

ROMANIAN DISTILLATES, TRADITION AND LANDMARKS

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In the entire Europe the production of the alcoholic distillates starts in the 14th and 15th centuries. All over Europe the production of the alcoholic distillates becomes a trade that was no longer the doctors' and pharmacists' monopoly. The alchemist Arnaldo de Villanova and his student, Raymondo Lulle are firsts europeans who characterised the power of the "spirits". But a technical progress emerges only in the 16th century by the activity of Paracelsus, Basilius Valentin, Gianbattista della Porta and Andreas Libau.

The production of distillates started in Romania in the 16th century, first of all in Transylvania, a moment when this trade also appeared in other parts of Europe. The specific terminology and the autochthonous raw materials led to the appearance of some typically Romanian products. Since the second half of the sixteenth century, vino sublimatum, brandies, rakies and aqua vitae are well known products in Roumanians countries.

Gradually, the distillation installations of the rich owners become bigger and bigger and are improved sometimes specialized in „food transformation” (distillation of the cereal dregs). Villagers processed only fruits (prunes) and the sub products of vinification (marc brandy, dregs), or some inferior wines. They did not have the right to trade these distilled alcoholic products.

From the 18th century they notice the development of a rural skill that of distillation. In the 19th century 70-80% from the fruit production was transformed by distillation. At present, by the accession to the EU, there have come into force laws regulating very strictly this sector.

Keywords: *alcoholic distillates, Romania, specific terminology, evolution in time, present perspectives.*

The coordinates of producing alcoholic distillates on the territory inhabited by Romanians needs a couple of observations meant to clarify the possible confusions or a possible lack of information in the field. In the entire Europe the production of the alcoholic distillates starts in the 14th and 15th centuries. They mention *aquavit* in Sweden (1469), *uisge-beatha* = life water -whisky (Scotland, 1494), *eau de vie* (Charante Cognac) in France (1529) and *calvados* in Normandy- (France, 1553). All over Europe up to the remote Russia, in Poland, Hungary, Transylvania, in Balkans and the entire Orient, the production of the alcoholic distillates becomes a trade that was no longer the doctors' and pharmacists'

monopoly. There will pass a short time until distillates become consumption products more and more spread.

For half a millennium, alcohol was used only to produce remedies, macerates of medicinal plants (el-ixir, liquor). The distillation of alcohol is initially attested to Arabians (al Razi or Rhazes 865-925) in the 10th century AD. Words like *alcohol*, *alembic* and *araq* are of Arabian origin. Though distillation as a procedure has been known from early antiquity (3500 B.C.) to produce essences, perfumes and medicines, there is no attempt known to distillate alcohol before the Arabians. The phenomenon was not understood, they talked about *spiritus vini* (*geist* in German), that was believed to come from the distillation heat or fire (*vinum adustum*, *brandy*, *Branntwein*).

But a technical progress emerges only in the 16th century by the activity of Paracelsus (1493-1541) who studies distillation and consecrates the terminology used, Basilius Valentin (? – 1624) invents the cooling of refrigerant through water, Gianbattista della Porta (1534 – 1615) builds the first practical alembic and Andreas Libau (Libavius, 1550- 1616) creates the zigzag refrigerant.

The alcoholic distillates produced a powerful impression in the epoch by their burning taste, the sensation of drunkenness and the euphoric and narcotic effect respectively. The alchemist Arnaldo de Villanova (1235 -1313) wrote in the treaty *De vinis* that distillates are the elixir of life, the remedy sought after and dreamt from old times that „prolongs life, enlivens the heart and maintains health”. His student, Raymondo Lulle (1235 –1316) surnamed the „enlightened doctor”, said that „ the distillate (eau de vie) is an emanation of Divinity, an element revealed to people recently and that was hidden from them in the Antiquity because mankind was too young then to need this remedy intended for the revitalization of energies in our times of decline.”

