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### **Traditional food in modern Hungarian food culture**

As well as folk music, folk dance and folk art, diet is also a major factor for identifying the relationship between present-day general culture and traditional folk culture and the points of contact between them.<sup>1</sup> Through the sources and methods of ethnology, the greatest amount of information on peasant food culture dates from the second half of the 19th and the first third of the 20th century. This period and social stratum can be considered as the benchmark for defining traditional dishes and eating habits. But the scope of traditional dishes and food preparation is much wider in time and space. It embodies the heritage of the food culture of earlier centuries and higher strata of society, as well as the interaction with the cuisines of the ethnic groups living together, through the Christian religion and the historical past of Central Europe. In my paper I shall draw on a series of quite remote examples to show the form and role in which traditional dishes and basic foodstuffs appear in food culture in Hungary today, and the intentions that can lead to the reinterpretation and greater appreciation of the past. I shall briefly analyse the many meanings traditional food can have today and what role it can play in the lives of small and large communities in Hungary.

The problem of the study and identification of traditional foods is of great significance today also among food researchers. This was also the theme of the SIEF Food Research conference held last year (in 2012) in Sweden.<sup>2</sup> The speakers presented many international examples of how dishes and ways of preparing food once thought to be out-dated or archaic have been revived and placed in a new context, of lost food preservation techniques, local food in relation to rural tourism, the construction of national food identity. One of the lessons of the conference was that it is not easy to give a scientific definition of the term “traditional dishes” so often used in the media. The word “traditional” in itself implies a certain temporal dimension, a glimpse from the present into the past, but the past is not uniform either, it contains the traditions of previous centuries. The wish to revive, experience and re-evaluate

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<sup>2</sup> SIEF 19th International Ethnological Food Research Conference. The Return of Traditional Food. Abstracts: [http://www.lu.se/upload/Kulturvetenskaper/Book\\_of\\_Abstracts2012.pdf](http://www.lu.se/upload/Kulturvetenskaper/Book_of_Abstracts2012.pdf)

the past has different meanings at the level of a country, a region, micro-region, settlement or family.

What is it that draws attention? Why have dishes, food technologies and basic foodstuffs of earlier periods that are now outdated and have either disappeared or are gradually disappearing from everyday practice become so interesting and important? Based on my own position and that of my colleagues participating in the SIEF conference I can say that the main driving force is a kind of opposition to the process of uniformization that can be observed in food culture under the influence of commerce, the food industry and globalisation.<sup>3</sup> This crisis of modern consumer societies could already be felt in Western Europe at the end of the 20th century; the turning towards the past and the forms in which traditions are being revived was more varied there than in Hungary where it is only in the last ten to fifteen years that this aspiration has really had an influence on the culture. Because of Central Europe's 20th century past, the disappearance of peasant culture, and the impossibility of passing traditions down from father to son, it is especially difficult to take up the broken thread, to define what we call traditional today. A major role is attributed to nutrition in the self-definition of small communities and the formulation of identities; it is foods that both divide us and bring us together.

Together with the traditions that have come down to us from the past, building on them, referring to them and selecting from them, communities are also continuously building their own new, invented traditions. The objects, customs and dishes in this context taken in isolation appear as symbols of the past, removed from everyday practice they become symbols of the common past that can be experienced and interpreted by everyone, intended primarily as a message to people outside the community (Appadurai 1986).

The biggest series of events presenting Hungary towards Europe also in food was held in 2011, during the Hungarian Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

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<sup>3</sup> On food industry refrigerators, deep-freezers, and microwave-oven Kisbán 1995. On the innovations in food culture in the second part of the 20th century Knézy 2005.



FIG 1: Traditional food as national symbol: Hungarian cakes and folk art combination. (Source: Győri Enikő-Bakos Piroska-Gál Helga: *Ezt főztük (ki) Európának*. 192-194. p. Budapest, Heti Válasz Kiadó, 2012.)

A group of experts that included master chefs and wine-makers selected the menus and wines. Their aim was to host discriminating guests at receptions that included unique, creative elements representing both the Hungarian and European character, that were modern and at the same time thought to be traditional (Győri – Bakos - Gál 2012).



