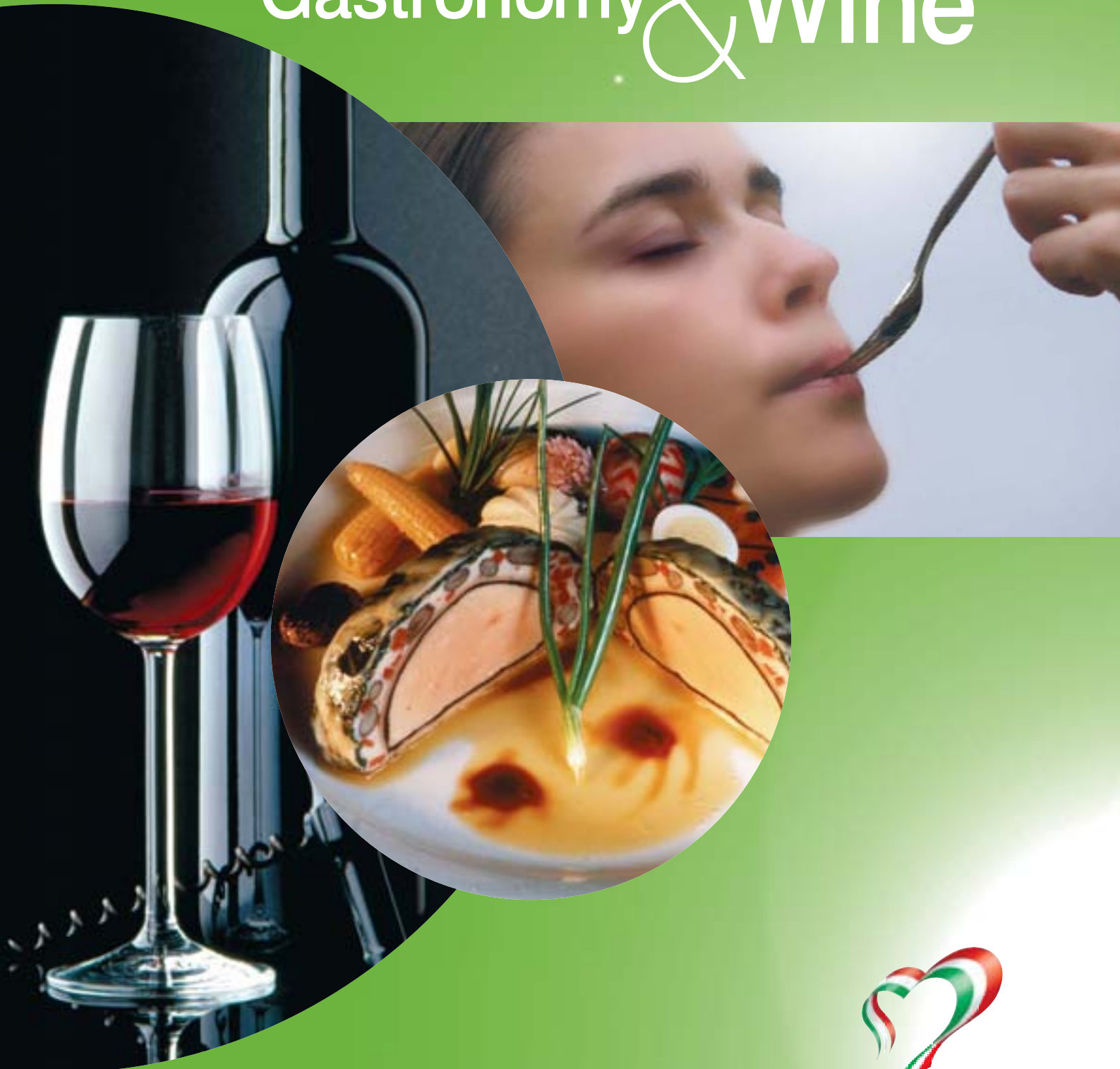


talent for entertaining

Gastronomy & Wine



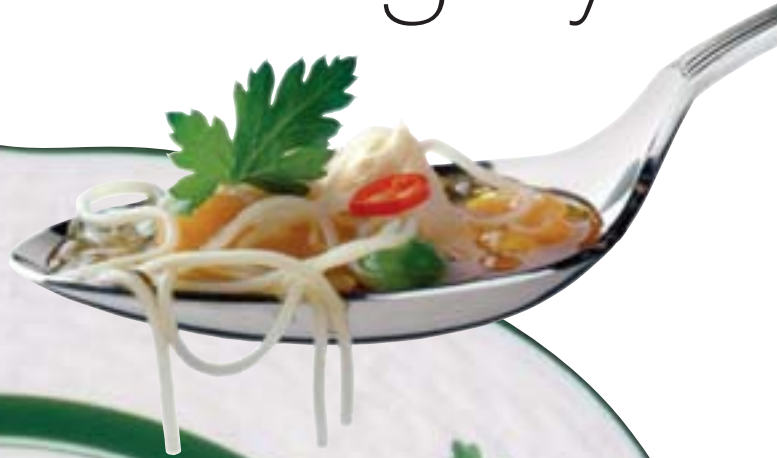
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Getting a taste for Hungary



