



The Culinary Art of Hungary

- by - LOUIS SZATHMARY



FROM FISHING TO SOUP

At age ten, I was the youngest member of my grandfather's fishing party. He and three friends — all retired railroad men — had rented fishing privileges on a small lake about a 90-minute brisk walk from our home. Grandpa was more than 70 years old at the time, but I could hardly keep up with his pace.

These fishing trips always began a day earlier when a very strong *puliszka* was cooked up at home. This is a delightful cornmeal spoon bread and a staple in Transylvanian homes at the time. Grandpa would form hazelnut size pellets from it, spread them out on a cloth and place them near the kitchen stove to dry overnight.

On a beautiful June morning, we arrived at the little lake, being careful not to make any noise as we walked along the shore. At a particular spot we stopped. There, Grandpa tossed about 30 of the cornmeal pellets he had brought with him out into the lake. Then he walked about 40 steps along the bank and threw another batch of the dried cornmeal balls into the water. Retracing his steps he continued another 40 paces beyond the original cornmeal volley, and let fly yet another batch.

Again we returned to the first feeding point. Here, Grandpa carefully baited several hooks with the *puliszka* pellets and cast the fishing line out to the place he had previously thrown the free pellets.

We sat and waited. As usual, within a half hour or so, we had caught four *tukorponty* (mirror carp) ranging up to about 16 inches and weighing at least 2-½ pounds each.

My job was to collect the fish as they were caught, and keep them in a bucket of water until we could string them on a line and put them back into the lake well away from our three fishing spots.

As noon approached, we usually had enough fish to start the long walk back home. This was the time when the farmers in the area took a rest from working in the fields and sat down in the shade of the trees to have their lunch.

In June, almost invariably, this included a bean soup — wax bean or green bean — eaten cold and thickened with sour cream, and brought into the fields in clay crocks made by local potters.

These were very special utensils. On the outside there was only the plain reddish-brown clay — no glaze, no design. On the inside, however, the painted,

baked glaze glistened.

During hot weather, the pots were submerged in the cold well water overnight. In the morning, they were filled with the thick, unheated bean soup. Because the pots were not glazed on their outer surfaces, the cold well water had been absorbed. As this water evaporated during the morning hours, the soup within was able to remain cold without refrigeration.

Usually a good chunk of the spoon bread — similar to what had been used to lure the fish — was packed with the lunch, although sometimes it was replaced with some regular brown bread, moist and crusty.

Mostly, the soup was eaten with personal wooden spoons, either hand-carved, or purchased from traveling spoon-makers.

The memories of those fishing trips are still in my mind, but with not nearly as much impact as the taste of that bean soup in my mouth. That was years ago. Today, of course, you can eat that soup from a dish — rather than a clay pot — and you can eat it hot for lunch or for dinner. But, it never really tastes as good as on a warm June day, fresh out of the refrigerator, with some zesty bread, if not *puliszka*.

Prove it to yourself with this recipe:

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CREAM OF GREEN BEAN SOUP

8 servings

1-1/2 pounds fresh green beans or wax beans, cleaned and diagonally cut into 1- to 1-1/2 inch-pieces
1 teaspoon granulated sugar
1 clove garlic, mashed
1 teaspoon salt
1/4 teaspoon black pepper
2 quarts chicken stock, or enough canned chicken broth, diluted according to directions, to make 2 quarts

1 tablespoon chopped parsley
1 tablespoon finely minced onions
1/2 teaspoon dried or 1 teaspoon fresh tarragon
1/2 cup 4% white vinegar
2 cups milk
1 tablespoon cornstarch
4 tablespoons all-purpose flour
2 tablespoons freshly chopped parsley for garnish
1 cup sour cream
Salt and pepper to taste

1. Mash the garlic with the 1 teaspoon salt. In a large soup pot, place the beans, sugar, mashed garlic, black pepper, and just enough stock from the 2 quarts to cover the beans. Cover the pot and bring to a vigorous boil.
2. Add the balance of the stock, cup by cup, so that the soup continues boiling and is just under the boiling point after all the stock has been added.
3. Mix the milk with the flour and cornstarch.
4. Add the minced onions and the 1 tablespoon of chopped parsley and, using a wooden spoon, stir in the milk-flour-starch mixture.
5. In a small saucepan, bring the vinegar to a boil. Drop in the tarragon and immediately remove the pan from the heat. Let the tarragon steep in the vinegar until cool. Then pour the liquid through a fine sieve into the soup and discard the tarragon particles.
6. Keep the soup gently boiling until the beans are tender but still firm. Correct the seasoning with salt and pepper.
7. Just before serving, place the soup in a tureen and dot the surface with teaspoonfuls of sour cream sprinkled with the freshly chopped parsley.

Cooking the beans with the mashed garlic and sugar in very little liquid intensifies the green bean taste.

Tarragon would never taste the way it should if it were simply sprinkled into the soup; steeping it in hot vinegar releases all its flavor and fragrance, regardless of whether it is fresh or dry.

It is desirable to have small lumps of sour cream in this soup. Therefore, you do not stir the sour cream into the liquid, but simply add it to the hot soup. In this way you get a third texture, in addition to the liquid part of the soup and the beans.

If you wish to eat the soup cold the next day, then change the ingredients as follows:

Increase the 1 tablespoon cornstarch to 3 tablespoons, and the 4 tablespoons all-purpose flour to 5 tablespoons. Don't add the sour cream until the soup is almost cold, then mix evenly and completely, and chill overnight.

For a copy of the *puliszka* recipe, please send a self-addressed, stamped envelope, marking the lower left corner "Puliszka", to me at The Bakery Restaurant, 2218 N. Lincoln Avenue, Chicago, IL 60614.