

## Romania, cheese

### 1. **Brinza de Burduf, Brînza de burduf transilvaniana**

Romanian sheep breeds used in the area are mainly Tsurcana, Tigae and their crosses. Both are descended from the wild species *Ovis vignei* acar. The Tsurcana has heavier, coarser wool that is better adapted to cold and wet conditions and its meat is fattier. The Tsurcana is similar to the Italian Sarda. The Tigae has semi-fine wool that is very resistant to dry conditions. Its meat is prized both locally and for export. The milk of both breeds is similar in quality: Tigae milk is 7% fat and 6.5% protein, while Tsurcana milk is 7-8% fat and 6% protein. Both breeds produce excellent milk for Telemea, Cascaval and yogurt. The cheese from the Rupea area, including those of the producers listed, is prized for its taste – not because of these breeds, but because of the particularly rich pastures. Prices are higher for these cheeses as a result. The shepherds take care to graze the sheep every night.

The production of sheep cheese in Transylvania is a tradition that has remained unchanged for hundreds of years and is intimately linked with village society, customs and with the maintenance of the spectacular flowered grasslands of the area – perhaps the most extensive flower-rich lowland grasslands surviving in Europe. Milking and cheesemaking are all done by hand up in the hills where the sheep graze in summer. The unique richness of flowers and herbs in the grassland gives the cheese a special character. These traditional production methods are threatened by stricter EU and national health regulations. Their loss would damage social and cultural traditions in villages that have survived for centuries. A typical village in the area is made up of 200 families, most of which are actively involved in farming. Most households own two or three cows and 10-20 sheep. Cows are milked at home morning and evening, and milk is often the only source of income. Sheep are kept for meat (especially spring lambs) and cheese.

Each spring there is a village meeting at which one or two shepherds are chosen according to their reputation and to the amount of cheese they offer to the owners for “rent” of their sheep. The sheep are kept at one or two temporary summer pens (stana) often several miles from the village during summer months. There are wolves and bears in the area which prey on a few sheep and perhaps a donkey every summer. The sheep are guarded by ciobanesc, fierce sheep dogs.

Once lambs have been weaned (traditionally on May 10), sheep are milked two to three times a day. Each stana usually holds about 300 sheep, and milking is done by hand. Milk is made into cheese at the stana, using lambs’ stomachs as a natural source of rennet. Each stana has a special cheese room with immaculately clean wooden trays and troughs for coagulating the milk and draining off the whey.

The Brînza de Burduf is a strong, salty cheese. After several days the caş (cheese) is cut into small pieces, salt is added and the mixture is kneaded by hand in a wooden trough before being placed in a sheep's stomach, carefully shaved sheep skin or a tube of pine bark. The cheese has a strong taste, and keeps very well in the sewn-up stomach/skin of the sheep. Brînza de Burduf has a specific resinous flavor if kept in pine bark. The cheese is transported down to the village by donkey or horse and cart once or twice a week. The cheese is sold, used for the stana shepherds' or owner's own consumption or given to local dignitaries. In addition, a certain amount of cheese is given back to the animal owners as "rent". Each summer sheep owners usually receive 6-8 kg of Brînza de Burduf (or Telemea, in the plains) and 1-1.5 kg of Urda per sheep. Most households receive a few kilos of fresh cheese each week directly from the shepherd. Its exceptional flavour and freshness are much appreciated by visitors of the villages. Brînza de Burduf is used in traditional dishes, oftentimes mixed with mamaliga (polenta). For example, Gîsca ("goose") is a Transylvanian speciality made of alternating layers of Brînza de Burduf and polenta, baked and served hot – a perfect winter food.

Linking the sheep's cheese to the medieval hay meadows of Transylvania and its flower-rich biodiversity should attract a premium price if properly marketed.

