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## **Festivals of kiselomlyako – a culinary tourism offer from Bulgaria to Europe and the rest of the world**

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**Abstract:** Festivals of certain foods in Bulgaria are a good initiative to promote the country to foreigners. This is a good and inexpensive way to show traditional Bulgarian food. The accompanied culinary geography and holidays became very important in the life of every Bulgarian.

This paper will clarify the origin of kiselomlyako, its distribution, consumption per capita, useful properties and influence on the human body. We will describe where the festivals of the product are organised and how they can be attended. The development of culinary tourism and festivals in these parts of the country will contribute to better and faster economic development in this area.

**Keywords:** Bulgaria, kiselomlyako, yoghurt, culinary geography, culinary tourism, culinary festivals

### **1. Introduction**

We should answer one very important question to understand the essence of the topic: “Why culinary tourism is useful and important to the contemporary Bulgarian people?”

The main reason is urbanization. Today, the Bulgarian cities are home to 72.5% ([www.nsi.bg/sites/default/files/files/pressreleases/Census2011final.pdf](http://www.nsi.bg/sites/default/files/files/pressreleases/Census2011final.pdf)) of the country’s population, but in the census of 1946, only about 25% of the country’s population lived in the cities. In 1985, the level of urbanization was about 65% ([www.nsi.bg](http://www.nsi.bg)). During the communist period, the inhabitants of villages and small towns and people employed in agriculture were the poorest in the country (Boyadzhiev, 2012). Bulgarian industry was created around the big cities. Many people in the country worked in construction. Thus, the second reason for the population migration over long distances is finding a job. The third reason for the relocation of the population is the social services in the cities – universities, schools, hospitals, supermarkets, sports stadiums, libraries, theatres and more. What are the consequences? Modern Bulgarians are away from their home environment. They are isolated from their tradition. Bulgarians do not know the meaning

of their names (forenames or surnames). They increasingly use modern, foreign names. Foreign influences can be observed in the media, hairstyles, clothing and footwear, in housing, and in the cultural landscape of the cities. These are the main reasons why Bulgaria is to create a policy and economy in order to preserve the Bulgarian identity while accepting the globalization and international realities. For these reasons, the traditions, folklore and geography are constantly intersecting, which results in the culinary geography. It enriches the Bulgarian food, fights GMOs and industrial food. It connects the biological reflex for dining with culture and art.

National culinary geography allows people to communicate in a new way, to enrich each other and to live a better life. Modern Bulgarian people are descendants of Thracians, Southern Slavs and Proto Bulgarians. All these three ethnic groups have cultivated many animals. Their main food was milk and dairy products. Even we, Bulgarians, have our own word for yoghurt. We call it „Kiselomlyako”.

Globalization involves some important issues related to kiselomlyako. Is it a traditional Bulgarian food? Is there a difference between

yoghurt and kiselo mlyako? Is it true that many scientists attempt to prove that the Bulgarian longevity (some people live more than 100 years) is associated with the consumption of large amounts of kiselo mlyako?

The kiselo mlyako is a traditional, well-known and widespread food in Bulgaria. On the international market, however, its popularity is lower compared to yoghurt. Therefore,

with the beginning of holidays and festivals of the product, Bulgarians hope to promote one of their main foods. The objective is to make businessmen and tourists remember Bulgaria with delicious food and joyous celebration of kiselo mlyako. These holidays and festivals in Bulgaria are an interesting novelty in the life of the Bulgarian people.

## 2. Description of the area, methods and material

Many issues are related to the kiselo mlyako and yoghurt. One of the most important is what is the traditional Bulgarian kiselo mlyako and how it is produced.

According to H.V. Chomakov (1987), it is a product of lactic acid fermentation. There are two main microorganisms in the process of fermentation – *Lactobacillus bulgaricus* and *Streptococcus thermophilus*. The fermentation occurs when both microorganisms are available. If there is only one, the fermentation does not take place. The traditional Bulgarian kiselo mlyako is free from impurities, additives, sweeteners, substances that alter the taste.

The history of kiselo mlyako is not fully understood. When exactly it was created remains a mystery. Many scientists believe that the Thracians had made it before the Bulgarian state (in 681) was founded. Another theory says that the product is a result of the mare milk processing by the Proto Bulgarians.

