

In Romania, Smoking A Kent Cigarette Is Like Burning Money

It isn't true that Romania, a hard-core Communist country, doesn't operate on the market principle. It does. Call it the farmers' market principle, and this is how it works:

As dawn breaks, a crowing rooster on sale at the downtown market signals the opening of an intense round of barter trading. Apples will get you peppers. Cauliflower will get you beets. Turnips will get you garlic. And Kent cigarettes will get you everything.

"Pssst. Mister. With the Kents," whispers a young farmer rushing from behind his fruit and vegetable stand to pursue someone who has just flashed a pack of Kents. Never mind the line of customers at the stand. They can wait; they have only *lei*, the official Romanian currency. The other guy has Kents.

"You sell?" asks the farmer, now being joined by

four fellow farmers. He presents his left palm and begins writing on it. "Twenty-five," he writes. That is 25 *lei*, or about \$2.20, for one pack of Kents. The man with the Kents sells two packs for 50 *lei* and inquires about the apples on sale.

"You want apples?" asks the farmer. He pulls out a bag hidden at the bottom of the pile. These aren't the yellow apples for the regular customers—the ones with *lei*. These are red apples for the man with the Kents.

Under the farmers' market principle, the fruit and vegetable farmer perhaps will trade away his Kents to get his tractor fixed. The mechanic will use the Kents to get a rare and relatively good cut of meat at the butcher shop. The butcher will pass on the Kents to get a table at a packed restaurant. The maitre d' will use the Kents to pay his doctor. The doctor will flash the

Kents at the farmers' market to get some attention. And some farmer, writing on his hand, will come running after.

"In Romania, Kents are the ultimate affirmation of the market theory," says a Western diplomat here. "You've heard of the gold standard. Well this is the Kent standard. Everyone in this country wants Kents." And only Kents. Winston, Marlboro, Pall Mall won't do.

Want to be a big shot in Romania? Flash a pack of Kents. Want a taxi? Wave some Kents. (With the distinctive gold box used for the European Kents, they can be spotted at surprising distances.) Want to get past a troublesome passport officer at the airport? A couple of packs of Kents will do. Kents will open most every door in this country, including the door to the outside world.

The Wall Street Journal, January 3, 1986

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