

I N G R E D I E N T

SHINY, SCARLET paprika pods make southern Hungary—more than 13,000 acres of fields, mostly around the towns of Kalocsa and Szeged—shimmer. Red peppers are heaped on flatbed trucks, piled into horse-drawn carriages, festooned on the sides of homes. This is the Great Hungarian Plain—a mineral-rich plateau fed by the Danube and the Tisza rivers—and this is where the world's finest paprika, one of the most delicious and versatile of all spices, and the one most definitive of Hungarian cuisine, is produced. (*Paprika* is the Hungarian word not only for the ground spice but also for the pepper itself. A *zöld paprika*, for instance, is a green pepper; the riper red specimen is called *paradisom paprika*, or “tomato paprika”).

The paprika plant, *Capsicum annuum*, isn't native to Eastern Europe, of course. Like the potato and tomato, it came from the New World. Exactly how it got to Hungary (and why it became so important there) is a subject of debate. The Turks are usually credited with having spread the capsicum, and the spice it produced, throughout this part of Europe, but they may have obtained it in the first place via a circuitous route from Spain to Italy and then Bulgaria—part of the Ottoman Empire at the time. It was apparently the Bulgarians who first cultivated the plant seriously, and who probably first brought it to Hungary in the 16th century. The capsicum thrived in Hungary, and paprika quickly became popular among the common folk, for the simple reason that it was much less expensive than imported black pepper. (Today, black pepper—now cheaper and universally available—is the only spice more common in Hungarian cooking.) Paprika was slow, however, to move up in society and didn't grace the tables of the gentry until the mid-1800s.

It is hard to imagine Hungarian cuisine without this vibrant seasoning. Paprika is an essential flavoring for such classic dishes as *pörkölt* (a thick stew made of pork, goose, duck, beef, game, and lots of onions), *tokány* (essentially a *pörkölt* with more vegetables),

paprikás (a creamy stew usually made with chicken or veal), and *gulyás* (the ubiquitous Hungarian beef soup or stew, originally made with reconstituted dried meat). Sometimes known as *piros arany*, or “red gold”, paprika is also a standard tabletop condiment, accompanying salt and pepper (and often reached for first).

RED GOLD

Paprika traveled from the Americas to become the defining spice of Hungarian cuisine

BY THERESA AGOVINO



Harvesting peppers at an agricultural co-op outside Kalocsa, above. Facing page, hanging peppers to dry in the nearby town of Bática.



stripped the peppers of the offending portions and milled the pods. Forty years later, Hungarian scientist Ferenc Horvath, through a combination of genetic mutations and crossbreeding experiments, developed a paprika pepper that was milder to begin with. Growers have been tinkering with the pungency of their peppers ever since, and today paprika is available in six categories in Hungary:

exquisite delicate, noble-sweet, semisweet, rose, delicatessen, and hot. (Another Hungarian scientist, Nobel Prize-winning biochemist Albert Szent-Györgyi, discovered that paprika peppers have an

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amazingly high concentration of vitamin C, even when dried. This may explain why Hungarians—who have traditionally laced just about everything with paprika—remain comparatively healthy even with their rich diets, which are high in pork and poultry fat.

Despite advances in paprika technology, production of the spice remains a relatively rustic pursuit. Farming is still governed by religious holidays: Seeds, for instance, are always planted on St. Gregory's Day, or March 12, and the harvest always begins promptly on the feast of the Nativity of the Holy Virgin, September 8. In addition, more than half of all paprika peppers are still harvested by hand. Farmers contend that handpicking is the only way to insure that the peppers are taken at their peak—

throughout September, fields are dotted with women bobbing up and down among the low-lying plants, stacking peppers in straw baskets. This scene hasn't changed much in the last 50 years. Even the lunches are the same—sandwiches of paprika-smeared lard on thick slices of soft white bread. Perhaps the only difference is that a number of the harvesters now wear baseball caps over their traditional head scarves.

Clockwise from right: Ripe peppers in the fields; the KAGE factory in Kalocsa; inspecting paprika at KAGE; handpicking peppers near the town.



János Igaz, who tends about 30 acres of paprika in Bática, near Kalocsa, says that he has lost track of how many generations his family has been farming paprika. He is a staunch believer in harvesting by hand. "You don't see it, do you?" Igaz asks as he points out the difference between

a pod that is ready—it has a touch of green, he says, and will continue to ripen into even redness after it has been picked—and one that frankly looks pretty much the same but supposedly needs more time on the vine. "We can see the difference," he adds. "Size is not important. This is all about color."

