a goat and a ram are carved in stone - proof of what the Romans found in this region.

Referring to the Thracians, Columella (20-70 AD), the author of "On Agriculture", noted: "Furthermore, sheep not only satisfy the peasants with an abundance of cheese and milk, but also cover the tables of the wealthy with numerous and enjoyable dishes, and for certain nations lacking wheat, they provide all their food; that is why most of the Getae are called 'milk-drinkers'" (Iliescu et al., 1964, 421; Dunca, 2004).

Herding, sheep raising, and the consumption of sheep-derived dairy and meat products thus have deep origins in the territory of present-day Dobrogea, and the sheep has always represented a source of food: "From the exiled poet Ovid to the present day, the cuisine of Dobrogea is based on two pillars: sheep and fish. The sheep comes from the land, while the fish comes either from the fresh water of the Delta or the salt water of the Black Sea. Shaped by various influences - Tatar, Greek, Turkish, Lipovan, and whichever others there may have been - these foundational meats have given rise to a variety of dishes that can blow any tourist away." (Nistor, 2004, p.86)

"Istoria Dobrogei" [The History of Dobrogea], written by Adrian Rădulescu and Ion Bitoleanu, includes a description of the region in terms of its natural riches, which comprise, among other things, flocks of sheep: "Dobrogea remained famous in the sultans' capital also for its lambs and rams, which - in addition to high-quality wool and sheep's cheese - offered delicious

meat infused with the flavours of the salty herbs grown near the sea. The need for such products prompted the Ottoman authorities to encourage and even protect the transhumant pastoralism of shepherds from the Romanian Principalities. In 1795, a firman of Sultan Selim III ordered the Vali of Silistra, the cadis of Isaccea, Măcin, Hârşova, Turtucaia, and other Ottoman officials along the Danube-Istanbul route, as well as Alexandru Moruzi, the Prince of Wallachia, to allow the unhindered passage of sheep and goat herds all the way to the Bosphorus Strait to help supply the imperial capital." (Rădulescu & Bitoleanu, 1998, 243).

An article published on November 14, 1893, in "Constanța" newspaper mentions that, during that period, Constanța County was one of the richest in terms of livestock numbers, owing to the soil quality which was "favourable for raising cattle and sheep breeds."

The same article also highlights that, in the East, the cheeses and butter from Dobrogea enjoyed particular appreciation due to their superior quality, and that Dobrogean wethers (batali) were in high demand in the markets of Marseille. In other Romanian regions, the cașcaval from Dobrogea was sold under the name Cașcaval de Brașov, likely due to the processing technique that had been imported from that city. This information is also confirmed by the testimony of a French diplomat, U. Chausserie - the Vice-Consul of France at Küstenge - who, in March 1886, compiled a report describing Dobrogea, addressing aspects of the region's geography, its administrative organization, economic development, and the locals' daily life. According to the French diplomat's account, "cașcaval formed the basis of the local population's diet. It can be estimated that it was produced in considerable quantities. Beyond domestic consumption, up to 600 tons were exported annually to Constantinople, Greece, or Asia Minor. Main meals were further 'enriched' with salted fish, watermelon (in summer), and onions or leeks (in winter)." (Pop, 2005, 34).

In 1923, the press of the time wrote extensively about a measure taken by the government's Economic Council to prohibit the export of "so-called Greek" cașcaval, which was widely produced in Dobrogea, amidst high domestic market demand that could barely be met. (Dacia, June 10, 1923, 1; Dobrogea Jună, September 4, 1923, 1). In the issue of August 12, 1925, of the Universul newspaper, a short article mentioned several Greek merchants who had come to Constanța ("it is known that most of the country is supplied with this product from Dobrogea, where the highest number of cheese factories are located") to buy up hundreds of train wagons of cașcaval for export to Constantinople, thereby causing the market retail price to triple. (Universul, 1925, 1).

In a comprehensive article dedicated to Dobrogea in the May 10, 1936, issue of the Vremea newspaper, which enumerated the benefits of annexing this region to the Motherland, a passage evoking the period prior to the War of Independence emphasized that, even then, "much cașcaval was produced here, fat rams were raised, and cauldrons of gold were buried in the ground" (Vremea, 1936, p. 10). These observations serve to confirm the long-standing tradition of producing this food item.

