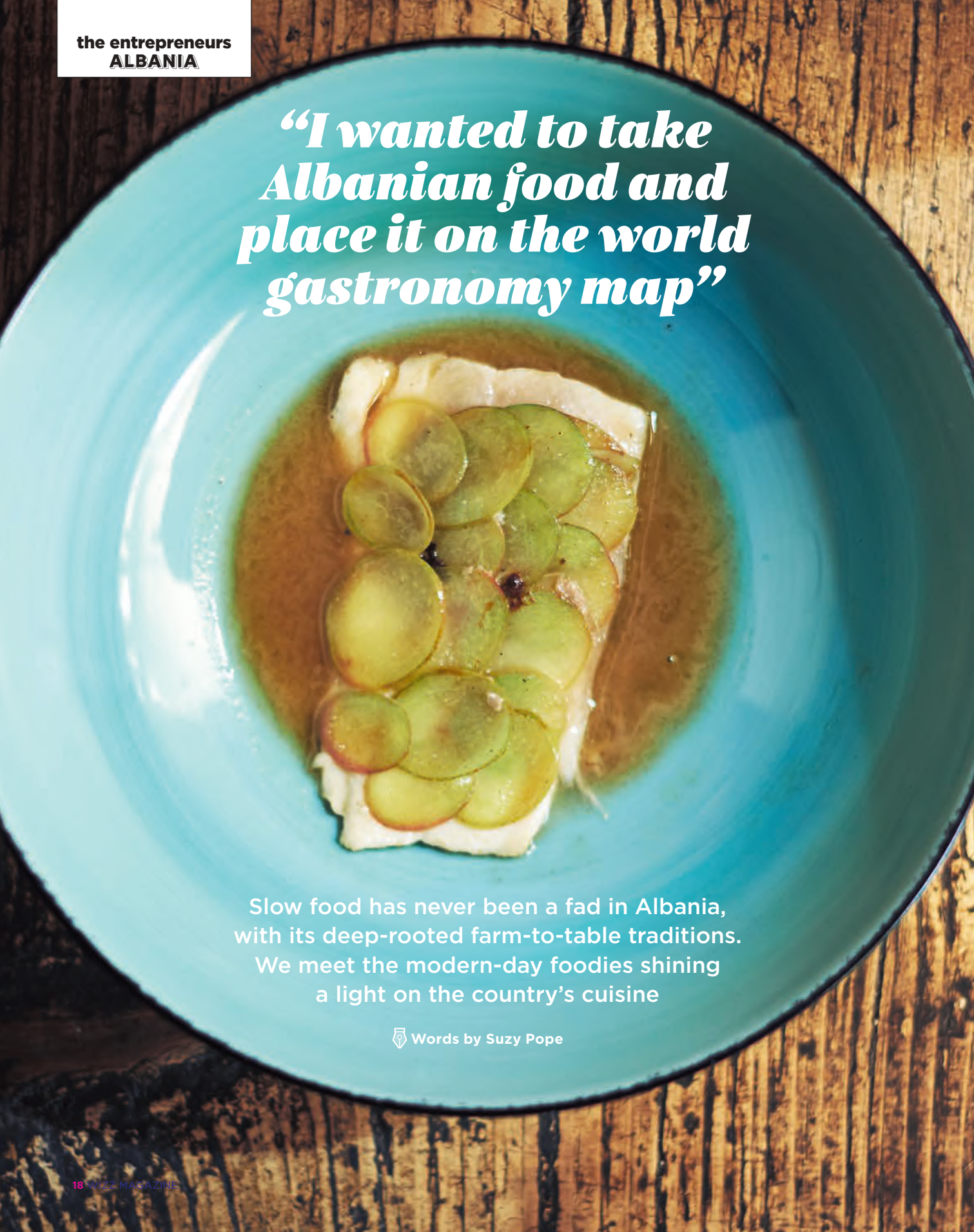
"I wanted to take Albanian food and place it on the world gastronomy map"



Slow food has never been a fad in Albania, with its deep-rooted farm-to-table traditions. We meet the modern-day foodies shining a light on the country's cuisine

Words by Suzy Pope







Clockwise from above
Linda Alia; unusual dishes from Mullixhiu; tea enjoyed on one of Linda's tours

"If it comes from a bucket, it's going to be good," says Linda Alia, founder of Albanian Food Tours. We're currently on her Tirana food tour, walking down Rruga e Saraçëve, where sellers sit on upturned crates surrounded by buckets of plump tomatoes, oranges and piles of walnuts. Residents amble down this narrow street to prod and poke at pomegranates and plums, searching out the best produce. It's not difficult, since everything on sale is organic and locally-produced – labels that would earn each item a high price tag elsewhere in the world.

