



The Culinary Art of Hungary

- by - LOUIS SZATHMARY



THE SEASON FOR CHERRIES

Translation from one language into another is often difficult, and it has caused a lot of confusion through millenniums of diplomacy and international relations. Also it keeps playing havoc in the kitchen as well.

Consider one of the most Hungarian of all soups, and the most favorite cold summer soup, Meggyleves.

In the dictionary you would find its translation as morello soup, sour cherry soup, or cherry soup. And if you look in a Hungarian dictionary under cseresznye, you will again find that it is the same soup. But, believe me, that is not so!

Even the tree of the sour cherries in England, called morellos, is entirely different in Hungarian than the tree that bears the sweet cherries, "regular" cherries, so to speak.

This magnificent-looking wood, with an inimitable and incomparable shiny dark bark, is grown in many regions of Hungary, not for its fruit but just for the wood. The second- or third-year saplings are cut right above the ground, dried carefully and slowly for a couple of years in special holding areas, then used for the manufacture of cigarette and cigar holders.

There was a time, from the turn of the century until the Second World War, when all Europe was using Hungarian sour cherry or tart cherry wood cigarette and cigar holders. The 9 to 15 inch long, arrowstraight branches were the most favored pipe stems from the Scandinavian countries to Constantinople, and from Baghdad to London. I know, because I had a grand-uncle who was selling hundreds of thousands of the cigarette and cigar holders, and tens of thousands of the pipe stems to shops in London, and also in Madrid, Rome,

Paris and Stockholm.

The roots of these saplings were left in the ground to give them a second chance to grow, usually for two or three years.

The straightest, thickest ones were made into walking sticks, lifting out the whole root section, and carving, from the part where the root met the original stem, the characteristic golf-ball size head of the walking stick.

Along with the hazelnut branches, the tart cherry sticks were the most favored disciplinary and educational tools of Hungarian teachers in bygone days, while in England the imported cane from India — and in Germany and France the local willows — served the same purpose. Yes, "dusting the pants" of the students while they were in them was a part of their education.

If you went home from school as an English student, it was most unlikely that your grandma or mother would soothe your pains by giving you a big bowl of cane soup, or in Germany willow soup. But Hungarian kids, disciplined with the tart cherry wood stick, could have a nice, large bowl of cold, tart cherry soup and a big hunk of strudel.

In the United States, July is the month when the tart cherries are grown the most. In the Northwest, and in the East, you can still get some of the English morellos even up to the second week of July, and you can get the Montmorency cherries, mainly around the middle of July.

The Montmorency are the most popular of the sour cherry varieties, and can be eaten fresh. But, of course, the main use is — at least for Hungarians — the cold cherry soup and the cherry strudel.

The recipes for both follows:

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COLD CHERRY SOUP

(8 Servings)

1½ pounds sour cherries, pitted
6 cups water
1 2-inch piece cinnamon stick
6 to 8 whole cloves
¼ teaspoon nutmeg
Small pinch mace
1½ cups granulated sugar
3 tablespoons cornstarch mixed
with ½ cup cold water

2 1-inch squares lemon rind
Juice of ½ lemon
½ lemon, sliced wafer thin
1 or 2 drops red food coloring
(optional)
1 cup sour cream
1 cup buttermilk

1. Place a large sieve over a soup pot. Pour the pitted cherries into the sieve, straining the juice into the pot. Add the 6 cups of water to the pot, pouring it over the cherries. Remove the cherries from the sieve and refrigerate them. Add all spices, sugar, and lemon rind (not the lemon juice or wafer-thin slices of lemon) to the pot and bring to a boil. Add starch mixture very slowly, and keep stirring until it dissolves.

2. Boil the mixture for 2 to 3 minutes.

Remove from the heat; let it stand, covered, in a warm place for 1 hour. Strain the liquid and discard the spices and lemon rind. Add the cherries. Cool to room temperature, and refrigerate.

3. Gently fold the sour cream into the buttermilk. To serve, put the sour cream-buttermilk mixture into the soup tureen and, using a wire whip, gently whip the soup, cup by cup, into it. Float lemon slices on top of the soup. Serve very cold as a first course.

Keeping the pitted sour cherries in the refrigerator keeps them firm and prevents overcooking.

Letting the soup stand for 1 hour slowly dilutes the spice oils, which flavor the soup after the spices themselves have been discarded.

Mixing the sour cream with the buttermilk makes the sour cream lighter and tastier, and it mixes more easily with the soup.

CHERRY STRUDEL

In most U.S. cities, filo leaves — the closest thing to the real Hungarian strudel dough — are available, sometimes fresh, other times refrigerated, but mostly frozen. And because the use of filo dough is spreading rapidly, I am sure that wherever you live you will be able to purchase some to make this cherry strudel.

Ingredients:

1 pound sour pitted cherries
About 1 cup sugar (omit if you use
frozen pitted sour cherries
which are frozen with sugar)
Pinch of cinnamon

½ cup breadcrumbs
½ cup ground almonds
If you wish, you may mix sour
pitted cherries with pitted Bing
cherries.

Defrost filo dough (if frozen), according to package directions. Lay in front of you two leaves on each other with their longer side along the edge of the table.

Melt ½ cup unsalted butter, and sprinkle the surface of the dough with some of the butter. Then sprinkle the whole surface with part of ½ cup dry fine bread crumbs mixed with ½ cup ground almonds.

Place two more filo dough sheets in front of you, so that they are approximately 4 inches away from the edge of the table. Repeat sprinkling them with some of the melted butter and some of the bread crumb/almond mixture.

Distribute the sour pitted cherry filling

over about half the surface closer to you. Be sure that it is spread evenly. Carefully start to roll the strudel dough — holding it gently but firmly away from you — in a loose, jelly roll fashion.

When you get so far that the whole cherry filling is covered, then sprinkle with some of the remaining butter and crumbs that part of the dough that covers the filling, and keep rolling until the entire dough is rolled out. Be sure that the seam is on the bottom.

Lift the strudel onto a well-buttered baking sheet with the help of a wide-bladed metal spatula. Brush the top with the remaining butter and bake in a very hot oven,

425° to 450°, for about 25 minutes.

This is not an easy technique, but if every young girl in Europe can learn it, why can't you? If you first lay out a tablecloth or other clean cloth on the table, and put the strudel dough on it, you will have a much easier task. I taught this often to beginners, with or without the cloth, and some people could do it and some couldn't manage it.

If you want to make your own strudel dough "from scratch", send a stamped, self-addressed envelope to Louis Szathmary, The Bakery Restaurant, 2218 N. Lincoln Avenue, Chicago, IL. 60614 and we will mail it to you.