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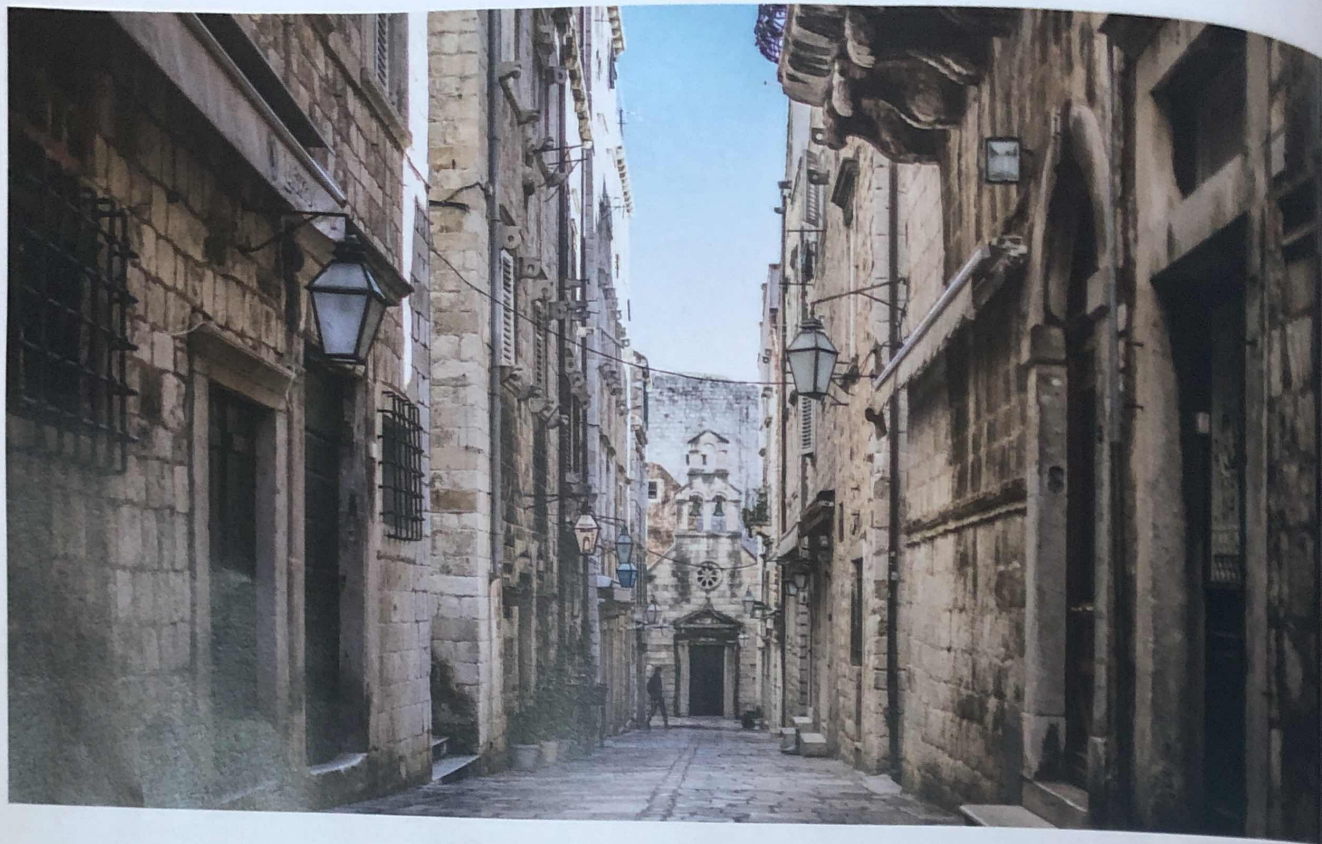
Food that warms the

While many Croatians are turning away from traditional cooking, the Papaks still gather at their Dubrovnik home to enjoy meals made a distinctly local way — buried in embers



bones by scent alone

WORDS: DAVID FARLEY. PHOTOGRAPHS: MAJA PECANIC



Sunday lunch at Marija Papak's house in Dubrovnik begins with pork. As I stroll into her home around noon, I find her standing in the kitchen, knife in hand, in front of a thick porcine leg, carving slices of prosciutto — or *pršut*, as it's called on this side of the Adriatic. Instead of greeting me with a customary kiss on the cheek, she holds out her knife. On it sits a delicate slice of pink-and-white cured pork. I let the silky fat melt on my tongue: the meat tastes of saltiness from the Dalmatian Coast with a faint nuttiness. It's going to be a delicious day.