INTRODUCTION

Learning about Hungary's traditional cuisine is a time-consuming process, and an experience full of pleasant surprises. But before taking your first bite, we think you should be aware that the risk of addiction is extremely high. Travellers returning to the country are often seen trembling with a craving which only a generous portion of class A goose liver, chestnut puree or stuffed cabbage can satisfy.

For a thousand years or so, Hungary's food, like its culture, has had an intriguing double identity, cleverly blending eastern mystique with the traditions of the west. As the borders have moved over time, a number of nationalities have found a home in Hungary and foreign troops have come and gone. From a culinary point of view, the many peaks and troughs of history have had very positive effect. Over the centuries, Hungarians have embraced everything worth adding to their cuisine, subtly adapting it to suit their palate. In addition, master chefs have always trained a keen eye on the latest trends across Europe, and most Hungarian specialities reveal hints of Renaissance Italian or 19th century French cuisine.

Hungarian gastronomy is always open to innovation, but traditional flavours and ingredients have always had pride of place. Rather than playing safe with steak and seafood, you won't regret plumping for unknown quantities like fish soup and curd dumplings. The culinary experience will stick in your memory for years to come and you, like us, will be itching to tell the world all about it. You may even try to recreate your delicious meal when you get home.

We hope you enjoy sampling Hungary's world of unforgettable flavours.

Hungarian National Tourist Office
www.hungary.com

SO WHAT IS HUNGARIAN COOKING REALLY LIKE?



This question is as difficult to answer as being asked to define the appearance, character and personality of a person you know. One thing is certain, Hungarian cooking is rich, exciting, sometimes surprising, and often irresistible.

Hungarians love to eat quality food, often in very large quantities, and they have always been resourceful cooks. Their favourite fare makes use of basic, fresh ingredients prepared in a simple way. Nevertheless, these dishes can more than hold their own against the most subtle delicacies. Hungarians have always known that it is possible to eat well without caviar.

Hungary's unforgettable flavours are not just the result of its people's exceptional skills in the kitchen. Thanks to the country's unique climatic conditions, fruit and vegetables grown here are particularly tasty – in fact, some are difficult to match anywhere in the world. If you have never tried Hungarian peaches, green peppers and tomatoes, you have never tasted a real peach, paprika or tomato. In Hungary, the rule of true gourmands everywhere applies even more than elsewhere – always choose the dish of the season.

The characteristic flavour at the heart of many Hungarian dishes comes from ground red pepper. It imparts the pleasant red or brownish colour, provides an unmistakable aroma and adds to the rich texture of any sauce.

Originally from America, the distinguished Hungarian career of this spice was launched by Napoleon. When the European continent was isolated, pepper became a rare treasure that was gradually replaced by dried paprika. A plant that had been used almost exclusively as an ornament became more and more popular. By the end of the 19th century, paprika, first crumbled, then crushed and finally ground, had cemented its place as Hungary's favourite seasoning.

There are many different kinds of paprika powder. It can differ greatly in granulation, colour, aroma and, most importantly, taste – ranging from sweet to extremely hot (as a result of selective breeding and reintroducing some of the seeds and veins removed during processing).

special flavour



SOUPS

the 'BOGRÁCS' & the 'GULYÁS'



Lunch is considered the main meal in Hungary and can be taken any time between noon and two in the afternoon. It is almost always introduced by soup (leves), followed by a main dish and dessert. It is not uncommon for the midday meal to consist of just soup followed by sweet or savoury pasta, in which case the starter must be rich and nourishing.

These liquid meals include goulash, fish and various bean soups. 'Jókai' bean soup, for instance, is made with plenty of pulses, cubes of vegetables, sausages and smoked pork, seasoned with bay leaves and sour cream.

Hungarian cuisine features an enormous variety of meat and vegetable soups. 'Ujházi leves' is just one of many favourite meat soup variations made with chicken and plenty of carrots, paprika, tomatoes and onions, poured over wafer-thin slices of meat and vegetables. Delicious vegetable soups are usually thickened very slightly and are generally seasoned with red paprika, giving them a yellow or red hue. Several green herbs are also thrown in, including generous sprinklings of finely chopped parsley.