In the early 19th century, the Nobel Prize winner Ilya Mechnikov explored the causes of human aging. He discovered that during food intake, food proteins are broken down by putrefactive bacteria in the large intestine, which results in body poisoning and early death. He proved that the only food that could reduce the growth of decomposition bacteria in the intestine is the Bulgarian kiselo mlyako. This explains why Bulgaria had the highest number of centenarians and why they were in good health at the time of the experiment. Mechnikov also stated that in Bulgaria, 426 people per every million are older than 100 years. Turkey is the second country in terms of longevity, with 318 centenarians per million, followed by Colombia (311), Brazil (246),

Sweden (64) and others. Mechnikov concluded that this is due to the consumption of kiselo mlyako (<http://www.lbbulgaricum.bg/история-на-българското-кисело-мляко>). At the same time, the microflora of the kiselo mlyako was investigated by St. Grigoroff (1905). He found a bacterium responsible for its formation, which was later named after him. Three years after Mechnikov's study, Grigoroff confirmed these results – the kiselo mlyako has many medicinal properties.

Another scientist – H.V. Chomakov (1987) also examined the question of health and longevity due to kiselo mlyako. This issue was also analysed by Y. Ivanov (2006). Traditional processing technology was examined by M.B. Dimitrova (2006). Many authors are interested in probiotics, kiselo mlyako from various animals, and its effects on the human body.

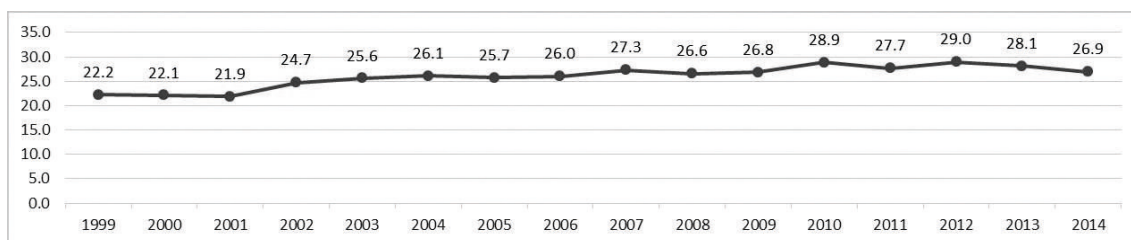
There is a national standard – БДС 12:2010 – for Bulgarian kiselo mlyako ([http://i.dir.bg/bds/BDS\\_12\\_2010.pdf](http://i.dir.bg/bds/BDS_12_2010.pdf)), according to which it is made today in Bulgaria. It can be made from cow, goat, sheep, buffalo milk or a mixture thereof, and can be full-cream or skimmed to a varying degree.

Another very important issue is the difference between traditional Bulgarian kiselo mlyako and yoghurt? The difference is in the technology. Both products are leavened with two main kinds of lactic acid bacteria – *Lactobacillus bulgaricus* and *Streptococcus thermophilus*. The kiselo mlyako is leavened in separate pots. Leaven of the yoghurt is done in a common silo and the product must have a creamy appearance ([http://www.kiselomliako.bg/faq.php?content\\_id=8&faq\\_id=1](http://www.kiselomliako.bg/faq.php?content_id=8&faq_id=1)).

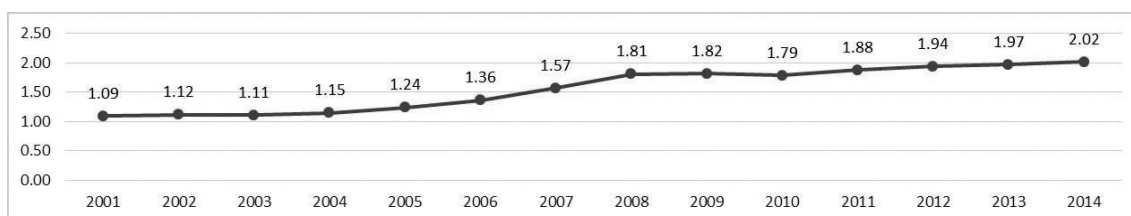
### 3. Results and analyses

One of the most important aspects for a product to gain popularity is marketing. The Bulgarian kiselo mlyako is advertised mainly in Bulgaria. There is no large market for the product abroad. The traditional Bulgarian kiselo mlyako, with a label informing that it is produced according to Bulgarian technology, can

The highest price was recorded in 2014 but the producers claimed that kiselo mlyako available then on the market was of higher quality. According to unofficial data, one litre of milk is sold for 1 lev in the villages around Sofia, while the product is sold for 2 lev per kg (NSI data; Veselinova, 2017).



