

Where the sweet peppers grow

Eating and drinking around the world: Hungary



Even the ancient ancestors of today's Hungarians are said to have always been thinking about their stomachs. And why shouldn't they have, when the end result consisted of such mouth-watering foods as quark noodles, paprika chicken or stuffed cabbage? Or their world famous goulash, although virtually nobody knows that goulash is really a soup in its country of origin.

That's no joke. Nor is this the only revelation that visitors to Hungary will experience. At least if they're expecting to see violin-playing gypsies, the romance of the Puszta or hundreds of girls named Piroshka. Goulash, by the way, is spelled gulyás in Hungarian, and originated as modest fare for herdsmen – although the word "gulyás" actually refers to the herdsmen themselves. So goulash soup really means "soup for the gulyás" – yet this didn't prevent culinary enthusiasts in centuries gone by from adopting the name as a synonym for this dish. If you order gulyás in Hungary, what you'll be served is a soup that's been slow-cooked in a kettle – traditionally over an open fire – made from meat, potatoes, onions, paprika, vegetables and spices. Goulash as it's known in Western Europe and the United States, on the other hand, is similar to what the Hungarians call pörkölt.

Hearty and heavy

The Hungarians' love of eating is legendary. Even the ancient Magyars are said to have always carried a piece of raw meat under their saddles in order to ride it until it was cooked. The average Magy-

ar, it is said, has the highest per-capita daily calorie intake anywhere in Europe. That's not hard, though, because Hungarian cuisine isn't only known for its good taste, but also for being heavy. The basic ingredients in most dishes consist of lard, bacon, onions, sour cream and, of course, sweet peppers and paprika.

Whenever we think of paprika or sweet peppers, we associate them with Hungary. Yet only since the 19th century have they been a key component in Hungarian cuisine. The best peppers and paprika come from the region around Szeged and Kalocsa in southern Hungary, where the landscape is typified by the bright red fields in which they grow. Paprika and sweet peppers are a world of their own – at least in Hungary, where sweet pepper plants seem to grow in every garden.



And there are any number of paprika varieties – ranging from spicy-hot rose paprika right through to piquant-sweet or mild gourmet paprika.

Mighty: Hungarian pastries

A typical Hungarian meal consists of two to three courses, usually soup, a main course and dessert. Hungarian specialties – aside from the country's famous salami – include stuffed cabbage, stuffed peppers or Szeged fish soup seasoned with paprika. Fresh water fish – from the Danube, the Tisza or Lake Balaton – are often found on Hungarian menus. One popular side dish that's served with a wide variety of foods is lecsó, a vegetable stew made from sweet peppers, tomatoes, onions and (lots of) paprika. Also famous, of course, are Hungarian pastries, whose kinship with Austrian cui-

sine is clear to see: Jam-filled pancakes, quark noodles with sour cream and rendered bacon, cherry or poppy strudel, Schomlauer dumplings or pogatsch, a baked delicacy made from flour, eggs and cracklings.



Choice wines: Erlau Stierblut and Tokay

One popular aperitif is barack, an apricot brandy that's traditionally aged in oak barrels. But Hungary is naturally also famous for its grand wines, like Erlau Stierblut and of course Tokay, which numbers among the world's most important dessert wines.

In fact, as a beverage wine has only one true competitor in Hungary: Coffee. An Hungarian, it is said, can't possibly make it through the day without five or six demitasse cups of strong black coffee – regardless of whether he lives in the city or in the country, whether he's a civil servant or a farmer.

Hungary and a love of culinary delights – there's clearly a close connection, as demonstrated by the following anecdote: A gypsy band that escaped Hungary in 1956 and fled to the United Kingdom, only to soon become homesick for Hungarian cooking and move back. In spite of the country's despised regime, they remained there – where the sweet peppers grow.