

The Culinary Art of Hungary

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TRANSYLVANIAN BEEF SOUP

Now as the weather is turning slowly to "snappy" across the United States, I am sure that I am not the only Hungarian living in this blessed country who is thinking of the wonderful soups that seem to stick to the ribs, and could serve as a whole meal, either at noon or at night.

You cannot open an American newspaper or magazine, you cannot watch the news on TV, without hearing something about what is going on in Transylvania, where one of the largest minority groups in Europe — two million in number — Hungarian Transylvanians live.

This tasty and unique beef soup that I share here with you used to be one of the favorites of the Hungarians in Transylvania during the 1940s when I lived at Marosvásárhely, and learned the following recipe.

8 servings

- 1 pound stew meat (chuck or similar, cut up)
- 2 slices bacon cut into small strips, or 3 tablespoons shortening
- 2 cups sliced onion
- 1 pound fresh green beans, cleaned and cut on a bias; or 12-ounce package frozen green beans, Fench cut; or the same amount of wax beans; or 1 16-ounce can green beans (liquid discarded and beans rinsed in cold water)
- 2 quarts water
- 1 cup milk
- 2 tablespoons flour
- 1 tablespoon cornstarch
- 1 teaspoon tarragon
- 1/2 teaspoon chervil
- 1 teaspoon salt
- pepper to taste
- 1 pint sour cream
- 2 large onions, chopped and marinated in 1/4 cup white vinegar, 3/4 cup water, 1 tablespoon sugar, 1/2 teaspoon salt, and a generous grinding of fresh black pepper

1. With a very sharp knife, cut the meat into matchstick-sized pieces. (When it is all cut it should resemble meat-colored spaghetti.)

2. In a large soup pot over high heat, fry the bacon or heat the shortening of your choice. Gradually add the slivered meat, stirring constantly.

3. Add sliced onions and continue frying.

4. If you use fresh beans, add them immediately. If you use frozen or canned beans, don't add them yet. As soon as the meat is fried and the onions are limp, add 2 cups of water. Continue cooking.

5. In a small bowl, whisk together the milk and 1 cup water with the flour, cornstarch, tarragon, and chervil. Stir this mixture until no lumps show, and pour it into the boiling soup, stirring constantly. Keep stirring and, as it thickens, add the remaining water, salt, and pepper.

6. Simmer over very low heat 1 1/2 to 2 hours.

7. If you use frozen beans, add them 15 minutes before serving time. If you use canned beans, add 10 minutes before serving time.

8. Put the sour cream into a large soup tureen, add to it a few spoonfuls of the soup, and stir until the sour cream heats through. Add the rest of the soup. Serve with garlic toast and offer the marinated raw onions and more sour cream if you wish.

9. This soup is one of the most delightful beef soups you could taste. The meat almost vanishes, but the beef flavor permeates the soup. If you add the hot soup to the sour cream in small amounts, it won't curdle or get lumpy.

The garlic toast that is traditionally served with this soup is made somewhat differently. Use a firm-textured rye, whole wheat, or pumpernickel bread and toast it under the broiler — or, even better, on a large toasting fork over the stove burner (either electric or gas will do the job). Toast it a bit more than you usually would. Peel a couple of cloves of fresh garlic and rub the dry toast generously on both sides. Brush or spread melted butter, duck fat, bacon drippings, lard, or oil on the garlic toast and reheat it in a 300 F oven before serving.