

# The Return of the Wood-fired Baking Oven in Hungary

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In modern Hungarian food culture changes brought about by globalisation and modernisation are evident, as are parallel new trends towards the revival of old traditions. In the past, there were, of course, also incidents of the temporary revival of old, out-dated methods of cooking, occurring under special practical circumstances, but these modern trends are mainly motivated by nostalgia. Elements of food culture that have been revived, have not become part of everyday life, but are focused instead on leisure-time activities. It is a worthwhile research exercise to try to discover the underlying motivations and values involved in such revitalisation trends.

In this paper I shall try to analyse such trends by using the example of the wood-fired baking oven which has not been in everyday use in Hungary for over fifty years, but which is currently undergoing a revitalisation impulse. My examples of the revival of this oven for the present paper are from the small village of Cserépfalu,<sup>1</sup> with a population of about eleven hundred people, situated in the northeastern part of Hungary. At present, there are eleven working wood-fired ovens in use in the village, six of which were built during the last few years. I should also add that I have found newly-built wood-fired ovens not only in the Hungarian countryside but also in the suburbs of Budapest.

In the first part of this paper I shall outline the recent history of the Hungarian baking oven. Then I shall describe and explain some of the communal and individual reasons behind the recent trend towards the building of this oven. Finally, I shall briefly describe the technology involved in its construction.

The Hungarian word for oven ‘kemence’ dates back to the Pre-Settlement period of Hungarian history. The word is of Slavic origin and, from the very start, it was used to denote the heating, cooking, drying and baking functions of the

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oven. Since the late Middle Ages, the ordinary people have used the enclosed baking oven for making their own bread at home. In the countryside, home-made bread remained the standard up to the mid-twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> This oven stood within the dwelling house and served also to provide heating during the winter months. The removal of the baking oven from the house itself and the building of it in the courtyard adjacent to the dwelling, was a late development.<sup>3</sup> This outdoor oven was still large, and was capable of accommodating the baking of five to six large loaves for family use over a week. However, the outdoor oven became a more important feature in the second half of the twentieth century, when houses were rebuilt and when kitchen technology was rapidly improving.<sup>4</sup>

Until the 1960s, families in Hungarian villages baked their own bread at home. But around that time they were forced to stop doing home baking, because of the re-organisation of farm ownership, when agricultural farmers' co-operatives were organised, and when the farmers had lost their own land. They had thus no access to the good quality wheat which they themselves had produced, and they were unable to buy flour for baking bread. Furthermore, the young women of the family were not in a position to help the older women with the physically-demanding task of baking, as they were engaged in study or work. In addition, the younger people had not learned how to knead and make bread, or how to pre-heat the oven, and, over time, even the older generations gradually began to forget these skills. It was also not worth heating up the oven in preparation for baking in a household in which only a few loaves of bread per week were consumed, and it was also quite difficult to get firewood.

Macro socio-economic processes were behind the changes in food culture which occurred in the second half of the twentieth century, and which entirely transformed earlier food traditions. The most important of these in the context of this paper were: the entry of women into the workforce which meant that meals for children and the elderly could no longer be provided within the family, and the growing trend towards the purchase of an increasing percentage of the food

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2 On the historical background of Hungarian food culture, see, Kisbán, Eszter, 'Táplálkozáskultúra' ('Food Culture'), in Balassa, Iván, (ed.), *Magyar Néprajz IV. Életmód* ('Compendium of Hungarian Ethnology, vol. 4. Ways of Life'), Budapest 1997, 417-582; Kisbán, Eszter, *A kenyér a táplálkozási struktúrában* ('Das Brot in der Ernährungsstruktur'/'Bread in the Nutritional Structure'), *Népi Kultúra-Népi Társadalom* IV. Budapest 1970, 97-125.

3 On the summer kitchens in Hungary, see, Zsuzsanna, Batari, 'The Interiors of Summer Kitchens: Changes in Lifestyle and its Material Consequences in the 20th Century', in Korhikangas, Pirjo, Lappi, Tiina-Riitta, Niskanen, Heli, (eds.), *Touching Things. Ethnological Aspects of Modern Material Culture*, Helsinki 2008, 248-60. *Studia Fennica Ethnologica* 11.

