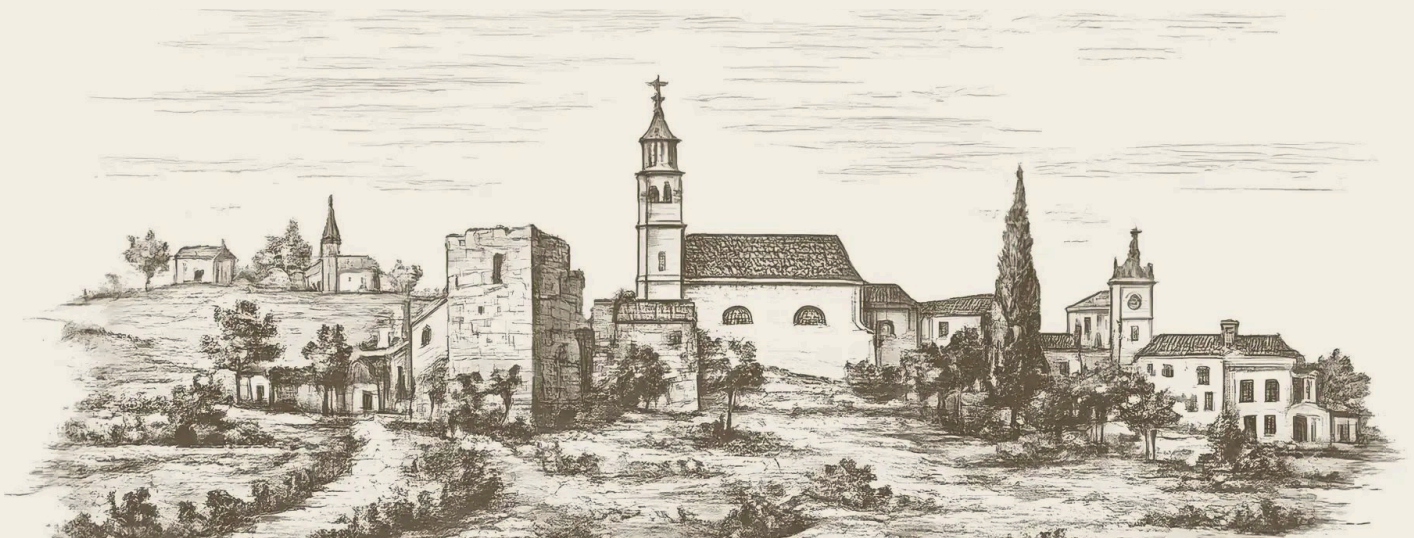


Smokvenjak. *The fig for winter.*

A short history of the pressed fig of Barban: where it comes from, how it was made, what it meant to the families who made it, and why the smokvenjak of Barban is made of fig alone.



c. 1000 BC	Roman Pula	1900s	1960s	2023	2026
The fig reaches the Adriatic with the Phoenicians, then the Greeks and Romans ²	Fig seeds are the most common plant remains in the old harbour ³	Smokvenjak made in Barban families, as far back as memory reaches ¹	Hand mincers arrive; older makers still prefer the knife ¹	The Ethnographic Museum of Istria documents Barban smokvenjak ¹	The twentieth Fešta smokve i smokvenjaka in Barban ⁷

AN OLD FRUIT

Older than *the town*.

The fig, *Ficus carica*, is one of the oldest cultivated fruits in the world. It is thought to have come from Persia and Syria, and to have reached the eastern Adriatic around 1000 BC with Phoenician traders, before the Greeks and Romans spread it further.²

In Istria the evidence is in the ground. Fig seeds have been found on Veli Brijun and under Flacius Street in Pula, where a Roman harbour shipped oil and wine in amphorae. There, fig is the most numerous plant remain of all, a sign that figs were an important food in antiquity.³

BARBAN

A month called *Smokvenjak*.

Barban sits on a hill in south Istria, above the valley of the river Raša. The Mediterranean climate, with the sea and the Kvarner close by, suits the fig tree, which grows at the end of vineyard rows and among the olives, often without being planted at all.¹

The fig mattered so much that, in the Istrian folk calendar, the month of September was long called *Smokvenjak*: the month when the later figs ripen, when they are dried, and when smokvenjak is made.¹

WHAT IT IS

A delicacy, not a sweet.

Put simply, smokvenjak is dried fig, finely chopped, kneaded and shaped like a small cheese. In parts of Istria it is also called *sir od smokav*, fig cheese, or *hlib od smokav*, fig bread. Almost everyone who makes it in Barban insists on one word for it: *delicija*, a delicacy, not a sweet.^{1,5}

Pressed figs are known all along the eastern Adriatic. What sets the smokvenjak of Barban apart is its recipe, and how simple it is.¹

Po meni je smokvenjak pravi od čiste smokve. Čista smokva i malo rakije za ruke namočiti.

To me, the real smokvenjak is made of pure fig. Pure fig, and a little rakija to wet the hands.

MAKER FROM BARBAN, BORN 1956¹

WHERE	THE FIGS	WHAT GOES IN
Barban	Opened, the hard stem end removed, dried in the sun. Never sulphured.	Fig alone. A little rakija, or the juice of white grapes, only on the hands.
Coastal Istria	Dried whole, then soaked for a few hours in the sea, which leaves a white bloom of salt.	Fig, minced. ¹
Cres	Dried, sometimes sulphured.	Fennel seed, almonds, walnuts, orange peel, rakija. ⁶
Vis (<i>hib</i>)	Dried.	Rakija and fennel, with the scent of bay and rosemary. ¹

HOW IT WAS MADE

From the tree to the chest.

