

The Book We Have Been Waiting for

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June 10, 2009—It doesn't happen very often these days that you come across something that gives you a reason for being thoroughly happy. Two books have been published that were sorely-needed for a long time, which is a reason for being doubly happy. The books are different versions of each other, written by Carolyn Bánfalvi, an American journalist living in Budapest since 1999. The two books – written in English – guide readers through Hungarian gastronomy and flavors and introduce them the world of Hungarian wine.

There are plenty of Hungarian cookbook translations and many wine regions have English language books about them. But these two books are very special and precious for us for different reasons. First of all it gives them special importance that their author is a qualified chef. She did not only see food on her plate like the writers of many other restaurant reviews. She has profound knowledge of the trade and this can be seen in the structure of her books. Secondly, these books are important because now, when tourism is in recession all over the world, these books give a compass in the hand of tourists that leads them here. And there is a third, not less important aspect. Some embassies in Budapest, unfortunately for a good reason, warn visitors to the country by posting blacklists of the restaurants to avoid. In Carolyn's books tourists are shown where they can go, which doors they can open with confidence. And according to the author's experience there are many of these doors.

So let's look at each book separately. The longer, more detailed edition is *The Food and Wine Lover's Guide to Hungary*. The title is well-chosen and true in every aspect. The book is beautifully illustrated by Gábor Roskó and can be purchased in Hungary. It makes an excellent gift to foreign visitors. The first sentence states: "Hungary is the right place for eating and drinking well." And the rest of book confirms this. Many features make the book especially enjoyable and practical. At the beginning of each chapter there are Hungarian proverbs translated into English. The author translates all food names (as much as possible) and provides a bilingual culinary dictionary at the end of the book, helping tourists to find their way through the maze of menus. The book unveils such mysteries as Újházy chicken soup and Jókai bean soup in such descriptive ways that it makes readers want to dip their spoon in immediately. Even us Hungarians don't exactly know what Dobostorta, Zserbószelet and Indiáner are. Would anybody dare to volunteer to explain—together with its romantic story—what Rigójancsi is? Or what the difference is between the preparation of gulyás and pörkölt? In this book you will find all of this and more in a precise, clear, easy to understand, and entertaining way.

You will learn such things as what small spritzers, large spritzers, or Krúdy spritzers are; how many wine regions there are and where they are; which wine-makers have been named wine-maker of the year; and what pálinka is made of. Restaurant reviews are done in a well-organized and easy-to-follow way. Restaurant categories include traditional, Hungarian, wine, international, kosher, Indian, Chinese, Italian, and more. A meticulously detailed description of each restaurant even includes transportation details. This is a commendable piece of work!

The book continues with detailed descriptions of coffee houses, pastry shops, and cafés. And then it lists museums connected to food and festivals related to food and drink. Festivals include the Mutton Cooking Competition in Karcag, the Fisherman's Soup Celebration in Baja, the Gulyás Festival in Szolnok, the Paprika Days in Kalocsa, and more. There are suggestions for daytrips to Rómaifürdő and Szentendre, and the brave can venture to the Agárdi Pálinka Distillery or the Zwack Distillery in Kecskemét. To wash down all of these Hungarian dishes, let's visit the wine regions. There are short descriptions of each region, along with the essentials. In Villány, Bánfalvi even mentions the number of hours of sunshine. Then come the cellars, listed in the same meticulous way as the restaurants. At the end of the book there is a section with useful information and tips to help travelers.

The other book, *Food Wine Budapest*, is shorter and has photos instead of illustrations. It focuses on the Budapest scene, with shorter restaurant reviews that equally useful. Its structure and content is similar to the other book, and it is equally professional and practical. The major difference is that *Food Wine Budapest* is mainly sold in North America. It is not an exaggeration to say that soon these two books will be must-reads for those who really want to have a good time in Hungary. — *András Révay*