On a hot summer's day, nothing is more refreshing than an ice-cold bowl of fruit soup, seasoned with cinnamon, cloves and lemon peel and thickened with sweet or sour cream to produce a subtle blend of flavours. The most popular recipes are based on bitter-sweet fruits, such as Morello cherries, apples and red currants. The crowning glory is the floating island of egg white often placed on top.

Despite generous use of a variety of herbs and spices, a consistent characteristic of Hungarian cooking is that the ingredients themselves are always allowed to shine through. Many people believe that this originates from the time-honoured practice of cooking in large cauldrons, known to Hungarians as 'bogrács'.

The 'bogrács' is a metal cauldron with a single handle used for cooking over an open fire. Nomadic peoples have used vessels of this kind all over the world, but Hungarians have stayed loyal to them even after settling down. They were traditionally used by fishermen, by shepherds separated for months from their families, and by farmers working in the fields furthest from the village. These men were not fussy about preparing their food, preferring to just toss ingredients in one after another. Today, far from being a museum relic, the 'bogrács' is an ever-present at outdoor parties – and its master chefs are always the men.

Originally, goulash, a Hungarian speciality known the world over, was also made in a 'bogrács'. The Hungarian word 'gulyás' actually means 'cowherd,' and the dish was once called 'gulyásos', or meat cooked in the style of a cowherd. On the subject of cowherding, it is worth mentioning that the 'szürkemarha', a distinctive breed of indigenous grey longhorn cattle is making a welcome return after a long period in the wilderness. Its incredibly tender and tasty meat was once hugely popular with gourmands all over Europe. We think it will be again.



SOUPS



Another mainstay of Hungarian cuisine is 'halászlé', a fish soup so substantial that it is usually served as a main course rather than a starter.

It is important to be aware that its characteristics differ from region to region. Halászlé may contain one or several types of fish and can be prepared in the simple style of the fishermen, or thickened with pureed fish for extra body. The name of the soup always includes an adjective to indicate the style in which it was made – Danube, Tisza, Körös or Balaton, for example – or the name of a town, such as Szeged, Baja, Paks or Mohács.

'Halászlé' has acknowledged – and often self-appointed – gurus in every corner of the country. To find the real champions, weekends are assigned when local town squares are filled with the irresistible aroma of hundreds of bubbling bogrács. The winners announced by the jury couldn't be prouder if they had been awarded Olympic medals. Nevertheless, the highlight of the event is when the cooks dish out their broth to the hungry crowds.

If you are not fortunate enough to take part in a public feast of this kind, make up for it by visiting a fishermen's 'csárda', a type of inn found in every town by a river or lake.

The 'csárda' was originally a modest roadside inn serving travellers arriving on foot, on horseback or by coach. Today, the 'csárda' comes in many shapes and sizes, offering inexpensive food or luxury dining. There is one thing you can be sure of; they all serve up traditional dishes in an unmistakably Hungarian setting, often accompanied by the bitter-sweet melodies of a Gypsy ensemble.


Of all the fish native to Hungary, the 'fogas' or pike perch – a predator found only in the cooler depths of Lake Balaton – is the tastiest. Its meat is as white as snow, unbelievably delicate and practically fat-free. In addition, if the 'fogas' is sufficiently mature, its bones can be removed perfectly cleanly. The pike-perch may grow to a size of up to 10 kilograms, but if it weighs less than 1.5 kilos it is known as a 'süllő'. Both the fogas and the süllő are the perfect match for mushrooms – it is worth trying the 'Jóasszony' style pike-perch with mushroom and white wine sauce, the Bakony style fillet of 'fogas', served with mushrooms and sour cream, and 'süllő' stuffed with chanterelle.

Hungarian fish



STEW &

the PIG-STICKING PLATTER



'Pörkölt', a thick stew made in the same way as goulash soup, but without the addition of water, is one of Hungary's most popular dishes. Although all stews of this kind are made according to a similar recipe, they taste very different according to the type of meat they contain. But it makes no difference if you choose beef, pork, fish or chicken, you can be sure the hunks of meat will be tender and that the sauce will ooze flavour.

These stews typically come served with home-made noodles, 'tarhonya' (a form of pearl pasta), polenta, potatoes or vegetables. Once they have finished, Hungarians enjoy nothing more than eschewing conventional etiquette and wiping their plates clean with a piece of bread.

Meat stews, such as the 'paprikás' – thickened with flour and sour cream – serve as the basis for several more culinary creations. Veal and chicken paprikás are a must, especially served with cottage cheese dumplings.

