



The Culinary Art of Hungary

- by - LOUIS SZATHMARY



LET'S GO FOR LECSO!

In the days when agriculture was very much dependent on horses to pull the plow and to carry home the harvested crops, and when the fastest military units were mounted on horseback, the cavalry procurers would go to villages in the spring to select yearlings for military service.

The army would pay a nominal amount for the horses, and train and use them for several years. Then they would be mustered out and sold back to the farmers for a nominal fee, whom they again served on the farm.

When I was a child, we still had those "retired" military horses working in the fields. We had a saying that, when people hear something very pleasant, they raise their heads and a spark comes in their eyes just as the ex-army horses did when they heard the sound of the bugle.

Why am I telling you this? Because if you want to know who is really and truly Hungarian in a group, you just say the word "lecsó" (pronounced let-show). The origin of this word is unknown. I couldn't find it in any of the dictionaries, but I suspect that it comes from the Spanish or the French. I could be wrong. The main thing is that lecsó is to the Hungarians what caviar, smoked salmon, lobster, or fresh oysters are to the gourmets of other nations.

Say "lecsó" to a Hungarian, especially in September or October, and his eyes will sparkle, he will smile, smack his lips, and his Adam's apple will run up and down.

The dish known as lecsó is simple and has few ingredients. Basically,

it is little more than onions, green peppers and tomatoes, slowly cooked with a shortening, and perhaps a couple of other ingredients, along with the obligatory salt and the optional sugar.

Lecso is the kind of dish that nearly everyone prepares with the ingredients in different proportions, uses different types of shortening, and different methods of cooking. But the result always is the same taste sensation.

Throughout the years, in different parts of the country, different customs developed in connection with this dish. In some places it is served as a so-called "second breakfast," known in Hungary as "breakfast with a fork," from which the American "Sunday brunch" evolved.

When it is served at this meal, generally some Hungarian sausage, such as csabai, gyulai or debreceni, or just plain Hungarian or Polish-style kolbasz, is offered, simmered with it, or on the side. As a luncheon dish, it is often fortified with scrambled eggs and served with crowns of bacon, or as a side dish with hot dogs or chicken. At dinnertime, it is an elegant vegetable dish you can offer with roast tenderloin, with a filet mignon steak, or with a grilled, broiled or baked pork or veal chop.

It goes with noodles or spaetzles; it is very good served with rice; and is marvelous with mashed potatoes, home fries, onion potatoes, or on baked potatoes. You can make it as mild or as hot as you wish (after all, it is up to you what type of green peppers you use). You can, if you wish,

include a small piece of jalapeno, chili pepper, or hot Hungarian pepper. Or, you can add the controlled heat of Tabasco sauce.

Some prefer their lecsó to be loose and runny, with generous amounts of sliced sausage in it — served and enjoyed as you would soup. Others cook it dry so that every piece of onion and pepper retains its shape and even the peeled, seeded tomato pieces keep their original chunkiness.

Some homemakers consider it a deadly sin to add sugar. Well, I am a "sinner", because I always add a bit. I know that when you expose tomatoes to heat, much of the natural sweetness turns into acid. Is it really sinful to restore the original fresh tomato taste by adding a little sugar, just to balance the flavor?

My recipe for lecsó follows. As a rule, this amount would be enough for 8 as a Sunday brunch dish, with Hungarian sausage, but it's not unlikely that 4 people will polish it off without difficulty. Don't worry about leftovers. Lecso can be kept for several days in the refrigerator — the high "Ph" factor of the cooked tomato will prevent spoilage. It also freezes and reconstitutes well.

For my restaurant in the autumn, when meaty yellow Hungarian peppers are abundant in the farmers' market, we buy large amounts, cut them in 2-inch strips, 1/2 to 3/4-inch wide, or into 1-1 1/4-inch squares, quickly cook them in a mixture of corn oil and rendered pork fat, and freeze them for as long as three months. —continued next page

LECSO

Ingredients for 8:

3 pounds sweet, thick-skinned yellow or light green peppers, often called Hungarian peppers, or, if not available, then cubinella. If possible, avoid using bell peppers; the results are usually too pungent

2 pounds tomatoes

1 pound onions

6 tablespoons bacon drippings, lard or corn oil

Peanut oil (don't use butter for this purpose)

1 scant tablespoon good quality Hungarian paprika

1 1/2-2 teaspoons salt (or more, according to taste)

1 teaspoon sugar

8-10 ounces Hungarian sausage per person, optional

Method:

Discard the pulpy core and white pulpy veins of the peppers. Cut into 6 to 8 pieces lengthwise, or slice into rings.

Drop the tomatoes into boiling water one by one for a minute or so, then plunge into ice water to cool. Peel the skin and cut out and discard the core (where the small part of the stem is attached).

Cut the tomatoes, flesh and seeds, into about 1 inch cubes, sprinkle with sugar. Cut the onions into 1/4-inch or 1/2-inch rings. Place them into a 2-quart container of cold water. Separate the onion pieces and let stand.

When all preparation is done, start the cooking. If you choose to use soft-type Hungarian sausage, quickly rinse in very hot water and then let stand in lukewarm water. If you use the hard-type Hungarian sausage, cut into portion sizes and simmer over very low heat, in just enough water to cover, for about 20 minutes.

To prepare the Lecso:

Heat the shortening. Remove the onions from the water, gently press them with your hand, and pat dry on paper towel. Add the onions to the hot shortening, keep stirring with a wooden spoon for 3 or 4 minutes over high heat. Reduce heat, add the pepper strips and the salt, turn for a couple of minutes with the wooden spoon, then adjust the heat to lower than medium.

Cover the pan and cook the onion-pepper mixture for about 10 minutes. Add the tomatoes and the sugar. Bring to a quick boil, then lower the heat. Cover the lecsó, simmer 10 minutes, then add the sausages, and simmer for an additional 10 to 15 minutes, under cover, before serving.

Serve it with mashed potatoes, parsleyed rice, or with egg barley or spaetzle. Kosher dill pickles, window pickles, or cucumber salad are good side dishes.

For a recipe for Filet Mignon Steaks a la Budapest, prepared with lecsó, mushrooms and crowns of bacon, send a self-addressed, stamped envelope, marking the lower left corner, "Filet Mignon Steaks a la Budapest," to me at The Bakery Restaurant, 2218 N. Lincoln Avenue, Chicago, IL 60614.