Peppers are still threaded onto long garlands and suspended from the eaves of homes around Kalocsa and Szeged to ripen and eventually dry out. It is a festive sight, like Christmas in September. Inside Kalocsakörnyéki Agráripari Rt. (KAGE), the largest of Hungary's twenty-some commercial paprika factories, however, the process is much less picturesque. A sweet, appetite-whetting aroma hangs in the air, and an orange dust coats much of the equipment and the floor—but the peppers themselves are hidden, stored in boxes until they ripen to a bright red. They are then dried in a warm oven for six to eight hours, until they become deflated and brittle. The pods are next transferred to giant vats where they are shredded and crushed. From there, what looks like red confetti travels through

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R E C I P E

Paprika Chicken with Egg Dumplings

SERVES 4-6

THIS IS A HOME-STYLE version of an iconic, paprika-flavored Hungarian dish as it is served at Gundel in Budapest. See *THE PANTRY*, page 107, for a source for the spätzle (dumpling) maker called for below.

FOR THE CHICKEN:

$\frac{1}{4}$ cup vegetable oil
3 medium yellow onions,
peeled and finely chopped
3 cloves garlic,
crushed and peeled
2 tsp. sweet Hungarian paprika
 $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. hot Hungarian paprika
3 fresh or canned
plum tomatoes
2 green bell peppers, cored
seeded, and diced
2 tsp. salt
2 $3\frac{1}{2}$ -lb. chickens, rinsed,
each cut into 4 pieces

 $\frac{1}{2}$ cup sour cream

2 tbsp. milk

FOR THE DUMPLINGS:

1 cup flour
Salt
1 egg
2 tsp. vegetable oil
2 tbsp. melted butter



1. For the chicken: Heat oil in a large heavy pot over medium heat. Add onions and sauté until golden, about 10 minutes. Reduce heat to

medium-low, add garlic, sweet and hot paprikas, tomatoes, green peppers, salt, and 1 cup water and stir well. Add chicken, cover, and simmer until tender, about 45 minutes, turning chicken once about halfway through. Remove chicken from pot and set aside.

2. Strain sauce in a fine strainer, pressing down on vegetables to release all liquid. Discard solids. Return sauce to pot, increase heat to medium and simmer until sauce has thickened, 20-30 minutes. When chicken is cool enough to handle, remove and discard skin and bones, keeping breasts and thighs intact. Return chicken to pot, reduce heat to low, and keep warm. Mix sour cream and milk in a small bowl and set aside.

3. For the dumplings: Combine flour and 1 tsp. salt in a large bowl. Beat together egg, oil, and $\frac{1}{2}$ cup water in a separate bowl, then whisk egg mixture into flour mixture. Set aside and allow to rest for at least 20 minutes. Place spätzle maker over a large pot of boiling salted water over high heat. Fill hopper with batter, then move hopper back and forth over grate, allowing dumplings to fall into the boiling water. Cook until dumplings float, 1-2 minutes, then remove with a slotted spoon, refresh under cold water, and transfer to a cookie sheet to cool. Repeat process, forming, cooking, and cooling dumplings until all the batter has been used. Preheat oven to 350°. Gently toss dumplings with melted butter in a baking dish. Season to taste with salt and keep warm in oven.

4. To serve, arrange chicken on a large platter and spoon sauce over and around it. Serve with dumplings and sour cream on the side.



Paprika chicken with egg dumplings, top. János Igaz working in Bática's pepper fields, above. Ripe paprika peppers after harvesting, inset left.

a series of smaller grinders, which reduce the dried flakes to a fine powder. Master blenders, working by sight and smell rather than with machines, analyze batches of the powder and mix them into the appropriate paprikas.

"When it comes to making paprika," says Ferenc Márkus, a plant geneticist at the Vegetable Crops Research Institute in Kalocsa, "the processing is basically the same no matter where you go."

If Hungarian paprika tastes better than the kinds produced in other countries, he says, that is because the peppers it's made from are better. This, in turn, is because the peppers grow in a soil that is rich in calcium, phosphorus, and nitrogen; because the local climate is ideal for peppers (heavy precipitation in May and June, followed by a bright, hot August); and because the Great Plain boasts a deeply entrenched farming tradition. Márkus believes, in other words, that everything comes together in Hungary. "Our paprika tastes better," he says, "because we start with something special." 🌶️