

# the Art of Eating

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## New Ways to Be a Restaurant in Paris



*fegatelli*, Belardi cuts pork liver into bite-sized pieces, wraps them individually in caul fat, and skewers each on a dried wild fennel sprig; these he roasts to a perfect pink and serves on a bed of turnip tops. Besides *la cioncia*, another specialty you won't find outside of the Valdinievole is *farinata*, a soup of beans and *cavolo nero* (the dark Tuscan kale) flavored with rosemary and sage and thickened with *farina gialla*, or cornmeal. Belardi's *ribollita* is more regional, the bread and tomato soup prepared as his mother in Arezzo did, stratified with the thinnest slices of dried bread. His *acqua cotta* is not a simple combination of water, bread, and oil, as in the well-known version from the Maremma, but a summertime favorite dense with fresh beans and other vegetables along with, when available, lots of porcini, which these days raise it well out of the *poveri* class. In fact, the poorest farmers always counted on porcini to enhance their diet, and mushroom hunting is still a main fall sport.

The olive oil, pressed in late November, comes from the *frantoio* in nearby Croci (a new mill with machines that pit the olives before crushing — I prefer the bite of the oil made by the old method of crushing the olives, pits and all, under granite stones). A bottle of this oil is on the table, and it is hard to resist pouring a bit on the sliced unsalted fresh Tuscan farm bread that arrives before the menu. The house wine, served *in fiasco* is, improbably, a very agreeable Merlot from the far-away Veneto.

Belardi, having no professional training but, like so many Tuscan men, having a knowledge of and practical appreciation for foods he grew up with, has gained a sure touch over the years he has been in Antico Colle's kitchen and now delights in a certain

whimsy. Last time I was there, the skinny first wild asparagus were just coming into season, and Belardi was featuring them in a pasta dish. When it arrived, I couldn't remember what I'd asked for. Here was a strange plate of wormlike beet-red pasta covered with a creamy sauce of skinny green asparagus topped with just the slightest smattering of bright yellow, hard-cooked egg yolk. Its attractiveness was dubious, it most certainly was not local or traditional, and yet I had to admit the taste was delicious. Another special that evening was *taglierini* with a sauce of white truffle cream and porcini. I asked Belardi about the odd dirt-brown color of the pasta. Made with chocolate, he told me proudly. Okay. Fortunately, the chocolate flavor wasn't obvious and only intensified the truffle and *funghi* sauce.

Although both foreigners and Tuscans tend to lean on the *primi* as the more interesting courses in Tuscany's *trattorie*, not so the locals. They go out to enjoy the main courses, and Belardi offers lots of them. *Tagliate*, slices from thick slabs of wood-grilled Chianina beef, still red inside, are served with sauces of fresh herbs or tomato or *rucola* and porcini or a cream sauce of Parmesan cheese and white truffle butter. The most popular beef dish is of course *bistecca fiorentina*, at least three inches thick, served on the bone, bloody inside. Fresh fish — brought directly each day from the nearby Tyrrhenian coast — are usually just grilled and fileted.

Belardi is good at desserts, too, pretty much all of them what appeals to the Tuscan palate: fruit *crostate*, *zuppa inglese*, chocolate mousse, and rich, all-too-sweet *semifreddo*. I stick with the *cantucci* served with *vin santo* to dip the dry biscuits into, a most traditional and satisfying way to end a meal.

— Beth Elon

## Books

### Hungarian Homemade

#### Helen's Hungarian Heritage Recipes

by Clara Margaret Czégény, 310 pages, Dream Machine Publications, 3rd edition, spiral-bound, \$24.95 plus shipping at Kitchen Arts and Letters in New York (2006).

If you remember your grandmother as permanently apron-clad, stationed by the stove holding a wooden spoon, and sharing stories of her childhood in a strong foreign accent as she stirred, kneaded, chopped, and sliced, then *Helen's Hungarian Heritage Recipes* will strike an emphatic chord. For everyone else, it will conjure up vivid images. The self-published book transports me back to my native Hungary, recalling the smoky, meaty butcher shops, the tang of fermenting vegetables at the market, and the hiss of the pressure cooker simmering goulash in my mother's kitchen.

The Helen of the book's title is Clara Czégény's mother, now in her 80s, who left Hungary with her husband in 1947, eventually settling in Brantford, Ontario, and raising three daughters. Clara and her two sisters grew up eating as if they had never left Hungary. Reading the approximately 300 recipes is like sifting through three generations of Czégény family albums, peeking in on birthday celebrations, holiday gatherings, and Sunday lunches.

While tidbits of culinary history sneak their way into the pages of the book, those interested in the origins of Hungarian food and precisely what makes it different will be left wanting more. Rather, the book records an oral and practical tradition that, with the passing of each grandmother, is being

lost. Readers of Hungarian origin will breathe a sigh of relief as they see all the dishes they ate as children but never learned to make — the *lecsó* is not lost! (That's a classic pepper stew.)