Vegetarians will not be hearing their stomachs rumbling either, Hungary also specialises in vegetable stews. A hotpot or paprikás made with mushrooms can compete with any meat dish. Potato paprikás may be a staple of the poor, but it is a firm favorite with all Hungarians and is often livened up by fiery sausages or beef cutlets – so if you are a vegetarian, ask before you order. 'Lecsó' is yet another type of basic stew made with fresh tomatoes and yellow paprika, and often spiced up in various ways. Lecsó may be a dish in its own right, but is also an indispensable addition to other dishes.

'Tokány' is a cousin of the pörkölt usually made from succulent red meat braised with chopped onions, but the ingredients are sliced and spiced differently. Mutton tokány and various kinds of beef tokány are especially popular.

Hungarians are very fond of pork, and villagers still slaughter pigs in their yards every winter. The climax of the pig-sticking ritual is the huge meal served up at the end of a long day. This feast consists of fresh fried sausage and black pudding, known as 'hurka'. If you are offered a pig-sticking platter, you can expect these delicacies to be piled high, along with other pork and liver treats.

The rest of the pig is also made good use of for smoked bacon, ham, spare ribs and, last but not least, the dozens of varieties of sausage are indispensable to Hungarian cuisine.




GOOSE LIVER

for carnivores

'FŐZELÉK'

for vegetarians



If there is any area in which Hungary can consider itself a gastronomic superpower, it is in the production of the finest goose liver. In southern areas of the Great Plain, the conditions are ideal for raising geese, and generations of farmers have learnt the secret of growing the liver – the most valuable part of the goose – to a size of up to four pounds.

Even in ancient Rome, dishes created from the liver of a fattened goose were saved for feast days and festivals. The pale, almost white liver is luxuriously tender and has a unique aroma that is every gourmet's dream. But to have this delicacy appear on your plate, you will have to dig deep in your pocket.

In home cooking, the liver is usually fried in goose lard, which is then poured over it and left to cool, ready for spreading on soft white bread. Sliced and glazed with aspic, fried goose liver is the star of buffet tables and makes a majestic starter. It is often served in the French style, in the form of a pâté or terrine.

Goose liver is also an unrivalled warm dish, simply roasted or combined with the soft flavors of truffles or cognac. Some chefs smoke it over a cherry-wood fire to bring out the best aromas.



Other parts of the bird are also made good use of. Goose crackling is excellent hot and cold, and restaurants often treat their guests to this crispy delicacy as a parting gift. In Hungary and many other parts of Europe, it is customary to cook goose on November 11. Saint Martin's Day is celebrated in honour of a Roman legionary born in the province of Pannonia – now Hungary – who became a monk symbolized by the goose. Regularly enjoyed right up until the first days of summer, fried goose is served with stewed cabbage and potatoes turned in goose fat, onion and paprika powder. It is sometimes also accompanied by stewed apples and plums. Other variations include risotto with goose giblets and liver.

'Főzelék' – boiled vegetables flavoured in a variety of ways and thickened until it can no longer be called a soup – is very popular with Hungarians, not to mention their vegetarian visitors. A pleasant light lunch may consist of finely shredded squash in a sauce of sour cream and dill, pureed sorrel leaves cooked with sweet cream, or ground spinach flavoured with garlic and black pepper and thickened with bread rolls soaked in milk. Főzelék is often served with veal cutlet, stuffed breast of veal, pork stew or fried eggs.



SALADS

and

PICKLES



In traditional Hungarian cuisine, salad accompanies meats and other savory dishes rather than being a course in itself, but it is almost indispensable in this supporting role. Summer salads, such as lettuce, cucumber, tomato, pepper and cabbage, are prepared with a light dressing of sugar, salt, vinegar and other basic seasonings. With their freshness preserved, they are a valuable aid to digestion.

‘Kovászos uborka’, home-made pickled cucumber with a hint of dill, is best-served chilled. The secret is in the preparation; natural fermentation is preferred to vinegar, giving it a unique tangy taste. It is so popular that a Hungarian summer would not be the same without the sight of huge pickle jars placed on sunny window sills and balconies.

In the winter months when fresh produce is at a premium, pickles fill the void. Many Hungarians buy pickles sold from huge barrels by small family businesses, in preference to factory-made or even home-preserved preparations. Some market stands can have as many as twenty varieties, a sight not to be missed in itself.



The same people also make sauerkraut, the key ingredient of winter's best-loved dishes.

The real taste of pickled cabbage is given by the pieces of smoked pork cooked in it and the sour cream poured on top.

It is most popular in stuffed cabbage – a mixture of pork, rice and various spices wrapped in pickled cabbage leaves and cooked in shredded pickled cabbage. Its seductive smell alone has legions of Hungarians salivating.