In Albania, this is the only way. Decades of isolation and trade embargoes during the 20th century meant pesticides and factory farming never developed here. Tirana's restaurants are still supplied by family-run smallholdings in the mountains and across the plains of this untamed country. "Processed food is not really in our cuisine," Linda says. "You won't find a McDonald's in Tirana."

After running a hostel in Tirana's trendy Blloku neighbourhood, Linda wanted to turn her restaurant recommendations into an experience championing traditional Albanian fare across the city. The first stop is breakfast. I forgo the staple spinach *byrek* (pastry) for a cornflour, leek and wild greens pastry made fresh that morning. "We use everything in Albania. We use the whole animal and dry meat for later, pickle everything and even use the rind of watermelons," says Linda. Like organic farming, nose-to-tail and leaf-to-root is ingrained in Albania's food history. When asked what her favourite dish is she says: "It's trahana. But it's hard to find in restaurants because it is like a porridge you make at home."

In his restaurant, Mullixhiu, chef Bledar Kola – who has his own version of trahana – champions traditional Albanian cuisine by elevating it to fine-dining standards. If you'd told the residents of the small, Alpine Albanian villages where trahana was born that it would end up on the tasting menu of arguably Tirana's finest restaurant, they might have laughed. This hearty porridge of fermented oats is the epitome of 'peasant food', designed to fill stomachs and fuel cold days of tilling the land and rounding up stray sheep from the mountainside. At Mullixhiu, Bledar's trahana is given a touch of sophistication by the sharpness of fermented mulberries cutting through, and purslane sauce adds a salty, sour complexity.

The atmosphere at Mullixhiu is like a wooden mountain cabin, with its low, rustic wooden ceiling and lampshades adorned with drying gorse flowers. It's a million miles away from Le Gavroche in London, where Bledar trained when it had three Michelin stars. He also did a stint at Noma in Copenhagen. "They all raised their eyebrows when I said I wanted to return to Albania and offer fine dining here," Bledar says. "Traditional Albanian cooking doesn't work with French style, but cooking New Nordic at Noma is where I realised I could take Albanian food and place it on the world gastronomy map."

The New Nordic food movement is all about the local and the seasonal, turning simple, staple ingredients into works of art on a plate. This fits perfectly with Albania's inward-looking culinary

PHOTOS: ILLIR AGASTRA, MATTHIAS HAUPT



foundations. Bledar has a personal relationship with each of his producers – his brother, Nik, makes the malty rye bread in his bakery around the corner. "When the season comes, they call me," Bledar says about the mushroom producers in north Albania. The squashes at the restaurant's entrance came from Lezhë.

"They came from north Albania," Bledar says, gesturing to the sacks of flour piled in the corner. "We don't import anything. Even the wine is Albanian." And why not? Albania has a viticulture tradition dating back to the 1st century and the vineyards remain small, family-run affairs. "Because things got so big in agriculture across the globe, we are now seeing a movement towards scaling back and focusing on farm-to-table experiences," Bledar explains. "But agriculture never got that big in Albania – we have always been naturally farm-to-table."

At Uka Farm between central Tirana and the airport, Flori Uka has a plot of land spanning two hectares. He continues a project set up by his father in 1996. His father was Albania's first Minister for Agriculture after the fall of Communism, and set up Uka Farm as a natural lab for agricultural students. Flori doesn't like the term 'organic farming'. "Organic is like an office term," he says. "I prefer 'natural' or 'forest' farming. At Uka, we follow the principles of the forest. Nobody waters the plants in the forest, yet there is balance and harmony." Uka Farm uses no pesticides. "I encourage war between the insects. Uka Farm is a five-star hotel for insects," Flori declares proudly. "Everything is about the natural balance."

Dinner here is in a barn-like space where a wood fire crackles in the centre. There is no à la carte menu, but seven starters and a main meat dish. Starters change with the season and can include crispy cornbread soaking in sour cream sauce and crunchy carrots and broccoli served simply. "Everything is 100% Albanian. What cannot be sourced from the farm comes from Albanian producers," Flori says. The meal culminates in a shared meat dish, as is Albanian tradition – lamb baked for hours with potatoes dripping with flavour. Farm tours and workshops are available, and Uka Farm runs a kindergarten for young children, teaching them about sustainable farming.

So, while the rest of the world works hard at decreasing the carbon footprint of large-scale agriculture, the chefs, farmers, bakers and food guides of Tirana can rest easy. The buzzwords of sustainable dining – farm-to-table, nose-to-tail, leaf-to-root – are already deeply ingrained in Albania's food tradition.

Wizz Air flies to Tirana





Clockwise from above
Flori Uka; the hearty lamb dish at Uka Farm; chef Bledar Kola