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GOULASH AND GOVERNANCE: THE POLITICS OF FOODWAYS IN SOCIALIST HUNGARY

CULINARY TRANSFORMATION AND EVERYDAY LIFE (1948–1989)

Abstract

This study examines the changes in the lifestyle and eating habits of Hungarian society during the radical social transformations of the era of socialism, placing the process within its socio-historical context. In the centrally planned economy, the key aspects of food supply, trade, and catering were inseparable from the intentions of domestic and foreign policy, sociopolitical considerations, propaganda, and the techniques of exercising power. After the harsh decade of the 1950s, the consolidation period, although with limitations, promoted a welfare-consumerist model that naturally influenced not only the complete institutionalised framework of nutrition – leading to an unprecedented homogenisation of culinary culture – but also affected the cultural environment of individual, family, and small-community decisions, tastes, and habits. Within this force field, the main directions of interpreting culinary traditions are as follows: What happens to the homegrown, regional traditions brought from rural life? What is the fate and role of national cuisine that is considered Hungarian? How does the regime treat the professionals operating in the supply chain? What happens to the tradition of 'good bourgeois cuisine', beyond, can it survive within the framework of 'actually existing socialism', and if so, what does it even mean – has it had an impact on the broader masses? Are there traces of international cuisine, and, if so, how do they manifest themselves?

What does the food placed on the table signify? What aspirations, identity markers, attachments, resilience, memory preservation, and nostalgia might lie behind the individual choices of where, under what circumstances, and what we eat? The study explores these questions, analysing how food became a site of ideological negotiation, cultural adaptation, and personal meaning in socialist Hungary.

Antecedents: Folk traditions, bourgeois refinement, and culinary nationalism

Before delving into the main topic, it is necessary to briefly address a few key points.[1] The 18th and 19th centuries brought a wave of agricultural innovations and the spread of new crops in Hungary, which had an impact on nutrition across the entire spectrum of society.

This era witnessed the flourishing of folk art, which expressed the newfound self-awareness and distinctive aesthetic of the peasantry, following the emancipation of serfs in the mid-19th century. As a result of dynamic capitalist development after the *Ausgleich* ('Compromise') between Austria and Hungary in 1867, there was increased mobility and intensified contact between rural and urban environments. Paradoxically, modernity had an inspiring effect on rural communities, which, for a time, still retained the ability to adapt external influences into their own systems of culture and aesthetics.

During the era of national awakening, efforts were made to identify and emphasise national characteristics in various symbolic systems of culture, including cuisine. The fascination with folk culture reinforced the invention of national 'Self'. The great industrial and world exhibitions of the second half of the 19th century and the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, popularised interest in vernacular styles. This period also saw the emergence of cottage industries, applied arts movements, and the formation of a national aesthetic in various artistic genres rooted in folk traditions. Nation-building elites played an important role in this delineation process. They actively shaped the image of folk culture and had a role in the construction of nationalised frameworks of everyday civic life.

During Europe's and the Austro-Hungarian monarchy's dynamic bourgeois development, travel, and leisure activities – once exclusive to the nobility – became accessible to the growing middle class, facilitated by an emerging professional hospitality industry. Part of identity-formation was the discovery, creative invention, and dissemination of national culinary traditions.

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1 Reference to this study: Ágnes Fülemile: Goulash and Governance: The Politics of Foodways in Socialist Hungary. Culinary Transformation and Everyday Life (1948–1989). In Anikó Báti and Patricia Lysaght (eds.): *Living Eating Habits, Revitalized Foodways and the Concepts of Tradition and Food Heritage.* Budapest: ELTE RCH Institute of Ethnography – Museum of Ethnography, 2025. pp. 35–76.
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The inspiration for shaping Hungarian national cuisine came from the romantic appreciation of newly-discovered folk culture. Paprika (red pepper powder), once dismissed as a low-regarded inferior peasant spice, along with characteristic shepherd dishes from the Great Hungarian Plains, began appearing on the menus of restaurants catering to the upper classes. The romanticised image of the Great Plains as the epitome of a quintessential Hungarian landscape – and its inhabitants as embodiments of the freedom-loving national spirit of Hungarians – emerged during this time, and is a topos fuelled by both domestic and foreign artistic fascination. This shift was reflected in dietary habits as well, with paprika-infused dishes like goulash and pörkölt stew replacing older meat-and-cabbage-based meals, becoming symbolic staples of national cuisine.[2] From the mid-19th century onwards, this culinary tradition was refined by a few iconic master chefs, who tamed its rustic flavours along French and Austrian lines to suit the palates of the European upper classes.[3] Culinary innovations were spread across the kingdom through hotels, taverns, restaurants, cafés, and middle-class households.

The refinement of peasant dishes into elite cuisine was paralleled by an equally significant reverse process: the dissemination of bourgeois culinary innovations to rural households. The middle-class, as an intermediate social group, was a two-way mediator of cultural influences.

Enlightened reform-efforts of the era were aimed at helping to elevate the countryside and to alleviate its social problems. Cottage industries, women's teacher-training programmes, and agricultural and housekeeping schools proliferated, aided by the joint efforts of local elites, churches, and government agencies. The need for social welfare led to charity efforts based on the establishment of soup kitchens for the poor. Through compulsory military service, men ate regular prescribed meals in army canteens.

2 See Eszter Kisbán's excellent studies on goulash: Kisbán, Eszter, 'From peasant dish to national symbol: An early deliberate example', Ethnologia Europaea 19/1 (1988), 95–102; Kisbán, Eszter, *Népi kultúra, közkultúra, jelkép: A gulyás, pörkölt, paprikás* ('Folk Culture, Popular Culture, Symbols: Goulash, Stew, Paprika') Életmód és tradíció 4 (Budapest: MTA Néprajzi Kutatóintézet, 1989).

3 A key figure was József Marchal, a Lorraine-born chef who had served European royalty before becoming head chef at Pest's prestigious National Casino and Queen of England Hotel. Marchal's crowning achievement was the organising of the coronation banquet of Franz Joseph I and Queen Elisabeth (Sissy) in 1867, at Buda Castle. Under his influence, a generation of exceptional chefs and pastry chefs – such as Ede Palkovics, Nándor Kedvessy, József C. Dobos, and József Marchal Jr. – emerged, becoming leading figures of the culinary scene in the early 20th century. Another notable example is the Gundel family, a Bavarian-origin dynasty of chefs, closely linked to the Marchals.

Fig. 1. At the 1873 Vienna World's Fair, in keeping with romanticised stereotypes of Hungary, the country's culinary specialities were presented in a tavern (csárda) typical of the Great Plains, alongside live performances by gypsy musicians and shepherds, which was a great success. (L'Esposizione Universale di Vienna del 1873 Illustrata. Volume Primo. Milano: Edoardo Sonzogno, 149.)

Boarding schools for girls taught comprehensive household management courses, including cooking, baking, food preservation, meal planning, table setting, kitchen hygiene, dietary meal preparation, kitchen gardening, medicinal-herb cultivation, basic healthcare knowledge, infant care, nursing, sewing, laundry, cleaning, and cost-effective housekeeping. The curriculum promoted economical, yet varied and flavourful, bourgeois cuisine. Alongside the well-known dishes of 'simple Hungarian good bourgeois cuisine', the programmes incorporated regional flavours and select international dishes (Viennese, Bavarian, Czech, and French). The importance of integrating a wider variety of vegetables and fruits into meals was emphasised.[4]

From the 1920s onwards, rational household management was incorporated into the curriculum for the upper grades of elementary schools and secondary schools. Trained instructors, nurses and doctors, held courses in the countryside with the goal of improving existing substandard nutritional and hygienic norms due to deep poverty, and resulting in high child mortality and tuberculosis-related death rates.

While boarding schools were mostly affordable for the middle classes, shorter courses were accessible to the more ambitious peasant, artisan and working-class families. Furthermore, maids and women serving in local and urban middle-class households also transmitted what they had learned in bourgeois families to peasant households. These women were highly regarded, found husbands more easily, and some even became wedding chefs. Between the two World Wars, the radio broadcasted housekeeping lecture series and cooking advice programmes, and educational household manuals and cookbooks were distributed to village libraries.

As a result of these initiatives, a greater variety of soups, vegetable dishes, meat courses, sauces, and pastries spread across the country. Regional differences began to fade, and culinary knowledge became more standardised nationwide. Kitchenware was replaced, and cleanliness and presentation started to follow urban trends.

Thanks in part to the activism of women's organisations, household education continued even during World War II. (In the war years, frugal cooking and substitution methods for scarce ingredients was promoted.) The training programmes persisted into the 1950s, until Hungary's education system underwent

4 About the issue of household-management schools and courses, see Judit Knézy's fine analysis based on extensive research: Knézy, Judit, 'Háztartási iskolák, tanfolyamok és a táplálkozási kultúra alakulása a 20. században' ('Domestic science schools, courses, and the development of food culture in the 20th century'), *Herman Ottó Múzeum Évkönyve* XLVII (2008), 489–513.

significant restructuring under socialism, while frugality recipes persisted into the austerity period of 1950s.

