

Real Hungarian Beef Stew

Stews overloaded with vegetables and sour cream give goulash a bad name. We wanted to set the record straight.

BY DAVID PAZMIÑO

Though you'd never guess it from the gussied-up versions served in this country, traditional Hungarian goulash is the simplest of stews, calling for little more than beef, onions, and paprika. Sour cream has no place in the pot, nor do mushrooms, green peppers, or most herbs. Least welcome of all are the ketchup and Worcestershire sauce that were standard ingredients in my mother's renditions. Instead, the best goulash features the simple heartiness of beef melded with the sweetness of long-cooked onions. But the real revelation is the paprika. Instead of being a mere accent, its fruity, almost chocolaty flavors infuse the meat and help transform the braising liquid into a rich, thick sauce.

Ignoring the countless recipes with ingredient lists as long as my arm, I set out to bring a humble but delicious stew back to its roots.

Sorting Out the Essentials

The Hungarian herdsmen who developed this campfire stew used tough cuts of meat such as shin (a cross-section from the front leg that includes both bone and meat), cooking it for hours over a low fire until tender. While many modern recipes still call for shin, it is not widely available in this country. I settled on chuck-eye roast, a flavorful center cut from the upper shoulder that is a test kitchen favorite for stew. I bought a whole roast and cut it myself to ensure uniform pieces that would cook evenly. In keeping with the authentic recipes I found, I cut large pieces—1½ inches—a size that kept the meat from turning stringy or falling apart during cooking.

As for the paprika, my tasters affirmed that the traditional sweet kind was best, preferring its floral, fruity qualities to the spiciness of hot paprika. Fresh, high-quality paprika is a must (see “Sweet Paprika,” on page 9), but to achieve the desired level of intensity, some recipes call for as much as half a cup per 3 pounds of meat. I found that once I reached 3 tablespoons, the spice began contributing a gritty, dusty texture I didn't like.



Great goulash is all about the meat—and the paprika.

To eliminate grittiness, I tried steeping the paprika in broth and then straining it through a coffee filter. This captured plenty of paprika flavor without a trace of its texture, but straining took nearly

Smooth Spice Solution

The large quantity of paprika in authentic Hungarian goulash can turn it gritty. Here are two solutions.



COMMERCIAL CONVENIENCE

Hard-to-find Hungarian paprika cream is a smooth blend of paprika and red bell peppers.



HOMEMADE SOLUTION

We created our own quick version by pureeing dried paprika with roasted red peppers and a little tomato paste and vinegar.

30 minutes—a deal breaker. Processing the paprika and broth in a blender proved futile, as the spice was already too fine to be broken down further. After consulting with chefs at a few Hungarian restaurants, I was turned on to a new idea: paprika cream, a condiment my sources told me was as common in Hungarian cooking as the dried spice. No stores I could find stocked it, so I ordered it online. “Paprika cream” turned out to be a deep red paste, packaged in a metal tube, that contained ground paprika camouflaged in a puree of red bell peppers. When I added it to my stew, it created vibrant paprika flavor without any offensive grittiness.

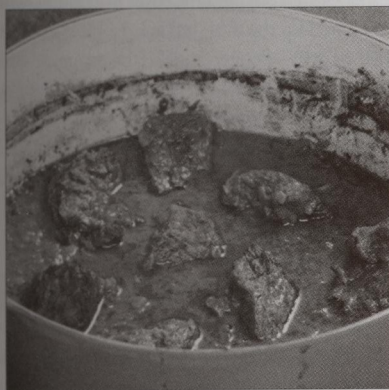
This convenience product was great, but I didn't want to have to hunt it down every time I made goulash. Why not create my own paprika cream? I went to the test kitchen pantry for a jar of roasted red peppers (their tender texture would be better for my purposes than fresh). I drained the peppers and pureed them in a food processor along with the paprika. To better approximate the lively yet concentrated flavors of the cream from the tube, I also added a couple of tablespoons of tomato paste and a little vinegar. Bingo! I was able to add up to ⅓ cup paprika without the stew seeming as if I'd dumped a handful of sand into the pot.

Stewing Things Up

To ensure the most tender meat possible, I had been salting the beef and allowing it to stand for a few minutes before cooking—a method we often use in the test kitchen. As the salt penetrates, it helps break down the proteins, tenderizing the meat fibers. Up to now I had also been following the standard stew protocol: Sear the meat in batches, cook aromatics (in this case, just onions), return the beef to the pot along with broth and other ingredients, and cook until the meat is tender. But once I introduced paprika paste into the mix, I found the flavor of the seared meat competed with the paprika's brightness. Referring back to the hundreds of goulash recipes I had gathered in my research, I found an interesting trend: Many did not sear the meat. Instead, the

SCIENCE: Skipping the Sear, but Not the Flavor

Most stews begin by browning meat on the stovetop to boost flavor. They also call for lots of added liquid. Our recipe skips the sear and goes into a moderate 325-degree oven. Though this relatively low temperature can't compare with the sizzling heat of a 500-degree skillet, over time, the dry top layer of meat will reach 300 degrees—the temperature at which the meat begins to brown, forming thousands of new flavor compounds. But only the top of the meat will brown; due to the surrounding liquid, the submerged part of the meat can't rise above the boiling point of water, or 212 degrees Fahrenheit. —D.P.



RIISING ABOVE IT ALL

Even at a relatively low oven temperature, our method still triggers browning—but only on the “dry” part of the meat above the liquid.

onions went into the pot first to soften, followed by the paprika and meat, and then the whole thing was left to cook. That's it. No liquids were ever added.