FIG 2: 2.Traditional food as national symbol: mangalica ham. (Source: Győri Enikő-Bakos Piroska-Gál Helga: *Ezt főztük (ki) Európának*. 4, 154, 160. p. Budapest, Heti Válasz Kiadó, 2012.)

An important part of the organisation was focused above all on Hungarian wines and so the customary order was reversed when compiling the menu: courses were chosen to complement the wines. Numerous small and large wineries in five regions were involved, and dishes were selected from the regional cuisines. The different courses used the ingredients and flavourings of traditional Hungarian cuisine, but these were blended with the innovations of molecular gastronomy and unusual taste combinations. Foodstuffs no longer much in use in everyday practice were also used, such as millet, buckwheat, spelt, and Jerusalem artichokes. Prominent among the meats were mangalica pork and Hungarian grey cattle beef, but venison and guinea-fowl were also served. What guests found most interesting was a mousse made from mangalica bacon, served as a dressing. Pálinka, Hungarian fruit brandy, was not included on the menu, but guests arriving at the airport could sample 2cl shots from automatic dispensers, a quantity that Nordic guests found rather small. An examination of the menus shows a wide gap between the goal and its realisation; the heritage of traditional dishes is visible only to the food researcher (Kisbán 2002).

The special characteristics of the country's different regions arise from the natural geographical endowments, the ethnic and religious composition of the population. Efforts are made to stress for the purpose of tourism these still existing characteristics that have historical roots, organising events and tours around them. The resulting tourist attractions can now be sold on the European market. Local dishes have become as much an attraction as the landscape or cultural values (Köstlin 2000): there are cases where people visit a place specifically for the local specialities that can only be tasted there. Over the past ten years, with the participation of places of hospitality and private kitchens, foodways and wine routes have been created all over the country to meet this demand. All this reflects the regional differences in eating habits at the turn of the 20th century.<sup>4</sup> Home-made jams, honey, baked goods and local wines not available commercially are appearing for sale locally, as a "past experience" of special value. Anyone can make such trips virtually thanks to the popular TV programmes on food (such as Gastroangel).

Following the change of political system in Hungary in the end of the 20th century local communities created a series of events aimed at strengthening their identity, using elements of the common past to build up a feeling of belonging together. What the weddings of the past with hundreds of guests, balls, church feasts, pig slaughtering events once meant in the life of

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<sup>4</sup> Similar to France. See Techoueyres 2005.

village communities (Báti 2008), is now being replaced in part for the participants by village days and festivals. While in the past there were customs that involved the whole community, these festivals are now increasingly aimed at guests coming from outside the community.