In issue 191 of the Universul newspaper, published on Saturday, July 15, 1939, "Cașcavalul de Dobrogea" or "Greek cașcaval" is referred to as being of "very high quality." The article also argues for the necessity of using a larger amount of salt (2-4%) to ensure better preservation, noting that when refrigeration is used "to help preserve the butterfat in the cheese, a much

higher quality product is obtained, as milk from Dobrogea is higher in fat." We further learn that the nutritional value of cașcaval is undisputed, it is in high demand on the market and commands a good price. However, the produced quantity barely covers domestic needs. "Cașcaval is in high demand in the markets of Egypt, Palestine, Turkey, Greece, Italy, and Spain. Our merchants lack sufficient and quality inventory to satisfy even a fraction of foreign market demand." (Universul, 1939).

The first cașcaval fermentation station in Romania

In 1939, in the presence of numerous officials, the first cașcaval fermentation station in Romania was inaugurated in Constanța, with a capacity of 60 railway wagons, sufficient to absorb production from across all of Dobrogea. The facility featured a modern milk fermentation laboratory, state-of-the-art equipment, warehouses for storing cașcaval and liquid products, and cooling systems built on the model of those aboard the motor vessels "Transilvania" and "Basarabia." The establishment of this fermentation station was intended to homogenize and standardize part of the production process in order to obtain a superior quality product (România, 1939; Neamul Românesc, 1939).

In an article from August 14, 1939, published in the România newspaper, a full page is dedicated to Dobrogea, and, in a section emphasizing the need to capitalize on the region's economic products, it is mentioned that "the cașcaval fermentation station is the only one of its kind in all of Southeastern Europe and the most modern in Europe, being equipped with the most up-to-date facilities." (România, August 1939).

Palas Sheep Breeding Station - the oldest animal husbandry research unit in Romania

Dobrogea was a favourable area for this activity because it had abundant grass for sheep flocks to graze on. Furthermore, as shown by the press of the time, **the first Systematic Sheep Station, the "National Sheep Breeding Station" at Palas**, was established in Constanța in 1897 through Decision No. 9173 of October 7, issued by the Ministry of Agriculture, Trade, and Domains. "The intended purpose was to establish a model sheep farm to improve local sheep in order to increase wool and meat production, as well as to study acclimatization and conduct various research and crossbreeding experiments between indigenous and foreign breeds." (Dobrogea Jună, 1929, 1).

In 2020, a pure native breed was officially certified here - the Palas Prolific Breed - providing breeders with a solution to boost meat and milk production depending on their desired exploitation focus; it was developed through multiple crossbreeding of the Palas Merino (the first breed created here between 1919 and 1965) with elite specimens of the Romanov, East Friesian, Border Leicester, and Finnish Landrace breeds.

Definitions, Raw Materials, and Technological Process

In the 1958 "Lexiconul Tehnic Român" [Romanian Technical Lexicon], definitions are provided for cașcaval as a generic product and specifically for Cașcavalul de Dobrogea: "A hard sheep's milk cheese, yellowish in colour, prepared from fermented, scalded, kneaded, and then salted curd. It comes in wheel shapes. The following types of cașcaval are distinguished:

Cașcaval de Dobrogea: A hard-paste cheese, prepared in the lowland region, from sheep's milk, sometimes mixed with cow's milk. The manufacturing technique is similar to that of cașcaval de Penteleu, with the distinction that the coagulation and curd fermentation

temperatures are higher. - Cașcaval de Dobrogea has the shape of a cylinder with a diameter of 25-38 cm and a height of 5-10 cm. The weight of a cheese wheel is 4-8 kg. The side surface may be slightly convex, having a flattened section of about 12 cm, where the wheel is placed for drying and where marking is done. The side surface is covered with a smooth, greyish-yellow rind. In cross-section, the paste is white yellowish to light yellow, without lustre, with no holes or with few, small, elongated eyes. The taste is salty; it has the characteristic smell of sheep's milk cheeses. Syn. Greek Cașcaval, Balkan Cașcaval." (Răduleț, 1958).