The standardisation trends, based on a middle-class model in the pre-war period mentioned above, are particularly relevant to this topic, because they help us to understand the state of the country's general food culture before the communist takeover in 1948, and also highlight the symbolic significance of bourgeois cuisine.

The politically-engineered attempt to transform society under socialism – a broader context

After World War II, half of Hungary's population was agrarian, a significant portion of which consisted of smallholders with just a few acres of land, or entirely of the landless poor. The 1945–1946 agrarian reform, implemented under Soviet oversight, sought to address one of the most pressing social issues of the inter-war period: unresolved land inequality. It also aimed to mobilise peasant labour for postwar agricultural recovery.[5] As a side-effect, the land-redistribution policy restrengthened the endurance of a traditional middle-peasant value-orientation, and actually prompted a sociological 're-peasantisation.'

The brief democratic interlude from 1945 to 1948 gave way to the communist seizure of power. After the radical nationalisation of private property in several stages, the tightly-controlled planned economy focused on rapid industrialisation, with the income siphoned off from agriculture being used to boost heavy industry. The new regime started to implement harsh Soviet-style agricultural policies. Its forced collectivisation campaign blatantly reversed recent land reforms. Authorities deployed relentless pressure tactics to drive peasants into the collectives. The campaign escalated into systematic persecution, through brutal crop confiscations, kulak blacklists, mass arrests, show trials, and deportations to forced labour camps. The 'dekulakisation' policy systematically eradicated Hungary's most skilled farmers from the agricultural system. This ruthless ideological crusade deliberately sacrificed

5 Large estates were expropriated and divided into small plots, thereby redistributing one-third of Hungary's arable land. In total, 650,000 beneficiaries received land, including 400,000 new smallholders and 240,000 existing farmers who gained supplemental plots. The reform altered rural demographics: the landless population shrank from 46% to 17%, while smallholder-farmers surged from 47% to being 80% of the peasantry. Many of the new plots were too small for subsistence purposes. By dismantling larger, more efficient farms, the reform entrenched fragmented, outdated farming practices, rather than fostering modernisation.

Fig. 2. Students for the cooking-baking course with the instructor sitting under the pictures of Marx and Engels, 1957, Dombóvár, Tolna county. (Photo donor: Tibor, Erky-Nagy, Fortepan, photo ID 13 970, 1957)

Fig. 3. Canteen of Thermal Power Plant, Ajka, 1961. (Photo donor: Sándor Bauer, Fortepan, photo ID 110447, 1961)

agricultural productivity and rural social stability in order to break peasant resistance and to enforce total control.

The regime's oppressive agricultural policies triggered massive land abandonment in the early 1950s, with approximately 300,000 peasants fleeing their recently-acquired plots. By 1957, about 650,000 farming families (35% of individual farmers) had become *kétlaki* ('dual residents'), clinging to their land while working in cities – a group that comprised 40% of industrial workers.

The regime systematically vilified these peasant-workers as being backward, uneducated, and ideologically suspect.[6] Official propaganda – through newspapers, textbooks, films, and newsreels – portrayed rural dwellers as reactionary remnants of feudalism, contrasting them with idealised socialist urbanites. This manufactured urban-rural divide served to justify the elimination of peasant culture as part of the communist modernisation project. The regime's ambiguous demagogic rhetoric about worker-peasant solidarity, and carefully-staged depictions of a 'socialist realist pastoral idyll', failed to counter the pervasive climate of dehumanisation and the growing sense of stigmatised self-identity of the peasants.

The third and final wave of collectivisation (1958–1961), implemented after the crushed 1956 Revolution, served as a form of collective punishment against Hungary's peasantry. This systematic campaign – carried out through persuasion, promises of benefits, and coercion – eliminated private farming by confiscating land, livestock, and tools, the very foundations of peasant life.[7] Families fractured under the pressure – women and elders typically joined co-operatives while able-bodied men became commuters or fled to cities. Traditional village culture collapsed with stunning speed: old social hierarchies dissolved. The 1960s saw not just the

6 Varga, Zsuzsanna, 'Mit ér a munkás, ha paraszt (is)? A falusi munkásság és a hatalom a Kádár-korszakban' ('What is a worker if he is (also) a Peasant? Rural workers and Power in the Kádár Era'), *Korall* 49 (2012), 40–41.

7 93% of farmland was transferred to state and co-operative ownership; thus, private farming virtually disappeared, with 1.6 million independent former farmers reduced to under 100,000 by the mid-1960s. For the coercive measures used in the last round of collectivisation, see: Balogh, Balázs, 'Egy férfigeneráció sorsa Tápon a téeszesítéstől napjainkig' ('The Fate of a Male Generation in Táp from the Collectivisation to the Present Day'), in Péter Berta, and Mihály Hoppál, eds., *Ethnolore* XXVI (Budapest: MTA Néprajzi Kutatóintézet, 2009), 289–325; Ö Kovács, József, 'A paraszti társadalom felszámolása a kommunista diktatúrában. A vidéki Magyarország politikai társadalomtörténete 1945–1965' ('The Abolition of Peasant Society in the Communist Dictatorship. The Political and Social History of Rural Hungary 1945–1965'), *Korall* (2012), 367–382; Kovács, Imre, 'A magyar társadalom "paraszttalanítása" – európai összehasonlításban' ('"De-peasantisation" of Hungarian Society – a European Comparison'), *Századvég* 2003/2, 41–65.

Fig. 4. The staff of Csárda (a tavern) from Bugac, clad in folkish garb at the National Agricultural Exhibition and Fair in 1959, Albertirsai Road Fairground. The inscription on the facade advertises: pork fillet, beef tenderloin, stuffed chicken, goulash, and mutton stew. (Photo donor: Sándor Bauer, Fortepan, photo ID 109623, 1959)

dismantling of cultural attributes of a lifestyle, but the mass abandonment of rural life altogether, and the rejection of peasant identity.[8]

The resulting social transformation was unprecedented: between 1948 and 1965, two-thirds of the population experienced radical mobility. While this was a long-awaited disintegration of the country's rigid semi-feudal structures, the social costs proved devastating. The intolerantly-engineered pace of change triggered widespread social pathologies – Hungary emerged as a European leader in suicide rates, alcoholism, and family breakdown.

While the overt hostility of the 1950s 'kulak' rhetoric had softened by the 1960s, everyday language, public discourse, education and media continued to circulate sarcastic stereotypes about the peasantry, while glorifying collective labourers and industrial workers as socialist role models. The rigid urban-rural hierarchy, with the capital's overt cultural supremacy over provincial areas, instilled lasting inferiority complexes, creating a generation ashamed of its rural roots.

At the same time, consolidation and a considerably better standard of living had made the urban model increasingly attractive to young generations from rural areas. Around 1963–1964, Hungary's communist leadership embarked on a more relaxed, pragmatic form of economic planning, shifting the previous, politically-motivated and exclusive emphasis away from heavy industry to light industry, and to the production of consumer goods.

The foundations of socialist consumerism began taking shape as new retail networks and distribution systems emerged. (While product selection remained limited, these developments marked a significant improvement over the scarcity-driven economy of earlier years.) Infrastructure and transport were improved. Modern housing estates became coveted status-symbols for loyal workers, while the marketing of furniture and appliances promoted new domestic ideals. (Since the 1970s, even a more dynamic wave of building large housing estates continued under the prefabricated housing programme.)

The entry of one million women into the workforce fundamentally challenged the traditional concept of family and household structures and spurred on demand for

8 See the analysis of the deculturation processes of the era: Fülemile, Ágnes, 'Social Change, Dress and Identity Observations on the Disintegration of Peasant Culture as Exemplified by Rural Women's Clothing in Hungary from the First World War to the End of the Kádár Era Socialism', *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica* 65/1 (2020), 107–186.

an expanded network of social services, nurseries, schools, canteens, and healthcare facilities. Universal access to free education and to subsidised cultural activities (theatre, museums, books) became hallmarks of the system. Organised leisure activities flourished, with workplace groups and youth organisations arranging excursions and cultural events, while state-sponsored vacation facilities introduced the working class to recreational tourism.

Mass media played a crucial role in the dissemination of new urban lifestyle patterns, while magazines and television (introduced in 1957 but not common in households until the mid-1960s) created new cultural icons as role models. Regular agricultural and industrial fairs effectively promoted new consumer goods, while advertising posters and illuminated billboards began transforming urban streetscapes across Budapest and other cities.

By 1967, 'reform' communists – those who proposed economic reforms, had emerged in the communist party leadership. The introduction of the New Economic Mechanism in 1968 created somewhat limited, but more liberal, market conditions. The planned management of the economy was relaxed, and state enterprises were given greater autonomy. There was also an important instrument that affected the food market. The collectivisation of the 1960s, had, in fact, provided a loophole in this context, namely the distribution of backyard farms of limited size, among the members of co-operatives. The importance of household-gardening increased after 1968. The beneficial effect of the reform was to change the nature of farming, from subsistence to commodity production, on backyard holdings. The yields of the household sector were measured at the level of the national economy.[9] This created a more thriving, secure food market with an abundance of good quality fresh produce.

