**Three courses against prejudice - How a Gypsy restaurant came to downtown Pécs**

Women from the Roma community cooking at Anna Várnai's restaurant Kóstolda in Pecs traditional food. She says: employment can grow self-confidence dramatically. / Foto: Tamás Sóki, “Off the beaten track”

The eastern parts of Pécs were once occupied by poor miners, and during socialism, by somewhat more well-off miners. The mine is now closed, and there are ever fewer miners in the area; only the names of the streets and some public sculptures recall the memories of those times. The area, which was never wealthy, has in recent decades been pushed even further to the periphery in almost every sense of the word. Residents are mostly poor families: there are segregated slums and Roma here are in the majority. No one would expect that in a place like this - with a little exaggeration - diplomats would be lining up at the door. But Kóstolda is not a typical restaurant, and neither is its story, which is still being written today.

That’s why we sat down with Kóstolda’s creator, , not in Pécs’s east end but in the restaurant which opened only a year ago on the city’s grandly weathered Király Street. Kóstolda is Gypsy restaurant on the promenade, and it fits in well here after the shops closed up in the wake of the shopping malls. Now, mostly cafés, bars, confectionaries and restaurants make up the face of the downtown.



In addition to funds from a Norwegian foundation, it is mainly thanks to volunteer work that the "Kostolda" could open in 2015 in one of the most beautiful streets of Pécs. / Foto: Tamás Sóki, “Off the beaten track”

Five years ago, Anna Várnai only secretly believed that she could successfully open a restaurant here. As a community organizer, she has won a series of awards, honours and nominations, and she founded the Szines Gyöngyök Association 16 years ago because she saw that the situation of Roma women was not being adequately addressed. She devoted her life to the cause, but in order to achieve national and international recognition, it seems she needed Gypsy cuisine as well.

The entire concept of the association, which aims to break down stereotypes within the Roma community and society at large, also contains many practical approaches and gives real solutions to real problems.

Prior to founding the association, Anna worked to address the situation of the Roma as a volunteer, and had gained the trust of many people in her previous workplaces. In fact, she says that giving help to the Roma community runs in her family, and has been with her throughout her life.

“My father always played a central assistance role in the communities where we lived, and people somehow always trusted him,” she said. When she founded the association, practically everyone around her, including representatives of the Roma minority, doubted she would be successful. But her aim was clear: to help Roma women and girls by showing them a path and giving them self-respect. The words “feminism” or “emancipation” can’t be found on the association’s website, but it deals with precisely those issues in their most simple forms.



Anna Várnai has been organising projects that support women and Roma for a long time. With the restaurant she implemented the most ambitious project so far, where even she herself had doubts whether it would be successful. / Foto: Tamás Sóki, “Off the beaten track”

One of their first projects, for which they received a grant, involved looking for women living in isolated communities and helping provide them with an education. Women were able to find professions and get diplomas, and some were able to receive money to start their own businesses. But to do this, many problems had to be solved. Even the authors of the tender had their doubts about the success and precise execution of the project. Travel and childcare needed to be provided for, and the attitudes of the participants needed to be changed: they had to be convinced that they had the ability to change their own lives.

For such programs to succeed, it is clear that this and the development of inner motivation are essential: according to a 2018 report from the Central Statistical Office, two-thirds of Roma aged 18-24 drop out of school, meaning they have an elementary education at best. Women are even harder hit because, in addition to reasons of tradition, Roma families typically have more children than average non-Roma families, further limiting their opportunities. In 2017, 54.6% of Roma men were employed while the number was 35.9% among Roma women. It is important to add that the latter proportion is 10% higher than in 2014, which may have been the result of the controversial public work program, which is currently being dismantled.



The success of the restaurant is probably also due to the fact that only traditional dishes are cooked with high quality local ingredients / Foto: Tamás Sóki, “Off the beaten track”

“I knew from the beginning that I didn’t want to concentrate on a special task like education, because it just isn’t right. However I looked at it, I saw problems which have to be solved organically because they build upon one another. I wanted to deal with women and assist in their prosperity. If they don’t know what role they play or what they can expect, then [I wanted] to help them forward in developing their needs for that and in awakening their self-awareness,” Várnai said.

