



# The Culinary Art of Hungary

- by - LOUIS SZATHMARY



## HUNGARIAN TURKEY

From around the turn of the century, until the end of the Second World War, the experts on population, census, heritage, ethnicity, and other demographics used to talk about the American melting pot.

But since then, they are ready to admit that we still cling to our various ethnic heritages, and although as individuals we mingle, we mix, we intermarry, as groups we are not about to give up our national background and our ethnic heritage, especially as far as food is concerned.

Perhaps I was never as much aware of this as I was on the 20th of August, 1976, when I was the featured speaker at the Hungarian Festival in Toledo, Ohio.

An estimated 25,000 people showed up in the Birmingham district of Toledo, a five block area that starts at St. Stephen's Hungarian-Roman Catholic Church, passes by St. Michael's Hungarian-Greek Catholic Church and the Calvin United Hungarian Protestant Church, and ends at the Holy Rosary Slavic Rumanian Catholic Church. If you are religious, that is how you describe the area.

On that mellow late summer Sunday, the place was filled with joy. Tempting fragrances wafted in the air, overpowering the usual gasoline and industrial odors of neighborhoods close to the "seamy side" of town. Here were the aromas of stuffed cabbage, smoked sausages, fresh doughnuts and the intriguing essence of "Hungarian Turkey."

You've never heard of Hungarian Turkey?

Now nearing 70, I have spent most of my life as a chef. I'm Hungarian by birth and lived in Hungary until I was 25. I own a copy of

almost every cookbook ever published in Hungarian. I write extensively on Hungarian food and have added more than 100 pounds of overweight sampling it. But I had never heard of Hungarian Turkey before that day.

I could recognize some of the ingredients of this nose-tickler, but what did they add up to? There was the aroma of freshly baked bread, of a charcoal broiler, roast suckling pig, onion, tomato, the edgy rawness of hot green pepper.

A slab of heavily-smoked bacon was turning between two charcoal fires built upright in two iron containers. Beneath the bacon and between the coals were slices of lightly-toasted rye bread covered with thick, juicy slices of ripe tomato, wafer-thin slices of sweet onion and finger-thick slices of green pepper.

The toast rested on a warm surface under the turning bacon. The bacon had small gashes over its surface, so that its hot drippings fell onto the vegetables and toast, flavoring them. They were served hot, on paper plates or paper napkins, with salt and pepper.

When I saw this Hungarian Turkey, I realized it was like something I had know in Hungary from my early childhood. But we had made it in a simple, old-fashioned way.

The bacon and onion were secured on long thin skewers, carved with a pocket knife from a young hazelnut or maple branch. The "fireplace" was a makeshift affair between two or three stones, made from dry twigs and leaves, covered with sticks of wood from the clearing. The bread was laid in front of us on large green leaves. We turned the bacon over the fire until it begun

to drip, then quickly moved it over the bread.

Back home, this dish was not for people in a hurry. It was eaten by herdsmen — the shepherds, the cowboys, the keepers of groups of horses (called csikós) and the cattlemen (called gulyás — yes, indeed, this is the name you know from their famous soup).

All would sit down after sunset for a very leisurely meal, where the slab of bacon was slowly, ever so slowly, rendered of all its fat, which was dribbled on the previously toasted bread, covered with onions, and, later on — perhaps in the last 100 years — also with slices of green hot or sweet pepper, and — in the last 30 to 40 years — with slices of tomato.

The dish had to be updated in the United States. Hungarian-Americans and American-Hungarians would not want to spend a couple of hours sitting in front of a tiny fire between three stones, waiting for the bacon to sweat out its golden drippings onto the bread.

But you can do it somewhat faster if you use commercial charcoal and light the fire at least one hour before your meal and let the coals burn until their centers are glowing red, the surface is covered with white ash, and not a speck of black remains in the coals.

