Tasting Szekler Heritage: How Harghita County Turns Local Food and Living Traditions into Responsible Tourism

Harghita County, Romania
Asociația de Dezvoltare Intercomunitară Harghita (Harghita Community Development Association)
Local Destinations (including villages, cities, municipalities, islands)
Culture & Heritage

Summary of Good Practice Story
In Romania's Harghita County, home to Szekler Hungarian culinary heritage, rising tourism interest risked reducing authentic local food and traditions to anonymous "local product" labels and staged spectacle, disconnecting them from the farmers and cooks who created them. Harghita County Council and ADI Harghita built a connected chain of trust: the 2009 Szekler Product trademark (now nearly 200 producers and 1,500 certified products) verifies authentic origin, QR-coded "Szekler Product 2.0" tools link products to their makers' stories, the Open Farm programme lets visitors visit working farms, the Székely Ízek festival connects producers directly with visitors, and a new Myrmidone label (2026) certifies nearly 70 restaurants that source locally and reduce food waste — while sacred community events like Ezer Székely Leány Napja are deliberately kept off the tourism market. This groundwork supports the county's 2027 European Region of Gastronomy title bid, with three-quarters of surveyed tourism providers now favouring local products. The core lesson: living heritage survives tourism only when visibility is paired with respectful relationships, and communities decide what stays theirs alone.

Setting the Scene: Destination & context

Harghita County lies in the heart of Szeklerland, in the Eastern Carpathians of Transylvania, Romania — a rural, mountainous county of forests, mineral springs and volcanic peaks, where Szekler Hungarian identity is still lived every day in language, faith, dress, crafts and, above all, food.

Here, food is the thread that ties the landscape to the people. A wheel of cheese, a loaf of bread, a jar of forest-fruit preserve or a slice of kürtőskalács, the iconic chimney cake, is never only a product. Each one carries a mountain pasture, a family recipe and the memory of rural work.

This is why Harghita's story belongs at the table. In 2027 the county will hold the title of European Region of Gastronomy, awarded by IGCAT — but the deeper value is older: the cheese, the bread and the celebration are still held by the communities that created them. The challenge was to welcome visitors without cutting these foods, and the people behind them, away from each other.

The Turning Point: Why change was needed

The realisation arrived in an ordinary moment: a handmade Szekler cheese standing on the same shop shelf as an industrial imitation labelled "local". Same word, same price — but one carried a pasture, a family and a season of work, and the other carried nothing.

Harghita's strongest tourism assets are also its most fragile. Visitors come because Szekler gastronomy feels authentic — not staged, but lived. Yet growing interest brought a quiet risk: that traditions would become decorations, that a festival would be photographed as a spectacle while its meaning was overlooked, that a dish would be served without anyone knowing the farmer, the pasture or the recipe behind it.

For producers, cooks and community organisers, this was not a marketing problem. It was a question of trust: would tourism strengthen local knowledge, or simply borrow its image and leave the makers invisible?

The turning point came when Harghita County Council and ADI Harghita understood that the county did not need to invent new attractions. It needed to protect what was already alive, make the real makers visible, and help visitors understand the meaning behind the meal. This shifted the goal from promotion to stewardship — not "more heritage for tourists", but tourism that keeps heritage in the hands that make it.

The Vision: What you set out to do

The vision was a community-owned chain of trust, with Szekler gastronomy at its centre: protect the ingredient, certify the meal, interpret the story.

A visitor tasting local cheese, bread or a forest-fruit preserve should never meet an anonymous "local product". They should discover the farm, the village, the landscape and the family knowledge behind it — while the farmers, cooks and artisans remain the storytellers and the beneficiaries of their own heritage.

Harghita County Council and ADI Harghita took the first steps together with municipalities, producers, restaurants, cultural institutions and event organisers. A clear milestone was 2022, which Visit Harghita dedicated as the Year of Gastronomy, placing food at the centre of the county's public agenda and preparing the ground for the European Region of Gastronomy 2027 bid.
The motivation was simple but urgent: authenticity cannot survive if the people who create it disappear from the experience. Tourism had to become a tool for local pride, rural livelihoods and cultural continuity — not a stage that separates traditions from their communities.

