



# The Culinary Art of Hungary

- by - LOUIS SZATHMARY



## THE SMELLS OF NOSTALGIA

A person with a "good nose" can recognize several hundred different odors and is able to pick out the various components of mixed smells.

Just think, it is a balmy Indian summer day in October, with weather known in Hungarian as "the summer of old women." Your outdoor charcoal broiler is glowing strong, and the breeze blows that tantalizing, incomparable aroma of charcoal toward you.

Close your eyes and open your mind. You are roasting fresh Hungarian sausages over the hot coals. Shift the olfactory scene to chicken sizzling and corn on the cob steaming in its husks. Switch again to a whiff of pork chops on the fire, bubbling under their spread of chopped garlic with salt, pepper and paprika.

Now imagine that unmistakable Transylvanian pastry, the kurtoskalacs, or "chimney cake." Remember? A yeast dough made with sugar, milk and eggs merged with flour and melted butter, and left to rise until it doubles in size. Then rolled into an inch in thickness and cut into long thin strips. The strips are rolled over what looks like a thick rolling pin, but minus its handles. Instead, there are two metal axles that fit into the two metal forks set up on each side of the charcoal broiler. This wooden cylinder has been pre-heated and brushed with butter and now, with its cargo of dough, is turned over the fire, generously brushed with butter as it spins and is sprinkled with sugar and rolled in almonds.

Ah, the perfume of melting butter, browning sugar, and toasting almonds, joined with the smoke of the charcoal, and the essence of the cake itself!

Whenever I walk around my neighborhood in Chicago and detect the emanations of the charcoal broilers in yards or gardens on an Indian summer evening, I always try to recall some tantalizing smell that can be easily recreated.

No, not the chimney cake. Much too complicated. I am thinking about something just as characteristically Transylvanian, just as fine, but relatively easy to reproduce the taste, smell and look of Transylvanian bitter mushrooms broiled over charcoal with sheep cheese and bacon bits. Since bitter mushrooms are not available in the United States, and since their little bitter tang is so much a part of the taste sensation, I find I can, quite simply, capture that tang with one, yes, just one drop of Angostura bitters for each mushroom.

It's well worth a try. You can buy the mushrooms practically anywhere, and a good quality Greek feta cheese is available in most stores. Remember, that the Transylvanian sheep culture, that started with the Hungarian settlers in the 8th and 9th centuries, came from the very same parts of the world — from the Near East where the Greeks learned how to make sheep cheese from their neighboring nations.

Of course, the two cheeses are not the same, but are similar enough to substitute for each other. For your bacon bits, you can get a good, tasty Hungarian bacon by mail from several mail-order firms. So, whether you live in Albuquerque, Baltimore, Cleveland, or Detroit (I could go on for the rest of the alphabet) there shouldn't be any problem in assembling all the required ingredients.

You won't find a tastier appetizer for an October night than these charcoal broiled mushrooms. There's yet another benefit. Should the weather not cooperate for al fresco cookery, you can fix these mushrooms in your kitchen broiler or frying pan, or even in your living room on one of those modern table-top electric ovens.

You will, of course, have to sacrifice the nostalgic aroma of charcoal.

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## MUSHROOM CAPS WITH BACON AND FETA CHEESE

### Ingredients for 8 servings:

**4 tablespoons flour**  
**1 quart cold water**  
**1 pound medium to large mush-**

**rooms (16 to 24 pieces)**  
**4 ounces Hungarian style bacon**  
**4 ounces feta cheese**

For charcoal broiling:

Approximately one hour before you plan to serve the mushrooms, light the coals and let them burn down to a glowing red, no black center remains, and they are all covered with fuzzy white ash.

If you have a grid with a fine mesh (approximately 1/2-inch squares), place it over the coals with the mushrooms already on the grid. If you don't have such a grid, take an approximately 8 x 6-inch aluminum foil pan, poke holes in it about 1/2 inch from each other with an icepick, the tip of a roasting fork, or with the point of kitchen scissors. Put the mushrooms in it and place on the coals.

While the coals are getting hot, prepare the mushrooms as follows:

With a sieve, sprinkle flour evenly on top of cold water in a bowl. Plunge mushrooms one by one quickly through flour 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 become. The flour adheres to the surface of the mushrooms 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 cubes a bit smaller than 1/2 inch. Distribute evenly among mushroom cavities, adding more in larger caps, less in smaller. Cover bacon and broil 8 to 10 minutes. Cool 2 to 3 minutes before serving.

If you do it indoors, first preheat your oven to 350°, then follow the directions, but instead of broiling the mushrooms, bake them for 8-10 minutes.

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

This reminds me that there are more vegetarians among Hungarians than you would think, and one of their favorite dishes is a Hungarian specialty, a mushroom paprikash.

If you would like the recipe for it, send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to me at The Bakery Restaurant, 2218 N. Lincoln Avenue, Chicago, IL 60614. Mark the envelope "Mushroom Paprikash" in the lower left corner.