I tried the dish many times, allowing 3 ounces of bacon for each of six people, over 2 slices of toasted light rye bread, using the dish as an appetizer with cocktails, beer, or with the wine cooler invented by the Hungarians hundreds of years ago, called fröccs, which is nothing more than one cup of wine mixed with one cup of club soda or seltzer.

## HUNGARIAN TURKEY

- 3-to-4 ounce piece Hungarian smoked back bacon, or smoked jaw or slab bacon (preferably with rind)
- 12 to 15 slices thin, day-old rye bread or whole wheat bread (2 to 3 slices per person)
- 1 large onion, sliced wafer thin

With rind down, cut 1/2-inch-deep gashes in both directions in bacon, about 1/2 inch apart. Do not cut through, stopping about 1/2-inch from the rind.

Lightly toast bread over coals or beforehand in toaster. Don't let it dry out.

Slice onions, peppers and tomatoes, and arrange slices on toast. Sprinkle with salt and pepper to taste.

Pierce bacon on long wooden

branch or skewer, or on a long-handled fork used for outdoor cooking. Hold bacon over coals and turn constantly. When fat starts to drip, hold bacon over vegetable covered toast. Repeat every couple of minutes until toast is covered with drippings and everyone is eating happily. 6 servings.

About this time the bacon itself will be cooked, and you can cut small pieces for everyone.

If you want to make an authentic

- 1 or 2 red bell peppers, or sweet banana peppers, cut into finger-thick slices
- 1 or 2 ripe beefsteak tomatoes, sliced thin
- Salt and freshly-ground black pepper

Hungarian late summer supper out of this event, cook a good *tökfőzelék* or, in English, creamed dill zucchini with any kind of charcoal broiled meat (my choice would be thin pork chops spiced with salt, pepper and paprika), or just simply cut small bits of bacon and eat them with the creamed zucchini.

Granted, this is not diet fare, but I assure you that you can gain weight from potato chips, french fries or ice cream just as easily.

## TÖKFŐZELÉK (DILLED ZUCCHINI)

Serves 8

- 4 pounds zucchini
- 2 tablespoons plus 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 small clove garlic
- 1/2 cup chopped fresh dill weed, or 1 tablespoon dried dill weed, or 1/2 teaspoon dill seed
- 1/2 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 1 teaspoon sugar
- 1/2 cup vinegar

- 2 cups water
- 4 tablespoons shortening (preferably half butter)
- 3 tablespoons flour
- 1 cup milk
- 1 cup sour cream
- paprika, finely chopped dill weed or parsley for garnish

Peel the zucchini and remove the soft, seedy inside parts with a spoon. Discard. By hand or with a grater, cut the squash into strips measuring 1/4x 1/4x4 inches. Salt the strips with 2 tablespoons of salt and let them stand in a bowl for 2 hours.

Press the salty liquid that has accumulated from the squash. Quickly rinse the pieces of squash under cold water. Shake dry.

Crush the garlic with 1 teaspoon salt. Place the squash, dill garlic, pepper, sugar, vinegar, and water into a

heavy pot and cook over medium heat 20 minutes.

Melt the shortening in a heavy saucepan.

Drain the cooking liquid from the squash. Save 2 cups of the liquid. Mix the flour with the milk and add the mixture to the 2 cups cooking liquid.

When the shortening is melted, slowly pour in the flour-liquid mixture, stirring constantly with a wire whip. Cook until the mixture is smooth and thickened. Pour the thickened sauce over the squash, cover, and simmer over low heat 30 minutes.

Just before serving, fold in the sour cream. Sprinkle with paprika, fresh dill weed, or fresh, finely chopped parsley.

Zucchini, in Italian, means "little gourd." But you may use the large, matured zucchini which is probably tastier than the smaller, younger squash.

The vinegar keeps the squash from cooking to a pulp.

Letting the squash stand with the salt removes much of the liquid from it, so that it will be firmer to the bite. It will not be salty if rinsed thoroughly.