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Features

Society: The Kitchen Revolution
by Michael J. Jordan
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Since 1989, post-communist choice and pre-communist tradition have changed the way Central and Eastern Europe eat. A TOL special report.

LAKE BALATON AND PRAGUE | Laszlo Takacs sweats over a bubbling fryer, deftly wielding his tongs to pull out another Frisbee-shaped *langos*. One swimsuit-clad customer after another requests Takacs' deep-fried dough disks, especially the classic: slathered with sour cream, sprinkled with grated Trappist cheese, and drizzled with garlic sauce for good measure.

"Hungarians have always loved *langos*, and they always will," Takacs says. "It's a national specialty, like goulash."

This was Hungary's communist-era version of fast food – oily, cheap, tasty, and reliably belly-filling. Today it's a relative rarity, overwhelmed by Western staples like pizza, hamburgers, hotdogs, even *shwarma* and Chinese food. *Langos* now is mostly relegated to flea markets and Lake Balaton, Hungary's favorite summer spot, just as *zsiros kenyér* – or "fatty bread," smeared with lard and sliced onions and sprinkled with paprika – is now primarily a pub snack.

Much has changed in the former Warsaw Pact countries since the Iron Curtain parted 20 years ago, of course, but gastronomic culture in particular opens a fascinating window into how lifestyles here have become Westernized, from higher quality food and slick advertising to the rise of customer service and the onslaught of obesity.

It all began with open borders and open competition, says top Czech gourmet Pavel Maurer.

"We're hungry for new things: hungry for freedom, hungry for travel, and hungry to try new foods," says Maurer, who founded the annual Prague Food Festival and publishes the Grand Restaurant dining guide. "We're hungry to try all the things that weren't possible for so many years."



Laszlo Takacs serves up traditional langos to vacationers at Hungary's Lake Balaton.

Two decades ago, Maurer says, Prague had precisely three non-Czech restaurants: one Russian, one Chinese, and one Indian. (When Maurer's father wanted to reward him for graduating from university, he had to book three months ahead for a table at the Russian restaurant.) Everything else was utilitarian Czech, state-owned eateries with surly, unmotivated cooks and waiters whose sole purpose was to feed people, not to dazzle them with culinary prowess. If the customer didn't like it, there was no sense complaining: they'd find no better anywhere else.

Maurer says Czech cuisine itself – heavy on meat, potatoes, cabbage, dumplings, and sauces – was “neglected,” as was true across Central and Eastern Europe. Most cooking was done in pork fat. A single orange might be a Christmas treat. And the notion of “salad” was a side of pickled cabbage, sliced cucumbers topped with a dollop of sour cream, or carrots and peas in mayonnaise. Amid the periodic shortages, long lines, and empty shelves of the post-war period and the communist era, people became accustomed to subpar products.

NEW SENSATIONS, OLD WAYS

The arrival of McDonald's in the region – the chain opened its doors in Budapest in 1988 – was a watershed of sorts. McDonald's embodied the West. Because it was relatively expensive, it became a status symbol. Because of its relative cleanliness, it became a popular hangout. It wasn't unusual to see young couples on dates, splurging for a small burger and Coke.

Carolyn Banfalvi, the American author of *Food Drink Budapest*, recounts a story her Hungarian husband tells of his youth, when he saved up enough allowance money to treat himself and his parents to their first taste of McDonald's. No one cooks Hungarian classics more religiously than her mother-in-law, Banfalvi says – goulash, stuffed cabbage, meat soup, and all the rest. “Yet they went to McDonald's and loved it,” she says. “[They're the last people you'd expect to like it. But it was the novelty of it. And they haven't been back since.”

Meanwhile, free markets have unleashed culinary creativity. Banfalvi's mother-in-law, at 69, experiments with new Hungarian and foreign cookbooks. Banfalvi, who has lived in Budapest since 1999, says the city is now filled with “gimmicky, high-concept” restaurants, some blending Hungarian and international cuisine (the domain of the young and newly rich, not their lesser-paid parents or pensioner grandparents). And in the countryside, among Hungary's renowned vineyards, some winery-restaurants are going retro, reclaiming Magyar recipes from a century ago.

“Those who take quality really seriously are starting to think there's more to Hungarian cuisine than what you see on the typical Hungarian menu,” Banfalvi says.

In neighboring Slovakia, the village of Slovensky Grob has revived another tradition: the goose-specialty restaurant, or *husacina*. The surrounding Pezinok region has purportedly been home to goose-breeding

for centuries, thanks to its plentiful water, meadows, and corn (a goose's main food source). These days Slovensky Grob bills itself as the "*husacina* capital," with no fewer than two dozen of the restaurants. Every fall, goose takes over their menus: goose-meat soup, goose liver, goose meat-filled pancakes, roasted goose. Typically, reservations are needed weeks in advance.

At the Husacina u Zapranych, Jana Hamorova explains how her grandmother began the business in 1948, roasting and selling geese for nearly 40 years until she fell ill. Back in the 1970s, when local factories held competitions for the best workers, the winning teams won a feast in her establishment. In those days, diners dove in with their hands, and the meat was served atop easy-to-wipe plastic sheets.

Hamorova and her husband, Robert, revived the family tradition in 1995, but today do it with a touch of elegance: they serve with white gloves, to avoid greasy fingerprints on the porcelain dishes.

"You have to make goose with love, and when you do it with love, that's where the magic is," she says. "Our guests can tell it's a family taking care of their food, which is why they come back."

MILES OF AISLES

The return to old traditions co-exists with a modern explosion of consumer choice. Store shelves are stocked with a dizzying range of local and imported products, especially in the ubiquitous hypermarkets. Some even have separate Asian or Mexican sections. Oranges are now a year-round option, as are kiwi, coconut, and pineapple. And where there used to be one brand of toilet paper or just one cereal, dozens now jostle for primacy, propelled by Western-style marketing.

The trickle-down effect is felt in places like a Prague butcher shop. Sausages are stacked into pyramids; a slew of salamis hang from hooks; the refrigerator holds Gatorade, Pepsi, and Schweppes. In the old days, some shops would sell a whole dead chicken, letting the customers worry about feathers and dissection. Today, butcher Josef Kosina does it for them, trimming the fat, arranging the meat by cuts.

"We're responding to customer demand, to give better service," Kosina says, cleaver in hand.

Owner Bohuslav Novy adds that if Kosina and his colleagues "aren't polite and don't smile at our customers, we must tell them goodbye, of course."

With so many types of food at consumers' fingertips, prepackaged, cleaned up, and ready for cooking, certain rural traditions might be lost, like the manic bottling and preserving of fruits and vegetables, or the seasonal pig-slaughter Josef Geci remembers from his native Slovak village, a ritual shared by the entire community. He doubts his daughters, growing up in Bratislava, will ever experience something like it.

"I don't even think my wife, who was raised in the city, has ever been to one," he says.

Still, it's unlikely Geci's girls, or their Czech and Hungarian peers, will entirely forsake their national and regional dishes. In Prague, Czechs are seemingly never too far from their beloved *svickova*, or beef with cream sauce. Gourmet Maurer cites a 2007 poll that found 85 percent of Czechs still eat such down-home specialties from time to time, though, per his guide, the capital now offers some 40 different ethnic cuisines.

"We have a stomach memory: we were educated and grew up in the kitchen of our mother, eating the same typical Czech food," he says. "You may try something new and exotic once or twice a month, but at the end of the month, you still eat the same food you have in your stomach heritage."

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