



The Culinary Art of Hungary

- by - LOUIS SZATHMARY



STUFFED MUSHROOMS TÖLTÖTT GOMBAFEJEK

Our Transylvanian villages were surrounded by small agricultural parcels, like a green ring; farther back the hills and mountains were covered with forests. From the first day that the snow began melting on the southern slopes of the hills and the first crocus appeared, until late fall when the wild pears grew soft and ready to pick along the roadsides, we always had a good excuse for going into the forest to pick something. We were picking from February to November — first the flowers, then the berries — then, beginning in late May, the mushrooms.

Boys and girls loved to pick mushrooms together. I spent many an afternoon in the forest myself, at work with the mushrooms.

Although we were not allowed to cook in our dormitories at the college in Sárospatak I attended, we all had hot plates, and we devised a simple method of cooking freshly picked mushrooms. We used only fresh mushrooms, slab bacon and feta cheese. Students from Transylvania regularly received packages of bacon, sausage and cheese from home. These three items needed no refrigeration, so you could keep them for weeks.

I revised this dish recently for a cocktail party hors d'oeuvre. It is so distinctive that I think you should try it. Right now, when beautiful mushrooms are abundant in the stores and the price is relatively low, the dish is a very economical hors d'oeuvre or first course. You can prepare it a day ahead or early in the morning and finish it in less than 10 minutes.

MUSHROOM CAPS WITH BACON AND FETA CHEESE

- 4 tablespoons flour**
- 2 quarts cold water**
- 1 pound medium to large mushrooms (16 to 24 pieces)**
- 4 to 6 pieces thick-sliced bacon**
- 4 ounces feta cheese**

Pre-heat oven to 350 degrees.

With a sieve, sprinkle flour evenly on top of cold water in a bowl. Plunge mushrooms one by one quickly through flour into water and gently wash under water, using all 10 fingers on each mushroom. ("Tickle" the mushrooms with your fingertips.) Remove quickly from water and place on paper towels.

(If you aren't familiar with this method, you will be surprised how snow-white and clean the mushrooms will be. The flour adheres to the surface of the mushrooms and won't let them soak up too much water. The flour also helps to wash off impurities and sand, which sink to the bottom of the bowl.)

With a sharp paring knife, remove stems from mushrooms and reserve for other use. (Sliced thin lengthwise, raw mushroom stems are a great addition to any salad.)

Place mushroom caps, cavity side up, on a lightly greased cookie sheet. Starting with a cold pan, heat bacon slowly, turning slices once until bacon is translucent and loses much of its drippings. Remove and cut bacon slices into as many pieces as you have mushroom caps. (Reserve drippings for another use.)

Cut feta cheese into tiny cubes, a bit smaller than 1 inch. Distribute cubes evenly among mushroom cavities, adding more in larger caps, less in smaller. Cover with bacon and bake 8 to 10 minutes. Cool 2 to 3 minutes before serving. Serves 8 as an hors d'oeuvre.

I tried another variation: I cut boiled ham into tiny cubes the same size as the feta cheese, mixed the two, and stuffed the mushrooms with the ham and cheese mixture.

For some vegetarian friends, I replaced the bacon with coarsely chopped English walnuts. It was surprisingly good.