A. Brillant – Savarin affirmed in *Fiziologia gustului* (1829) that „in the 17th century the habit to drink distillates spread step by step. Distillation in itself still remained a sort of a mysterious operation known only by a small elite. At the beginning of the reign of Louis XIV (1643) alembics were something common but *eau de vie* became a popular drink only during the reign of Louis XV (1715 – 1774). Alcohol is the king of liquids and thanks to it the roof of the mouth gets hot at the highest degree; the different ways of preparation meant new sources of joy: it gives to certain medicines a vigor they would never have without its help, moreover, in our hands, it turned into a weapon since the peoples of the New World were crushed and enslaved almost at the same extent by eau de vie that by means of the fire weapons.”

MATERIAL AND METHOD

Starting from the documentary material existing where they highlight different viewpoints regarding the beginnings and the way of propagation of the techniques related to distillation of alcohol at world level and in the territories inhabited by Romanians, we sought for a manner of synthesis and completion of the less clarified aspects. We tried to establish as precisely as possible the first existing documentary

written data. We studied typology and relevance of these occupations in the Romanian countries up to the modern times.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the Romanian space, the production of distilled alcohols is attested in the 16th century. The names and specific terms from Romanian may be separated after origin or area where they were assimilated as follows: a) from west, by Transylvania: plum brandy, glass, carafe, demijohn, eventually brandy (*vinum adustum*, Branntwein) etc; b) from west, through the Polish and Hungarian neighbors: brandy distiller, keg, bottle, vodka; c) from south-west: plum brandy; d) from the Slavic origin: strong plum brandy, distillery, dregs, marc brandy; e) from the Orient: (*rachiu* from *raki*- resulted from *araq at tamr*), and by means of French, alembic, alcohol. (Ciorănescu, Al., 2002; DEX 1984; Graur, Al 1978; Bogdan, D. P.1946).

From Transylvania comes the first written evidence on the production and consumption of distillates. For the three Romanian principalities there are historical data relatively similar. The vassal town of Bistrița supplied the ruler Petru Rareș and his successors in reign with „*vino sublimato*”, a wine distillate (1545-1585). [3-16]

In 1558, the inhabitants of Brasov sent to the spouse of Mircea Ciobanul, the ruler of Țara Românească, two bottles of „sublimated wine” and two bottles of rose water (Izsak, S 1979).

A register of the municipality of Cluj registers for almost six decades (1578-1637) the variety, frequency and price of the products that were consumed by the foreign guests. They mention: 16 vegetables, 16 fruits, 2 tropical fruits, as well as **11 processed products that we enumerate in order of use frequency**: *brine cabbage, vinegar, dry prunes, raisins, brandy, raki, pickles, must, plum wine, aqua vitae and dry pears.*

Cluj hosts on December 22nd-25th, 1637 two Moldavian boyars who brought gifts from the ruler Vasile Lupu for the voivode of Transylvania Gheorghe Rakoczi I. They mention that „the superior Moldavian messengers did not drink but ***aqua vitae*** and hydromel”.

In *Istoria comerțului românesc. Epoca veche* (1925), speaking about the relations between Bistrița and Moldavia in the 16th century, N.Iorga asserts “*as gifts people brought to the court brandy (the old “vinum sublimatum, vinum adustum”), that was also given in monasteries”*.”

Pomohaci N. (2002) quotes Cioltean, I.(1989) who says the first written information about the brandy production from fruits in the Romanian principalities at the end of the 16th century (1570) at Satu Mare (Turț).

In Țara Românească (Valea Petrii or Piua Petrii in the delta of Ialomița, near the Danube) and in Moldavia (the Barnovschi monastery, Iași) there is information dating from the end of the 16th century regarding the functioning of some distillation installations.

The brandy makers from villages are mentioned in the 17th century in minority as compared to the number of installations on the boyars' (noble gentry) estates or monasteries. Gradually, the distillation installations of the rich owners become bigger and bigger and are improved sometimes specialized in „food transformation” (distillation of the cereal dregs). Villagers processed only fruits (prunes) and the sub products of vinification (marc brandy, dregs), or some inferior wines. They did not have the right to trade these distilled alcoholic products. At the end of the 18th century we witness an important increase of the number of distillation installations (brandy distilleries, stills, buckets etc). In Moldavia de la 151 distillers in 1676, their number increases to almost 800 in 1785, surpassing Țara Românească (583 distillers). They notice down the great quantity of cereals tuned into alcohol.

