



FOOD GUIDE TO HUNGARY



By Carolyn Bánfalvi
co-owner of Taste Hungary,
author of *Food Wine Budapest*

tastehungary.com

A FOOD GUIDE TO HUNGARY

What to Eat, Why to Eat it, and Where to Eat it

Hungarians are incredibly enthusiastic eaters, and that is one of the first things that cemented my love for the country. Their pride in their food extends to talking about it in great detail, and is so contagious that when in Hungary, eating and drinking just seem like the truest way to get to know the country's soul.



Hungary is a small country (under 10 million in population) in the middle of Europe, surrounded by Austria, Romania, Slovakia, Croatia, Serbia, Slovenia, and Ukraine. Just as Hungarians have preserved their distinct Magyar language (despite being surrounded by so many unrelated tongues), they've sustained their beloved culture of food and wine. European countries often stress their differences, but after living in Hungary for many years and traveling extensively in Central and Eastern Europe, I've realized that when it comes to food, in this region the similarities and influences abound.

Look at the menus in Hungary and its neighbors and you'll see Turkish influences, and many remnants from the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which is when the cuisines of many nations became intertwined. Hungary has long been influenced by Jewish food, with dishes like sólet (cholent), matzo balls, and goose soup so commonplace that Hungarians often don't know they originated as Jewish foods.

Despite the intermingling of cuisines in this part of the world, Hungary remains true to its classic dishes. When you see a gulyás (goulash) on the menu in Croatia it may be made of octopus. In Austria it's likely to be a stew served with dumplings, but in Hungary it will always be a paprika-rich soup made with cubes of beef and potatoes. Gulyás is perhaps the most iconic Hungarian dish. Like so many Hungarian dishes, it is simple and complex at the same time. It's so elegant that it is served at fancy Budapest restaurants, yet humble enough to be served at practically every red-checked tablecloth eatery in the country.



Hungarian food is wide-ranging and diverse, yet it's relatively unknown outside the region. Perhaps it's because there are so few Hungarian restaurants around the world and one must get introduced to Hungarian food through home-cooked meals. I have been blown away so many times by genuine feasts cooked at the homes of Hungarians. After eating (and drinking) more than you thought possible, the meal invariably ends on a celebratory note with a bottle of homemade pálinka (fruit brandy) appearing and poured into tiny glasses which are clinked together with enthusiastic proclamations "egészségedre!" (to your health!).

Paprika, Hungary's "Red Gold"

There is a certain aroma, often wafting through kitchen windows into apartment building hallways, that every Hungarian instantaneously recognizes. It's the smell of paprika and onions cooking in sizzling lard, and it usually begins a speculation about what the resulting dish will be. "Somewhere along the line the Hungarians hit on the holy trinity of lard, onion, and pure ground paprika," wrote Hungarian George Láng in *The Cuisine of Hungary*. "This simple combination became the base of virtually unlimited taste combinations." This base of lard (be it goose, pork, or duck), onions, and paprika (only added at the end as not to burn) is the essence of Hungarian cooking. With this technique the onions are cooked so slowly that they soften and remain translucent.



It's unbelievable how much flavor emerges from simple onions when cooked this way. The hot fat releases the paprika's oil, turning this mixture into a flavor bomb from which many dishes can begin—including pörkölt (stew, made from any kind of meat), chicken, veal, or mushroom paprikás (this is when sour cream is added); and lecsó (stewed peppers and tomatoes).

If one knows nothing else about Hungary, they will still probably have heard about Hungary's penchant for paprika. But paprika hasn't always been synonymous with Hungarian food. Pepper plants arrived in Europe in the 16th century, were embraced by peasants in the 17th century, and had become a wholly Hungarian spice by the mid-18th century. There's a reason why paprika is sold by the kilogram at the markets. Hungarian cooks use it in quantities that would shock cooks in most other nations. But Hungarian food isn't all about paprika—there are plenty of dishes which don't contain a trace of it. There's also a misconception that Hungarian food is typically hot. Nearly all cooks use sweet paprika when cooking rather than the hot stuff. For extra heat, a small container of hot paprika is always on the table.