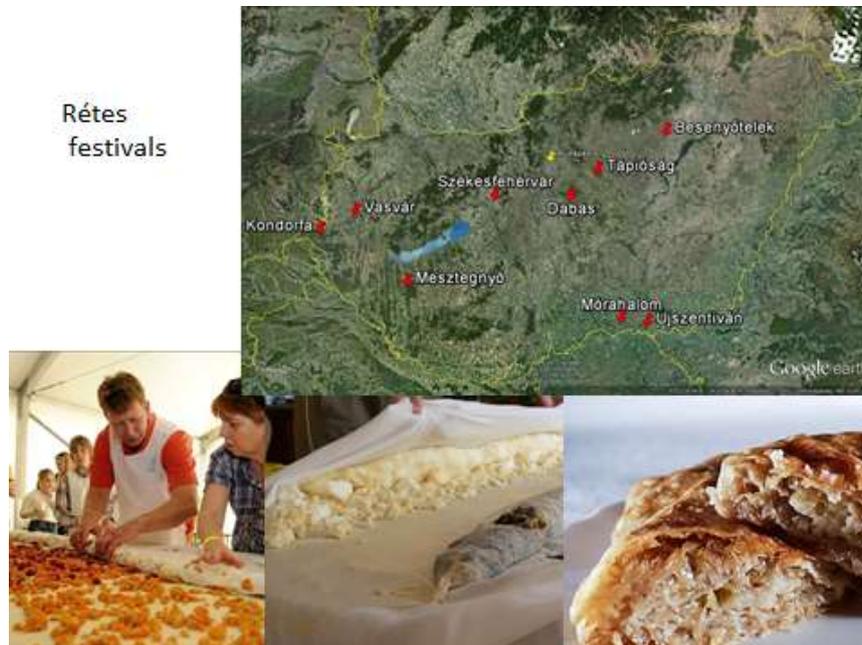


FIG 3: Traditional food as local symbol: rétes festivals in Hungary.

(Source: [www.mixonline.hu/cikk.aspx?id=2635](http://www.mixonline.hu/cikk.aspx?id=2635) accessed 10. 04. 2013. Map by Anikó Báti.)

The festivals have transformed local customs into tourist attractions: for example, people can pay to take part in pig slaughtering without any practical knowledge of the process. While home bread-baking was quickly given up in the 1960s, efforts to be self-sufficient in the area of meat consumption survived until quite recent years in most villages, but now we can only document the gradual disappearance of the custom. Pig slaughtering events no longer serve for the natural transfer of traditional skills within the family. At the same time these festivals and events have become important sources of income for local entrepreneurs.

Efforts are made to focus the newly invented traditions, the gastro-festivals on dishes and foodstuffs that can be presented as a symbol of themselves<sup>5</sup>, a local speciality and the main attraction of the celebration. The foods selected (such as plum, pumpkins, cherries, pork jelly, “rétes”, mutton stew) can rarely be linked exclusively to the given village or town, they are much rather characteristic of the whole micro-region, or of a group of settlements within a region having the same religion or ethnic group, or to an even broader area. In the final

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<sup>5</sup> On the symbolic value of objects Baudrillard 1984.

analysis the choice is also influenced by foods highlighted in programmes organised with a similar aim in the neighbouring settlements. Some of these events have already been held for a number of years with a well-established scenario, and serve as an example for the others. The fish soup cooking competition in Baja, for example, attracts enormous crowds.



*FIG 4: Traditional food as local symbol: Fishsoup festival, Baja, Bács-kiskun county. (Source: [http://bajaihalfozofesztival.hu/index.php?option=com\\_ponygallery&Itemid=110&func=viewcategory&catid=2](http://bajaihalfozofesztival.hu/index.php?option=com_ponygallery&Itemid=110&func=viewcategory&catid=2) accessed 10. 04. 2013. Map by Anikó Báti.)*

But the majority of festivals are organised for a smaller public. Since practically all settlements strive to present some kind of speciality, even several times a year, the overall picture is highly varied, almost impossible for the researcher to examine as a whole because it comprises several hundred occasions.

The wood-fired ovens that can be regarded as a symbol of the Hungarian peasant kitchen have become indispensable features of these festivals. Mobile ovens made of iron can be seen at festivals everywhere. In the villages in the 1960s most of the ovens that stood within the dwelling houses were dismantled and bread was no longer baked at home. Now we are witnessing a renaissance of the ovens, not only in community spaces: it has become fashionable among the well-to-do to have one built outdoors. A symbolical part of the peasant

kitchen has become a prestige object. But over the past half century the know-how and experience needed to bake bread have been almost entirely lost; the owners of the new ovens have to call in old women to teach them the skills. The old/new oven also influences the range of foods that can be cooked in it: old dishes and recipes are being revived.<sup>6</sup> Potters are experiencing a growing demand for fire-proof pot that can be used in these ovens. But building and operating such an oven is very expensive and time-consuming and its use differs from everyday practice. Heating the oven and cooking in it are generally men's work, while the preparation is done by the housewife.