This period was cut short in 1972, when conservative Brezhnev-era Soviet leaders and domestic hardliners, reversed course. The 1973 oil crisis, triggered by Middle East conflicts, destabilised both Western and socialist economies. As the USSR

9 In key intensive agricultural sectors, such as pork production, grapes, fruit and vegetables, household plots accounted for 50–60% of total production. Their contribution was even more significant for some specialised products – reaching 80–90% for early-season vegetables grown in poly-tunnels – and for some small livestock production. See: Molnár, József, '"A" háztáji' ('The backyard economy'), in István Orosz, Lajos Für, Pál Romány, eds., *Magyarország agrártörténete* (Budapest: Mezőgazda Kiadó, 1996), 631–643, Márkus, István, 'A hazai mezőgazdasági kisárutermelés az 1960–70-es években' ('Domestic Agricultural Small-Scale Production in the 1960s and 70s'), *Századvég* 1991/2–3, 193–201.

raised the oil prices for its allies and domestic economic reforms stalled, Hungary's growth slowed significantly, stagnating completely by the 1980s. To sustain living standards and social stability, the government secretly took on substantial foreign debt.

By the early 1980s, limited reforms resumed, permitting small private businesses to operate and granting state firms more autonomy. This partial market liberalisation, combined with Hungary's agrarian potential and relatively well-working food industry, improved consumer access – funded by Western loans – and created relative prosperity in Hungary, compared to other Eastern Bloc nations. This unique system of soft dictatorship of the late Kádár-era, earned Hungary labels such as 'goulash communism', 'fridge-socialism' and 'the happiest barrack', characterised by full employment and strong welfare benefits. While these policies fostered a sense of security for the population, they came at the cost of a soaring national debt.

Shifting foodways and consumption patterns under centralised management

After the above general political and socio-historical context, let us focus on foodways-related aspects of the era. Following the hunger, food shortages and the black market in food during World War II, and the post-war reconstruction period, a resulting one-sided and deficient nutrition system was still the norm in the 1950s. By the 1960s, the food supply stabilised in line with the intentions of socio-political economic policy. Food production started to be secured, trade and catering began to be improved, and the range of available foods gradually expanded.

For many people from poorer backgrounds, the first period in their lives when adequate food was available to satisfy their hunger, was in the 1960s. Food prices were kept under control. School and work meals were cheap, and dairy bars (selling bakery and dairy products), buffets, self-service restaurants, cafeterias, confectioneries and pubs, were easily accessible even on an average salary.

Comparative statistics on per capita annual consumption of various food items reveal that the amount of food consumed increased significantly from decade to decade, indicating a general consolidation of living standards. In the three decades between 1960 and 1990, per capita annual consumption of meat, fats, sugar, milk and dairy products grew by one and a half times, while eggs were consumed two and

a half times more than previously.[10] At the same time, it should also be noted that high calorie intake, combined with the transformation of lifestyles involving reduced physical labour, led to obesity becoming almost an epidemic in the Hungarian population, resulting in a high rate of cardiovascular mortality.

With the completion of the collectivisation process (with the radical diminution of private farming and the centralising of agricultural production) and the improvement of the food-supply network, self-sufficiency decreased, though it did not disappear entirely (in terms of vegetables, fruit, and meat produced in rural households). At the same time, albeit varying by region and settlement type, the proportion of food purchased in food stores increased even among the rural population.

In the socialist society, with the aforementioned goal of full employment, the high level of population mobilisation amid socialist industrialisation and urbanisation, and the expansion of educational opportunities, workplaces and educational institutions had to provide meals for their employees and students. Large numbers of people, both children and adults, began eating in canteens and buffets.[11] Families increasingly relied on public catering during weekdays rather than on home-cooking. In many households, especially in cities, hot meals were cooked at home on weekends.

With the high proportion of female employment, the time available for household chores decreased, which partly pushed labour- and time-intensive domestic processes into the background. Moreover, women operating under the burden of slowly-changing traditional gender roles, had to balance their responsibilities with considerable self-exploitation, both in the workplace and within the still conservative, male-centred family structure.

So, altogether, there was a shift in food-consumption patterns towards store-bought goods and reliance on public catering. In both cities and villages, the former pattern

10 However, cereals and potatoes were consumed about a fifth to a third less by 1990, again a telling sign of changing eating habits. Consumption peaked in the second half of the 1980s, then declined in the mid-1990s due to price increases and market transition, as well as shifts in consumption patterns following the 1990s regime change. See analysis of statistics in: Valuch, Tibor, 'Táplálkozás, étkezési és étrendi szokások' ('Nutrition, eating habits and dietary patterns'), in Valuch, Tibor, *Magyarország társadalomtörténete a 20. század második felében* ('Social history of Hungary in the second half of 20th century') (Budapest: Osiris, 2001), 322.

11 It is worth mentioning here that until the mid-1960s, kindergartens, schools, and factories, operated their own kitchens with dedicated kitchen staff. After this period, however, the state started to centralise the system and established large-scale regional public-catering firms with wide territorial coverage. This led to further uniformity of the much-criticised canteen food offer.

of everyday and festive meals was undergoing transformation, and a significant standardisation of home-cooked meals occurred during this period.

From the second half of the 1960s and throughout the 1970s, a wave of new food-industry products appeared, including an increasingly-diverse range of cheeses, dairy products, processed meats, and baked goods. Even in villages, store-bought bread became the norm, practically eliminating homemade bread. (In small settlements without stores, bread and other basic groceries were delivered at least twice a week by mobile shops.)

With the growth of the canning industry, preserved vegetables, fruit, meat products, and ready-made meals became commonplace in households. From the 1970s, the use of oil and margarine-spread, started replacing lard and butter. Mention must also be made of the growth of pleasure foods and luxury items – the expanding selection of sweets, soft drinks, coffee and distilled spirits. The Hungarian food industry established its own sought-after branded products in chocolates and soft drinks.[12] (The list would be too long to detail here, year by year, which products were novelties and became hits of the era, many of which would be banished today from health-conscious diets.) Ice cream flavours also diversified, and by the 1970s, parfait and ice pops had appeared. (These are flavour-memories that children of the time, still today, nostalgically recall.)[13] The increase in carbohydrate intake, the indulgence in sweets, and the rise in soft-drinks consumption, were all partly prestige consumption in character, as a form of compensation for the previous lean era.[14]

Despite this development of food retail, the choice and quality of products was, nevertheless, limited. Housewives had a vested interest in maintaining jovial relationships with shop managers or the butcher, earning their favour in order to access better-quality goods or scarce items, from under the counter. This was especially true for imported southern fruits. There were periods when, apart from

12 Although originally a Russian invention, its Hungarian version, the chocolate-covered cottage-cheese stick called *Túró Rudi*, remains successful to this day, and has even made it onto the list of Hungarikums. Its dotted packaging cleverly capitalised on the popularity of a fundamental children's literary work of the era, the 'Pöttyös Panni' ('Polka-Dot Panni') books.

13 For example, consider the *Márka Meggy* ('sour cherry') soft-drink brand, the quince juice from the Kecskemét Canning Factory, or the grape-based *Traubisoda*, which was originally produced under an Austrian licence. Some soft drinks, as well as certain products from the Győr Biscuit Factory, or from the now closed-down Szerencs Chocolate Factory, have recently been cleverly reintroduced into production through savvy marketing strategies.

14 The same logic of a compensational pattern can be found, in general, in the consumption of junk food by the poorest, and was also observed in the socialist-bloc countries after the regime-change in the 1990s.

lower-quality and less desirable Cuban oranges, other varieties of oranges were scarcely available. And before Christmas, securing even a single bunch of bananas was considered a great triumph.

The introduction and the spread of refrigerators and later, from the 1980s onwards, of freezers[15] in households, brought a significant transformation in kitchen technology and food storage: think, for example, of the way garden produce, and home-slaughtered meat such as pork or poultry, were processed. Accordingly, a widening selection of frozen raw products and Mirelite ready meals appeared in the grocery store offer. Similarly, in the second half of 1970s and throughout the 1980s, mechanised kitchen appliances appeared, such as electric mixers, grinders, food processors, juicers, pressure cookers, toasters, sandwich makers, and coffee machines. Some of these were domestically produced, but most were socialist imports, primarily from East Germany and the Soviet Union. The use of these appliances was further encouraged by the era's propaganda, which promoted the 'required' image of the modern Hungarian socialist family and household. Advertisements and media-messaging reinforced the idea that these devices symbolised progress and convenience in everyday life.

Here we should note that with the expansion of domestic travel opportunities and the growing network of campgrounds,[16] new innovations also emerged for outdoor picnickers and campers.