- Picking.** At the end of August and in early September, when the fig is no longer watery. Only ripe, healthy figs with cracked skin, picked on a dry, sunny morning once the dew is gone. In Barban the white *blažanka* is held to be the best.¹
- Drying.** The hard end where the fig hung on the branch is torn off, the fig opened and laid on a board under gauze. It is turned, and carried in at the first sign of rain and every evening before sunset. Three to five days or more, until it no longer sticks to the fingers.¹
- Beating.** The dried figs are beaten fine on a wooden board with the *peštadur*, a broad, blunt knife, or a small hatchet. Hand mincers came in the 1960s, but the older makers still say smokvenjak is better beaten by hand.¹
- Kneading.** Long and hard, like bread, for more than half an hour, the hands wetted with rakija so the fig does not stick. The rakija evaporates; its scent does not stay.¹
- Shaping.** The fig is shaped into a round, like a small cheese, and its surface smoothed well, so that nothing can get in while it dries. It is laid on a fig or maple leaf, covered with gauze and aired for a few days, turned regularly.¹
- Keeping.** In a wooden chest, the *kasela*, with nothing beside it but fig leaves: bay or rosemary would lend it their smell. In time a thin white crust of the fig's own sugar forms and helps it keep through the winter.¹

EVERYDAY LIFE

A slice for the day.

Food in rural Istria was modest, and sweets were for church feasts, weddings and confirmations. Nothing from the fig tree was wasted: what was not eaten fresh was dried, and dried figs became smokvenjak.¹

It was eaten mostly in the morning. Children took it to school for *marenda*, a slice between two slices of bread. Men, and older men above all, took a little smokvenjak and a small glass of rakija before going out to work; most people in Barban remember their grandfathers and fathers by it.¹

In poorer families it was kept for the labourers who worked the fields all day, and the women sold it, with dried figs, at the markets in Labin and Raša. One maker remembers her father counting them: do not sell them all, or we will have none.¹

HANDED DOWN

From grandmother to granddaughter.

In Barban the skill passed through the women of the family. The makers say they learned it from their grandmothers; the men remember their grandmothers and mothers making it, and say they took no part, apart from helping to pick and chop in later decades.¹

Women who married into villages with figs but no smokvenjak took the craft with them, and women who married into Barban learned it from their mothers-in-law. One maker traced it back through her great-grandmother, born in 1918, who remembered her own mother making it.¹

Nisu smokve hodile za nič, sve se koristilo.

No fig went to waste. Everything was used.

MAKER FROM BARBAN, BORN 1944¹

A GIFT

For the doctor and the children.

When there was little money, smokvenjak was the gift. It was taken to relatives in town and, above all, to the doctor, because it could not be bought and was not made everywhere. At Carnival, children in Barban were given a small smokvenjak in a little basket, and dried figs were a gift for St Nicholas, Christmas and New Year.^{1,4}

Not everyone gave it away. For some families it was a sign of hard times, and they were shy to offer it.¹

Od maloga, ja sam još mala bila kad smo počeli smokve brat i sušit... od stare babe još.

Since I was small, I was still a little girl when we began picking and drying figs... from my old grandmother's time.

MAKER FROM BARBAN, BORN 1944¹

The museum's field research concluded that smokvenjak has been made in Barban families, without a break, for more than 120 years. Those who make it every year say that autumn simply does not pass without it, unless a wet year spoils the figs.¹

Za sebe doma vajak, da imaš kroz zimu.

Always some for the house, so you have it through the winter.

MAKER FROM BARBAN, BORN 1952¹

TODAY

Out of the shadows.

Barban has held the Fešta smokve i smokvenjaka, its festival of the fig, every September for two decades; the twentieth was held on 12 September 2026. The makers interviewed by the museum credit it with bringing smokvenjak out of the shadows, and with persuading women who once made it to make it again.^{1,7}

The school in Barban, OŠ Jure Filipovića, named its pupils' cooperative *Smokvenjak*. In 2018 its pupils made a fig cookbook, *Ča se sve more parićat od smokav*, for a project called "The fig, queen of the dry-stone wall".¹

Mirjana Prgomet, a homemaker from Prhati, has helped organise the Fešta since its first year. "The idea was to lift the fig from the ground onto the table and give it the place it deserves," she says. For the twentieth Fešta she made a 20-metre pancake with fig marmalade, a metre for every year.^{7,8}

The museum's conclusion: with the knowledge passed to the young, the festival held every year and the original recipe kept, the smokvenjak of Barban has a long past and a bright future as one of the gastronomic symbols of the region.¹



OPG TERRA MAGICA

The same recipe, in Barban.

OPG Terra Magica is a family farm in Barban, owned by Mihaela Rojnić. Her family has made smokvenjak in Istria for more than 100 years, and she makes it today to the family recipe: in the Barban way, of fig alone, with no sugar and no preservative, and only a little rakija on her hands as she kneads it.

The figs are dried for seven days, then pressed by hand into a round smokvenjak of 160 g, which rests for twelve days. More than 600 g of fresh figs go into each one.

At the Fešta smokve i smokvenjaka in Barban it has taken first place four years in a row: 2023, 2024, 2025 and 2026.

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The sections on the fig, on how smokvenjak was made and on its place in family life summarise source 1. The paragraphs on OPG Terra Magica are the farm's own.

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LOGO AND DOCUMENTS

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