Most of the recipes are simple, with compact ingredient lists and straightforward instructions. The *zöldborsó leves nokedlival* (green pea soup with dumplings) tastes *exactly* like the version I ate as a child. Some dishes, however, need adjustments. The proportions called for in the *meggy leves* (sour cherry soup) made a dense, gooey pudding rather than a refreshing summer soup that is meant to be, well, soupy. Sour cream is the key ingredient, after the cherries, and I used what I could find at the grocery store. As I added water to get the familiar consistency — not a suggestion in the recipe — I thought that maybe tart, runny *tejföl*, real Hungarian sour cream, was always on hand in the Czégény household and made the soup just right. But cooks new to Hungarian cuisine won't know how dishes are supposed to taste and look.

And even if you're familiar with Hungarian cooking, results are not guaranteed. Helen's recipe for pickled cucumbers is faithful to the traditional method, in which you place pickling cucumbers in a jar, add dill, cover with brine, and then put a slice of rye bread on top before securing the lid. Unfor-



Evangelina Mackell

Clara Margaret Czégény

tunately, when I made the recipe, the centers of my cucumbers rotted before they pickled.

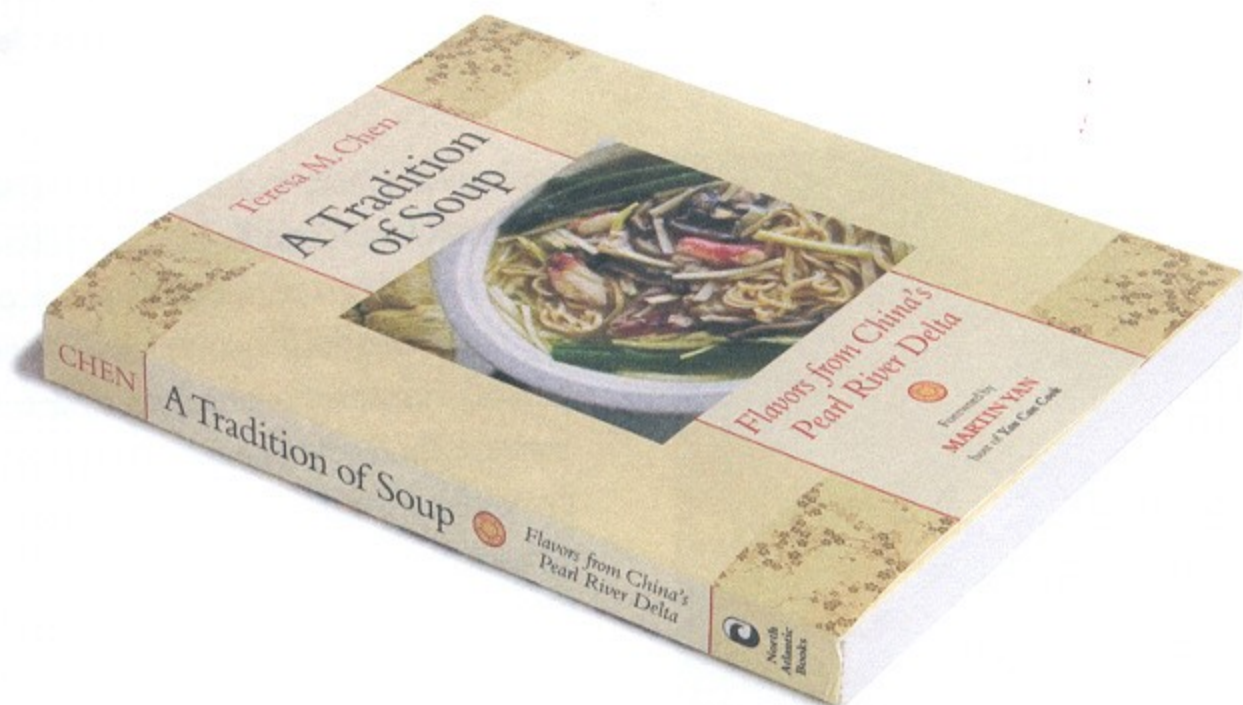
The book includes a useful but haphazard glossary of ingredients to help orient those who are new to Hungarian food. Essentials like paprika, poppy seeds, and caraway make the cut, but a few important items, heavily relied upon in the recipes, are missing. One is *túró*, a soft, white, fresh, acid-set cheese, not unlike quark, and a staple of Hungarian cooking. Many recipes, however, call for “dry cottage cheese,” and using that instead of *túró* in the *túrós gomboc* (*túró* dumplings) will yield radically different results. A somewhat better option is farmer's cheese. The entry for “celery,” called for in numerous recipes, should read

“celeriac”: celery stalks are virtually impossible to find in Hungary. Bacon, another mainstay, receives just a passing mention. As Clara writes, the Hungarian version “is smoked and full of intense flavor.” But my mother would consider the book's suggestion to substitute sliced bacon to be culinary treason, especially as *szallona* is available in many urban areas of the United States, especially those with Hungarian émigré populations. When I was growing up in Washington, D.C., my mother would pack us in the car and drive directly to 1580 Second Avenue in Manhattan to stock up on the real thing at the Hungarian Meat Market, still an excellent resource. The smell of smoked fat would linger in the car for days.