Soups and Stews

Soup is an integral part of a meal in Hungary. One of the most beloved soups is *húsleves*, a rich consommé made from slowly simmering beef, marrow bones, and root vegetables. Thin egg noodles, matzo balls, liver dumplings, or semolina dumplings are added to it. But the soup is just the beginning. Next comes the tender boiled beef with mustard and horseradish. And then you spread the bone marrow over toast and sprinkle it with salt and paprika. It's a classic Hungarian culinary experience.



Some soups—like *halászlé* (“fisherman’s soup”), *Jókai-bableves* (bean and smoked meat soup), and *gulyás*—are hearty enough to be meals in themselves. In the summer, herb and vegetable soups can be made from whatever is in season—asparagus, mushrooms, green beans, squash, dill—and thickened with sour cream. Chilled fruit soup (*hideg gyümölcsleves*) is also ubiquitous then. It’s most often made from sour cherries, but can be from any type of fruit (strawberries, apples, peaches, gooseberries, even watermelon), thickened with heavy cream, and sweetened with a bit of sugar.

We’ve already discussed *gulyás*. *Gulyás*’ brother is *pörkölt*, a stew in which the meat slowly cooks in its own juices, thickened by lots of onions. It is often eaten with *nokedli* or *galuska* (dumplings). Both are even better when cooked over an open fire in a *bogrács*.

Pork, King of Meat

Hungarian cooking is meat-centric, and the meat of choice is pork. A traditional winter rite is the disznótor (pig slaughter), and there's no better way to understand the importance of pork in the Hungarian kitchen. The slaughter is a job requiring several butchers. Work starts before sunrise, and the helpers who've come are fed throughout the day (as well as given copious amounts of pálinka). "Butcher's breakfast" (böllérreggeli) is the cooked, coagulated blood served with fried onions, bread, and maybe some mulled wine. Not a single piece of the pig will be discarded. The rest of the day will pass in a hectic haze of chopping, grinding meat, stuffing meat into intestines to make kolbász, stirring chunks of fat big in cauldrons (destined to be töpörtyű, cracklings), preparing bacon and pork chops.



Sausages will later be smoked and dried, bacon will be cured, and ham will be smoked. Kocsonya (pork jelly with a pig feet, ears, and snouts, set into aspic made from consommé) will be prepared. But first, the well-earned meal at the end of this day of communal work is sausages that are incomparable to any you've had before. The meat will last throughout the summer.

A visit to any of Budapest's markets reveals that pork is not the only meat Hungarians love. In addition to the dozens of varieties of paprika-tinted sausages and piles of bacon on display, there's an abundance of goose, duck, foie gras, beef, and wild game. Somewhere in the sea of meat, there's freshwater fish (usually carp or catfish), used for fisherman's soup. And the delicate pike-perch (perhaps the best local fish) is served lightly breaded or with a creamy sauce.



Bountiful Markets Halls

Much of Hungary is fertile orchard and farmland, with soil so rich it's the color of dark-roasted coffee beans. Market stalls abound with gorgeous seasonal local fruit and vegetables from this land. Because of this seasonal abundance, Hungarians are adept at turning summer produce into products to last through the winter. Fruit is cooked into jam and distilled into pálinka. Savanyúság—pickled and fermented vegetables—plays a hugely important role in the Hungarian diet. It's practical both in terms of preservation and taste, since a little plate of pickles goes down perfectly with a heavy pörkölt.



Each market has an entire section devoted to colorful pickles, and they are an impressive sight. You'll see barrels of sauerkraut (savanyú káposzta), colorful peppers stuffed with sauerkraut and dyed red with beet juice, and a variety of pickles that could include melons, plums, beets, tomatoes, peppers, and cauliflower. In the summer, kovászos uborka (fermented cucumbers) are made from gherkins. They're stuffed into a big jar with a sprig of dill, covered with water, sprinkled with a little salt, and topped with a slice of bread to promote the fermentation. After a few days in the sun, they're ready to eat. Even the cloudy pickle juice is drunk, sometimes mixed with soda water.



