

Potato meals in the North-eastern Highlands and the corn producing Great Plain in Hungary

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The first Hungarian technical book on gardening was published in 1664¹ not mentioning the potatoes. In the 18th century Protestant students brought the potato seeds with them when they returned home from Germany,² but potato growing was not until later.

According to historians³, ethnographers⁴ and botanists⁵ potato-growing was started at the end of the 18th century in eastern Hungary. Farmers grew potatoes later than corn⁶ or tobacco⁷ for it was valued less.

Potatoes were grown first in the royal domains of the Habsburg rulers who prompted the production by introducing national statutes. At the beginning they offered potatoes for making spirits/probably vodka). Potatoes became popular with the increase in the need for grain, but still more benefit was seen in the cultivation of corn. The utility of potatoes was compared to the grain.

The cultivation of potatoes became widespread as a result of „high culture”. Farmers had to be instructed on how to grow potatoes since the features of the potato were very different from that of corn and grain. Nearly all agricultural technical books in the second half of the 18th century emphasised the importance of potatoes. Illiterate farmers acquired the methods of cultivating potatoes through practise. Learned men coming back from abroad encouraged peasants living in the feudal system to engage in potato growing.

First production in the home gardens; later in commonly owned fields. The geographical names of villages refer to this process. The next step was field-growing, with the same technique.

¹Lippay, J. 1664.

²Kósa, L. 1980.

³Orosz, I. 1971. 1-24.

⁴Kósa, L. 1980.

⁵Mándy, Gy.-Csák, Z. 1964.: Péntek, J.- Szabó A. 1985.

⁶Balassa, I. 1960.

⁷Kósa, L. 1980.

From the beginning of the 19th century potatoes became popular food in Hungary. The great famine, the increase of population of cities, German and Slovakian colonists, the recognition of cool climate in the hills as a perfect condition for growing-potatoes; all these contributed to the increasing popularity of this vegetable.

The potato plague in the 19th century had its worst devastation in 1846 and 1847, never the less potato growing was still continued. Hungarian potato growing fields developed by the end of the 19th century, still determine the nutritional habits of the people there.

Potato-growing places in Hungary are the following: *the Western part of Hungary*: the Great Plain in north-west Hungary, Somogy country, Tolna country, Mohács island, the surroundings of Veszprém, the western boundary (cool climate); *in the north*: the North-Central chain of mountains, *in the central part*: the territory between the river Tisza and the Danube (sandy soil), *in the east*: Nyírség (sandy soil) and the very eastern part of Hungarian language community Székelyföld (Romania). In these territories where the potato does not grow the main crops remain corn and wheat.

There are more than 40 names for potato.⁸ The most frequent are the following: *burgonya, krumpli, kolompér, burgundia, pityóka, bandurka, baraboj, bibricskó, bigyizó, bojóka, bubulyicska, csucsor, csucsorka, földi alma, földi körtvély, földi mogyoró, golandé, gruje, gumós ebszölő, gurgonya, indija, kartifli, körömpe, földi kukujó, lipsai gyümölcs, péra, picsóka, pijó, pirkó, piskó, pityó, pityere, pityirkó, svábtök, svábdinnye, tojórépa, tótrépa*, etc. Similarly there is a great variety of names in the Polish language. Several names refer to recent cultivation, utilisation and the slipping of ethnic cultural usage into the language.

Potatoes in Hungary are used for consumption and make spirits. According to recipe books any meal, which has grainflour as its basic ingredient, may be made from them. Popular practise, however, does not seem to prove this statement even in the 20th century.

Now I am presenting the potato consumption of Hungarian, Slovakian, Polish and German villages found in the potato-growing regions and also that of market town of the grain-growing Great Hungarian Plain. The data represent the present culture. It has been acquired through my ethnographical research⁹.

The grain without processing is not suitable for human consumption, potatoes, however, may be consumed immediately after peeling. Potatoes are given

⁸Kósa, L. 1980.

⁹Bódi, E. 1981. 89-105.: 1984.

to the children to strengthen their teeth. Potato consumed this way may not be measured since it serves only as a type of snack like *csicsóka*¹⁰ or apple.

Potatoes boiled in their skins or fried potatoes are eaten in every region and they already belong to the part of the tradition. Potatoes boiled in their jackets are not mashed or sliced. Potatoes cooked in ashes are particular in the North-Central chain of mountains. They serve as an occasional meal and their consumption is connected to the gathering of the new potato. On this occasion the workers in the fields make fires from the dried potatoes vines and cook their potatoes in their skins in the glow of fire. The northern territories are linked by this custom where the potato is roasted in open fires for the common joy while in the southern parts bacon is roasted instead.¹¹

Peeled and chopped potatoes boiled in the salty water or fried (oil or fat) are consumed in all of Hungary. Potatoes prepared this way do not belong to typical traditional dishes of the countryside. Presently town people eat potatoes as a side dish to meat.