4 On the innovations in food culture in the second part of the twentieth century, see Knézy, Judit, 'Innovations in Food Culture among the Rural Communities of Hungary, 1920-1970', in Oddy, Derek J., Petranova, Lydia (eds.), *The Diffusion of Food Culture in Europe from the Late Eighteenth Century to the Present Day*, Prague 2005, 135-51.

requirements of households, in the form of raw ingredients and ready-to-eat foods, in shops. A change could also be observed in the value attached to money and time, as people were prepared to spend money on foods which they had previously produced themselves. They bought electrical appliances to lighten household tasks, and they learned recipes from many different sources, rather than just in the home. At the same time they completely abandoned certain techniques, technologies, and dishes, or these remained the provenance only of the elderly.<sup>5</sup>

Most Hungarian households began to buy, rather than bake, their bread, around the same time (1960s),<sup>6</sup> but the outdoor oven, in which bread could be, and often was, baked for weddings and, even at a later date, for great festive occasions, was still kept by a few families. From the late 1950s, no traditional oven was provided in any of the new village houses built in the uniform design that had turned their back on traditional regional architectural forms. Thus the owners had no opportunity to make traditional home-baked bread, even if they wished to do so. Factory-made iron ranges with ovens, which had been installed in the houses, were later replaced by bottled gas ovens, and then in the twenty-first century, by modern gas cookers. Unlike the large traditional baking ovens, these modern cookers had ovens just large enough to bake bread for a single day, but refined cakes and pastries could also be made in them.

The equipment formerly used for baking bread almost completely lost its original functions with the demise of the oven-baking of bread. It was either no longer used or was given a secondary function – for example, wooden bowls and troughs which had been used in bread making were later sometimes used during pig slaughtering.<sup>7</sup>

By the end of the twentieth century, a complete change had taken place in the history of Hungarian bread making. During the 1990s, the bread-making machine appeared in the households of young and old alike in Cserépfalu. As the appliance could perform the whole bread-making procedure, no previous knowledge of, or skill in, bread-making was needed. The main reason for buying such a machine was the pleasant aroma of the freshly-made bread, apart from trying to provide healthy food for the family, and to be self-sufficient as much as possible, at least in the case of a staple food like bread. But the advent of the bread-making machine

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5 On the food industry, refrigerators, deep-freezers, and microwave ovens, see, Kisbán, Eszter, 'Economics of Shortage: Conditions of the Food "Market" in the Case of Hungary', in Hartog, Adel P. den, (ed.), *Food Technology, Science and Marketing: European Diet in the Twentieth Century*, Edinburgh 1995, 168-86.

6 On bread consumption in Hungary today, see, Bági, Anikó, 'The Role of Bread in the Hungarian Diet Today', *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica* 57, no. 2 (2012): 253-61.

7 This is similar to the situation in other regions of Hungary. For other examples, see, Szarvas, Zsuzsa, *Tárgyak és életmód*, ('Objects and Lifestyles'), Budapest 1988.

was an important stage in the revival of the making of bread at home, and also in the renewal of old memories of traditional baking.

After the fall of communism in 1989, there were substantial changes in values in local communities. In both villages and large cities, a kind of ‘quest for identity’ was underway. The revival of old, out-dated, forgotten elements of lifestyle, especially with regard to rural nutrition, was seen as one way of achieving this. Dishes from the first part of the twentieth century were regarded, and presented, as food items which could be easily interpreted and enjoyed by all participants at various local and regional summer gastro-festivals. This food was also seen as having remained beyond the influence of urbanisation and modernisation trends and, in terms of the public image of a region, it could thus function as a sort of tangible manifestation of local values and local identity. Special village museums were established in local dwelling-houses in several communities. The buildings were renovated and they also had a rebuilt baking oven. Later on, communal festivities, old and new, based on an emotional bond with local traditions, were organised around these buildings with their ovens, as the festivities usually included the participants having a meal together. By then a new set of communal festivities had been established – mostly based on invented traditions – which were playing an essential sustaining role in the life of the local community, as well as being tourist attractions.<sup>8</sup> In connection with such festivals, fairs, or village events, each town and village tried to pick dishes and ingredients from their own local gastronomy which they regarded as being truly local and unique, in order to turn them into symbols of a given festival. Objective research has found, however, that these foods were also part of regional gastronomy and they thus cannot be connected with a single settlement only.