**Figure 1.** Consumption of kiselo mlyako per capita per household (in liters)  
(Source: NSI)



**Figure 2.** Average prices of kiselo mlyako (in lev for kg)  
(Source: NSI)

be found in some countries like Germany (in addition to yoghurt). Nevertheless, the yoghurt market is much larger.

Many brands of the Bulgarian kiselo mlyako could be found on our market. Some of them are standard, others are not. In the years of transition, the product was produced not only from milk, but with addition of many other supplements, which were unknown to the traditional Bulgarian product. It was still produced according to the original recipe only in rural areas.

The media spoke how harmful things were found in the product. People started to complain. Those who were able to find milk sellers made their own kiselo mlyako. Bulgarians always consume large amounts of kiselo mlyako (Fig. 1).

In recent years, the highest consumption was recorded in 2012 – 29 kg on average per capita. The price per kilogram of the product has increased over the years (Fig. 2).

Culinary feasts, festivals and fairs have been promoted to support local and regional development of certain areas. In Bulgaria, there are three main festivals of kiselo mlyako.

The first fair of the traditional Bulgarian kiselo mlyako was organized in 2002 in Razgrad District, located in north-eastern Bulgaria (Fig. 3).



**Figure 3.** Municipalities organising the festivals  
Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/> (modified)

The regional centre of Razgrad is located 354 km north-east from Sofia (the capital) and 131 km north-west from the largest city in Northern Bulgaria – Varna. The total population of the area is 125,190. The Razgrad municipality has a population of 51,095 and the town of Razgrad – 33,880 (www.nsi.bg, 2011). The population consists of different ethnic groups – Turks and Gypsies account for the highest percentage. However, the total population size is constantly decreasing.

The fair in Razgrad is related to the festival of folk traditions and crafts. It is held every year in July. Contests for home-made kiselo mlyako

and dairy products are organised. Guests come from Bulgaria and abroad. There are many events organised within three days. The objective is to develop the territory and to promote folk traditions and crafts and traditional Bulgarian food (Fig. 4B).

The new initiative for traditional Bulgarian kiselo mlyako started in western Bulgaria in 2007. The Tran municipality is located in the Pernik region, Bulgaria. The town is located 46 km west of the district centre of Pernik and 75 km west of the country's capital Sofia (Fig. 3). The town of Tran and its municipality are located on the western border with Serbia.



**Figure 4.** A: Museum of the Bulgarian kiselo mlyako in the village of Studen Izvor, the municipality of Tran; B: Festival of the Bulgarian kiselo mlyako in Razgrad; C: Traditional Bulgarian kiselo mlyako; D: Poster from the Festival of kiselo mlyako in Momchilovtsi

(Sources: A - <http://bulgariatravel.org/bg/object/1034/>; B - <http://www.bta.bg/bg/c/BO/id/644548>; C - <http://www.perniknews.com/news/read/s-bor-na-kiseloto-mlyako-zaradva-tr-nchani>; D - [http://www.regal.bg/novini/bulgaria/2015/09/04/2603619\\_na\\_10\\_septemvri\\_zapochva\\_festivalut\\_na\\_kiseloto\\_mliako/](http://www.regal.bg/novini/bulgaria/2015/09/04/2603619_na_10_septemvri_zapochva_festivalut_na_kiseloto_mliako/))

The historical events in the country and natural resources predetermine the peripheral role of the territory today. The total number of residents in the municipality is 4146. The population of the town is 2443 ([www.nsi.bg](http://www.nsi.bg)). The population is constantly decreasing and aging.