Intrigued, but dubious that this method would work, I cooked the onions briefly in oil, added the paprika paste and meat, and placed the covered pot in the oven. (We have found that the gentle, steady heat of a low oven provides better results for stew than the stove.) Sure enough, the onions and meat provided enough liquid to stew the meat. As I cooked batch after batch using this no-sear method, I noticed something peculiar: The meat above the liquid actually browned during cooking. In effect, I was developing similar (though not quite as intense) flavors as if I had seared the beef. Toward the end of cooking, after the meat browned, I added a little broth to thin out the stewing liquid and make it more saucelike.

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In keeping with authentic goulash, the only vegetables in the pot were onions. But in deference to my American tasters, who wanted at least a few vegetables in their stew, I incorporated carrots into the mix, finding that I also appreciated the sweetness and textural contrast they provided. For those tasters who wanted the extra richness of sour cream, I found $\frac{1}{4}$ cup did the trick. Even with these slight adulterations, my Hungarian goulash was the real deal: a simple dish of tender braised beef packed with paprika flavor.

HUNGARIAN BEEF STEW

SERVES 6

Do not substitute hot, half-sharp, or smoked Spanish paprika for the sweet paprika in the stew (see our recommended brands at right), as they will compromise the flavor of the dish. Since paprika is vital to this recipe, it is best to use a fresh container. We prefer chuck-eye roast, but any boneless roast from the chuck will work. Cook the stew in a Dutch oven with a tight-fitting lid. (Alternatively, to ensure a tight seal, place a sheet of foil over the pot before adding the lid.) The stew can be cooled, covered tightly, and refrigerated for up to 2 days; wait to add the optional sour cream until after reheating. Before reheating, skim the hardened fat from the surface and add enough water to the stew to thin it slightly. Serve the stew over boiled potatoes or egg noodles.

- 1 boneless beef chuck-eye roast (about $3\frac{1}{2}$ pounds), trimmed of excess fat and cut into $1\frac{1}{2}$ -inch cubes (see note)

Table salt

- $\frac{1}{3}$ cup sweet paprika (see note)

- 1 (12-ounce) jar roasted red peppers, drained and rinsed (about 1 cup)

- 2 tablespoons tomato paste

- 3 teaspoons white vinegar

- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil

- 4 large onions, diced small (about 6 cups)

- 4 large carrots, peeled and cut into 1-inch-thick rounds (about 2 cups)

- 1 bay leaf

- 1 cup beef broth, warmed

- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup sour cream (optional; see note)

Ground black pepper

1. Adjust oven rack to lower-middle position and heat oven to 325 degrees. Sprinkle meat evenly with 1 teaspoon salt and let stand 15 minutes. Process paprika, roasted peppers, tomato paste, and 2 teaspoons vinegar in food processor until smooth, 1 to 2 minutes, scraping down sides as needed.

2. Combine oil, onions, and 1 teaspoon salt in large Dutch oven; cover and set over medium heat. Cook, stirring occasionally, until onions soften but have not yet begun to brown, 8 to 10 minutes. (If onions begin to brown, reduce heat to medium-low and stir in 1 tablespoon water.)

TASTING: Sweet Paprika

Some cooks think of paprika as merely a coloring agent. But the best versions of this sweet Hungarian spice (made from a different variety of red pepper than hot or smoked paprika) pack a punch that goes beyond pigment. We sampled six brands, two from the supermarket and four ordered online. Our findings? It pays to mail-order your paprika—the supermarket brands had little flavor and even less aroma. For complete testing results, go to www.cooksillustrated.com/deceber.

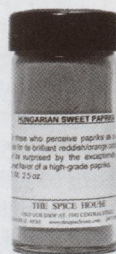
—Elizabeth Bomze

FIRST-RATE FRUITINESS THE SPICE HOUSE

Hungarian Sweet Paprika

Price: \$3.28 for 2.5 oz.

Comments: This specialty brand outshone the competition with the complexity of its “earthy,” “fruity” flavors and “toasty” aroma, making the slight inconvenience of mail-ordering it well worthwhile.



BOLD STATEMENT PENZEYS Hungary Sweet Paprika

Price: \$4.75 for 2.4 oz.

Comments: Tasters described noticeably more “heat” (despite being a sweet variety) and a slightly more “vegetal bite” in this second-place paprika.



SUPERMARKET STANDBY McCORMICK Paprika

Price: \$3.99 for 2.12 oz.

Comments: Some tasters found this supermarket staple (which finished fourth out of six brands) perfectly respectable, but most considered it “one-dimensional,” even “flavorless.”



3. Stir in paprika mixture; cook, stirring occasionally, until onions stick to bottom of pan, about 2 minutes. Add beef, carrots, and bay leaf; stir until beef is well coated. Using rubber spatula, scrape down sides of pot. Cover pot and transfer to oven. Cook until meat is almost tender and surface of liquid is $\frac{1}{2}$ inch below top of meat, 2 to $2\frac{1}{2}$ hours, stirring every 30 minutes. Remove pot from oven and add enough beef broth so that surface of liquid is $\frac{1}{4}$ inch from top of meat (beef should not be fully submerged). Return covered pot to oven and continue to cook until fork slips easily in and out of beef, about 30 minutes longer.

4. Skim fat off surface; stir in remaining teaspoon vinegar and sour cream, if using. Remove bay leaf, adjust seasonings with salt and pepper, and serve.