

Soup of Ages

To many people from outside Hungary, real goulash comes as a revelation

BY CAROLYN BÁNFALVI

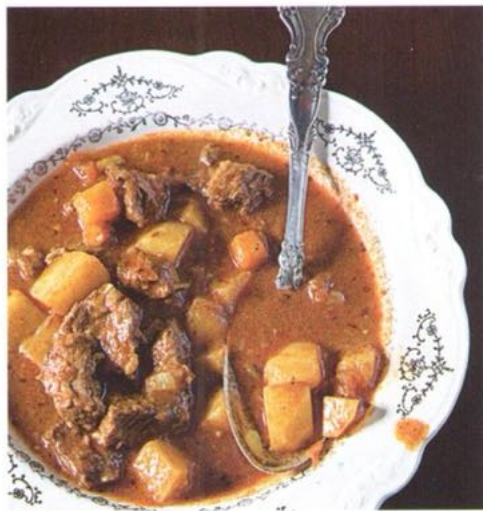
SINCE I MOVED TO Budapest a decade ago, I've enjoyed introducing visiting American friends to Hungarian cooking. Always, I start my guests off with the one local dish most of them know: goulash. At least they think they know it. When you ask for that dish in Hungary, you won't get the flour-thickened, sour cream-laced stew that's come to be called goulash in the States. In fact, you probably won't get a stew at all but a delicious, savory soup. Formally called gulyásleves but more often known simply as gulyás (pronounced GOO-yash), it's one of many soups that figure in the Hungarian culinary canon, including almaleves, a chilled apple soup, and Jókai bableves, a bean and smoked-pork specialty named for the 19th-century Hungarian novelist Mór Jókai.

That Hungary's best-known dish is so liberally interpreted outside its home country has long been a source of some annoyance among Hungarians. In the classic *Hungarian Cookery Book* (George Vajna & Co., 1934), the early-20th-century Budapest restaurateur Károly Gundel complained, "Without wishing to give offence to my colleagues abroad, I am forced to state that they usually spoil the reputation of that excellent dish." In traditional gulyás, paprika is a key ingredient, just as it is in the Americanized version, but the real thing contains no flour or sour cream; it derives its luxurious texture and intensity of flavor from a slow, easy simmer.

Beef is the meat of choice (though a thicker, mutton version, called birkagulyás, also exists). In fact, the word *gulyás* means cowboy, a nod to the dish's supposed origins among medieval Hungarian cowherds, who stewed meat until all the liquid disappeared, dried it further in the sun to preserve it, and then, when they wanted a quick and hearty soup out on the range, simply added the dried meat and some water to a pot and heated it over a fire. Even today, many Hungarians, including my husband, occasion-

ally cook gulyás in a *bogrács* (cauldron) over an open fire, which imparts a subtly smoky flavor.

When I make gulyás, I start by sautéing onions in bacon fat or sunflower oil. Next, I add cubes of beef and brown them; then I put in a few spoonfuls of Hungarian sweet paprika (never the hot kind) before pouring in water to make a broth. After it has all simmered for about 45 minutes I add diced potatoes and tiny, pinched dumplings called *csipetke*. The result is a dish as hearty as its American cousin but at once more refined and more restorative.



Most Hungarian cooks follow this basic recipe, but even traditionalists diverge on certain points. Some skip the potatoes or the dumplings; my mother-in-law adds dried marjoram and chopped garlic, carrots, parsnips, tomatoes, and fresh banana peppers. The restaurateur George Lang, who acquired Károly Gundel's namesake establishment in 1991, allows for the addition of caraway seeds, while the author Elek Magyar, in *The Gourmet's Cook Book: Hungarian Cuisine* (Corvina, 1970), insisted that they "spoil the touch". I've tried gulyás both ways—and many other ways besides—and have never ceased to find it a delicious surprise. 🍴

GULYÁS

(Hungarian Goulash)

SERVES 4-6

The recipe for this hearty, savory soup (left) comes from Katalin Bánfalvi, the author's mother-in-law, who lives in the village of Böny, in northwestern Hungary. Hungarian sweet paprika (see page 96) confers a singularly deep, rich color and flavor.

- 4 **tblsp. sunflower or canola oil**
- 2 **yellow onions, chopped**
- 1½ **lbs. beef chuck, trimmed and cut into ½" cubes**
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste**
- ¼ **cup sweet paprika**
- 2 **tsp. dried marjoram**
- 2 **tsp. caraway seeds**
- 2 **cloves garlic, finely chopped**
- 2 **medium carrots, cut into ½" cubes**
- 2 **medium parsnips, cut into ½" cubes**
- 1½ **lbs. medium new potatoes, peeled and cut into ½" cubes**
- 1 **tomato, cored and chopped**
- 1 **Italian frying pepper, chopped**

① Heat oil in a 5-qt. dutch oven over medium heat. Add onions, cover, and cook, stirring occasionally, until soft and translucent, about 10 minutes. Increase heat to high. Add beef and season with salt and pepper. Cook, uncovered, stirring only once or twice, until the meat is lightly browned, about 6 minutes. Stir in paprika, marjoram, caraway, and garlic and cook until fragrant, about 2 minutes. Add carrots, parsnips, and 5 cups water. Bring to a boil; reduce heat to medium. Simmer, covered, until the beef is nearly tender, about 40 minutes.

② Add potatoes and cook, uncovered, until tender, about 25 minutes. Stir in tomatoes and peppers; cook for 2 minutes. Season with salt and pepper to taste and serve with rye bread, if you like.