The importation of cheap alcohol of cereals from Poland increases. In 1783 the clergy and boyars of Moldavia decide the interruption of this importation „because here they make brandy which is better than horelca since it is made from prunes, marc or wine dregs and the sour wine”. Alexandru Mavrocordat (1784) rejects the mediation of the Russian consul from Iași, invoking the firman of the sultan confirming the same measure. In Țara Românească similar measures are taken by Alexandru Ipsilanti (1774-1782). In the following years there developed bootlegging that cancelled the effects of these laws. The illegal alcohol circulated in higher and higher quantities though rulers (such as Alexandru Moruzzi, 1793) tried to stop the phenomenon.

Ion Ionescu de la Brad said in 1868 that in the sub-mountainous area from county *Mehedinți*, the culture of fruit trees and first that of plum trees is easy and profitable: „There is hardly someone here who might not have a plum tree orchard. Plums are all turned into brandy. Brandy is the main product for survival and getting rich for the mountaineers.”

In county *Dorohoi* (1866) they describe the traditional industrial procedure of turning cereals or potatoes into alcohol and the preparation of alcoholic drinks by diluting alcohol with water up to the concentration for consumption: “when water is not cleans then brandy gets turbid and gets white like milk especially if water contains lime or plaster”. About the distiller in Svoraste: “the income is considerable; that is why the construction of this *distillery* is monumental, having all the details taken to the utmost perfection”

In county *Putna* (1869): “the quantity of brandy produced in Vrancea goes up to 72000 liters resulted from 600 thousand kilos of plums. This brandy is made in 600 stills.”

Cherciu (1920) quoted by Pomohaci, N. (2002) said that “*The big distilleries usually belonged to owners or land agents. Stills with a reduced capacity that were used to process plums and marc belonged more to peasants, the small owners and some of the richer socmen*”.

Distillation has a great development in county Putna. If in 1870 there were 600 distillers, in 1882 the number increases to 1082, so that in 1887 they reach 1342 “*especially in the wine-growing and hill area of the county*” [42]

They mention (according to studies published at the end of the 19th century), that the benefits achieved from the plum tree culture by turning it into brandy were 20 times bigger than for wheat, 15 times bigger than for corn, 10 times bigger than for linseed, 8 times bigger than for potatoes and more than 3 times bigger than for vine. At the beginning of the 20th century, the number of stills was 5709 in county Gorj, Vâlcea - 4890, Mehedinți - 3874, Argeș - 3706, Buzău - 3715. [42]

In 1929 Romania had more than 40.000 stills belonging to a number of 5.000 owners. The natural brandy consumption was 82 – 108 million decaliters /year, and the fees paid by owners reached 125 million lei per year, according to the law from 15 July 1926. In 1927 they promulgate the law against frauds and set up in the territory 25 laboratories for the control of brandy quality.

Ștefănescu, D., (1924) mentioned the existence in România Mare of about 80 million fruit trees out of which 64 million plum trees. The production of plums reached on average 430 thousand tones annually. In the period 1920-1930 the fruit production was valorized in proportion of 75 % distillation, the remainder of the fruits being destined for fresh consumption, drying or producing jam and marmalade. In the Old Kingdom, the proportion of transformation into brandies was 80-90%, depending on the region, whereas in Bessarabia it was under 30%, the number of oven for the drying of fruits was much bigger. Romania had in 1932 only 1.700 over for drying and more than 52.000 stills that produced annually about 150 million decaliters of brandy in alcohol equivalent. The natural brandy consumption was 82 – 108 million decaliters /year, and the fees paid by owners reached 125 million lei per year, according to the law from 15 July 1926. In 1927 they promulgate the law against frauds and set up in the territory 25 laboratories that insured the application of this law.