It is worth mentioning briefly that a broader transformation in food packaging also occurred. Back in the 1960s, paper, cardboard, greaseproof paper, cellophane, and tinfoil were used in food packaging, while beverages and dairy products came in returnable glass bottles. (Many people would go to the dairy shop with their own enamelled metal milk jugs to fetch fresh milk, which then had to be boiled at home.) Everyone used their own baskets, or crocheted, sewn shopping bags for groceries. From the 1970s onwards, plastic packaging began spreading rapidly, with Tetra-Pak cartons appearing in the 1980s. (Parallel to this process was the development of

15 Kisbán, Eszter, 'Táplálkozáskultúra' ('Food Culture'), in Iván Balassa, ed., *Magyar Néprajz IV. Életmód* ('Hungarian Ethnography, IV. Life Style') (Budapest: MTA Néprajzi Kutatóintézet, Akadémiai Kiadó, 1997), 437.

16 The development of the Lake Balaton area, especially the southern shore, gained momentum around 1960. Camp-grounds, hotels, and vacation houses for employees, were developed. The modernisation of existing taverns and restaurants, along with the establishment of seasonal beach buffets, camping bistros, ice-cream stands, self-service eateries, and wine bars, were carried out to accommodate summer tourism.

techniques for the long-term preservation of milk.) This era saw the explosive rise of plastic advertising bags.[17]

Nevertheless, for the majority of the population, the average standard of living was converging, as lifestyles and incomes consolidated. (It should also be noted that, for ideological reasons, both the income of and social esteem for the intelligentsia, were withheld by the system, in favour of the industrial workers.) The average socialist citizen could afford to eat plentifully. Even though life was lived within a firmly-defined, limited, and controlled framework of opportunities, Sunday meals – complete with meat soup (bouillon), breaded cutlets (*Wiener-schnitzel*) with French fries and cucumber salad, and some sort of pastry – never failed to appear on the table.[18]

However, marginalised and impoverished social groups and related malnutrition were undeniably present in socialist Hungary. (The school canteen[19] pricing-by-income-category and the school milk campaign, were intended to address this situation.) These groups included unskilled industrial labourers, residents of economically-depressed small villages, and the isolated farmsteads (*tanya)* of the Great Plain region. The Roma population also faced systemic disadvantages, while those accused of 'labour evasion' were criminalised – their very existence was interpreted as resistance, which contradicted the policy of the instrumental system

17 These plastic bags were not just used for shopping, as bags with a more attractive advertising graphic or colour, were also carried on the street as a kind of fashion accessory – paired with everyday outfits – until they wore out.

18 See Valuch, Tibor, Iván, "'We ate, we drank, we filled our stomachs": nutrition, eating, and dietary habits', in Valuch, Tibor, *Everyday life under communism and after: lifestyle and consumption in Hungary, 1945–2000,* (Budapest, New York: Central European University Press, 2021), 415–468.

19 The recent and current state of school catering was examined in a multi-year, large-scale research project, led by Anikó Báti. This interdisciplinary study, not only drew upon ethnographical expertise, but also involved specialists from public institutions dealing with public catering and public health, in the cross-institutional research team. See: Báti, Anikó, 'School Meals on the Menu. Studies on the Practices of Children's Catering', *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica* 68/1 (2023), 1–10; Báti, Anikó, 'Opportunities for Interdisciplinary Research on School Catering', *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica* 68/1 (2023), 91–123; Husz, Ildikó, 'The Social Embeddedness of School-Holiday Meals for Children Based on Discourses of Need and Deservingness', *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica* 68/1 (2023), 125–142; Kelemen, Katalin, 'The "School Meals Market" in Hungary – Typical Characteristics of Demand and Supply', *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica* 68/1 (2023), 143–159; Juhász, Katalin, 'Urban and Rural Attitudes toward School Food', *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica* 68/1 (2023), 161–178; Csajbókné Csobod, Éva and Katalin Tátrai-Németh, 'The Role of Dietitian and Catering Manager in Public Catering and Opportunities for Training in Hungary', *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica* 68/1 (2023), 191–206; Kiss, Anna, and Laura Pfeiffer, et. al., 'How Do Food Service Managers Look at School Catering? A Qualitative Content Analysis of a Roundtable Discussion on School Meals Provision', *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica* 68/1 (2023), 207–227.

of full employment. These intertwined issues sparked major debates about the most controversial socio-political problems of the period.

In stark contrast, on the other side, stood the privileged and rewarded group of cadres loyal to the party, the *apparatchik* in top positions. Their privileges included, for example, access to Western goods in the so-called 'diplomatic stores' run by the foreign trade company *Konzumturiszt*, which were exclusively available to those with special permits. (In a workplace or factory, it was completely normal for members of the top brass – the director, party secretary, and the trade union leader, to start the day with cognac, coffee, and cigarettes.)

Smoking, without any regard for children or non-smokers, was completely commonplace. In family homes, at gatherings with friends, in workplaces, restaurants, trains, and even in university lecture halls, the air was thick with smoke. During the transition period around the turn of 1980s and 1990s, efforts to curb smoking in public areas encountered significant challenges due to smokers' deeply-entrenched habits and feelings of resentment.

The nationalisation of the service sector

In the late 1940s, during the nationalisation period, the state confiscated businesses from countless family-run enterprises – small eateries, restaurants, and pastry shops.[20] Many renowned chefs and confectioners, whose dynasties had worked in the hospitality industry for generations, were forced to surrender their businesses to the state and to become state employees. Only a few establishments retained their former names after the nationalisation period – when they were then run by the state – or could revive them during the 1980s or after the regime-change, such as e.g., Gundel (since 1894), Kugler (since 1847 in Pest), Gerbeaud (taking over the shop from Kugler in 1884), Auguszt (since 1870), Hauer (since 1890), Ruszwurm

20 During the nationalisations, in December 1949, even small businesses with more than 10 employees were nationalised, and many former confectioneries became the property of the giant state-owned Bufe National Company, from 1 January 1950. Among its primary tasks, the company was providing catering services for workers at the emerging industrial cities. It operated buffet networks for factories, theatres, sports facilities, and spas, as well as mobile food-stands for large parades (such as 1 May Parade), and outdoor events. From 1953 onwards, numerous restaurants (including at the airport) came under the management of the Restaurant and Buffet Company, which, itself, was overseen by the Representative Catering Directorate of the Interior Ministry.

Fig. 5. Foodstore, Budapest, 1958. (Photo donor: Gábor Szabó, Fortepan, photo ID 174775, 1958)

Fig. 6. Emke espresso and buffet, Budapest, 1961. (Photo donor: Sándor Bauer, Fortepan, photo ID 112851, 1961)

Fig. 7. Gundel Restaurant, Budapest, 1957. (Photo donor: Sándor Bauer, Fortepan, photo ID 113467, 1957)

(since 1827), and Daubner (since 1901).[21] Coffee houses, seen as gathering places for the bourgeois, critically-minded intelligentsia, and as breeding grounds for 'capitalist reactionism', were deemed undesirable and shut down. Most of the nationalised, once-prestigious hotels and restaurants stagnated, their standards sharply declining. A good number of gastronomic professionals had left the country, leading to a serious dilution of knowledge and the loss of creative recipe variations.[22]

In the aftermath of the suppression of the 1956 revolution, the state began developing the commercial retail network and also the hospitality industry, as part of a new policy to consolidate the way of life in Hungary, in order to regain loyalty to the regime. In the capital and larger cities, several new, large grocery stores, pastry shops, and buffets, were opened. The media prominently displayed their abundant merchandise, contrasting it with the previous era of scarcity – a clear propaganda tool.

As part of the booming housing construction programme, affordable restaurants and confectionaries (which were also live-music entertainment venues) sprang up in newly-built housing estates and at popular socialist holiday resorts. (These modernist buildings, constructed under the auspices of the state building-industry, featured interior designs reflecting contemporary trends.) Urban areas saw a rise in breakfast spots (so-called 'milk bars'), self-service canteens, and transport-linked catering outlets, such as railway-station restaurants and buffets. The *Utasellátó Vállalat* ('Passenger Catering Company') operated the dining cars on trains as well as having mobile vendors moving through the carriages.

The political leadership realised – both for diplomatic reasons and to satisfy their own representational needs – that they required establishments offering both exclusivity and luxury. Alongside the development of a hospitality network accessible to ordinary citizens, iconic upscale venues from the bourgeois era, were revived or repolished. These included legendary names like Gundel, Gerbeaud (renamed Vörösmarty), Gresham, Abbázia, Emke, Savoy, the Fisherman's Bastion Restaurant, the Grand Hotel and Casino on Margaret Island, the Astoria and Múzeum café, the members-only Fészek Művészklub ('Nest Artists' Club) catering to the cultural elite,

21 The founding father, Béla Daubner, was incarcerated under socialism for 11 years, out of which 2.5 were spent in prison under the Kádár's regime.

22 For more, on the nationalisation of the hospitality sector, see: Szigeti, Andor, 'A vendéglátás története' ('The history of hospitality'), in András Rubovszky, Andor Szigeti, and Miklós Walkó, *A magyar vendéglátás és turizmus újkori története* ('The modern history of Hungarian hospitality and tourism') (Agrár Szaktudás Könyvtár) (Budapest: Szaktudás Kiadó Ház, 2009), 15–199.