A Nation of Sweet-Teeth

Hungary has one of the great baking traditions of Europe and is renowned for its fancy layered cakes like Dobos torta (vanilla cake layers with chocolate buttercream topped by a shiny solid caramel top) and Esterházy torta (layers of walnut cake and walnut cream). Cukrászdas (patisseries) abound, and they tempt sweet-lovers with a confections made from ingredients like poppy seeds, apricots, plums, túró (farmer cheese), chestnuts, whipped cream, and walnuts. Of course there are the simpler desserts made at home, like palacsinta (stuffed crepes) and yeast-raised cakes (like aranygaluska). During the Christmas season beigli (walnut and poppy seed rolls) are baked by everyone's mom and grandma and given as gifts. Budapest still has a few traditional late 19th / early 20th century coffeehouses, and these are excellent places to settle down with a cup of coffee and an exquisite dessert.



Hungarian Wine

Like the rest of the region, food and wine traditions and industries suffered terribly during the four decades of Communism. But these days Budapest is a hot restaurant city, with new restaurants continuously opening. It even has four Michelin-starred restaurants to be proud of. Local food artisans and growers—from cheesemakers and butchers, to bakers and farmers—are reviving old traditions and making visits to the markets even more exciting. Nowhere is the revival of old traditions more evident than in Hungarian wine. Hungary is a true wine country, and no meal here is complete without it. In the past few decades most of the country's 22 wine districts have been getting back to focusing on growing indigenous regional grapes—with Furmint, Juhfark, Hárslevelű, Kadarka, and Kékfrankos being some of the most intriguing ones to seek out.



Tokaji aszú, an amazingly complex sweet wine made from botrytized grapes which have not only been hand-picked, but picked berry by berry when they reach the optimal stage of over-ripeness), is a national treasure and has been being produced for hundreds of years. That winemakers in Tokaj are singularly obsessed with the botrytis fungus, ever wondering when it will come and how much there will be, much look strange to this who are not yet under the spell of Tokaji aszú. But this wine is only made in years when botrytis invades the vineyards, turning the healthy grapes into shriveled raisin-like berries. Winemakers in the Tokaj region are focused on re-introducing this wine to the world, as well as the deliciously volcanic dry Furmint that they have mastered more recently. These are wines that can stand up, and perfectly complement, often heavy and meat-oriented Hungarian dishes.



The Hungarian enthusiasm for food and drink is well-justified considering a culinary heritage including such things as rich stews gently simmered for hours, delicate soups made from herbs and fruit, intense pops of paprika flavor, dishes which (literally) have piles of poppy seeds on them, and wine flowing from cellars in nearly ever corner of the country.

Essential Hungarian Dishes and Where to Try Them

Hungarians are true to their classic dishes—even as they may be undergoing another major influence: being re-thought and embellished by the creative chefs who have made Budapest into such a wonderful food destination.

Gulyás (Goulash)

Gulyás is the Hungarian dish most people mistakenly think they know. But in Hungary a true gulyás is not a stew. It's a hearty soup made with lots of paprika and onions, beef (sometimes mutton), potatoes, and pinched pasta (csipetke). "Outside Hungary, almost all the dishes seasoned with paprika are labeled" as goulash, writes Károly Gundel, the famous early-20th-century Hungarian chef, in his classic *Hungarian Cookery Book*.

But gulyás is such an important dish in Hungary that its general character is never questioned or altered—though cooks may make minor variations. At simple lunch canteens or Michelin starred restaurants, gulyás will always be recognized as such. The word gulyás means cowboy and the dish originated with ninth century cow-herders stewing their meat, sun-drying it, and "whenever they wanted food, they took out a piece of the dried meat, added some water and reheated it," writes George Lang in *The Cuisine of Hungary*.

It remains a simple everyday meal, usually eaten with thick slices of white bread, and often prepared over an open-fire in a bogrács (cauldron). Pair it with a light Hungarian red wine like Kadarka or Kékfrankos.



Stand25, the new Buda-side bistro by Szabina Szulló and Tamás Széll, serves gulyás.