Not everyone was happy about this: they suspected she wanted to break apart Roma families. So she arranged club nights where they invited not just young girls, but their mothers and even heads of their families, their husbands and fathers.

“Our goal is not to pull them apart, but to give women the kind of stable spiritual and existential background which would allow them to be a support to their families,” she said.

The idea of group cooking came up during one of the club nights. Someone suggested during a tasting of the best-of-the-best Gypsy foods that they should be shared with other people representing the majority in society. During conferences and community events, they had always noticed that more active communication among participants broke out immediately during shared traditional meals. It was easier to discuss serious topics in this environment. Várnai thus began working to provide a framework for this idea.



Success came immediately after the opening five years ago.. Most guests are non-Roma, but many Gypsies also visit. / Foto: Tamás Sóki, “Off the beaten track”

Because of a lack of money and experience in professional restaurants, they would certainly not be able to open a restaurant right away, so they discovered the concept of apartment restaurants. This was at a time when quite a few apartment restaurants were operating across the country, so the concept was not unknown to the community. The model was favorable because it was easier for them to fulfil administrative requirements and it gave them the opportunity for more flexible working conditions and operation. The apartment they chose had to be modified, and they received assistance from the Norway Civil Fund. Though they received only around HUF 5 million - enough to cover part of the renovation and equipping the space - they were able to complete the project through a lot of volunteer work and other donations.

Success came immediately after the opening five years ago. Every dinner they advertised was packed to capacity, and they still are today. Since then, diplomats and local and national politicians have dined there, complimenting the initiative and the chicken stew. Most guests are non-Roma, but many Gypsies also visit. They don’t even advertise their programs anymore: dinners fill up through registration well in advance.

“After awhile, it was really embarrassing how many people we had to turn away because there wasn’t any space. That’s why we decided to open a restaurant. It’s operated by a social cooperative, which makes it possible to operate on a much more stable, daily basis,” Várnai said.

She played a key role in developing the menu and organizing the labor, and in choosing the ingredients. The goal is to be able to offer the guests home-style flavors which makes the restaurant unique. The ingredients, like the lecsó paprika for the Gypsy *lecsó* to the sweet paprika for the chicken stew are all made by producers that can guarantee their quality. It’s also important that they can provide flexible employment: the staff of the apartment restaurant and the restaurant in downtown Pécs are able to move between the two.



When Anna Várnai gave Roma women work in her restaurant many suspected that she wanted to break apart Roma families. But it became an big sucsess and she already plans a new, educational project in Pecs. / Foto: Tamás Sóki, “Off the beaten track”

“Giving employment to Gypsy women can grow their self-confidence dramatically. They aren’t in a subordinate position in the family, but are strong, equal partners. And they don’t only receive self-confidence, but experience as well. Some of them gain professions. It’s a really great feeling to meet with girls in other workplaces who started to get accustomed to the working world with us,” Várnai said.

Very serious discussions often come out of Kóstolda, sometimes about confrontational, sensitive issues.

“One of these is that Gypsies are an eternal problem, and an eternal opportunity. I don’t want to concern myself with that, but rather to show how I eat, how I live, how I raise my child, and how I see the world,” she said about her faith. This visibility itself, experts say, raises acceptance.

They fulfil another of their commitments in the apartment restaurant. In the first year after opening, they regularly gave food to people who didn’t have money to pay. They hold not only organized food distribution, but cook the same quality food as they serve in the restaurant. Every day, they help to feed at least 30 families. The downtown restaurant doesn’t throw away any excess food, because whatever is left over from the lunchtime offer is immediately shared with the needy.

“That’s why this was a commitment of mine, because I was sick of distributing food at Christmas and other holidays. There’s nothing wrong with this in and of itself, but what happens on the other days of the year? People don’t need help then? We give to everyone who comes, and we don’t ask whether they’re sure they really need it. I think that whoever waits in that line is in need,” said Várnai, who has already developed her next plan based on Gypsy cuisine: soon, she will launch a chef school. She’s already got the recipes.