In *Industria Alimentară* magazine, several scientific articles were published regarding the production of Cașcaval de Dobrogea, presenting both the raw materials and the production process. From the article written by Eng. C. Toma and published in issue 9 of 1959, we learn that, although the production base was located in the lowland areas (Constanța, Galați), manufacturing centres had also developed in other regions of the country in recent years. In one of these laboratories, issues regarding moisture and yield were identified, leading to research and proposed solutions. The raw material used was sheep's milk curd (caș) (three pieces produced daily by each sheepfold) delivered to the processing centres by the shepherds themselves. "During the 12-14 hours it takes from the moment of their preparation at the sheepfold until their arrival at the processing centre, the curds undergo a fermentation process that is all the more intense the more defectively the curd was processed regarding whey drainage. Curds containing a high amount of whey generally arrive over-ripened; from such a raw material, not even the most skilled masters manage to obtain good quality cașcaval." (Toma, 1959). The article provides recommendations to fix these issues, demonstrating the strong commitment to ensuring a very high-quality product.

A very important contribution is made by Dr. C. Stoian, who, in issue 3 of the *Industria Alimentară* magazine from 1962, addresses aspects regarding the "Improvement of the quality of Cașcaval de Dobrogea by modifying certain stages of the manufacturing technology." The author provides important information concerning raw materials, the product's name, and the technological process. According to him, the production of Cașcaval de Dobrogea included both sheep's milk curd (caș), prepared directly within the cașcaval processing units, and curd from other facilities transported there for processing. He further states that the designation of cașcaval de "Dobrogea", given to this hard-paste lowland cașcaval, stems from the fact that it was produced in larger quantities in the region with the same name. Prior to adopting this name, it was also referred to as "Balkan" or "Greek" cașcaval. The author mentions that as early as 1374, cașcaval was being produced in the mountainous region of Wallachia, referencing *Hrisovul lui Vladislav Voevod către Mănăstirea Vodița* [The Charter of Prince Vladislav to Vodița Monastery], 1371, State Archives, Bucharest, Historical Section No. 1.

In the centuries that have passed since then, the quality of the product has evolved both according to the skill and expertise of the respective cheese masters (cășari) and depending on the environmental conditions of the production areas. (Stoian, 1962, 72-76).

Cașcavalul de Penteleu

An equally important production, spanning over two centuries from the mountainous region near Ploiești, is that of another type of cașcaval: **Cașcavalul de Penteleu**, which is frequently cited in specialized literature in comparison with Cașcavalul de Dobrogea. Its definition from

the 1958 "Lexiconul Tehnic Român" [The Romanian Technical Lexicon] is: "A semi-soft paste cheese prepared in mountain regions from cow's milk, sheep's milk, or a mixture of both. After the milk is curdled, the clot is broken down and drained of whey. Following a 12-hour maturation period, it is sliced into narrow strips that are held in warm water until they become elastic. The resulting paste is kneaded by hand and placed into molds. - The hardened cheese wheels are submerged in brine and then dry-salted with coarse salt. During this time, the curd undergoes maturation, which lasts about four weeks. – Cașcavalul de Penteleu has the shape of a cylinder with a diameter of 25-30 cm and a height of 5-8 cm. The weight of a cheese wheel is 3.5-6 kg. The side surface is slightly convex. Cașcavalul de Penteleu has a thin, light greyish rind covering only the side surface. During maturation, as several wheels are stacked and stuck together (bașama), only the wheels forming the top and bottom caps may have a rind on one of their flat bases. - The rind is sometimes covered with a silver-green mold with rare red spots. In cross-section, the paste is white or slightly yellowish, uniform, without holes." (Răduleț, 1958).

Current Situation

At present, Cașcavalul de Dobrogea is not protected at either the national or European level, nor does it enjoy the popularity it once held when it was exported to numerous markets across Europe and the Middle East.