The equally mouth-watering 'székelygulyás' – pork stew cooked in the same vegetable base – also comes highly recommended. 'Rakott káposzta', or cabbage bake, owes its smoked flavour to a generous smattering of sausage slices added to layers of minced pork stew, rice, sour cream and, of course, cabbage. 'Korhelyleves', literally 'drunkards' soup' is cooked with sauerkraut and smoked sausage, and is usually served the morning after a huge feast.

This unconventional breakfast is believed to have a soothing effect on the stomach, but, whether or not your stomach needs soothing, it is always delicious.

MIXED PICKLE RECIPE

Ingredients: 1 kg of cucumbers, 1.5 kg of cabbage, 1 kg of fresh peppers and 0.5 kg of onions

Method of preparation: Grate the ingredients into a large bowl. In another bowl, mix 0.5 kg of sugar, 70 grams of salt, 600 millilitres of vinegar and a tiny spoonful of natural preservative and pour them onto the shredded vegetables. The mixture is kept and stirred regularly for 2 or 3 days, before it is filled into jars with airtight caps.

PASTA,


PASTRIES and PANCAKES



Hungarians love their endless varieties of pastas, noodles, pastries and cakes, some of which are considered a main course in their own right. Even average cooks can serve up a different dish for every day of a year, and they don't have much to worry about the following year, either. Some are sweet, others are savoury, but all Hungarian pastas and pastries are very tasty. Kneaded boiled pasta, usually softer than its Italian counterparts, and countless variations on the dumpling may be offered as a main course, and smaller portions make an ideal dessert or side dish.

A few of the staples are pasta sprinkled with ground walnut or poppy seed, farfalle pasta (shaped like a bow-tie) in peppered cabbage stew, which is also used as a filling for fried duck. Then there is 'gránátoskocka', simply reddish pasta in paprikás potato, pasta oven-baked with ham, or layers of pasta with walnut, poppy seed and apricot jam and a wonderful whiff of vanilla.

Those who wish to get to know the most basic forms of Hungarian cooking cannot afford to miss 'túrós csusza', thin layers of pasta torn into irregularly shaped pieces, mixed with curd and crowned with sour cream and freshly fried strips of bacon. This dish is usually served as a second course to follow fish soup. The most popular sweet dumplings are filled with plums or jam – known as 'barátfüle', literally 'friar's ears', legend has it that they were favoured by monks during Lent.



In days gone by, poor people would fire up their cauldrons to make hearty dishes based on long-lasting dried pastas. 'Tarhonya', a pearl pasta of Turkish origin, has been around for at least five hundred years, and some say much longer. Equally, 'lebbencs', a sheet of dry pasta broken into pieces, is also very filling if added to herdsman's dishes of smoked bacon, onion and red paprika.

Dumplings made from potatoes and flour dough are often filled with plums, apricots and jam for a surprisingly light dessert. The same dough may be used for making tiny noodles to be rolled in poppy seeds, walnut or fried breadcrumbs. Not strictly speaking pasta, but eaten as such, irresistible cottage cheese dumplings grow two or three times in size when boiled, making them fluffy and light. When served as a dessert, they can be smothered in warm flavoured sour cream. As a savoury side-dish to chicken or veal paprikás, the same dumplings produce a wonderful harmony of tastes.

Pancakes are known the world over, but vary slightly from country to country. The Hungarian pancake is light and thin, its whitish-yellowish surface mottled brownish marks. It forms the basis of a number of very different dishes: Pancake strips may be added to soups or served as a hot starter, like the Hortobágy-style pancake, which is filled with chicken paprikás and flooded with a delicious savoury sauce. However, it is as a dessert filled with jam, walnut, poppy seed, chocolate and various cottage cheese creams that the pancake really comes into its own. They are also sometimes layered with a filling and baked with a covering of beaten egg white. The 'Gundel' pancake, a creation of the former owner of the celebrated restaurant of the same name, is one of Hungary's favourite delicacies.

Glancing at the ingredients, it is easy to see why; a pancake filled with rum, raisins, orange rind and walnuts, swimming in dark chocolate sauce, and sometimes even flambéed.



savoury 'LÁNGOS' & sweet 'RÉTES'



If you need to satisfy your hunger on the move, the 'lángos', a hearty snack made from bread dough deep-fried in oil, is sure to hit the spot. Served plain or with a variety of toppings, usually garlic, sour cream and cheese, lángos is available everywhere large crowds congregate, including markets, beaches and fairgrounds. 'Pogácsa', savoury cakes that can be as small as thimbles or as big as your palm, are another favourite Hungarian snack. There are hundreds of recipes handed down through the generations, but the most common use potatoes, butter, cheese, ewe cheese or pork crackling. Another typical delicacy is the 'kürtőskalács', a light puff pastry rolled into the shape of a chimney pipe and glazed with caramelized sugar and ground walnut. Simple but irresistible fast food options might also include corn on the cob, or fried or boiled sausage with mustard and spicy pickled paprika, straight from the local butcher.