Fig. 8. Delegation of the Republic of India at the Palotagyöngye Restaurant, Budapest, 1958. (Photo donor: György Sándor, Fortepan, photo ID 117168, FSZEK Budapest Gyűjtemény, 1958)

the rebranded Vörös Csillag ('Red Star') restaurant in the historic hotel on Liberty Hill, and the exclusive *Különlegesség Cukrászda* ('Speciality Patisserie') on Népköztársaság Avenue, among others.

In these restaurants, Gypsy bands playing traditional Hungarian art music continued to be a living hallmark of 'Hungarian-style' hospitality. Meanwhile, in the new patisseries and garden venues, a socialist-approved, toned-down melodic variations of the era's light music repertoire was featured, accompanied by solo piano or estrada band. (Many jazz musicians, previously condemned in the 1950s as symbols of 'imperialist influence', had left the country after 1956.)

Diplomacy on a Plate: Hungarian cuisine at the 1958 Brussels World's Fair

The participation of Hungarian artists and athletes, sent to the Moscow (1957), Vienna (1959), and Helsinki (1962) World Festival of Youth and Students,[23] after the 1956 reprisals, held diplomatic importance for the country's opening-up to foreign countries. (This was part of the soft diplomacy efforts in the late 1950s and early 1960s, where top artists and athletes were given opportunities to tour Western countries or to attend international competitions.) Similarly, the party leadership attributed great importance to Hungary's presence at the 1958 Brussels World's Fair, viewing it as another crucial platform for international engagement. (After the Second World War, Brussels was the first world exhibition to be reorganised.)

It is worth mentioning here that ever since the success of the (previously mentioned) Hungarian *csárda* (tavern) from the Great Plain at the 1873 Vienna World's Fair, Hungary placed great emphasis on its gastronomic presence at every subsequent world exhibition, showcased in architecturally-prominent pavilions. The international presentation of Hungarian hospitality was not only about serving iconic Hungarian dishes, but also about creating a folk-inspired atmosphere, complete with live Gypsy music. Even during the socialist era, Hungarian catering never fully broke free from the clichéd image of the Great Plain-style *csárda,* with its cauldron-cooked goulash and *pörkölt* (stew), and rustic charm.

23 The youth festivals organised by the anti-imperialist World Federation of Democratic Youth (WFDY) and the International Union of Students, under Soviet guidance, were important ideological propaganda tools of the left-wing 'peace alliance' during the Cold War.

The Hungarian pavilion's presence at the 1958 Brussels World's Fair carried profound political significance – it represented a crucial opportunity to rehabilitate the country's battered international image. Recognising this, the communist leadership mobilised all available resources to exploit the exposition's propaganda potential to its fullest.[24] The aim was to showcase Hungary as a progressive and culturally-vibrant socialist state. The programme proposal recommended a light, witty style, elegance, and the creation of a cheerful, direct atmosphere, in order to dispel any criticisms that socialism was monotonous and drab.[25] (The approach was rather cynical, when, in reality, summary courts were in operation, and imprisonments and executions were commonplace.) The Hungarian pavilion's modernist, aluminium-clad building, its interior design, and art exhibition highlighting Csontváry's oeuvre, no longer conceived of the spirit of the ideologically-imposed socialist realism at home. Nor did the display of Hungarian products reflect the harsh realities of communism's toughest scarcity period. The greatest success of the Hungarian participation was the 500-seat restaurant with a terrace and Hungarian décor, the initial inspiration for which was the idea that its revenue could cover the pavilion's construction costs. Alongside the head-manager of the restaurant – the well-recognised culinary expert József Venesz – the kitchen was run by the similarly renowned master chefs Emil Túrós and József Rákóczi. The culinary offerings became a centrepiece of a soft power campaign, transforming traditional dishes into edible diplomacy. (Waitstaff received intensive training in Western etiquette and had language skills.) The restaurant featured live Gypsy music,[26] introduced international audiences to quintessential national dishes such as goulash, fish-soup, chicken paprikash with dumplings, Balaton pike-perch, strudel, and more, along with wine from Tokaj. János Rákóczi invented the *Rákóczi túrós* (a type of cheesecake) for the occasion. Western media raved about the exotic paprika-laced flavours of the most vibrant cuisine behind the Iron Curtain.

The Hungarian restaurant won the Grand Prix, and, as the icing on the cake, even IBUSZ, the state's 'Tourism Procurement Travel and Transport Company, took home a gold medal. Architect, Lajos Gádoros, not only won the Grand Prix but was

24 In fact, it never occurred to the Belgian organisers to boycott Russians or Hungarians because of the Russian armed invasion suppressing the revolution.

25 György Aczél, the later powerful minister of culture-policy of the Kádár era, oversaw the preparations in his role as deputy minister. The programme-drafting was entrusted to Iván Boldizsár, a sophistically-cultured writer and editor-in-chief of a main media organ of the 1950s, who had extensive experience in the French art world and who always had a good sense of political winds.

26 The music was provided by the folk orchestra of Sándor Lakatos.

Fig. 9. The Olympia restaurant in the 15,000-person housing estate for uranium miners in Pécs, modelled on the Hungarian restaurant of the Brussels World Exhibition, built in 1960. (Photo donor: VÁTI, Fortepan, photo ID 31226, 1960)

also knighted in the Belgian Order of the Crown.[27] (His architecture foreshadowed the modernist style in which a series of new public venues would be constructed in Hungary from the 1960s onward.) Thus, the desired success was complete. The Brussels World's Fair significantly boosted the global promotion of Hungarian cuisine. The state strategically leveraged this recognition, exporting Hungarian food products, and even establishing state-run 'Hungarian restaurants' in Western cities during the 1960s, as part of its soft power efforts.[28]

After 1958, the leadership recognised the previously-neglected potential of tourism to develop into a fully-fledged economic sector. (Traditionally, tourism in Hungary had been concentrated in Budapest and around Lake Balaton, following inter-war trends.) As a result, the number of guest nights began to rise, and between 1960 and 1964, the number of foreign visitors surged fivefold, reaching 1.3 million in 1964, with 1 in 5 tourists hailing from non-socialist states.[29]

Master chefs of the socialist era and the legacy of bourgeois cuisine

The Venesz controversy: the culinary tradition versus standardisation

It is worth taking a closer look at the pivotal yet controversial figure of József Venesz (1912–1978), whose remarkable career left an indelible mark on the Hungarian gastronomy of the era. In the 1930s, he served as head chef at Budapest's most prestigious venues – the New York Café and the restaurants of the Kárpátia, Palatinus, and Hungária hotels – before becoming executive chef in Milan and Abbazia (Opatija, Croatia) from 1937 onwards. After returning home following the Second World War, he worked at the Savoy Café (Budapest) but soon found himself drawn into the political sphere and became a member of the Communist Party.

27 See details in: Róka, Enikő, 'Az 1958-as brüsszeli világkiállítás magyar pavilonja' ('The Hungarian Pavilion at the 1958 World Expo in Brussels'), in Zoltán Fehérvári, Virág Hajdú, and Endre Prakfalvi, eds., *Pavilon építészet a 19–20. században a Magyar Építészeti Múzeum gyűjteményéből* ('Pavilion architecture in the 19th–20th centuries from the collection of the Hungarian Museum of Architecture') (Budapest: OMvH Magyar Építészeti Múzeum, 2001), 169–172.

28 From 1959 to 1962, József Venesz was the head of the Department of the KONZUMEX Foreign Trade Company, where he organised and supervised the Hungarian restaurants established abroad. These 'friendship' restaurants staffed by party-vetted chefs, became hubs for cultural outreach.

29 Tischler, János, 'Az Onódy-ügy, 1964' ('The Onódy case, 1964'), *Beszélő* 9/2 (2004), <http://beszelo.c3.hu/cikkek/az-onody-ugy-1964#2004-f02-14> from 35 accessed 2.4.2025.

From 1948 to 1960, during Hungary's most austere period, he served as chef for the Hungarian Olympic team, having earned a gold diploma at the 1948 Brussels World Food Exhibition. Beginning in 1949, Venesz held leadership positions in Hungary's rapidly-changing state-hospitality sector, including the National Food Company, Budapest Catering Trust, and the Representative Catering Directorate, before achieving his crowning triumph at the 1958 Brussels World's Fair. From this point onwards, his influence became both uninterrupted and decisive. Together with Emil Turós (his co-chef in Brussels), he co-authored the *Unified Catering Cookbook and Kitchen Technology Regulations,* which was codified into law in 1961. Its instructions became mandatory for decades, standardising both commercial and institutional kitchens, while accounting for the era's limited ingredient availability and sociopolitical priorities – such as the stated goal of expanding catering services for agricultural co-operative and industrial workers. The planned economy and austerity measures of the early socialist period are clearly manifested in the cookbook's ingredient measurements, and in the simplified recipes that conformed to 'socialist morality'. It substituted specialty ingredients and reduced meat portions, while increasing calorie-dense side dishes, and also Hungarianised elitist-sounding foreign dish names.