On the "Lumea brânzeturilor" [World of Cheeses] website, we find the product description for Five Continents Trading Company 1993, produced at their factory in Fetești, Ialomița County: "Cașcavalul de Dobrogea is a traditional Romanian semi-hard cheese produced from scalded and kneaded curd (stretched-curd technique), aged for at least 6 months, made from sheep's milk from Dobrogea and Ialomița at Fetești, Romania."

Despite being one of the oldest and most renowned products from Dobrogea, representing through its very name an important vehicle for promoting local heritage, Cașcaval de Dobrogea has fallen into obscurity. There is a lack of attention from local authorities regarding its promotion, and no campaigns have been launched to foster its rediscovery or public awareness.

From the in-depth interviews conducted during doctoral studies with several sheep breeders, it emerged that the main difficulty stems from a shortage of personnel to handle sheep milking and milk processing, which, unlike cow's milk, is produced in much smaller quantities, requiring significantly greater effort for a lower yield. Furthermore, intensive exports of lambs and young sheep to countries in the Middle East have shifted the focus away from processing dairy derivatives and toward selling well-fed livestock (raised primarily on milk).

Best practices

If there are producers interested in initiating the Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) registration process but do not know the required steps or what this endeavour entails, they could consult the documentation for PGI Cașcaval de Săveni available on the website of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development:

<https://madr.ro/docs/ind-alimentara/2017/caiet-sarcini-cascaval-saveni-2017-update.pdf>

The procedure is lengthy and involves numerous bureaucratic requirements, but the recognition and protection of a product yield substantial long-term benefits. Even though different raw materials are used, and many distinctions exist between these types of cheeses, understanding the required administrative process is useful, as Cașcaval de Săveni stands as the first and, to date, the only Romanian cașcaval protected at European level.

Other best practice cases can be found in European countries with a rich tradition in processing sheep's milk cheeses. In Italy, no fewer than nine types of cheese called pecorino, with varying degrees of aging, are registered as PDO: Pecorino Romano PDO, Pecorino Sardo PDO, Pecorino Siciliano PDO, Pecorino Toscano PDO, Pecorino di Filiano PDO, Pecorino di Picinisco PDO, Pecorino Crotonese PDO, Pecorino delle Balze Volterrane PDO, and Pecorino del Monte Poro PDO.

Conclusions

In the context of growing focus on the gastronomy of Dobrogea, which can serve as a "vector for leveraging cultural and intercultural promotion" (Casangiu Siea, 2026), it is essential to establish an inventory of local identity products to form a foundational baseline for developing a narrative discourse centred on aspects of local cuisine.

These products, such as Plăcinta dobrogeană [Dobrogean Pie] or Cașcaval de Dobrogea, through the geographic identity embedded directly in their names, represent fundamental references, and the primary motivation for expanding the production of Cașcaval de Dobrogea and promoting it rests upon multiple economic, cultural, and social factors.

First and foremost, Cașcaval de Dobrogea represents a traditional product with a strong regional identity. Expanding its production contributes to preserving local gastronomic heritage and passing down authentic recipes and techniques from generation to generation. At a time when consumers are increasingly seeking authentic and natural products, this type of cheese can become a symbol of Romanian quality and tradition - not just of Dobrogea.

Secondly, expanding production carries a significant economic impact at the local level. It supports farmers, livestock breeders, and small producers, generating jobs and stimulating the rural economy in Dobrogea. By making full use of locally produced milk, dependence on imports is reduced and the development of short supply chains is encouraged. Developing and promoting a quality local product fosters responsible consumption and the support of local producers, contributing to sustainable development and the preservation of food diversity.

Promoting Cașcaval de Dobrogea is essential for increasing its visibility on both national and international markets. Through effective marketing strategies, participation in trade fairs, and securing quality certifications (such as Protected Geographical Indication status), the product can earn consumer trust and access new markets. Furthermore, pairing it with gastronomic tourism can attract visitors seeking authentic experiences, thereby contributing to the development of the region.

In conclusion, developing the production and promotion of Cașcaval de Dobrogea represents a strategic opportunity to leverage local resources, sustain the regional economy, and assert Romanian cultural identity on a broader scale.

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