



The Culinary Art of Hungary

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BACK TO BASICS — HUNGARIAN GOULASH SOUP WITH CSIPETKE

By popular demand of readers, we published in April a recipe for a very popular and very common Hungarian dish, Chicken Paprikash. Frankly, I was surprised at the number of comments I received from people who used the recipe, liked it, and told me to go on with more of the basic recipes.

Whenever somebody mentions Hungarian food, the reaction in most cases is, "Oh, yes, Hungarian goulash." It's generally believed that this is the oldest, the best, and the most popular dish in Hungary. Not so.

First of all, what people eat in the United States and call Hungarian goulash is not Hungarian goulash in Hungary; it is called "pörkölt". And it is basically a ragout, a close relative of the French ragout of beef, except for the paprika and other spices and herbs.

In Hungary there is a dish that became very popular towards the middle of the nineteenth century. It is called "gulyás leves", meaning goulash soup, soup of the herdsmen, soup of the cowboys. It is a thin beef soup containing — besides beef — onions, potatoes, and tiny pinched dough pieces called "csipetke", and perhaps some root vegetables such as carrots, parsley root or turnips, or in the summer, tomato or green pepper.

At the turn of the century, the Hungarian restaurant industry made a delightful adaptation of this soup, adding a few ingredients and changing its presentation. It is served at the table in a small individual iron kettle hanging on a tripod, resembling that of the herdsmen, in which this dish was cooked originally. Its name comes from the kettle hanging on the tripod, "bogrács gulyás."

This dish became popular during the millenium celebration of the founding of Hungary, when a record large number of foreign visitors came to observe the festivities and exhibits, and special restaurants were set up to take care of the tourists.

At the same time, in the same restaurants, along with the goulash soup, another Hungarian beef dish was featured. It was "marha pörkölt", meaning a ragout of beef. The bogrács gulyás was more like an American beef stew — less liquid, more concentrated, and thicker — than the goulash soup.

And the third dish, the beef pörkölt, which was basically cubed beef in a very heavy, thick paprika gravy, somehow got mixed up in the Western mind, and from the mix-up a dish was born which didn't exist in Hungary, Hungarian beef goulash.

In the Western mind, this dish became as Hungarian as Italian meatballs, spaghetti and pizza, which, in the form we eat them here, are practically non-existent in Italy. Just as many other dishes on the American menu, attributed to European countries, do not exist in that form in their supposed country of origin. Or just like the two most popular Chinese dishes in the United States, chop suey and chow mein, never existed in China.

In this Back to Basics series, I would like to give you the recipe for the authentic Hungarian beef goulash soup with the tiny dumplings; then on another occasion, the recipe for the beef pörkölt, known as Hungarian goulash in the United States, with another type of small Hungarian dumplings, called galuska. And then an authentic recipe for the bogrács gulyás, so you won't get them mixed up.

You will see that the basic dish is indeed a delightful soup which is served at the beginning of the meal, and is followed with a heavy, non-sweet pasta or potato dish (like the layered potatoes we wrote about in February, 1987).

Then we will give you the recipe for the bogrács gulyás that is still served in the best restaurants of today's Hungary.

But first things first. Here is the recipe for the Hungarian beef goulash soup with pinched dumplings, or "csipetke."

If you are a novice in cooking Hungarian dishes, you should bear in mind a few general rules. Among them, the most important is that you should be very careful how you cook the onions. Their preparation is the most important in making this soup. Cold onions should go into a cold pot with cold lard or cold bacon drippings. Then they should be heated together over medium heat. This is important, because if the pot and the shortening are hot, the onions will start to fry, brown and evaporate, instead of turning into the thick, hot substance that is needed.

In step 8, we mentioned the word "slurry". This word comes from the food manufacturing industry, and it means any kind of starch, in this case flour, mixed with a liquid. This is the safest and fastest way to secure a lump-free soup without making a roux, and, of course, for this clear soup, you don't need a roux, but it should have a syrupy thickness.