However, the culinary revival of recent decades and the critiques from food-bloggers' circles have led to a cascade of swift, damning judgments that seek to topple Venesz's legacy. Critics from the fine-dining, reform- and eco-cuisine movements particularly condemn his excessive use of flour, non-seasonal recipes and relience on Hungarian canned goods. They also target his paprika-and-tomato sauce combinations and his adherence to the 'Holy Trinity' of onion, lard and paprika powder, along with the generous use of sour cream. As a critic put it in her 2013 article: Venesz's approach foregrounded 'peasant romanticism and a cheerful-barracks aesthetic' – a characterisation that has become a topos in the debate on his complex culinary heritage.[30] Altogether, he is blamed for the perceived decline in socialist-era dining standards without proper consideration of the historical context in which he operated.

Yet, upon closer examination, we must recognise that the generation of experts who created these regulations emerged from the high-standard, Western-oriented Hungarian hospitality industry of the inter-war period, bringing with them immense

30 Melocco, Anna, 'Kipróbáltuk a nemzet receptjeit, és kétségbeestünk' ('We Tried the Nation's Recipes and Were Horrified') (2013) <https://www.origo.hu/tafelspicc/2013/03/venesz-jozsef-magyaros-konyha-konyvkritika-receptekkel> accessed 28.3.2025.

international professional experience. Contrary to contemporary criticisms, we owe it to them that the communist leadership did not completely discard – as 'bourgeois remnants' – the culinary refinement inherited from the previous era. The imprint of the 1964 reissue of the above *Regulations* still bore the names of the great chefs of the 1930s – Emil Turós of the Bristol Hotel, János Rákóczi of the Gellért Hotel, László Szinder of the Royal Hotel, and Oszkár Lontai from the Danube-side hotel row (who later retired as manager of a socialist canning factory). During the 1960s, more discerning housewives, who kept Venesz's 'Hungarian Cuisine' cookbook[31] as their 'bible' on the shelf, could read in the 'Introduction' how Venesz's culinary philosophy referenced the great French authority, the legendary innovator of haute cuisine, August Escoffier (1846–1935). Venesz's recipes, ranging from appetisers through fish and game dishes to desserts, provide varied insights into a more sophisticated middle-class cuisine, still featuring numerous ingredients that were hardly easily obtainable at the time. The festive menus, photographs of plating, and tables set in various styles with fine chinaware, all testify to high standards. Actually, the cookbook seems rather to suggest, how these professionals navigated between preserving standards and adapting to impossible constraints. Several stories reveal how this generation of chefs, despite economic hardships, oppressive centralisation, ideological pressure, and authoritarian political control, struggled to salvage some intellectual independence, civic bearing, self-dignity, and traditions, within socialism's constricting framework.[32] (Ultimately, it should also be added, that eagerness in catering for luxury consumption is inherently linked to the elite in any political system and remains a part of hospitality professionalism.) With a more nuanced consideration, their work represents not culinary decline per se, but rather the resilience of professional traditions under circumstances that would have destroyed crafts with lesser legacy- and identity-strengths. We should, perhaps, in this context, consider the reflection written by Venesz's grandson: 'Instead of texts creating public enemy images about "Veneszism", we should rather discuss historical objectives, possibilities, and why original intentions became distorted over time ...'[33]

The vehement criticism of Venesz by the reform-centred younger generations, has also swept aside the reputations of several established culinary personalities from

31 It was first published in 1958 and later had multiple editions. Venesz's *Hungarian Culinary Art* was also published in four languages for the international market in 1958.

32 Perhaps, it was not altogether accidental, that after his 1975 retirement, Venesz and Turós received the *Golden Spoon Award* from the American culinary magazine Chef.

33 Mélyi, József, 'Javított kiadás előtt. Venesz nagyapám élete és utókora' ('Revised edition. The Life and Legacy of My Grandfather Venesz'), Magyar Narancs 2013, 16 June <https://magyarnarancs.hu/belpol/javitott-kiadas-elott-84759> accessed 28.3.2025.

the late Kádár-era and the post-regime-change decade. Károly Unger (1939–2011), a master chef and culinary writer, came from a multi-generational family of restaurant owners, whose famous tavern in Óbuda was nationalised in the early 1950s. Despite this, he chose the path of a chef, learning from great predecessors and climbing the ranks in Hungary's socialist hospitality industry.[34] As President of the Hungarian National Gastronomic Association, he organised national culinary competitions, established the Venesz József Memorial Award, and always saw it as his mission to preserve the traditions of Hungarian cuisine. He responded to the escalating debates around Hungarian gastronomy in several interviews, which included this notable quote: 'I know we must move with the times, eat in a more modern way, care for our health, and so on. But our classic dishes – our national treasures, which belong in the world's culinary heritage – should remain untouched. This is our legacy. These dishes should be prepared in the same way, everywhere, without exception.'[35]

The controversy reached its peak on the opposing side with the 'Culinary Charter' manifesto.[36] The well-intentioned manifesto – the closing line of which declared: 'Our dining culture is a rhinoceros in need of rescue. Let us adopt it!' – was signed by around 110 gastronomy professionals, winemakers, and leading intellectuals.

An emblematic effort to uphold quality – the Honey Bear buffet and the rise and fall of its leaders

The *Mézes Mackó* ('Honey Bear') buffet, that opened on Budapest's Kígyó Street in 1955, quickly established itself as the most sophisticated cold buffet of socialist

34 Between 1976 and 1985, working within the framework of the Pannónia Hotel and Restaurant Company, he served as head chef in hotels across more than 20 countries – primarily in Europe, the Middle East, and the Far East. In 1986, he succeeded Egon Lontai as President of the Hungarian Chefs' and Pastry Chefs' Association, holding the position for four terms until 2002. In 1996, his team brought home 14 gold medals from the Berlin Culinary Olympics. In 1997, he founded the Hungarian National Gastronomic Association, and he was a member of the Swedish, Japanese, and German Chefs' Associations. He also became a lifelong member of the World Association of Chefs' Societies, an honour granted to only 100 individuals, with new members admitted only upon the passing of existing ones.

35 Hargitai, György, 'Unger Károly a Magyar Nemzeti Gasztronómiai Szövetség alapítója' ('Károly Unger: Founder of the Hungarian National Gastronomic Association') <https://receptletoltes.hu/unger-karoly-a-magyar-nemzeti-gasztronomiai-szovetseg-alapitoja/> accessed 20.3.2025.

36 It was published on 9 June 2007, by the rival organisation, the Hungarian Gastronomic Association (MGE), in the *Magyar Nemzet* magazine's gastronomy column, run by Tamás B. Molnár and Dóra Bittera. <https://www.buvosszakacs.com/kulinaris-charta/ accessed> 29.3.2025.

Fig. 10. To celebrate the third anniversary of the 'Honey Bear' Buffet, they welcomed the zoo's bear as a guest. The store manager, Géza Tódor, is in the front of the photo. Budapest, 1958. (Photo donor: Sándor Bauer, Fortepan, photo ID 127340, 1958)

Hungary. It offered an exceptional French-inspired selection of delicacies, that redefined public dining standards, with its elegant presentation and refined flavours. This culinary gem served an impressive array of dishes, including mayonnaise-based salads, devilled eggs, horseradish ham rolls, aspic meat preparations, fish terrines, Swedish-style mushroom salad, caviar, fresh pastries, desserts, and refreshing drinks, while boasting about what was widely considered to be the best cream coffee in Budapest at the time.

The premises in which it was opened was formerly Géza Tódor's delicatessen shop, which had been nationalised. The story began when the powerful and gourmet-loving Minister of Culture, Gyula Ortutay, sought out Géza Tódor – who was then working as a cook in a suburban barracks canteen – with a mission to create something special. Tódor rose to the challenge, vowing to create something 'Budapest had never before seen'.[37] He transformed the space into a lavishly-elegant venue adorned with mirrors and marble, personally selecting a staff that included a chef who would later win an Oscar, demonstrating the exceptional standards he demanded.

Tódor proved equally innovative in his marketing approach, borrowing a tame bear from the zoo which he dressed in a white apron and stationed behind the counter, while personally greeting well-dressed passers-by and to invite them inside. The unique combination of quality, and the showmanship of the ever-present boss, quickly made Mézes Mackó a chic place to be, attracting party elites, artists and bureaucrats, while also remaining accessible to ordinary citizens looking for quality food in the city centre. The concept proved so successful that multiple branches opened across Budapest, all operating under state ownership, as part of the National Restaurant and Buffet Company led by Onódy Lajos (1920–1996) – a strategically important position, especially in post-1956 Hungary, where dining establishments served as listening posts for the regime.[38] Among the attractive-looking waitresses,

37 See the interview with Tódor, by Boglárka Kovács (2001): Kovács, Boglárka, 'Egy medve nem csinál nyarat' ('One bear does not make a summer'), Népszabadság 59 (Nov. 17, 2001), 27.