Marija and her husband, Zlatko, host these long, weekend lunches once a month or so, usually when Zlatko's grown-up daughter, Vanja, is visiting from Slovenia. Joining us are the couple's two younger children, 11-year-old son Josip and 13-year-old daughter Lea, and our mutual friend, Zrinka, with her daughter, 11-year-old Zara.

Today they're doing something special: *peka*, a uniquely Balkan way of cooking. Meat and potatoes are piled into a pan and roasted slowly under a large, bell-like lid, covered with sparkling embers. The *peka* oven sits on the same patio where we'll be eating, so we can relax around the table and anxiously await our feast.

I first met Marija around a year ago, during Dubrovnik Winter Festival. Amid the food kiosks of sausages and *rakija* — the potent fruit brandy ubiquitous in the Balkans — friends told me I needed to visit Marija's food stall, or *kućica* (literally 'little house'). "She is making and selling dishes you rarely find in Dubrovnik restaurants," Zrinka said. "This is stuff we only eat at home." There was a cinnamon-and-chocolate-spiked *Stonska torta*, a cake from the seaside village of Ston made of pasta noodles; *umbolo*, thick-sliced pork loin from Istria; *morsko jaje* (or sea egg), a metallic-tasting bright yellow morsel of the Adriatic. And, of course, a seemingly endless stream of *pršut*.

Every time I'd return to town Marija would take me out for food and drink. And so, a year and several visits to Dubrovnik later, we've forged a friendship based on pork. And lamb. And seafood. And lots of other Dalmatian delights.

Marija was one of the few people in Dubrovnik I had met who was obsessed with local, artisan food, often wandering through seaside and mountain villages to seek out farmers quietly producing exceptional ingredients. She introduced me to a whirlwind of flavours and dishes that — even as a frequent visitor — I would never have been privy to.

There are few places I've been on the planet where the division between eating at a local restaurant and eating at someone's home is so stark. "It's because we don't really have much of a dining-out culture," said Božidar Jukić, who holds food-themed tours in the city. We met up for coffee the day before the lunch and he was excited about that fact that I'd get to experience real Dalmatian home cooking. "The war in the '90s completely threw off our 'normal' way of life," he said, adding that the restaurant scene didn't really recover until relatively recently. And when it did, it was in correspondence with the rise of mass tourism in Dubrovnik. "So local restaurants started gearing their menus more towards tourists than locals, serving the sort of dishes visitors recognise — like pizza and spaghetti. Things are slowly changing though."

Self-service household

Within a few minutes of my arrival, a small glass is put in my hand. Vanja pours me an almond-and-olive liqueur made on the Dalmatian Coast. "Živjeli", we say — to life — for the first of many times that day, and take a sip. Zrinka is opting for a walnut variety, while Marija is sipping a sweet tangerine liqueur.

From left: Dubrovnik old town; Marija Papak visits the market; leafy greens for sale; lamb and veal, ready to be cooked under the bell. Previous pages: Sunday lunch at the Papaks



Meat and potatoes are piled into a pan and roasted slowly under a large, bell-like lid, covered with sparkling embers

After Marija has finished slicing the *pršut*, she moves on to preparing the *peka* course of the meal, rubbing rosemary just plucked from the garden and sprinkling sea salt onto fist-sized pieces of veal breast and lamb shoulder, before adding diced garlic and onions. She piles pieces of potato on top of the meat, douses it all with a liberal pour of olive oil, and yells to Zlatko that it's ready for the oven.

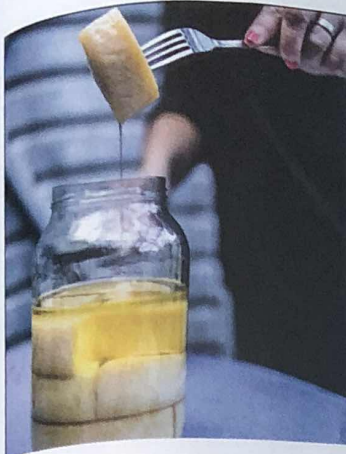
Zlatko, a big bear of a man in his fifties, takes the circular, three-inch-deep pan out to the patio and places it in the open oven where a small fire is still birthing embers. The heavy, metal, bell-like lid he places over the pan is pockmarked and looks like it was just removed from a tank. I half expect someone to tell me it was handed down to them by their great grandmother, but it turns out the *peka* lid is only 12 years old. The ageing is down to frequent use — and the cooking method. Zlatko shovels hot embers on top. "It's important to make sure it's completely covered," he tells me. "This is the trick. It's the one sure way to know the meat will end up cooking in its own juices."