The traditional "kenyérlángos", a deep-fried flat bread, is made of bread dough on the basis of the old recipes and the top brushed with sour cream and lard, flavoured with bacon and onions. It was made every week when the bread was baked but after the bread ovens were dismantled it gradually disappeared from the diet.<sup>7</sup> Then "lángos" made of bread dough fried in oil over an open fire became very popular from the second half of the 20th century, so much so that it is offered abroad as a Hungarian speciality for example in Malmö hering festival, and is even a popular meal in cities, at markets and outdoor swimming pools and beaches.<sup>8</sup> The revived flat bread "kenyérlángos" (known regionally as "pompos" or "lángalló") plays the same role, but it is baked in a closed oven.

The families that I studied during my research do not cook at home every day on weekdays, they have lunch at school or at work; the family generally eats together only at supper. In contrast to weekday diet, meals at the weekend and, above all the Sunday lunch has preserved family tradition – both in the menu and in the order of meals – that in most cases in both town and village can be traced back two or three generations. Although as regards the menu this now generally means the customs of the housewife's family, especially in neolocal families, whereas earlier young couples moving in with the husband's parents carried on the customs of that household. I shall give only one example, although at the level of families the process whereby traditions are passed on can best be described through individual practice: it is taken from the festive eating customs at Easter (as this is the most timely). In the Upper Tisza region "yellow cottage cheese" was placed in the basket containing the ham, sausages and milk loaf that Greek Catholics took for the consecration of Easter food. One particular

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<sup>6</sup> On the bread consumption today in Hungary Bati 2012.

<sup>7</sup> On the historical background of the food culture Kisbán 1997 and Kisbán 1970.

<sup>8</sup> Shared public meals are bringing 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. Recipes of lángos: Schwartz 2003 and Gergely 1999.; [http://easteuropeanfood.about.com/od/hungarianbreads/Hungarian\\_Bread\\_Recipes.htm](http://easteuropeanfood.about.com/od/hungarianbreads/Hungarian_Bread_Recipes.htm)

family that has been living in Budapest for three generations no longer keeps the Easter customs such as sprinkling young girls and women, but yellow cottage cheese is always on the festive menu, as a family tradition. The internet is largely contributing to making this food known and to its spread beyond the original roots: the recipe, the photos and the comments made on the blogs mentioning family customs are all interesting sources for the researcher.

Under the influence of the range of food available through international trade (from exotic fruits and spices to sea fish) and the wide choice of dishes on restaurant menus, our food culture has become more varied and independent of the seasons, but at the same time it has shifted away from the local characteristics (Kuti 2008; Kisbán 2012). The slow food movement was launched in opposition to this process that can be observed also at the international level; it popularises dishes made of local ingredients and favouring handcraft techniques. In Hungary too various local forms of food production and trade are being organised on an ever wider scale. Most of the technologies and basic foodstuff reach back to traditional peasant culture. Both in animal husbandry and plant cultivation we can observe a partial reversal of the change of variety that occurred in the first half and middle of the 20th century (when Hungarian long-horn cattle were replaced with dairy cows, spelt, millet and buckwheat were no longer cultivated). Food science has confirmed the beneficial effect of these foodstuffs for the health, and special emphasis is placed on this in marketing. This is the turning point where a food that had disappeared from the diet returns to everyday practice and is valued much higher than before on the basis of an entirely different value judgement. This can also be seen in the fact that these products reappear in commerce at a much higher price than their mass-produced variants. The mangalica pork sausage bought from the producer and home-made cornel jam bought at “markets of handcraft Hungarian tastes” organised to bring these products and their consumers together are accessible for only a few. For this reason their significance within food culture as a whole is slight, they are rather only delicacies. They are only one possible alternative that enable urban consumers to experience something of home jam-making and pig slaughtering. This form of self-sufficiency is declining in the villages too nowadays; even if people make such foods, the proportion of meat and meat products, preserved, ready-made products is substantial within everyday diet at the annual level.

I mention only briefly the likewise substantial effort being made at government level: to describe Hungaricum (Hungarian specialities), comprising agricultural products, alcoholic beverages and processed foods, reflecting the regional variety. A special committee deals with the products that have been placed under protection and symbolise the Hungarian nation. In

this artificially created set of values, selected elements of traditional peasant nutrition, that in most cases were part of the everyday diet not festive food, become the symbols of a region or a nation, far removed in time and space from real practice. The products enter Hungarian and international commerce provided with a trademark and legal protection.

