



# The Culinary Art of Hungary

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## OF TIME AND TRADITION

For centuries, the passing of the seasons was measured not so much by the calendar as by recurring events, which could be, but not necessarily, holidays.

All races and all cultures in both the Old and the New Worlds had some kind of celebration in the Northern Hemisphere around Christmastime, when the days, getting shorter and shorter from the fall equinox, started to get longer after the 21st of December.

Birthdays and name days of rulers and heads of clans or families were also days for celebration, as were the major events that secured the well-being and prosperity of the family. Harvest time, wine pressing time, the processing and preserving for later use of household animals, were always done at certain times of the year.

In Hungary, families who lived year round on a two-pig-per-year economy had the first feast in the late fall, so that the hams, the bacon and the sausages would be ready for the holidays. The second pig was usually killed and processed towards the end of March. After all, winter doesn't end until the 21st.

In many ways, this second pig killing was more important for the family's wellbeing than the first, because the meat had to keep from March through the middle or end of October, so for a much longer and much more critical time than the first one.

Just think of it. We had no refrigeration in any shape or form up until the end of the 18th century. And in the early 19th century there was a limited amount of ice available in Budapest and in a few other cities, mostly for commercial use in the largest hotels.

So all the meat processed in March had to be prepared to keep without refrigeration, and without any canning technology, throughout the summer. Salt curing of the bacon, ham, the boneless loin, and then smoking these pieces with a slow, cold smoking process, was one way. The other was to make Hungarian sausage, the dry type of smoked sausage, and salami from as much of the carcass meat as possible.

Because of this, the butchering itself was done differently. Therefore, at the spring killing feast, different foods were offered to the helpers and to the guests than in the late fall or early winter.

The soft type of fresh sausages, and the Hungarian's beloved *hurka*, a type of sausage made from blood with

bacon bits and rice or kasha, or from precooked liver, pre-cooked fat, pork trimmings, and rice or kasha, was not practical for the spring.

Some heavily smoked liver was prepared sausage with cereal, because that could keep for six weeks or so, but practically all the rest of the meat had to be used as quickly as possible.

So, in March almost every family cooked a delightful, typically Hungarian soup as one of the dishes for the feast of the pig killing. Its name is *orjaleves*. When I decided that I would include this recipe for March, I checked the new edition of the largest and best Hungarian English dictionary, Laszlo Orszagh's, and to my great surprise, I found some misinformation. It says, "Orja (kb) spare rib". "kb" means *körül belül*, which means approximately. But, of course, orja is very far from spare rib.

Orja is that part of the pig's neck that starts right behind the skull and goes down between the two shoulders, approximately to where the shoulder blade ends. And it used to be butchered so that first you remove the head, then you remove the two pieces of great bacon on the double chin, or, in Hungarian, *toka*, which is sometimes available in stores, especially in the south, and is called smoked jaw in English.

Then you remove the two shoulders or picnics or front hams, and before you cut the loin with or without bone, you cut the neck piece with the remaining meat on it, and crosscut it into 8-10 pieces. This nice bony, juicy, not-too-lean, not-too-fat piece is called the *orja*.

Perhaps you won't be able to buy this piece. Don't fret. All over the United States, in every chain store, you can purchase a whole fresh butt or fresh picnic. You can ask the butcher to cut it for you into 8-10 pieces, and from this meat you can make a marvelous *orjaleves*.

I am giving you a recipe for a whole butt. It will feed 10 generously, first with a soup, then with a delightful main course of the boiled pork with the vegetables.

Serve it with potatoes boiled in their jackets, with a good crusty bread, and with freshly grated horseradish, or with a horseradish-apple sauce, or with a horseradish-sour cream sauce. You will have an authentic Hungarian dinner, which takes advantage of the first fresh vegetables of spring, as well as the relatively inexpensive pork.

## ORJALEVES

### Ingredients for 8-10 people

**2-1/2 to 3 pounds orja or pork butt, cut into 8-10 pieces**

**Approximately 3-1/2 to 4 pounds mixed spring vegetables:**

**3-4 medium sized carrots, scraped and cut into 2-inch pieces**

**4-6 fresh parsley roots, scraped, cut the same way**

**4 stalks of celery**

**2 young kohlrabis, peeled and quartered**

**1 piece celery root, if available; if not then 1 parsnip, peeled and trimmed, cut into 1-inch pieces**

**2 onions, the size of an egg, unpeeled, split in half**

**a handful of green beans or green peas, including the pods**

**1 firm tomato**

**1 large red pepper cut into 1 inch pieces**

**1 small hot pepper like jalapeno, optional 2 cloves garlic**

**10-12 whole white peppercorns, slightly bruised**

**10-12 whole black peppercorns, slightly bruised**

**1 heaping tablespoon dry tarragon, rubbed into a powder between your palms**

**3 tablespoon salt**

**1-1-1/2 cups good quality white vinegar**

**1 pint sour cream**

### *Method:*

Wash the meat, pat dry. Place a large heavy soup pot, approximately 10-12 quarts, or larger, on the stove.

Place in it half the vegetables, mixed. Lay the meat on it. Spread out. Rub with the salt. Add the rest of the vegetables and add 5-6 quarts cold water.

Bring to a boil, partially covered, over medium heat. With a slotted spoon, remove the foam from the top. If vegetables are floating and you removed them with the foam, rinse them and put back into the pot.

Adjust the heat to low. Cover almost completely and simmer the soup for approximately 2 hours, then add the tarragon and the vinegar. Simmer for 10 minutes, stir gently and taste. Add more salt if needed.

First remove the meat to a deep platter. Surround it with the carrots, parsley root and other vegetables. Remove and discard onion skin. Add onions to the vegetables. Discard spices and garlic.

Strain the soup through a fine strainer. Remove some of the soup into a small bowl. Add the sour cream slowly to it. Mix it with a wire whip, then pour back into the soup pot. You may add to the soup some small dumplings (galuska), or some Hungarian-style pasta.

Serve the soup with toasted bread cubes or with fresh bread. Then serve the meat that you kept warm in a 200° oven with the vegetables. Offer grated fresh horseradish on the meat, or mix in a small pan 1-1/2 cups apple sauce with 4 tablespoons prepared horseradish, its liquid pressed from it in a sieve, then diluted with a little of the soup, and stirred into the apple sauce. Add some sugar and a few drops of lemon juice.

Or, press out the liquid from 3-4 tablespoons prepared horseradish, add to it 2-3 tablespoons of the soup and 1 tablespoon sugar. Fold it into 1-1/2-2 cups sour cream. Gently warm up the sauce, but don't let it boil.

Accompany the meat and vegetables with boiled potatoes in their jackets.