The other trick is that instead of just letting the meat and potatoes cook undisturbed for two hours, they brush off all the ashes and remove the lid every 40 minutes, shifting the contents, before once again letting the burning ashes work their magic.

"This makes everything crispy," Marija tells me. "At *peka* restaurants they don't do this and it makes the potatoes soft and mushy." If anyone should know how to make good *peka*, it's the Papaks: they owned and operated a *peka* restaurant in Dubrovnik from 2008 to 2011 and now they make it in their home regularly.

After Zlatko completes the first of three of these meat-and-potato stirrings, he announces, "It's time to drink!" And out comes the *rakija*, because there could be no festive gathering in this part of Europe without this potent brandy. It's poured from a one-litre wine bottle,





Croatian classics

CHEESE IN OLIVE OIL:

Dalmatian cheese sits preserved in an olive oil-filled jar, which adds a slightly grassy, flavour dimension. "You can't get cheese like this in the supermarket," says Lea Papak, Marija's daughter. "I like to eat it with my mum's homemade bread and a slice of prosciutto." The Papaks serve a cow's milk version, but another Croatian favourite is Paški sir — a sheep's cheese from the Adriatic island of Pag.

PEKA: The origins of peka, a word that derives from the Serbo-Croatian for "bake", are murky. Most culinary histories point back 2,400 years ago to the ancient Illyrians who had a proclivity for slow-roasting meat over fire. Lamb and veal are most commonly cooked 'under the bell', but sometimes monkfish and octopus are also used. "It's the perfect meal to socialise over," says Marija.

PRSTACI: Sometimes referred to as a date shell, this form of mussel is historically an Adriatic delicacy, but you're no longer allowed to eat them. They're mainly found attached to rocks along the Dalmatian Coast, eating them has been banned since 2001, partly due to over-consumption and partly because removing them destroys the rocks, reeking havoc on the underwater environment. As a result, Vanja Papak hasn't had them for a while, but wishes some day they'll be legal to consume again. "They're like biting right into the sea," Vanja says. "And when cooked with white wine and garlic, they're so delicious."



Marija slices pršut (prosciutto) for family friend Zara

indicating it's homemade — in this case by a farmer friend in the nearby Konavle Valley.

"Živjeli!" says Zlatko, his glass of rakija raised above his head. We follow suit. "To peka," he says. "And prosciutto!" I add. Shot glasses in hand — the kids are drinking mineral water — we take large sips and then slam our empty glasses down.

"David," Zlatko says to me, "This is a self-service household." He nods at the tall bottle, indicating for me to drink as much as I like. Despite this, every time my rakija or wine glass is nearly empty, I hear Zlatko calling out to anyone who can hear that I need a refill.

A little while later, food starts to hit the dining table, an impressive spread of Dalmatian delicacies: bowls of figs, olives picked from a nearby church yard, and one-day old cheese with a flavour so fresh it tastes like grassy milk straight from the cow's udder. There are baskets of Marija's dense homemade bread. And then, of course, the pršut from earlier in the day makes an appearance, fanned out on large serving plates.

The pršut comes from a town called Dirmo, about 15 miles from Split, on the central Dalmatian Coast. Zlatko's brother lives there and introduced them to a farmer who happens

to know his way around cured pork. Dalmatian prosciutto is distinct from its Italian brethren because it's smoked, its flavour profile swayed by the strong northern bura and southern jugo winds that regularly sweep the coast.

"We like it from this area because the salty wind blows on the cured pork just the right way to give it the flavour we like," says Marija. "You can't find prosciutto like this around Dubrovnik. Not many farmers around here make it — you can only buy it in the supermarket and I refuse to do that."

Despite the local proclivity and convenience of the few chain supermarkets in town, Marija relies on her background and upbringing to inform her eating and cooking choices. "When I was growing up in Dubrovnik," — this is the only house she's ever lived in — "my mother would make everything from scratch. No fast food. No pizza. We ate simple, but good food, such as squid ink risotto or sarma," she says, referring to a Turkish-influenced dish of cabbage leaves stuffed with meat. "It was slow food and it's still slow food."

As was the custom when she was young, lunch is the big meal of the day around here. "When we were growing up in communist Yugoslavia, meat wasn't as readily available

as it is now. So we'd reserve weekend lunches for meat-eating. It became a tradition. We're continuing this but we often don't just roast the meat in the kitchen oven. We do it peka-style out here on the patio."