The names and symbols that can be traced back in some way to traditions, the past and parallel with this to Hungarian origin appear as a kind of quality guarantee in the case of products sold through commerce and in food recipes, taking advantage of the increased value placed on traditional food culture.



*FIG 5: Naming practice and historical symbols on the labels of foodstuff*

(Of course, content and form are not necessarily closely related.) References to “traditional”, “home-made”, “granny’s favourite” can be found on packaging, in cookery books and in blogs, authenticated with images ranging from elderly women, Hungarians from the Pre-Settlement period (from the 9th century when they settled down in the Carpathian basin). There is complete confusion in this area, created by emotionally-based manipulation. Extreme cases of using the past for authentication are the names “Scythian pita” and “Scythian burger”, reflecting the mingling of ages and cultures.



**Scythian burger**

FIG 6: (Source: <http://5.kerulet.ittlakunk.hu/eszem-izsom/121028/szittyja-meki-deakon> accessed 10. 04. 2013.)

The name Scythian leads us to the Anonymous chronicler, and the problem of Scythian-Hun-Magyar kinship that divides historians and linguists. In reality they are striving to create as much advertising as possible for oven-baked flat bread. As a food researcher it is very amusing to discover examples of this kind of “innovation”. It is another matter whether, as researchers, we can or should intervene in a process taking this direction in the culture.

I have used examples taken from little-related areas in today’s diet to illustrate ways in which elements of traditional Hungarian cuisine have survived and how they are used in practice today. Within the frame of this paper I have been able to sketch only very briefly the social processes occurring in the background of the documented changes in nutrition.

The increased value attached to traditional food culture we are witnessing today can be regarded as a transitional phenomenon, generated simultaneously by tourism, the media and commerce. But parallel with this, certain foods as elements from the common past also play a big role in shaping the identity of local communities. These dishes appear as symbols pointing outside the community, they are addressed to those who turn, mainly as paying guests and consumers, towards communities preserving local knowledge.

## **Recipe for yellow cottage cheese**

### Ingredients:

1 l milk, 10 eggs, 3 tablespoons of sugar, 1 packet of vanilla sugar, a pinch of salt.

### Preparation:

Bring the milk to the boil, in the meantime in another bowl mix the 10 eggs with the sugar, the vanilla sugar and the salt, then slowly pour the mixture into the milk, stirring constantly. Boil for 5-10 minutes over a gentle heat until the mixture thickens. Then tie it up in a thick linen cloth (shaped into a round ball), and hang up in a cool place to allow the whey to drip out. Then place in the refrigerator. Serve sliced, together with ham and cold sausages.

## **Lángos**

### Ingredients:

1 large potato, boiled, peeled, mashed and kept warm, 2 1/2 teaspoons instant yeast (same as rapid-rise or bread-machine yeast), 1 teaspoon sugar, 1 3/4 cups all-purpose flour, 1 tablespoon vegetable oil, 3/4 teaspoon salt, 1/2 cup milk, 2 cloves garlic, cut in half

### Preparation:

1. Place the ingredients in the order given, except the garlic, in a mixing bowl. Using the paddle attachment, combine the ingredients until well moistened.
2. Switch to the dough hook and knead for 5 to 7 minutes or until smooth and elastic. Transfer to a greased bowl, cover and let rise until doubled.
3. Separate dough into 4 portions, shape into a round and place on a lightly floured board. Cover and let rest 20 minutes.
4. In a large skillet, heat 1 inch canola oil to 350 degrees. Flatten and stretch dough to about an 8-inch diameter. Make a slit in the center. This is traditional and also helps to keep the dough from puffing up in the middle and not frying properly. Fry one at a time about 2 minutes per side or until golden. Drain on paper towels.

5. Serve hot rubbed with garlic clove and sprinkled with salt. Variations include topping with sour cream and chopped dill or shredded Emmenthaler or Gruyere cheese. Or, for a sweet version, sprinkle with cinnamon sugar or confectioners' sugar.