38 Onódy was the head of the company, overseen by the Representative Catering Directorate of the Interior Ministry, from its establishment in 1950 (see also footnote 20). Over time, the enterprise grew into one of Hungary's largest catering companies with a nationwide network, boasting 380 establishments of varying sizes. The company under Onódy introduced, for example, street soda carts, imported Italian Caggia machines for cream coffee, launched soft-serve ice cream machines, smoothie drinks and music jukeboxes, to Hungary. To better illustrate the complexities of the era, it is worth noting that this paradoxical individual (Onódy) had been sentenced to die in a Gestapo prison during the war and was awarded the Righteous Among the Nations honour by Yad Vashem in 1995. Even in his communist leadership position, he quietly aided numerous socially-ostracised

there was always someone, like Teca the coffee-maker in Snake Street, whose job it was to report back to the regime.

The buffet's prestige reached such heights that it hosted Khrushchev during his Hungarian visit in 1955. And later, when Mézes Mackó was invited, as a reward, to the USSR, they impressed the Soviet leader and Moscow with their culinary offerings. However, the political winds shifted dramatically when Khrushchev fell from power in 1964, interestingly taking Mézes Mackó's management down with him, through fabricated charges.[39] Onódy Lajos had stood in someone's way and was arrested on charges of conspiracy, misappropriation, abuse of office, fraud, and bribery. There were also salacious rumours of orgies with actresses. Tódor was also arrested and got out of prison only in 1971. Despite these setbacks, the buffet continued to operate uninterrupted until the early 1990s when it finally succumbed to the new capitalist era. It left behind a legacy of unmatched cold-buffet cuisine that Hungary has yet to replicate, serving as both a testament to socialist-era gourmet culture and as a cautionary tale about the intersection of politics and gastronomy.

Bridging pre–war and socialist home economics

Alongside the above-outlined portraits of male experts, it is worth highlighting the impactful legacy of a distinguished female professional who stood out primarily because of her educational and specialist literary work. Ilona Horváth (1906–1969), of Transylvanian origin, first trained as a primary-school teacher before specialising in home-economics instruction, while also serving as a church community sister. During World War II, she relocated to Budapest, and in 1945 was appointed Director of the Törökszentmiklós Housekeeping Middle School. From 1952 until her retirement, she served as Director of a Budapest girls' boarding school, while

contemporaries by providing them with employment. 'The secret to Onódy's success lay in the fact that from the very beginning, wherever possible, he entrusted the management of both existing and newly-established canteens, buffets, and restaurants, to former owners officially classified as "declassed elements" – highly regarded professionals who were true experts in their field. Simultaneously, the most skilled masters, who had been sidelined during the Rákosi era due to political unreliability, found employment in the company's central pastry workshop and cold kitchen that supplied Budapest. This unconventional approach was made possible primarily by Onódy's impeccable working-class movement credentials, which provided him with the necessary political protection.' (Information about Onódy and the quote is from: Tischler 2004 – see note 29 above. János Tischler's historical case-study draws on archival sources, court documents and interviews.).

39 'The uncertainty that arose after Khrushchev's fall, raised the question of how János Kádár could overcome the shakiness of his position, which his opponents in the upper echelons of the party sought to exploit.' (Tischler, 'Az Onódy-ügy, 1964' – see note 29 above.)

continuing to teach home economics. Her cookery book, an enduring classic (with over 20 editions), was first published in 1955 by the Democratic Alliance of Hungarian Women. (From 1956 onwards, significantly-expanded editions appeared.) This work, subtly preserving pre-war culinary traditions, became one of post-war Hungary's most influential domestic manuals.

The 7th edition, published in 1973, was supplemented and revised by Angéla F. Nagy. This updated version of Ilona Horváth's cookbook by Angéla F. Nagy, is still considered the essential guide for both novice and advanced housewives alike. Beyond its excellent recipes, this beloved manual also shares technical kitchen fundamentals and rational household management tips in an accessible and enjoyable style. (Notably, Angéla F. Nagy was the first wife of famed writer István Örkény.)

Ilona Horváth's personal example also sheds light on the perseverance of middle-class influences under socialism – through the process of standardisation of cooking skills as a result of the successful spread of the ideal of 'good bourgeois cooking' through several channels, including the pre-war education of women in domestic science (discussed at the beginning of this paper).

Here it must be mentioned that handwritten pre-war recipe notebooks – a distinctive form of female heritage – carefully preserved by mothers and grandmothers in declassed middle-class households, were treasured family heirlooms. Those special flavours – pâtés, pastries, sweet delicacies, homemade Christmas fondant candy, liqueurs or spiced vermouth – which could thus grace the holiday table, brought unique colour to family celebrations, and became integral parts of distinctive family traditions. These dishes served as vessels of memory, a tool for family remembrance and generational bonding through taste and ritual. This quiet culinary resistance as a form of civil resilience could lift families for a day above the uniform drabness of everyday life in socialism.

Liberalisation of travel, allure of new flavours, and the diversification of palates

Another aspect of the late Kádár era, one that gradually left its mark on individual eating habits, and which should also be elucidated, is travel. In the 1970s and 1980s, Hungarian citizens were given more and more – albeit still limited – opportunities

for international travel. At first, they were allowed to travel within the socialist bloc, then to the West, initially on an organised (i.e. controlled) basis or by special invitation, and later as individual tourists. Western travel, initially allowed only once every three years, was later increased to once a year, with strict restrictions on convertible currency exchange. (For many, it was a game of hide-and-seek to smuggle currency through the strict border controls.)

Before the 1970s, only high-career athletes, artists, scientists, and loyal cadres, were allowed more opportunities for official travel to the West, but still under strict supervision. The risk of getting caught did not stop many of these from smuggling Western luxury goods into the country on their return – often in quantities large enough for sale under the table, be it chewing gum, Swiss chocolate, nylon stockings, or Swiss watches.

By the mid-1980s, economic shortages within the Eastern Bloc led to a boom in shopping tourism. While Poles, Serbs and others came to Hungary to avail of street-vending in the semi-legal 'Comecon Market, Hungarian shoppers eagerly headed West. Vienna's Mariahilfer Strasse became a prime destination for them, its stores crowded with Hungarians hauling back refrigerators, hi-fi systems and other electronic gadgets, packing their socialist-era cars (Zsigulis, Trabants, Wartburgs, Škodas, and Dacias) to the brim with Western goods unavailable at home.

Young people of the 1980s were eager to take the opportunity to 'breathe the fresh air of freedom'. For young Hungarian backpackers – equipped with an Interrail pass to spend the night on the train, hitchhiked, stayed in youth hostels with a student card or simply slept in sleeping bags in public places – these trips became a symbolic escape. They saw the West as an aspirational ideal, an unattainable world where they could absorb new fashions, ideas and experiences, which they were eager to bring back home.

The average tourist's very limited travel allowance was good for a baguette and a bunch of browned, cut-price bananas, a day, in addition to the canned food and dry sausages brought from home. For many, a slice of pizza, a plate of spaghetti, or a fast-food burger was the highlight of the trip if they could fit it into their limited budget. The McDonald's craze in Eastern Europe also dates back to this period, when the craving for a hamburger made fast-food a symbol of Western travel for the low-end traveller. It was an iconic moment of the last years of the Kádár era when, on 29 April 1988, the Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister of Agriculture and Food, officially

opened the first domestic outlet of that American fast food chain, the first in the Soviet bloc, on Régiposta Street in downtown Pest. From then on, long queues snaked down the street in front of McDonalds, which was open for a surprisingly-long 14 hours a day. Together with the soon-be-opened Burger King, these were a sensation, as they were elsewhere in Eastern Europe.[40]

Until the 1980s, Hungarian catering was exclusively basic Hungarian in style. Only one or two restaurants representing the Serbian and Greek minorities in Hungary (e.g. the 'Greek Jug' and the 'Serbian Restaurant' in Szentendre) brought limited ethnic flavours to the offer. German and Austrian cuisine was not alien to Hungarians because of its geo-cultural and historical antecedents, and it was also present in the restaurant offerings of the socialist era. The 'Berlin Restaurant' opened in 1960 (Szent István boulevard 13, Budapest). It advertised itself with German dishes prepared by German chefs.[41] At the time, there were restaurants under the name of 'Sofia', 'Bucharest' and 'Belgrade', showcasing the cuisine of friendly socialist countries.

In addition, the then very popular and unique 'Baikal Tea-house and Restaurant' in the House of Soviet Culture and Science (Semmelweis Street, 5th district, Budapest) was perhaps the greatest success.[42] It represented top gastronomy and introduced some staple dishes of Russian cuisine to the Hungarian public (e.g. Russian meat salad, pirogue, bulochki, syrniki, crab salad, solyanka soup, beetroot soup, pelmeni dumplings, cutlet slices, and Stroganoff steak). Vodka, Armenian cognac, or the Baikal cocktail made by combining the bull's blood-red wine from Eger and Soviet Igristoye champagne, were also popular drinks. Operating between 1973 and 1990, the catering unit was a worthy contender for the title of the country's first truly trendy restaurant. The tearoom at street level was a popular meeting place for downtown strollers and students, while the basement restaurant was the venue for more exclusive occasions.[43] There is no need to explain the political-ideological motivations behind this soft power gesture of Soviet-Hungarian friendship in a country where Russian was a compulsory subject in schools for children from the age of 10 years.