Another glossary omission that may stump readers is Vegeta, included in a handful of dishes. A seasoning based primarily on salt and MSG, Vegeta was first produced and marketed in 1958 in the former Yugoslavia, and smuggled into Hungary before it was exported in 1967. Though certainly not a traditional ingredient, Vegeta continues to be a common addition to soups and stews (so common that expatriates can buy it by the kilo at the Hungarian Meat Market). Although in many ways Helen's recipes are frozen in time, her use of Vegeta probably points to relatives or friends from back home telling her about this new ingredient. There is perhaps nothing more authentic in today's Hungarian food.

And if compromises have been made in the case of some ingredients, those compromises are inconsistent. To make *túrós csusza* (noodles with *túró* and bacon), you will need not only *túró*, *tejföl*, and *szallona*, but also the large square *csusza* noodles. The book calls for merely “broad” packaged egg noodles, but you could and should





make *csusza* from scratch. Meanwhile the recipe for *töltött paprika* (stuffed peppers) calls for yellow Hungarian peppers, which you will have to grow from seed.

Though some ingredients may be hard to come by, traditional techniques go a long way toward producing authentic results. Among Hungarian techniques, the most important are making *rántás* (roux) and *habarás* (slurry) to thicken everything from soups and stews to chicken paprikas, and Clara details the making and use of both. My mother rarely bothered with *rántás* and relied on *lisztszórás* — simply sprinkling on flour in the first stages of cooking — a method also found in many of Helen's recipes.

The most appealing quality of *Helen's Hungarian Heritage Recipes* is her daughter's friendly voice, sometimes loud and funny. "Confession: when Mom used to station me to stir the noodles — there were hardly any left for the soup." "Rice, milk, sugar and butter — what could be better and more comforting? Hey — I know — tucked in the butter flakey sheets of phyllo sheets. Who knew?" "What's up with all that sour cream in Hungarian cooking?" The nine recipes for sweet noodle dishes are preceded by a friendly warning: "Once you sample any one of these luscious treats, you will NOT be able to resist these classics."

Readers will forgive the errors in spelling and grammar in a book that feels as terrifically homemade as its recipes.

— Petra Tanos

## Soup's On

### **A Tradition of Soup: Flavors from China's Pearl River Delta**

by Teresa M. Chen, 383 pages, North Atlantic Books, paperback, \$25 (2009).

Civilizations that place soup at the apex of fine cuisine are often themselves considered to be complex and sophisticated. From great stocks emerge the sauces of classical French cuisine; from dashi, the stock of sea vegetables and fish, emerge the complex mineral flavors so critical to Japanese cuisine. Among the advanced soup cultures are the French, Polish, and Chinese. Now, to illustrate the link between soup and civilization, comes *A Tradition of Soup: Flavors from China's Pearl River Delta*, which focuses on part of Guangdong province, formerly Canton. Teresa M. Chen addresses the intersection of Chinese food, medicine, and culture that is expressed in soup.

In Chinese gastronomy, what tastes good and what is good for you overlap to a high degree. In China, rice and a brothy, simple, warm soup are the foundation of everyday family

meals. Soup is present at breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Warm, comforting soup — sometimes also tea, never cold water — washes down a meal. During my childhood in Bangkok, the Chinese women around me, especially my mother and our Cantonese cook, imbued in me the notion (it was never really articulated and taught) that soup holds the extracted essences of nutrition, medicine, and flavor. Soup is at once gentle and powerful. If you're sick, soup heals. If you're weak, soup fortifies. If you're welcoming grand guests, soup celebrates. *Tong* (湯) the general term for soup, refers to decoctions of all kinds and extends even to tea and herbal infusions.

I'm disheartened these days when I visit cities in China and the Pacific Rim and see youths drinking ice-cold sodas with their food, because of the sensory conflict caused by the icy and sugary Coke. Chen explains that in traditional Chinese medicine, the cold liquid disturbs the crucial workings of the stomach, which is considered a cauldron in which foods are held at 100 degrees and are broken down for optimal metabolism. "It follows that cold drinks lower the temperature of the 'soup' in the cauldron, hence impeding the breaking down of food in the middle burner, and, therefore, impairing digestion." Chen lays out the principles of Chinese herbal medicine and then fits food into that framework.

Chen traces the soup-making traditions in southern Guangdong province, noted for their highly developed soups. The Cantonese language reflects the complexity of soup. Chen defines the four varieties: "*Tong* [also *tang* in Mandarin]: broth, soup, and stew. *Gang*: thickened soup or bisque. *Juk*: rice soup or porridge. *Tohngseui*: sweet soup." She lists the four degrees of boiling, including *bou*, "boiling for more