So does its more upscale sister-restaurant, **Stand Étterem**.

You can always count on finding a nice gulyás at **Náncsi Néni**, up in the Buda hills.

But, really, you can find gulyás practically anywhere.



Húsleves (“Meat Soup”) and Bone Marrow (Csontvelő)

Soup is an integral part of a Hungarian meal, and one of the most beloved is húsleves. This rich consommé is made from slowly simmering beef and marrow bones. A variety of different accompaniments can then be added, like root vegetables, thin egg noodles, matzo balls, liver dumplings, or semolina dumplings.

But the soup is just the beginning. When prepared at home, the tender boiled beef could be served next (with mustard and horseradish). The climax is the thick beef shank bones— filled with lusciously fatty bone marrow, the consistency of a buttery crème brulée— which were cooked in the soup. Extract the marrow from the hot bones with a knife, spread it over toast, and sprinkle with salt and paprika. Húsleves is both commonly made at home, and found on the menus of almost every Hungarian restaurant. But to experience the almost primal pleasure of eating the marrow straight from the bone, you’ll have to look a bit harder.

Bone marrow served as an appetizer at **Pozsonyi Kisvendéglő**.

And the classic **Kéhli Vendéglő** in the Óbuda neighborhood has both bone marrow with toast and garlic as an appetizer, or the whole works: the soup with the bone marrow.



Lecsó (“Hungarian Ratatouille”)

When tomatoes and sweet peppers are at their peak, Hungarians buy them in quantity to make lecsó: sweet yellow Hungarian peppers and tomatoes, cooked in just a bit of smoked lard or oil (but mostly in their own juices), and some paprika. Every family has its own preferred ratio of peppers to tomatoes (it’s mostly peppers), and it’s often canned to last through the rest of the year. Lecsó is an all-purpose dish that brings together so many classic Hungarian flavors. It can be eaten on its own, topped with a bit of sour cream and a sprinkle of hot paprika. Or it can be added to other dishes, such as *túrós csusza* (pasta with cottage cheese), on top of eggs, with a slice of bread, or next to meat roasts or sausage. Like so many Hungarian recipes, lecsó can be made bare-bones at home, or more refined in the kitchens of fancy Budapest restaurants. It’s versatile enough to pair well with different wines. Eating it with a dry stony furmint from Tokaj would be just as enjoyable as a more fruity Kékfránkos from Eger.

In season, lecsó is served everywhere. One place to try it is **Café Kör**, a traditional bistro near the Basilica, serves lecsó on its own as a side dish.



Sólet (Cholent)

Throughout the centuries Hungarian cuisine has been influenced by many countries and cultures. The Jewish influence has been so strong that many Jewish dishes—like cholent, matzo balls, and goose soup—are so commonplace that Hungarians often don't know they originated as Jewish foods. Sólet (cholent) is a slow-baked bean stew, traditionally put in the oven so it could cook on its own for the Sabbath. The Hungarian version adds paprika, onions, boiled eggs, and meat (such as goose, duck, smoked brisket, and sometimes even pork).



Add a little bit of body text

At **Rosenstein**, Budapest's top Jewish restaurant, the sophisticated sólet (served on Fridays) comes with stuffed goose neck, creamy roasted egg, and smoked brisket. It's a hearty, wonderfully-prepared meal that not only deserves a pilgrimage but also clearly underlines the restaurant's motto: everything is kosher that tastes good.

You can get sólet (with your choice of topping) every day at **Fülemüle**, a Jewish restaurant in the Palace District.

Kádár Étkezde, a no-frills lunchroom in the old Jewish quarter, makes it on Saturdays (be prepared for a line out of the door).

Mangalica

Mangalica, one of Hungary's most beloved heritage breeds, had nearly disappeared by the time Communism ended in Hungary. As foragers, these hogs were poorly suited to the Communist-era industrial pig farms. But since the early 1990s Hungary has been reviving many food and drink traditions—including Mangalica—that were interrupted or forgotten during Communism. Mangalicas are covered in thick curly hair, and look startlingly different from other pigs. Mangalica is prized for its particularly tasty and velvety (and abundant) fat, which is perfect for making sausage, cured charcuterie, and salami, which you can find at the Great Market Hall. You'll never think of pork the same way after tasting this intensely flavorful pork—which is deep red and richly marbled.