Production area  
Southeastern Transylvania

## **2. Transylvanian sheep Telemea, Telemea transilvaniana de oaie**

Telemea is a fresh, whole feta-type cheese which is typically cut into 1 kg blocks. It is a semi-soft cheese, softer and sweeter when fresh, harder and salty when aged, as it is stored in brine. Older cheese should be soaked in cold water before eating. The cheese is transported down to the village by donkey or horse and cart once or twice a week. The cheese is sold, used for the stana shepherds' or the owner's own consumption or given to local dignitaries. In addition, a certain amount of cheese is given back to the animal owners as "rent". Each summer sheep owners usually receive 6-8 kg of Telemea and 1-1.5 kg Urda per sheep. Most households have 10-20 sheep and receive a few kg of fresh cheese each week directly from the shepherd. Its exceptional flavour and freshness are much appreciated by visitors of the villages. Telemea is a cheese very much associated with the Vlach nomadic peoples of Romanian origin, who have spread all over Europe, particularly northern Greece and Poland.

Telemea is the summer staple cheese and offers a wonderful fresh taste. It is delicious with Romanian tomatoes in salads.

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Production area  
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### **3. Buffalo milk Cascaval, cascaval din lapte de bivoli**

There is no native buffalo breed in Romania; they came to Romania from South Asia via Turkey and Bulgaria in the Middle Ages. Transylvania favored buffalo breeding as it is a damp, hilly region more suited to livestock than the flat, dry plains of southern Romania.

Buffalo were kept by Saxon farmers in southeastern Transylvania for their milk, their meat and their use as draft animals. In some villages there were more buffalo than cattle, often hundreds in a typical village of 200-300 households. However, the number of buffalo has fallen sharply – first under communism and then due to the current agricultural recession and departure of many Saxons to Germany. A few farmers still rear buffalo and produce buffalo products, but the relative difficulty of milking them, and the lack of bulls (once the numbers fell, the villages no longer kept their own bulls) means that many villages that have had buffalo for hundreds of years now have none at all.

Buffalo milk has twice the fat content of cow milk (about 9-10% as compared to 4.5-5% fat) and is favored for a variety of cheese products because its taste and texture is superior to cow milk.

Cascaval is a hard cheese with a stringy mozzarella consistency (like true Italian mozzarella), and is sometimes plaited into long decorative cheese shapes. It is made of whole milk in the summer months when the buffalo are grazing.

Buffalo are milked at home in the courtyards of their owners in the morning and evening. They are very particular about being milked, and will not yield milk at times. Buffalo can be aggressive to strangers. Locals say that the shorter and more curved the horns of the buffalo, the gentler and better milking animals they are.

In summer, the buffalo go out with the village herd each morning after milking to graze communally and walk back into their courtyards in the evening.

Their masters scythe fresh grass every day for their evening feed and bring it home by horse and cart. The hay meadows that surround each village are probably the richest and most extensive flowered grasslands remaining in Europe today.

In winter the buffalo are fed on the hay from the same meadows. Milk yields are considerably lower in winter.

Smantana, Telemea and Branza, the area's buffalo milk products, are much appreciated for their flavor, which owes its quality to the flower- and herb-rich diet of the buffalo, and the freshness and homemade nature of the product. The Saxons especially prized buffalo, and would eat sour cream (Smantana) and butter only made from buffalo milk – it is very white, compared to yellower cow milk, and richer.

Linking buffalo milk products to the medieval hay meadows of Transylvania and its flower-rich biodiversity should attract a premium price if properly marketed. Better prices and a wider interest in buffalo products could help the buffalo survive in these villages.

Production area  
Southeastern Transylvania

#### **4. Transylvanian whey cheese, *Urda transilvaniana***

Urda is made with the whey of the caş (cheese). It is like ricotta, relatively high protein and low in fat. The cheese is shaped into 1-1.5 kg cakes once dry, it is kept in a clean cloth and is transportable. It keeps for several weeks in such conditions.

Like Telemea it is eaten fresh and considered a delicacy although its fine, crumbly dry texture is not universally appreciated. It is often eaten in puddings or with fruit compote, rather than on its own. Clatite (pancakes) are often stuffed with Urda, mixed with finely chopped dill and a little sugar, while another dish consists of a mixture of milk, Urda and polenta.

Production area  
Southeastern Transylvania