One of the outstanding features of Hungarian cuisine is the 'rétes', a delicious variation on the strudel. Its preparation is somewhat unusual, the chef walks around a large table pulling and stretching the pastry by hand, until it is so wafer-thin that it is almost transparent. According to a colourful description given in a cookbook published 100 years ago, rétes pastry is only ready once its bun-sized dough is stretched to a size that could cover a mounted hussar.

The pastry is then filled, rolled, fried and sliced. Fillings are usually boiled fruits, such as cherries, apples and plums, but walnut, squash, poppy seed, chestnut, cottage cheese with raisins or dill, and even cabbage make rétes an extremely versatile snack. Another close relative of the rétes, the 'vargabéles' is the brainchild of a brilliant restaurateur. It consists of vermicelli pasta mixed with butter, vanilla, raisins and light cottage cheese fried between two layers of 'rétes' pastry, cut into cubes and served piping hot.

variations






When you set out on tour of discovery through Hungary, sooner or later, you are sure to come across a very pleasant institution: the confectioner's shop. The simple display windows filled with cakes, pastries and other sweets has resisted all catering trends for a good 200 years.

Then as now, some guests prefer to sit around chatting while others prefer to just drop in to pick up something tasty for the family at home. In summer, ice-cream adds to their irresistible allure, and sugary chestnut puree with sweetened whipped cream awaits in winter. House specialities line up alongside obligatory classics, among them the 'Dobos' ('drum') cake, made of layers of sponge cake filled with chocolate cream and topped with a hard caramel glaze, the 'Stefánia' cake, similar but for the cocoa powder sprinkled on top, and the 'Lúdláb' (literally 'goose leg'), with rum, sour cherries and a creamy chocolate filling. The 'Rákóczi' cheesecake is one of the most typical Hungarian cakes – a cheese base covered in a thin layer of apricot jam and mountains of baked egg white. Of all the deserts, 'Somlói galuska' is probably the best known: three layers of sponge cake, one plain, one walnut and one chocolate, sprinkled with raisins and ground walnut, then mixed with vanilla cream and cut into blocks called 'galuska'. Not a single calorie is spared, real 'Somlói galuska' is served with lashings of chocolate sauce and whipped cream.



CONFECTIONERS & COFFEE HOUSES

Much like cake shops, cafés make the perfect setting for idle chatter – throughout the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, they were an integral part of everyday life. After World War II, the coffee house went into decline and was eventually all but closed down as a symbol of the subversive bourgeois lifestyle. Today, café culture is flourishing once again, with each coffee house offering its own choice of food and drink, and a home to a set of regular customers.



If you wanted to track down a well-known writer, poet or painter in Budapest in the first half of the twentieth century, it made more sense to enquire about his regular coffee house (kávéház) than his actual address. The appeal of the smoke-filled coffee house is conveniently summed up by humorist Andor Kellér: “You may be out of the house, but you won’t get any fresh air”. This lifestyle was not unique to Budapest – the public lives of many urban Europeans centred around the coffee house.

