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Naslov: Night Markets Lure Youngsters Back to Fading 'Pijacas'

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One Belgrade Night Market at Kalenic market (pictured) in Vracar, attracted estimated 30,000 people.

Photo: Courtesy of Gradske Pijace

Night Markets Lure Youngsters Back to Fading 'Pijacas'

Regular nocturnal markets featuring music and dancing as well as top produce are luring a trendier crowd back to the city's increasingly neglected green markets.

Srdjan GARCEVIC

Going to "pijac", as the locals call Belgrade's 32 open-air green markets, is an established tradition in the city.

However, it is under threat from ever-expanding supermarket chains and other food delivery options.

Their inconvenient working hours and locations are also prompting younger Belgraders to turn their backs on the fresh produce and camaraderie of the traditional markets and opt for speedier choices.

But help is in sight. To re-invent and save the "pijac" in the 21st Century, Gradske Pijace (City Markets), the municipal company that runs the markets, and Redesign, the firm that pioneered Rakia

Bars, which focus on Serbia's traditional tippie, teamed up two years ago to launch Beogradski Noćni Market - the Belgrade Night Market.

A series of events, it aims to lure visitors back to markets by opening them up at night and complementing traditional fresh produce with music and products made by small local manufacturers, designers, craft brewers and restaurateurs.

Marija Bosnjakovic, who heads Gradske Pijace's PR and marketing team, explains that the idea is to attract the kind of people that often skip green markets - mostly young Belgraders and tourists - by taking a cue from successful markets around the world, which carefully curate their offering and live it up to provide a more social, and fun, experience.

"Our team travelled around and saw how much fun people are having at the San Miguel Market in Madrid and then, of course, at La Boqueria in Barcelona," she says about the initial idea.

To ensure that products at the Night Market represented the best that Belgrade has to offer, top merchants, selling fruits, vegetables, dairy and meat, were picked from all over the city after the Gradske Pijace team visited their farms to ensure that their wares were produced locally and were of high quality.

Other merchants, selling anything from rose liqueur to glass-frames made of used skateboards, were invited, to ensure that all browsers could find something they really like. Beside the merchants, the Night Markets also feature DJs and live music, making the visit a pleasant after-work alternative to cafés and traditional kafanas.

Initially, merchants expressed some reservations, worried that the new concept would ruin the original conception of the "pijac", which traditionally opens early in the morning and closes in the early afternoon. But after a few events were held, Belgraders seem to have embraced the concept. Bosnjakovic estimates that up to 300,000 people have attended the 13 Night Markets held so far across the city.

"People of all ages are coming - youngsters, mothers with children and the usual elderly crowd... It's great to see teenagers shopping at the market, and the more mature visitors dancing," Bosnjakovic noted.

The first event was held at the central Bajloni market. It then travelled to other markets around town: Zeleni Venac, Kalenic, Zemun and New Belgrade's Blok 44 covered market.

This year, seven more night markets are planned, roughly one a month until late autumn, except in August. They normally take place on Fridays, from 6pm to midnight, however the next one

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Marija Bosnjakovic,
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will last for two days, on May 25 and 26, at the site of Belgrade's first marketplace, Studentski park and will start at noon.

Besides offering an unusual night out for Belgraders, Night Markets allow small local producers to connect with a larger audience more intimately than through social media.

"We wanted to see how people who are not our friends react to our products and gather feedback to improve," explains Natasa Djurkovic, from element_handmade, who recently started manufacturing soaps with a group of friends.

Nevena Todorovic, from Zebrew craft brewery, is equally enthusiastic. "We started exhibiting at the third Belgrade Night Market and have stayed ever since," she said.

"As the event and the organisation are great, we always try to be there. It is rare for us to be able to get to know our customers, but also to reach new people beyond our normal consumer base."

Bosnjakovic maintains that Night Markets are just part of wider efforts to revive the city's green markets. Other events also take place, such as "Children's market", where school pupils sell their own handicrafts, and "Wine markets", dedicated to wine producers.

Belgrade's pijace is also investing in upgrades to the markets - from buying new stalls to rebuilding the Pallula market along the lines of Spain's San Miguel. They have already received an award for their efforts from the World Union of Wholesale Markets, an organisation that works to preserve markets around the world.

The next Belgrade Night Market will be held on Studentski Trg on 25 and 26 May from noon to midnight. For future events follow their Facebook page (www.facebook.com/beogradskinoctnmarket).