Modern, newly-built baking ovens became, and remain, an indispensable element in local events – villages, towns, and cities alike soon began to copy this idea and to use it in their own festivals and events. Nowadays, forgotten dishes are baked in the oven and sold on the spot. Examples of these include, typical Hungarian pastry, *rétes* (unleavened, rolled pastry, filled with cottages cheese or fruits and poppy seeds), *kenyérlángos*<sup>9</sup> made from bread dough (flat round bread,

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8 Kovách, Imre, Megyesi, Boldizsár, ‘Local Food Production and Knowledge Dynamics in Rural Sustainable Development’, in Górlach, Krzysztof, Koách, Imre, (eds.), *Local Food Production, Non-Agricultural Economies and Knowledge Dynamics in Rural Sustainable Development (the Czech, Hungarian, Polish cases)*. Working Papers 7, 2006/5, 24-38; E-book, see, <http://mek.niif.hu/04000/04024/04024.pdf#page=73>; Köstlin, Konrad, ‘Tourism, Ethnic Food and Symbolic Values’, in Lysaght, Patricia, (ed.), *Food and the Traveller, Migration, Immigration, Tourism and Ethnic Food*, Nicosia, Cyprus 2000, 108-14.

9 Shared public meals are leading to a great revival of leavened foods. Lángos, a deep-fried flat bread, made of bread dough on the basis of the old recipes, became a popular food at open-air baths and markets, evoking home bread-baking in taste and smell. For recipes for lángos, see, Schwartz,

with different toppings similar to pizza, but served with sour cream rather than with tomato sauce), meat, duck, and goose legs.

Apart from these communal festivities around such ovens, in some villages, the baking oven is rented out for family gatherings when it are not in use for public purposes. For different festive events, when large numbers of guests have to be provided for, several smaller, portable ovens made from modern materials, are used.

Apart from communal baking ovens, the demand for private ovens – and with them the possibility of providing spectacular hospitality and dazzling food and entertainment, for guests – has increased dramatically in the course of the last decade. The inspiration for these ovens comes from many sources. Apart from the ovens in the communal spaces mentioned above, the most authentic sources of instruction for building new baking ovens are actually the old ovens still surviving in summer kitchens, and which are also occasionally used by their elderly owners. There are still a few people who have cherished childhood memories of seeing grandmother baking bread, and this motivates them towards having their own baking oven sometime in the future. International cuisine, involving wood-fired baking ovens, such as those in pizzerias, is also a great source of inspiration for the building of bread ovens. Many Hungarian restaurants offer oven-baked strudels, and also meat, as specialities. Cooking shows on TV with popular actors and cooks, have also contributed to the revival of the traditions of preparing food in the baking oven and to the awakening of nostalgic sentiments concerning it.

**Fig: 1: Modern, newly-built baking oven with a cooking stove, in Cserépfalu, in the northeast of Hungary. Photo: Anikó Báti, 2012.**

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Baba, *The Lost Art of Baking with Yeast. Delicious Hungarian Cakes and Pastries*, Melbourne 2003; Gergely, Anikó, *Culinaria Hungary*, Budapest, 1999; see, [http://easteuropeanfood.about.com/od/hungarianbreads/Hungarian\\_Bread\\_Recipes.htm](http://easteuropeanfood.about.com/od/hungarianbreads/Hungarian_Bread_Recipes.htm); accessed 20. 1. 2012.