Which may be why she cherishes high-quality artisan food. "I still cook simple dishes using local, seasonal ingredients," she says. "This sounds obvious but many people here in Dubrovnik rely on eating frozen food, for example, or easy-to-make food available in supermarkets. I realise this is very easy and tempting for people but it's so much more rewarding when you make it yourself."

Lea, the couple's teenage daughter, who has inherited her mother's thick, dark hair and her father's height, is likely to carry on the tradition. "I'm spoiled. I rarely eat fast food," she says, preferring to eat what her mother

The sound of sizzling emerges, followed by wafts of roasted meat. The juices bubble like molten lava

cooks — she often asks about where the food came from and how it was made.

Zlatko says they go to the supermarket maybe once per month. "But just to buy things like toilet paper or dish soap. Not food. For that, we get everything at the local outdoor market or buy it directly from farmers in the Konavle Valley."

The main attraction

About 40 minutes later, Zlatko lifts the peka lid for what will be the last time, using a spade to raise it. The sound of sizzling juices emerges, followed by wafts of roasted meat that warm my bones by scent alone. Zlatko puts the pan smack in the centre of the table. Juice is bubbling in it like molten lava. The potatoes are leopard-spotted, golden orange with dark, crispy hues dotted around each piece. "Dobar tek," says Vanja — bon appetit — and everyone commences part two of the feast, the main attraction.

The veal is falling off the bone — no knife needed. Barely even a fork. The lamb has a crispiness to it but it's almost gooey on the inside, the meat having been slow-cooked in its own juices in such a way that it practically melts away when it hits your palate. Why, I wonder at this point, do they even bother to make meat any other way around the world? Why even eat meat unless it's going to be this good, given this amount of attention?

For a while the sound of chewing dominates the table, as mastication replaces conversation. "This food," Zlatko says, finally



The peka lid covered with embers.
Below: Marija's husband, Zlatko Papak, stokes the flames





Peka, a traditional dish of slow-cooked meat and potatoes

breaking the silence and waving his arm over this epicurean feast, “would be impossible to find in a restaurant in Dubrovnik. Sure, there are a few places that make peka, but not with this high-quality meat and other ingredients.”

“And at peka restaurants they often pre-cook the food and then reheat it when it’s ordered,” says Marija.

Zrinka, our friend, adds: “The difference between eating in a restaurant and at home like this is the laid-back camaraderie. The fact that your glass is constantly being re-filled, for example, or that we can sit back, relax and just take our time over the food and not have to

worry about vacating the restaurant or giving the table to someone else.”

“And we can eat with our fingers,” Zlatko adds. Everyone laughs. We raise our wine glasses — we’re drinking a particularly robust red from the nearby Pelješac peninsula — and then sip.

With only a few scraps of lamb, veal, and potatoes left in the cooking pan, Marija brings out dessert. It’s something I’ve never heard of but is apparently a typical sweet in this the area: *paradižot*, a simple concoction of butter biscuits, cream, sugar and milk — a sort of chilled custard if you like. It’s light and fluffy

— like biting into a cloud. After the heavy meat and potatoes, it’s the perfect way to end the meal.

If it was the ‘authentic’ Croatia experience I was looking for — after all, what traveller doesn’t go in search of a true taste of the region they are visiting — then I certainly found it in the Papak home. We sit at the dining table, chewing through another spell of solitude as we lap up the creamy pudding. And then Zrinka says, “This silence among us that shows everyone here is very well fed.” We raise our wine glasses once more and toast to that. “Živjeli!” To life! ● @davidfarley

Marija’s *paradižot* recipe

A cool, creamy Dubrovnik dessert that’s perfect for a crowd

SERVES: 8 TAKES: 20 MINS

PLUS 2HRS CHILLING TIME

INGREDIENTS

- 200g buttery biscuits, such as shortbread
- 6 eggs, separated
- 2 tsp vanilla sugar
- 1 ltr whole milk

- 6 tsp caster sugar
- grated dark chocolate, for sprinkling

METHOD

- 1 Break the biscuits into small chunks and place in a serving dish. Set aside until later.
- 2 In a bowl, combine the egg whites and vanilla sugar. Beat by hand or with an electric whisk to stiff peaks.
- 3 Heat the milk in a pan over a low heat, then slowly stir in the egg white mixture until

cooked (about 3-5 mins).

- 4 Pour the egg white mixture over the broken biscuits and gently stir.
- 5 Whisk the egg yolks until smooth, then pour into a clean pan and slowly cook over a low heat, gradually adding the caster sugar until the mixture thickens.
- 6 Pour the egg yolk mixture into the serving bowl with the biscuits and egg whites, mixing as you go. Sprinkle generously with grated chocolate; chill for 1-2hrs before serving.