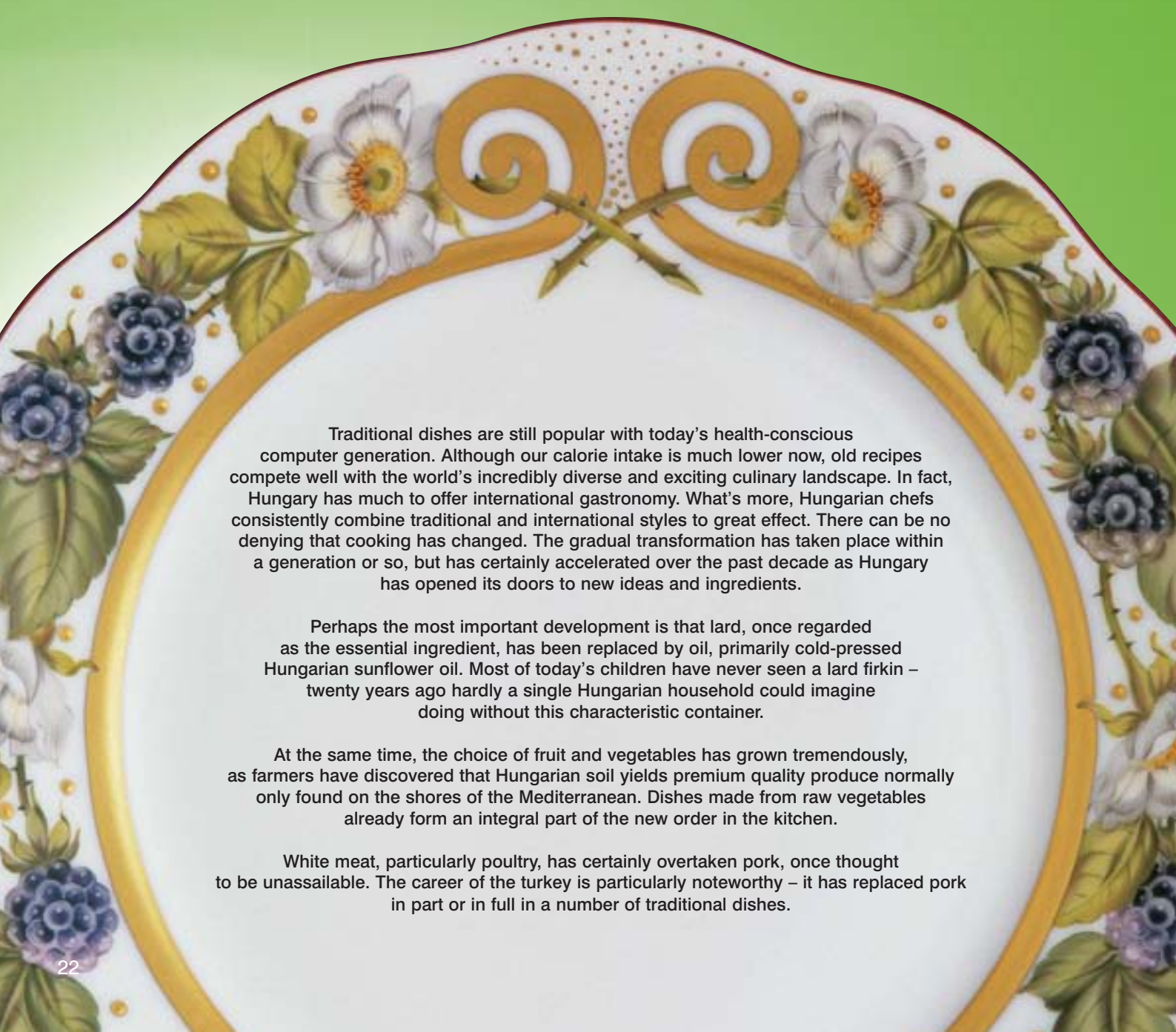
After World War II, coffee house culture went into steep decline, and its passing was universally mourned. Thankfully, the turn of the millennium has seen a dramatic revival. If you walk through Budapest now, you will notice that it has become a city of cafés once again, even though they look very different to the old-style coffee house, and the clientele is considerably younger. In most places, Italian has replaced Viennese coffee, and there is Internet access where once the day’s newspapers hung on cane frames on the wall.



TRADITIONS

enjoying a

REVIVAL



Traditional dishes are still popular with today's health-conscious computer generation. Although our calorie intake is much lower now, old recipes compete well with the world's incredibly diverse and exciting culinary landscape. In fact, Hungary has much to offer international gastronomy. What's more, Hungarian chefs consistently combine traditional and international styles to great effect. There can be no denying that cooking has changed. The gradual transformation has taken place within a generation or so, but has certainly accelerated over the past decade as Hungary has opened its doors to new ideas and ingredients.

Perhaps the most important development is that lard, once regarded as the essential ingredient, has been replaced by oil, primarily cold-pressed Hungarian sunflower oil. Most of today's children have never seen a lard firkin – twenty years ago hardly a single Hungarian household could imagine doing without this characteristic container.

At the same time, the choice of fruit and vegetables has grown tremendously, as farmers have discovered that Hungarian soil yields premium quality produce normally only found on the shores of the Mediterranean. Dishes made from raw vegetables already form an integral part of the new order in the kitchen.

White meat, particularly poultry, has certainly overtaken pork, once thought to be unassailable. The career of the turkey is particularly noteworthy – it has replaced pork in part or in full in a number of traditional dishes.



For economic reasons rooted in history, Hungary is an ideal location for organic production. This can be observed both in successful cultivation of fruits and vegetables, but also in the reintroduction of old breeds of animals. Grey longhorn cattle, the Hungarian 'racka' sheep, the 'mangalica' pig, the barnyard fowl and many others are reclaiming the place they deserve. Studies consistently show that their meat is lower in fat and their nutritional value is higher.