The Journey: How change happened
Harghita's journey began with one decision: instead of creating heritage for visitors, the county would protect, connect and interpret the heritage already living in its villages — and it would do it through food.
The first link was to protect origin. In 2009, Harghita County Council created the Szekler Product trademark to separate genuine local products from imitations. For small producers, this became more than a label: a shared sign of trust, so that cheese, bread, preserves, honey and herbal products could be recognised as rooted in real local work. Later, the EU mountain product quality term reinforced the bond between product, landscape and origin.
The second link was to make the maker visible. A certified product still needed a human face. Through Szekler Product 2.0, QR-coded tools began linking each product to its maker — turning a market item into a story, a feedback channel and a relationship, so a visitor can move from tasting to understanding: who made this, where it comes from, and why it belongs here. The Open Farm programme, launched by Visit Harghita, carried this into the real world. Farms, food processors and producers open their gates by appointment, and twice a year an Open Farm weekend invites visitors to walk in, watch the daily work and see for themselves how local ingredients are made. At GAZSI Manufaktúra in Zetea, founder István Gáspár — a second-generation herbalist whose family has gathered and processed mountain herbs for fifteen years — now welcomes visitors into the herb garden, where a jar of herbal tea arrives with the forest, the family and the hands behind it.
The third link brought heritage to the table. The Székely Ízek (Szekler Flavours) festival created direct encounters between producers, cooks and visitors, where a wheel of cheese or a jar of forest-fruit preserve became a conversation about mountain pastures and family recipes. In 2026 this logic reached restaurants through the new Myrmidone label, awarded to restaurants that source within 100 km, work with local producers, serve signature Szekler dishes and reduce food waste. Where Szekler Product certifies the ingredient, Myrmidone certifies the meal.
The fourth link was knowing what not to commercialise. Harghita deliberately kept some heritage off the market. Ezer Székely Leány Napja (Thousand Szekler Girls' Day), first held in 1931, banned under communism and revived in 1990, brings dress, music and dance together as a living gathering, not a performance staged for tourists. At the Csíksomlyó Pentecost pilgrimage, Szeklers and Csángós gather in folk costume for worship and belonging. These

events set the boundary that protects the whole approach: responsible cultural tourism also means deciding what should stay primarily in community hands.
The fifth link was to scale without standardising. The Visit Harghita website and app gave the county a multilingual gateway, but the aim was never to flatten local differences into one product. ADI Harghita worked as a connector between municipalities, businesses, cultural actors and community organisers. In 2023, Visit Harghita launched the bid for European Region of Gastronomy 2027 with a consortium of twelve regional partners; in 2024, an IGCAT jury visited the county and met more than one hundred local stakeholders before recommending Harghita for the title.
The obstacles were real: fragmented offers, limited marketing capacity, uneven digital skills and community caution toward tourism. These challenges shaped the answer. Harghita learned that the safest way to scale heritage is not to standardise it, but to build a chain of trust around it — link by link, from the pasture to the plate.

The Breakthrough: What you achieved
The breakthrough is that Harghita's heritage is no longer communicated as scattered attractions. It now works as one connected trust system — from product to plate to place.
By 2024, the Szekler Product trademark had grown to nearly 200 producers and around 1,500 certified products. In 2025, Szekler Product 2.0 added QR-coded tools that turned certification into storytelling, feedback and relationship-building. The new Myrmidone restaurant label extended the same logic to hospitality: nearly 70 restaurants applied and met demanding criteria, with ADI Harghita conducting on-site audits for every applicant.
Independent 2025 research with 62 county tourism providers confirms the model is changing behaviour: three-quarters favour local products, and nearly half source more than 60% locally.
The story travels, too. In the first months of 2026, the Visit Harghita website reached more than 142,000 users and 286,000 views, with audiences from Romania, Hungary, Germany, China and Singapore.
The emotional change matters just as much. Producers see that their knowledge has value. A cook can finally name the farmer behind a dish. Visitors discover that local food is not a slogan but a relationship. Living traditions gained visibility as well: in 2025 more than 5,000 people in traditional costume joined Ezer Székely Leány Napja, and in 2024 around 1,000 dancers from 36 folk-dance groups and 30 settlements performed together. Harghita has moved from promotion to stewardship.

Reflections: What you learned and what others can learn
The most important lesson was that living heritage cannot be protected by visibility alone. At first it seemed enough to promote local food and events. We learned that visibility without context can simplify culture, and that promotion without the people behind it erodes the very trust it depends on.
What surprised us most was the power of small, personal encounters. A producer explaining a recipe, a cook naming the farmer behind an ingredient, a young person wearing traditional dress

with pride — these moments teach more than any campaign. Authenticity is not created by perfect staging; it is protected through respectful relationships.
We also learned that not every tradition should become a tourism product. Sacred events, family knowledge and community rituals need boundaries. Responsible tourism means asking who owns the story, who benefits from sharing it, and what should remain in community hands.
There were challenges: fragmented offers, limited time and marketing capacity among small producers, uneven digital skills and hesitation in some communities. Next time we would involve more young people and remote-village producers from the very beginning, and collect impact data and personal stories earlier.
Our advice to other destinations is simple: start with the community, not the visitor. Protect the origin, make the maker visible, and let tourism support the people who keep the heritage alive.

