

Lost in Translation

On Pag, cheese is the universal language

WRITTEN BY KRISTIN VUKOVIĆ

ILLUSTRATED BY ALEKS SENNWALD



I arrived on Pag island for the Croatian Days of Cheese Festival sans underwear. Rather—thanks to the translation of “clothes” in an outdated English-Croatian dictionary and my tenuous grasp of the language—that’s what my driver understood. My luggage was likely looping around a carousel in Paris, where I’d transferred planes, leaving me with just the rumpled loungewear on my back.

Pag is known for its Manchegolike sheep’s milk cheese. The Croatian island’s rocky hills are sparsely vegetated with aromatic herbs dusted with salt from the sea—a diet that makes for flavorful milk. I’d sampled *Paški sir* (“Pag cheese”) on previous visits to the mainland, and now I was about to meet its makers ... in pajamas.

At the famous Sirana Gligora cheese factory, festival guests lingered at tables displaying wheels and wedges from all parts of the country. Familiar, savory aromas permeated the hall; I was reminded of my grandmother’s kitchen in Dayton, Ohio. The same smells lingered when she prepared *sarma*, pickled cabbage leaves stuffed with a ground meat and rice mixture. I wondered what she would have thought of me returning to her homeland, to learn about cheese and

sheep and the agrarian life she had left behind.

Ivan Gligora, Sirana Gligora’s founder, shook my hand firmly. I hoped he wouldn’t spot the jersey track pants I was sporting beneath my long coat. I also hoped the cameras following him around were filming above the waist.

“I come from a long line of cheesemakers, and at Sirana Gligora we try to make cheese similar to the way it has been made on Pag for centuries,” Ivan told the cameras. “Now the technological process of cheesemaking is advanced, but we still need to keep tradition alive.”

I envied these people and their traditions. My grandmother shared her heritage through cooking, but she didn’t pass down the language. She wanted her children to be American. “The good old days, you can have ‘em,” she used to say, which made me wonder about the hardships she and her family had endured. But she was proud and tight-lipped, just like my father. He didn’t speak a word of his parents’ native tongue, and by the time I learned elementary Croatian in college, my grandparents had passed away.

During lunch, guests hunched over bowls of Balkan-style cabbage soup. The next course featured the island’s *Paški* lamb.

Even today, lamb is served on Pag only during special occasions. It’s expensive, like the island’s cheese. My grandmother emigrated from a poor country and came of age during the Depression, and she carried those lean times with her. She certainly wouldn’t have splurged on *Paški sir*—and, regardless, the cheese wasn’t available in the US during her lifetime.

As afternoon bled into evening, local men performed *klapa* music, a style of a cappella with rich, moving tones. I felt the deep, resonant notes in my stomach. Emptiness washed over me. I wished I understood the words, wished I had grown up with these songs, wished I were fully part of this culture. Instead, it’s both familiar and foreign. Each time I visit Croatia, the language remains elusive, an ever-painful reminder that I am removed from my roots—an American who will never quite belong in the country of her ancestors. But when I taste dishes my grandmother used to cook, I feel a sense of home. A warm cheese community, so embracing of a disheveled traveler, helps, too. **C**

Kristin Vuković is a writer and editor based in New York City. Recently her writing has appeared online in BBC Travel, AFAR, Fathom, and Public Books (kristinvukovic.com).