**Fig. 2: A modern, newly-built baking oven during the heating stage, in a suburb of Budapest.  
Photo: Fruzsina Cseh, 2012**



Outdoor cooking is one of the most popular leisure activities in Hungary today, and it is one of the few occasions on which men also prepare food. Until the 1990s, Hungarian stew, *pörkölt* or *gulyás* soup cooked in a *bogrács*, a kind of

cauldron hung over the open fire, were the main dishes on the menu at family and friendly gatherings in both cities and rural areas. By the end of the twentieth century, the small, kitchen gardens around village houses, had been transformed into lawns, as young adults were no longer prepared to cultivate them, and most of the yards were rebuilt in a fashion suitable for outdoor parties. Barbecue grills became more and more widespread due to the influence of the media, cookbooks, and the DIY ('Do it yourself!') stores. These grills represented affluence and modernity in rural communities. In a very short time, however, the barbecue grills became affordable for urban and rural families as well, so they ceased to be a status symbol. Nowadays, it is the newly-built wood-fired baking oven, surrounded by garden furniture, located in a neatly-groomed garden, that can represent the wealth and social standing of the local elite towards their visitors, and towards viewers from the street as well. The hosts usually have their own ovens built to order, and they typically do the heating up of the oven themselves. They also supervise the process of cooking, and the wife usually does the preparation for the cooking or the baking. In the past all of these activities were women's tasks.

The reasons why the bread oven – which became out-dated fifty years ago, but which has entered a new life situation – could have become an object of such high prestige<sup>10</sup> include, first of all, that it has been removed for a sufficiently-long period of time from the daily domestic routine. In addition, the costs of constructing such an oven are quite high (nearly two months' average salary), and it is very little used.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the idea of cooking and baking food in an oven is in complete contrast to typical daily food-preparation and eating habits, but that is another important reason why it is so special. The average family does not cook food every day, as the members eat their meals away from home in canteens, or they just have a sandwich. But cooking in a baking oven takes time in a time-scarce world – in fact it can require a whole day from start to finish. The building and maintenance costs of an oven, as well as the outlay involved in acquiring the necessary cooking tools and utensils, are also rather high. Heating up the oven may take three to four hours and requires constant supervision. The preparation and the cooking of the dough or meat also require skill and plenty of time. All of this can only be carried out in one's leisure time as these steps are preparatory to the actual entertainment of guests, as the oven is worth heating up only for the sake of a larger company.

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10 Appadurai, Arjun, (ed.), *The Social Life of Things. Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Cambridge 1986.

11 On the symbolic value of objects, see, Baudrillard, Jean, *Le système des objets*, Paris 1984.

**Fig. 3: An older-type baking oven in use in a summer kitchen, Cserépfalu. Photo: Anikó Báti, 1999.**



The renaissance of the baking oven occurred at almost the last moment in Hungary. Two generations had grown up since most ovens had been demolished in the villages. The practical skills necessary to operate them, the recipes known by heart, the little tricks of the trade, and knowledge of the right method of heating them up, had almost been lost. Home-baked dough had not remained a regular part of the daily diet. Associated traditions were no longer passed on naturally from mother to daughter through the process of learning within the family, but were transmitted to a few new owners as part of a special tendency to preserve tradition. In most cases, knowledgeable elderly women were asked for help with the heating up of the newly-built oven, and with the kneading of the first batch of bread to be baked in it – that is how local knowledge and skills were utilised. Most problems connected with the newly-built ovens arose because the people concerned had little or no experience regarding the use of such ovens. Through lack of traditional experience, the younger folk did not know when the oven was hot enough, or how to adjust the heat, and they also did not know when the dough or meat was actually cooked, or how to protect food from soot.

Opinions on the new ovens differ greatly. Those who have one emphasise the unique taste of food cooked in such an oven, the distinctive cooking method involved, and the special ambience surrounding the cooking. Those who cannot afford such an oven tend to just see the wastefulness involved in leaving it unused for most of the year. Elderly women who had actually used these ovens, and who were able to pass on their knowledge concerning them, regard them as a means of preserving old traditions and of leading to a new appreciation of the past; and they are also proud of the wealth of their children who can afford to build an oven. Others are unable to comprehend why some take on the task of building an oven without having previous knowledge and experience in this regard.