In his book “Fabricația rachiurilor” conf. Ph.D. N. V. Pătrășcanu, says that in 1935 the number of stills increased in Romania up to 52.372, and the value of the brandies produced was estimated to be between 1,4 and 1,7 billion lei (25-30 lei /liter). The author showed that “the production of brandies must be considered a safety valve for the fruit valorization”.

The surface occupied with plum trees in 1937 surpassed 146 thousand hectares, with a production of 550 thousand tones, from which more than 80% was turned into “brandy - a national product”. From the data of G. D. for State Monopolies, the brandy quantity sold by producers was about 25650 thousand liters, with a total concentration of 7524 MGD in 1935/1936, about 23334 thousand liters with concentration of 5968 TGD in 1936/1937 and 23661 thousand liters with concentration of about 6261 TGD in 1937/1938 (Țuculescu, 1939 quoted by [42]).

The fruit-growing surface in 1950 was about 300 thousand hectares (3% from the cultivated surface), and plum trees predominated (about 65%). In 1953, they distilled 44% from the plum production, 18% was turned by concentration, dehydration, stews and the remainder of 38% was consumed in fresh state or was exported (Constantinescu, N., 1957 quoted by [42]). Before 1990, fruits or marcs were taken over by 310 distilleries and 240 floating centers.

Table 1

Sales of some processed horticultural products by the state and cooperative trade

Product	UM	1950	1960	1970	1980	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989
Alcohol and alcoholic drinks	TGD*	144,0	99,7	276,9	451,9	491,6	507,6	455,6	387,4	374,2
Brandy and natural alcoholic drinks	TGD*	78,3	103,0	204,9	317,6	310,5	303,5	296,7	252,6	218,3

*TGD = thousands grade dal (grade dal = decaliter grade equivalent to 10 vol. % alcohol)

In 1995 there were 24 companies specialized exclusively on alcoholic distillates, 38 companies just partially specialized on alcoholic distillates and 14 companies that produced distillates from other parts of the country. In 1995 fruits and marcs were processed in 120 distilleries. The degree of use of the distillation installations was 30% in 1993, 35% in 1994 and 40% in 1995, and the storing degree was 45% in 1993, 50% in 1994 and 55% in 1995 due to the decrease of the resources of raw materials (Pomohaci, N. 2002).

In NW of Transylvania the number of distillation installations with direct fire in the households of population almost doubled in all counties (table 1).

Table 2

Situation of distilleries in NW of Transylvania

Type of distillation installation	Satu Mare		Maramureș		Sălaj	
	1989	1996	1989	1996	1989	1996
With direct fire	158	354	193	486	30	72
With steam	2	2	2	2	2	2
Alcohol factories	-	1	1	3	-	1

Table 3

Share of fruits destined for distillation in county Satu Mare in the period 1992 – 1996

Years		1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	tones %
Total production out of which for distillation		56137	68926	49076	28145	60273	
		24261	27433	23139	12919	27839	
		43,21	39,80	47,15	45,90	46,27	
Species	Apple tree	7616	10459	3903	3547	7263	28,5
	Pear tree	149	140	189	182	126	0,7
	Plum tree	16116	16488	18655	8963	20234	69,8
	Apricot tree	48	26	81	18	29	0,2
	Peach tree	67	54	59	61	64	0,3
Sour cherry tree + cherry tree		265	268	252	148	177	0,5

CONCLUSIONS

At present, distillation is a traditional manner of transforming fruits (or cereals) that do not have another use. The surplus from the years with rich crops or the areas with bad roads, far from the processing centers, or the non-harvested wild fruits may be turned into fermented marcs for distillation. Distillates concentrate a great value to a reduced volume being able to be manipulated, kept and used depending on the needs.

The economic interest manifests through the steady demand of distilled drinks, the excise paid, the work places occupied, the industries that sell equipment/materials and, last but not least, by limitation of importations. Alcoholism is a social danger but prohibition is not a solution. Like in other European countries or from other continents, there is a popular tradition to produce some assortments of high quality distillates in well known areas and also to consume alcohol at festive moments.

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