The municipality of Tran established the festival of kiselo mlyako to advance the progress of the territory and to promote the traditional Bulgarian food (Fig. 4C), as well as to attract the tourists and to pay homage to one of the Bulgarian scholars. It was held for the fifth time in June 2015, and it was established in 2007. Many manufacturers attended. They presented their products and participated in competitions for the best kiselo mlyako. A museum of kiselo mlyako was created in the municipality of Tran, in the village of Studen izvor (Fig. 4A). Today the village is almost depopulated. Stamen Grigorov, who first investigated the composition of the product, was born in this village. In the museum, you can see traditional Bulgarian houses, a library and an exhibition hall. There are many books on the traditional Bulgarian kiselo mlyako.

#### 4. Discussion and conclusions

Why these holidays are held and what is their main purpose? Firstly, it is a way to preserve the identity of the people, to maintain the local population, their traditions and peculiarities. Territories and settlements are depopulated and poor. These festivals and holidays are an important instrument of regional and local policy to attract Bulgarians from other parts of the country and foreigners as well. At first, these people come as tourists. Some of them remain just tasters, but others like the kiselo mlyako and continue using it every day. The expansion of the kiselo mlyako market and festivals is an excellent opportunity to promote the traditional Bulgarian food. It must not only remain Bulgarian, but it must also be known under its traditional name. The traditional Bulgarian kiselo mlyako should not be called yoghurt. This name is not only inaccurate, but also wrong. Not only because of the production technology, but also because of the long tradition of producing kiselo mlyako,

The Momchilovtsi village is located in the south central region, in the Smolyan region and the Smolyan municipality (Fig. 3). It is situated 242 km south-east of Sofia and 19 km from the town of Smolyan. It is a large village with a population of 1294 inhabitants. It is a traditional Rhodope village, with beautiful scenery and production of domestic ecological products. In September 2015, the village held the first festival of kiselo mlyako (Fig. 4D).

In addition to kiselo mlyako, you can find and taste during the festival other home-made dairy products (<http://www.plovdiv-online.com/zdrave/item/70380-festiv%D0%B0l-n%D0%B0-kiseloto-mlyako-v-momchilovtzi>). A very beautiful “path of longevity” was opened. It has a shape of numeral 8 (eight), which according to local people is a symbol of infinity. The trail leads to the excavations of the ancient Thracian field, with beautiful views of the National Observatory Rozhen, Pamporovo. It is expected that the festival will be very popular and the village will be visited by tourists in all seasons of the year. A prerequisite for this is the large Pamporovo resort, located 18 km west of Momchilovtsi.

which has nothing in common with the yoghurt.

In the European Union, Bulgaria needs to provide an accurate, clear definition of the name “Kiselo mlyako”. It should be written in Latin: “Kiselo mlyako” and should be known under this name and not be translated as “yoghurt”.

Festivals contribute to the regional and local economic development. Of course, it has to go beyond the traditional framework of purely rural character of events as traders and stalls. Our local authorities gladly report that the various festivals are visited by the Chinese, Europeans or other guest producers. The organizers of the festivals are very keen to attract more investors. However, they must comply with the specifics of the Bulgarian technology and consumer tastes and preferences. For example, at the beginning of the democratic changes, a large French company bought the largest Bulgarian milk company in the country – Serdika in Sofia. The French brought their technology,

the taste of kiselo mlyako was immediately amended and the consumers withdrew. Today the company uses the same bacteria as Bulgarian companies. This was necessary because Bulgarian kiselo mlyako has a specific taste. Foreign investors do not have to define the quality of our traditional food – we must offer, protect and define our production.

The festival of kiselo mlyako should be promoted not only in Bulgaria, but mostly abroad, among the general public. The three festivals are organised in summer – June, July, September. At that time, our country is visited by many tourists, attracted by the Bulgarian Black Sea coast. Tour operators could include different packages that offer views of these culinary feasts. We are aware that the analysed areas are border regions,

but there is potential for their development. Tran settlements and Momchilovtsi are further away from the coast, but this would be an additional incentive to visit the sites in the country in the form of a one-day or two-day trip.

Bulgarian kiselo mlyako has the potential for development and will find an extensive market with a proper and targeted development and marketing program. Our manufacturers must improve the quality of production and offer a high quality product. This is necessary in order to protect the identity of the Bulgarian food and its taste qualities.

Celebrations related to kiselo mlyako will contribute to the dissemination and improvement of the product and the economic development of the territory.

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