Several kinds of experts are available to help customers with the building of a new baking oven. In the country and also in suburban homes, more and more families are having fireplaces built, in addition to having central heating in the house. The fireplace, as an object of high prestige, and because of the atmosphere which the sight of a fire creates, acts as representation of wealth and social status. The most experienced builders of the ovens are stove makers, but brick masons are also often requested to do this work. And I have seen some ovens that were built by the owners themselves. There are numerous Internet sites where useful tips, ideas, and stories, on how to build an oven, where to find building materials, what steps to follow, and so on, are shared by the readers. DIY magazines have been dealing with the topic, in virtually every issue, for many years. The book on the former use, and the building of, baking ovens by the ethnographer of the Open-Air Ethnographical Museum of Szentendre,<sup>12</sup> has become a highly appreciated and popular work in this regard, and not only among professionals. The Open-Air Museum also runs courses for crafts-people and folk artists in order to preserve and pass on authentic traditions. In this way they can also learn about how to build baking ovens and about regional varieties of these as well. In Cserépfalu, the new ovens were built either by a stove maker who came from Transylvania, or by a brick mason.

The material used, in most parts of the country, in the construction of traditional ovens, was mud, often layered on a wooden frame. From the twentieth century onwards, the body of the oven has been made using bricks, but also adobe (that is unburned sun-dried brick), and these kinds of materials are still in use today.

**Fig. 4: A newly-built oven in the eastern part of Hungary. Published with the kind permission of the website editors. The steps for building this kind of oven are to be found on the Internet.**<sup>13</sup>

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12 Sabján, Tibor, *A búbos kemence* ('The Baking Oven'), Budapest 2002.

13 [http://www.kemencebence.hu/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=236:kemence-epites-a-tisza-tonal&catid=10:cikkajanlo&Itemid=2](http://www.kemencebence.hu/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=236:kemence-epites-a-tisza-tonal&catid=10:cikkajanlo&Itemid=2); accessed 18. 1. 2013.

See,



The building materials utilised in the ovens that I have examined were natural stone or brick, with used bricks forming the bottom of the oven in order to ensure heat resistance. The first step in the building process is to lay down a concrete foundation under the bottom of the oven, and also to lay the foundation of the fire compartment using bricks. The bottom of the oven is layered with lots of broken glass and glass shards to preserve heat more efficiently. Ovens made from mud or adobe are baked dry and become durable in use, but internal joints and cracks have to be regularly repaired in stone- or brick-built ovens. The oven in the picture above (Fig. 4) was built in a month. The proper heating of the newly-built oven is essential because of its heat storage capacity and the perfect, uncracked state of the walls – baking will not be very successful if the flow of hot air is insufficient, and the oven itself even might crack if the steam from the baking food cannot escape.

It is essential to have the right tools and utensils when using the ovens. The nationwide trend towards the building of new ovens gave a new direction and impetus to related crafts and pottery making – for example, a new market opened up for fire-resistant earthenware. In fact pottery centres, such as Nádudvar, had worked especially in this connection, at the end of the nineteenth century. Nowadays, jug- and bowl-makers also try to meet these new demands, and the craftsman who moved to Cserépfalu a few years ago also extended his range of products to include fire-resistant pots. As recipes and ideas, except for the baking of bread, have been mostly taken from the Internet, the resulting dishes cannot be seen as being local specialities, but that is not really expected either.

The building of new baking ovens has brought about a special way of preserving traditions. It has also led to the appreciation and conservation of a body of knowledge known to previous generations concerning the building and use of these ovens. Thus, nowadays, practical skills and recipes are conserved, not in the traditional manner of everyday performance, but rather in the context of entertainment and fun, in a completely

different life situation than was formerly the case. To understand what the future might hold for these objects and trends, and to discover whether other elements of past gastronomic traditions may ever prove to be as popular as the wood-fired baking ovens, needs further intensive research.