40 Pizza Hut arrived in Budapest, on Király Street, in 1991, at the time of the regime-change.

41 The Europa Restaurant, for example, hosted Austrian dinner parties in 1983. The Wernesgrüner and Kaltenberg Bavarian royal pubs also opened in the mid-1980s.

42 See the newsreel on the opening of the cultural complex: <https://filmhiradokonline.hu/watch.php?id=21405 Budapest Filmstúdió, inv. no.: MFH_1974_05-01> accessed 18.3.2025.

43 Pál Somogyi was the interior designer of the pleasant environment, using glossy materials.

The Soviet Union, on the other hand, was not accessible to ordinary tourists, who could only travel there on official trips under controlled conditions. So, despite years of language-learning, there was little opportunity to use Russian. It was much easier to travel to other European countries of the Eastern Bloc. The relatively more-accessible trips to the Bulgarian coast, for instance, brought back home to Hungary the fashion for shopska salad. Trips to Yugoslavia (perhaps Italy, Greece or France) in the 1980s, made it possible for the Hungarian tourist travelling to the seaside, to taste fresh seafood, mussels, oysters and crabs, in addition to the canned herring, sardines, sprats, Albanian mussels, and Russian caviar, that reached Hungary in the socialist trade. (At the same time, love of seafood is still rather a characteristic of more open-minded, experienced travellers, while many Hungarians, even intellectuals, are more averse to it and stick conservatively to the good-old familiar tastes.)

Then, in the 1980s, home-made recipes, attempting to approximate the Italian taste-experience began to circulate, such as spaghetti Bolognese (made with Hungarian dry pasta and canned tomatoes) or home-made pizza, which imitated the original, but was made in a rectangular baking pan with Hungarian sausage on top. At the turn of the 1970s and the 1980s, the fondue-set appeared in the crockery shops and very quickly became a favourite dish at house parties, especially the recipe version of the Swiss cheese fondue. The raclette grill-set started to appear in shops and in more innovative households somewhat later, around the change of regime. It was at this time that French onion soup began to appear on the menus of some restaurants and on the tables of more experimental housewifes.

It should be mentioned here that it was of great diplomatic significance – thanks to President Mitterand's visit to Hungary in 1982 – that the French launched an architectural competition in 1984 for the new building of the French Institute, which was constructed on the Danube bank near the Chain Bridge in Budapest, between 1988 and 1992. The architecturally-sophisticated and progressive building was designed by the distinguished French architect, Georges Maurios, who still considers the Budapest building to be one of the most important works of his oeuvre.[44] The new French Institute, and the French restaurant opposite it operating in the garden

44 On the construction of the building see: *'A KÉK Kortárs Építészeti Központ kiállítása a Budapesti Francia Intézetben, Kiállításkatalógus'* ('KÉK Contemporary Architecture Centre exhibition at the French Institute in Budapest, Exhibition catalogue') (Catalogue design: Németh, Zsuzsa) (Budapest: Budapesti Francia Intézet, 2013), online: Issuu; Published on 6 Oct, 2014 <https://issuu.com/kekfoundation/docs/fo-utca-17> accessed 20.3.2025.

of a historic Buda House – albeit expensive and, therefore, accessible to but a few – definitely drew attention to French cuisine in those days.

Hungarians also started to get acquainted with popular versions of ethnic cuisines from further afield – the Hungarian traveller abroad could stray into Indian, Chinese, Japanese or Korean diners. It was in the 1980s, however, that the first Chinese restaurant – the 'Red Dragon' (operated from 1982 to 1994 at Népköztársaság street 80, now Andrássy Avenue) – and the 'Duck' in the 1st district, were opened. The head chef of the 'Red Dragon' (Lajos Bíró) had authentic knowledge backed up by study trips to North Korea and China, but the recipes were re-tuned to bring the flavours closer to Hungarian tastes. Original raw materials were regularly sourced from Germany through the state-owned foreign trade company – Medimpex. The first Japanese restaurant opened a few years later, around 1985, opposite the Erkel Theatre (Luther street 4–6), and again after a slight delay, the first Korean restaurant ('Seoul House' in the 1st district, Fő street) opened in 1990, the year of the regime change. (It was only after the change of regime that cheaper Chinese and Turkish restaurants started to mushroom in Budapest. Thai and Vietnamese restaurants, in contrast to their current proliferation, are relatively recent arrivals.)

The evolution of recipes, reflecting reformist approaches, more adventurous flavours, and international culinary influences, is clearly traceable in the published cookbooks of the era and in media coverage of international cuisine connected to travel reports.[45] By the 1980s, a wave of new publications emerged, often richly illustrated with photographs, aiming to both modernise traditional Hungarian cuisine and to encourage creativity, variety, and openness to novelty in both everyday and festive cooking. Among these, the '99... Dishes' series (featuring cheese/egg, potato, meat, and game/fish dishes, etc.) by Mari Lajos and her husband – photographer Károly Hemző – grew to 31 thematic volumes. This album-like series became a runaway success and remains a staple on many family bookshelves to this day. (The project began when Hemző, commissioned by Globus canning factory to shoot promotional images for the Arab markets, found the plain packaging uninspiring. His discerning wife decided to cook the canned contents creatively, thus marking the start of their collaboration.)

45 See the Hospitality industry database ('Vendeglatoipar-torteneti-adattar-adatbazisa') for the download in Excel format, of the Hungarian Trade and Hospitality Industry Museum (Magyar Kereskedelmi és Vendéglátóipari Múzeum) Budapest <https://mkvm.hu/vendeglatoipar-torteneti-dokumentacios-gyujtemeny/> accessed 3.4.2025.

Celebrity chefs also shaped home cooking: László Benke, Gundel's head chef and Olympic cooking gold medalist, won housewives' hearts through his TV show *Főzőcske, de okosan!* ('Cook Smartly!'). Many women clipped and collected recipes from the popular weekly *Nők Lapja* ('Women's Magazine'). Meanwhile, the quarterly *Magyar Konyha* ('Hungarian Kitchen'), launched in 1977 by the Tourism Propaganda and Publishing Company, targeted more dedicated home cooks.[46]

It should be added that in the 1980s, there was a significant upward momentum in the entrepreneurial sphere. It was, in fact, a period of a kind of grey economy. A good part of the catering industry became 'gebines'.[47] (The word means an enterprise operating under a lease contract, which may operate on a long-term rental basis for a fixed rent without accounting. It was most commonly used to refer to 'a catering business without accurate accounting during the party-state era'.) In a report about one of the star chefs of the time, Lajos Bíró recalled, that:

> it is also important to examine how the chef managed to stand out from the crowd. It was not only due to the fact that ... the average standard was very low, undeniably ... In the half-baked, entrepreneurial, profit-oriented units of socialism, the big money was made by cheating the owner, which was the state, and the guest on top of that.

After the change of regime, this money pump did not, of course, magically disappear. According to Lajos Bíró, what was new at the 'Red Dragon', for example, was that 'the guest was not cheated'. He added, that later on, when he became part owner of his next shops, he made sure that he was not short-changed, but it remained a matter of vanity that his guests always got a quality service.[48]

So, all in all, the liberalisation of the late Kádár era, and the relative permeability of borders, began to challenge the ethnocentricity of Hungarian cuisine, and to colour the palette with some typical pieces of Western-European standard street-food, and the ethnic cuisines of other nations. It can be stated, that the consumer-driven mobility had quietly mentally-eroded socialist isolationism.

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46 Today, the magazine continues in operation – in print and digital formats– with substantial state subsidies, chaired by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's wife, Anikó Lévai <https://magyarkonyhaonline.hu/gasztromagazin> accessed 28.3.2025.

47 The term is probably based on the German term *Gewinn* ('profit') in its native German form.

48 Quoted in an interview with Bíró by Horváth, B. Balázs, 'Bíró bezár – Ha ez itt a vég, hát az nagyon derék', ('Bíró closes – If this is the end, then so be it'), 5.10.2022: <https//index.hu/kultur/degusztator/2022/05/10/biro-lajos-portre-gasztronomia-buja-diszno-k-sef/> accessed 19.3.2025.

After the change of regime, gastronomy, and especially the Hungarian wine industry, started to undergo thorough quality changes, although the old reflexes were still in effect for a long time. The 1990s were, in many ways, a decade of transition. The real sophisticated gastronomic breakthrough, the convergence of the offer with international trends, the reform of the recipes of Hungarian dishes, and the emergence of restaurant businesses that achieved international success, began more from the turn of the millennium, and even more so again from the 2010s. However, the process was unfortunately interrupted by the lockdown and recession caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, to which many businesses fell victim.

In spite of the unifying impact of the bourgeois and socialist period (public catering,[49] the food industry, service sector, education, etc.), recognisable regional differences can still be observed today in Hungary – in the traditional tastes of larger regions and in family cooking-habits that have carried on local traditions. Of course, individual situations, ambitions, abilities, and the former social status of a family, can still create exceptions in the field of knowledge. The role of food heritage in constructing the identity of groups and localities, including Hungarian minorities and diaspora communities outside Hungary, could be the topic of another article.[50]

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