Potatoes boiled in salty water are mashed and flavoured with bacon pieces fried with chopped onions or with curd cheese and fried butter, with flour mixed with milk, buttermilk or sour milk. They are consumed as a separate dish if prepared this way. These meals are the ethnic versions of the mashed potato, which is widely known in today's kitchens and is usually served as a supplement to meat.¹² The mashed potato is typical in the North-Central chain of mountains, but not in the Great Plain.¹³

Grated potato mixed with flour, seasoned and boiled in water or fried in fat has turned into a typical traditional dish. These dishes are linked to nationalities Slovaks, Ukraines, Polish, but they are not national characteristics brought from their common native land. These communities became familiar with the cultivation of potato in Hungary. The people keep animals for their milk since they used various dairy products for flavouring. In the 20th century these dishes became characteristic of those communities where people did not have enough bread—grain.

Boiled, mashed potato was used as a raising agent for baking cakes, which afforded a nutritious meal than only grain. Common dishes include fried dough, small unsweetened round cake (*pogácsa*) and different kinds of bread. These

¹⁰Péntek, J.-Szabó, A. 1985.

¹¹Fazekas, M. 1994.

¹²Cziffray, I. 1840.

¹³Fehér, Á. 1978-79. 155-160.

meals are peculiar not only to potato-growing regions but also to grain growing regions.

The potato as a basic ingredient encouraged the creation of new meals: especially with soups and vegetable dishes. The most typical Hungarian dishes, potato stewed in paprika or potato soup a'la Hungarian, have been developed not in the great potato growing regions, but in the grain-growing Great Plain.

Potato as a flavouring agent may be found in most soup, which are served as a first course. It can also be independent thick liquid meal such as meat soup, bean soup, vegetable soup, and goulash soup, pea soup and fish soup.

Potatoes do not play an important role in the traditional festival menu. Fried and boiled potato have become dominant in the fast foods.

Potato meals made from potato flour or those, which were too complicated to make, have not become implemented in the cooking habits of the countryside. These meals were found in the recipe books from as early as the 19th century. Breads, cakes, cookies, and pastries made from only potato flour are not prepared today in these regions.

In a book published in 1816-18 *Zsuzsanna Rátz* provides more than thirty ways of preparing potato. One third of the listed meals have become potato dishes.

István Cziffray's recipe book dated 1840, sixth edition offers potato as an ingredient for 35 dishes. These meals include soups, flavouring agents for soups, potato fried with meat, potato as an addition for meat, fried potato, potato hot-pot, potato boiled in milk, potato used as bread-crumbs, stewed potato, gravy made from potato, stuffed potato, potato dumpling, potato dishes with celery, onion, cheese, cream, anchovy, pickled cabbage, marjoram, potato pie, potato pudding, potato mush, potato *pogácsa*, and potato griddle cake.¹⁴

From these dishes, gravy and pudding stayed unfamiliar in Hungarian countryside kitchens.

Sixty-four potato dishes are prepared in recent Hungarian books.¹⁵ Kitchens of the countryside are familiar with only half of them. Wheat bread and meat, salty unsmoked bacon and dairy products serve as the basic ingredient for everyday and festive meals in the grain-cultivating region of the Great Plain. Peasant families in these territories rarely use potatoes. A family of 5-6 eats 3.5-4 quintals of potato in the potato-growing region of the countryside. Meanwhile 1,5-2 quintals of potato is used up in the Great Plain as a flavour.¹⁶ There is only one independent

¹⁴Cziffray, I. 1840.

¹⁵Varga, Gy. 1993.

¹⁶Fazekas, M. 1994.;Varga, Gy. 1993.

meal made out of potato: potato stewed with paprika. Its basic ingredients are onion stewed in fat suet, red pepper, salt and potato. This dish is believed to be a typical Hungarian one because of its taste and smell although it is easy to prepare and may be varied to taste. Even men can make its simplest version and main meals for herdsmen. It may be made more nutritious by adding some dried or smoked meat and gnocchi made from flour and eggs. It is a delicious meal and may be served with various vegetable salads.¹⁷ It is only typical in Hungarian territories for everyday consumption.

Potato meals are still undervalued today in the Great Plain.¹⁸ People think that only their stomach will grow as a result of eating a lot of potato and they will not have enough strength for the physical jobs. Only one potato is allowed to be boiled for a typical lowland food “mutton-paprika-stew” in the Great Plain.¹⁹

Finally as a summary we may conclude that the consumption of the potato and potato meals divide Eastern Hungary into two: the northern part potato consuming area and a grain-consuming area. In the potato-consuming area a great variety of meals is made from the potato, the names of which are of Hungarian, Slovak, Polish and Romanian origin. In the grain-consuming area few dishes are prepared from the potato, the most common dish became a typical Hungarian meal, potato stewed with paprika.

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¹⁷Varga, Gy. 1993.

¹⁸Fazekas, M. 1993.

¹⁹Fazekas, M. 1993

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