The use of herbs and spices is also increasingly drawing on age-old influences. Hungarians have always been generous with parsley, celery and dill, but forgotten herbs are also being rediscovered, such as tarragon, savoury, sage, rosemary, basil and lemon balm, together with all the other healthy and succulent produce from the vegetable garden.

Another major development is the widespread use of reduced-calorie versions of the essential ingredients of Hungarian cooking, such as sour cream and cottage cheese.

Spontaneity and careful consideration are both present in the process of developing new flavours. Amateur and professional cooks are always on the lookout for tasty new recipes and ways of updating time-honoured treats. Hungarian chefs compete to bring the most out of typical Hungarian specialities, finding new ways of making chicken paprikás that stands out from the crowd, and adapting to the culinary trends of the day.

WINE & PÁLINKA



The Hungarian wine renaissance that began some 15 years ago has resuscitated a culture nourished by roots reaching back hundreds, some say thousands, of years. During the brief period since the triumph of democracy, the country's vintners have gone to work on rescuing traditions from obscurity, and set about winding up the damage caused by being locked away behind the iron curtain for four decades. As they dusted off ancient winemaking practices, the love of wine that had secretly survived the totalitarian era in the tiny farms left in family ownership now freely invigorated entire wine regions in Hungary.

If you visit Villány and Szekszárd, the two southern regions known for their near-Mediterranean climate, you will encounter big, velvety reds of great warmth. You will surely meet a favorite, as most producers offer a range of the best-known international varieties, such as cabernet sauvignon and franc, merlot, and syrah. Nor will you be disappointed if you are looking for a local flavor. You will find all the red wine grapes indigenous to the Carpathian Basin – kadarka, kékfrankos, and portugieser.

The region around Lake Balaton is absolutely unique and cannot be compared to any other wine region in the world. The loess and clay soils of the southern shore tend to produce wines with a Mediterranean flavor. The geographical complexity of the northern shore is a different story altogether. Approaching from the east, you will first travel through limestone ranges known for their popular chardonnay, sauvignon blanc and, more importantly, olaszrizling (Welschriesling) of superb structure and great elegance. Moving further west, you will arrive among denuded volcanic buttes that have calmed down through the eons of geological history but still hang on to their mystic charm. The most famous of them – Badacsony, Somló, Csobánc – yield steely and dense whites with an intriguing spectrum of acids that you will not likely forget anytime soon. One absolute rarity is the wonder of a grape known as kéknyelű, which is not grown anywhere else in the world, including in other regions of Hungary.



If your taste is for a leaner red wine style of the northern type, marked by lower tannins but more vigorous acidity, you should look around Sopron on the western border, or head east for Eger. Although in these two regions you will find almost all of the usual red grapes, *kékfrankos* and pinot noir have shown exceptional promise, as have quite a few white wines. In and around Eger, the cellars themselves are spectacular enough to make the trip worthwhile. In fact, throughout the northeastern part of the country, cellars carved deep in the hillsides stand as a unique testament to an ancient wine culture of oriental origins.

The easternmost wine region, Tokaj, is at once the single most famous wine producing area in Hungary, and one that has undergone tremendous transformation. Some 10 to 15 splendid great wineries have sprung up owing to large-scale investment. Luckily, quite a few smaller, family-owned estates have managed to keep up with the push upmarket. The region shows us a new face each year. The charm of the local countryside is now universally known, and there is a growing recognition of Tokaj as producing the finest, most natural sweet wines in the world. While styles and official categories of sweet wines abound, the greatest surprise of recent years has been the release of distinctive and superb dry whites. Today, few would debate the fact that dry Tokaji, especially from the furmint grape, has the potential to scale hitherto unknown heights of wine quality and character.

The European Union recognises 'pálinka', a strong clear spirit made from a variety of fruits, as a Hungarian speciality. It is excellent as an aperitif, a digestive or a winter warmer, and great for lifting spirits on a special occasion.

It can be made from several kinds of fruit and the top traditional brands hail from Kecskemét and are made from the delicious apricots nearby. The plum variety distilled from fruit ripened in the Szatmár and Bereg counties is also known and loved throughout the country. Pálinkas are especially tasty if they are matured for a longer period.

Pálinka is best served at 18°C to bring out the fragrance and character of the fruit. Although it is usually consumed in one gulp, connoisseurs believe pálinka should be enjoyed in small sips to cherish the flavour of every last drop. 'Pálinka' is also used to add flavour to food, cocktails and cakes, lending them a pleasant aroma. Following the example of chocolates filled with cherries soaked in cognac, sweets containing high-quality pálinka enhance the reputation of this traditional Hungarian spirit yet further.



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