The Michelin-starred **Onyx Restaurant** has multi-course tasting menus which often also feature Mangalica.

Textura often offers a Managlica dish, for example Mangalica loin with polenta and eggplant.



Pörkölt and Paprikás

Staples of Hungarian cuisine, there are many variations of pörkölt and paprikás, stews which are considered basic Hungarian cooking methods. “These names were not adopted from popular usage but were rather the result of a gentleman’s agreement among restaurateurs to give uniform names to the different ways of preparation,” wrote Károly Gundel. Pörkölt is a slow-cooked paprika-spiced stew which can be made from any kind of meat (or even gizzards, fish, or mushrooms). The meat cooks in its own juice (which is thickened by lots of minced onions) and it’s usually eaten with boiled potatoes, galuska (flour dumplings), or fresh bread. Paprikás is also made by slowly braising meat in a mixture of smoked bacon fat, onions, tomato, and paprika. Sour cream is added to the cooking juices, and it’s often served with túrós csusza or galuska. Paprikás csirke (chicken paprikás) is the best known version, but it can be made with veal, lamb, or fish.

Gettó Gulyás, a restaurant in the seventh district not far from the Great Synagogue, is a restaurant entirely devoted to Hungarian stew. It calls itself a pörköltöző (which translates something like “a place to get pörkölt”), and offers more than a dozen types. But pörkölt can be had at any Hungarian restaurant!



Charcuterie

You can't go far in Budapest without meeting a butcher shop brimming with an assortment of charcuterie. The standard selection includes strings of orange paprika-spiked sausages, stacks of bacon in various cuts and styles, salamis, cold cuts, smoked pork hocks, head cheese, and tubs of cracklings. The meat of choice is pork, but there are also lovely smoked duck and goose breasts and other meaty treats. "Perhaps the extraordinary quality of pork in Hungary contributed to the popularity of dishes made with pork, or perhaps it was the other way around," writes George Lang in *The Cuisine of Hungary*. "The fact is that what beef is to Argentina and veal to Italy, pork is to Hungary."

The best way to experience this meaty abundance is to browse the butcher stalls at one of the city's market halls—the **Great Market Hall**, **Lehel Market**, or **Fény Street Market** are all great options—and choose a selection of your own. Or head to Bock Bisztró and order their mixed plate, which is a feast of Hungarian meat and cheese.

Or head to **The Tasting Table Budapest**, to taste some local wines next to a platter of artisan cheese and charcuterie!



Lángos

Lángos is the most Hungarian street food. Back in the days when families baked their own bread, a little piece of dough was snipped from the end to make lángos for snacking. Today, the dough (which is best when it has potatoes mixed in with the flour) is shaped into wide, flat disks and deep-fried in oil. It's best when it's spread with sour cream and grated cheese, and sprinkled with garlic. But it can be eaten plain, spread with jam, or a topped with variety of other things. It's sold at festivals, markets, or on the street. When you order lángos, make sure it's being fried to order, and not just sitting around and grabbed from a pile. There's nothing worse than a cold, stale-tasting piece of oily dough. When it's fresh and made with good ingredients, it can be very good, though your body may make you feel guilty afterwards. A relative of the lángos is the töki pompos, a thick piece of bread (baked, not fried) spread with sour cream, cheese, onions, and chunks of bacon—almost like a pizza.

The best lángos can be had at the city's market halls. At the **Central Market Hall** head upstairs to find the lángos stall (but stick with the traditional style). At **Lehel Market** there are a few lángos stalls. Also, at Arany János tér there is an always-busy lángos vendor called **Retro Lángos**.