The Ripple Effect: Lasting impact

The ripple effect is a new understanding of heritage. Food, crafts, dress and celebrations are no longer separate attractions but parts of one responsibility: to keep rural communities alive, give producers visibility, and welcome visitors without losing local meaning. The county council, ADI Harghita, producers, restaurants and community organisers now share one question — how can tourism create value without taking control from the people who own the tradition?
This continues into 2027, when Harghita holds the title of European Region of Gastronomy — not an end, but a platform to scale a transferable model: protect origin through certification, make producers visible through digital tools and on-farm visits, bring local food into restaurants through audited sourcing, and keep communities as the storytellers.
One emblem captures the promise. The Myrmidone label takes its name from the strictly protected Colias myrmidone butterfly, which survives in a few European valleys, Harghita's among them. Its fragility reminds us that purity, biodiversity and culture are bound together. Harghita is not turning heritage into a show; it is learning to share it as a relationship. Visitors do not only taste Szekler heritage — they meet the people, places and values that keep it alive.

Awards or Certifications

- EDEN 2019 – Harghita County ranked 4th in Romania’s EDEN 2019 competition, which highlighted destinations with strong health and wellness tourism potential. (https://adiharghita.ro/stiri/Jude%C8%9Bul%20Harghita%20%E2%80%93%20locul%20IV%20la%20Concursul%20EDEN%202019)
- Destination of the Year 2024 – Best Promotion – Visit Harghita won the national award for Best Promotion, recognising the destination’s outstanding branding and communication work. (https://www.destinatiaanului.ro/media/comunicate-de-presa/gala-destinatia-anului-r-2024-a-premiat-cele-mai-atractive-destinatii-turistice-din-romania-id-2-cmsid-56)
- Best SPA Destination 2025 – Destination Harghita received the grand prize for Best SPA Destination, confirming the county’s strong spa, balneo and wellness profile. (https://wellandia.eu/en/spa/castigatorii-premiilor-spa-romania-2025/)

- Top Foodie Website 2025 – Visit Harghita was selected by IGCAT among the Top 10 Foodie Websites for 2025, highlighting its role in promoting local gastronomy and authentic culinary experiences. (https://igcat.org/savour-the-journey-igcats-top-10-foodie-travel-websites-for-2025/)
- FIJET Romania 2026 – No. 1 Tourist Destination – Harghita was ranked No. 1 in the 2026 tourism ranking of the Tourism Press Club – FIJET Romania. (https://fijet.ro/destinatiile-fijet-romania-2026-locul-1-harghita/)
- European Region of Gastronomy 2027 – Harghita was officially awarded the title European Region of Gastronomy 2027, recognising its commitment to local food heritage, culture and sustainable tourism. (https://igcat.org/harghita-officially-awarded-european-region-of-gastronomy-2027/)

Web Articles

European Region of Gastronomy 2027: https://www.europeanregionofgastronomy.org/platform/harghita-2027/
Celebrating ten years of the Szekler Product trademark: https://transylvanianow.com/celebrating-ten-years-of-the-szekler-product-trademark/
Visit Harghita – a treasure in nature: https://transylvanianow.com/visit-harghita-a-treasure-in-nature
Harghita, European Region of Gastronomy: https://www.rri.ro/en/features-and-reports/travellers-guide/harghita-european-region-of-gastronomy-id863707.html
Programmes to strengthen Harghita County's culinary heritage launched ahead of 2027 European Region of Gastronomy title: https://agerpres.ro/english/2026/02/24/programmes-to-strengthen-harghita-county-s-culinary-heritage-launched-ahead-of-2027-european-region---1531323

Other Relevant Links

Visit Harghita's webpage: https://visitharghita.com
ADI Harghita's professional website as a DMO: https://adiharghita.ro/

Quotes or Testimonials

“The producer, the restaurateur and the guest are like three people walking hand in hand.” (Adorján Trucza, owner and manager of Páva Restaurant, Székelyudvarhely)

"My childhood was spent close to nature, and I absorbed everything the Harghita landscape gave us. As a second-generation herbalist, our real strength is family cohesion — and passing our knowledge on to the young." (István Gáspár, founder of GAZSI Manufaktúra "Füvesasszony kertje" / The Herb Woman's Garden, Zetea)

"What happens here is pure magic. They manage to preserve the old, grandmother-style Székely flavors while keeping the presentation and quality at the absolute highest level. The

homemade bread, local cheeses, and wild game dishes are simply heavenly. You can tell that every single ingredient comes from local producers and that they treat traditions with utmost respect. We didn’t just have a great meal; we felt like we were guests at a Székely family's home. It is exemplary how they keep their culture and flavors alive!" (A guest from Hungary)

"The breakfast is hearty and brilliant, with fresh, warm, home-style flavors welcoming us every single day: local jams, zacusca, home-smoked sausages, and blueberry pálinka like you can't find anywhere else. The owners proudly share stories about local customs, and during dinner, the traditional Székely kitchen truly comes alive. Here, quality doesn't mean being fancy—it means honest, pure food made with heart and soul." (A guest from Great Britain)

“There are a few people obsessed with quality in the area, whose products we can use without remorse.”
(Szabolcs Péter, Schwarz Bistro / Transilvanian Gastronomy Association)