Foie Gras

Order foie gras in Hungary and you'll be presented with slabs of it rather than the bite-sized appetizer portions you might get elsewhere. Foie gras is abundant in Hungary, and is a fixture on restaurant menus. Most foie gras lovers elsewhere would be surprised to learn that their pâtés, terrines, mousses, and parfaits originated here in Hungary. Hungary is the biggest foie gras producer in the world, producing 60 percent of the world's supply and exporting more than 1,900 tons of it annually (mostly to France). Nearly every Hungarian restaurant offers at least one variation, and it's common for menus to offer half a dozen foie gras dishes.

Hungarians tend to prefer their foie gras simply prepared, and the delicate liver is served in thick pieces, so tender that it melts in your mouth. It's often seared, roasted, or grilled whole with little else but salt added. Purists will say that there's no better way to cook goose or duck liver than in its own fat. Before cooking, it's de-veined, often soaked in milk, and seasoned with a little sweet paprika. It's cooked until tender, just long enough to still be a little rare in the middle. Cooked like this, it can be eaten hot, or chilled and served with toast and red onion slices. But creative chefs prepare foie gras in a variety of ways—like with Tokaj wine sauce and sautéed peaches, apricots, or apples, or with an onion chutney garnish and creamy mashed potatoes. A glass of thick sweet Tokaj aszú is a perfect match for foie gras, any way it's prepared.

The menu at Michelin-starred **Borkonyha (“Wine Kitchen”)** changes often, but the foie gras appetizer is always amazing.

Macesz Huszár, a modern Jewish bistro, has several types of goose liver. (And delicious cholent and “Jewish eggs.”).



Halászlé

Without a doubt, the star dish in the Hungarian fish repertoire is halászlé, or fisherman's soup. Hungary's version of fish chowder or bouillabaisse is a rich and flavorful soup that gets its deep burnt color from the heaping spoonfuls of paprika thrown into it. There are as many methods to making halászlé as there are cooks, and many river and lake towns have their own local versions. There are some types made from one single type of fish, but most cooks say halászlé should be made from at least three different fishes (which most often includes catfish and carp). But the more types of fish in the pot, the better the soup will be (even better, add the fish roe and milt). As usual, Hungarians throw no part of the fish away when it comes to making halászlé.

Here's generally how it goes: The fish is cleaned and cut into pieces. The bones, heads, and skin are first simmered (along with the paprika) to make a broth. The broth is usually strained, but sometimes the whole mixture, bones and all, is puréed and then added to the fish. The fish is simmered in the broth, possibly with the addition of a sliced green pepper and a tomato. It's not stirred, as the fish would break, but just tilted a few times and quickly cooked, until it's just done. And no one would argue that it doesn't taste better when cooked in a bogrács over an open fire. Eat bread with halászlé and add dried hot peppers if it needs more heat. Halászlé is hearty enough to be a one-course meal, but when it's a first course it's traditionally followed by túrós csusza. Light Hungarian red wines like kadarka and kékfrankos are typically great matches for this heavily-spiced soup.



Kiskakukk Étterem

is a traditional place with an old-school atmosphere, and a lengthy menu of classic dishes, including halászlé.

Bock Bisztró is an excellent place to try the Hungarian classics (and try some wonderful wines).

Dobos Torta

One of Hungary's most unique desserts—which was created in Budapest, and helped bring fame to Hungarian cuisine—is the Dobos torta. This iconic layered cake was invented by József Dobos—a chef, cookbook author, and culinary entrepreneur—and debuted in 1885 at the National General Exhibition in Budapest, attended by Queen Elisabeth and Emperor Franz Joseph.

The cake is six thin buttery-sponge cake layers and five layers of chocolate butter cream, with ground hazelnuts dusting the sides. What makes it so unique is the layer of hardened caramel covering the top, which was a practical addition for Dobos. Shipping all over Europe was a big part of his business, and the butter cream combined with the hard caramel were his innovations which gave the cake a longer shelf-life, without the need for refrigeration. His custom-designed wooden boxes also helped keep the cakes cool and perfectly intact during their journey.

József Dobos' shop is long gone, but Budapest has many fine patisseries which make their own Dobos torta, including:

- **Centrál Café**
- **Auguszt Cukrászda**
- and **Daubner Cukrászda**



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