In Search of Lard Time

FOR A HUNGARIAN, THE MEANING of lard, much like the substance itself, cannot be pinned down. It slips and slides through meal and memory, unseen in arteries and pies, ob-scene to my New World children, delicious to my Old World parents, life itself to their parents, a tasty reminder of where I almost came from and who and what I am.

My parents were Hungarian refugees. They raised me in an Old World hearth of irredentism and marzipan until it was decided that I should learn English. The vehicle for this trauma was called nursery school, a stupefying blur of pint-sized hippies and Peanuts characters. A crew cut and homemade lime-green suit marked me as an alien. So did my diet, the highlight of which was katona (literally “soldiers”), a straight yet sensual line of faithfully poised bread squares the size of Eucharist wafers, each morsel sporting a jingly white smoked crown of pork lard.

I faintly recall some excuse of green on top, maybe a sliver of chives from the garden I was regularly forced to weed. Garnish is not the way of my people. Sometimes there was a nuisance dusting of paprika. The variations depended on which aunt was feeding me. I can perfectly recall the singularity of pig fat melting on my palate, a tremor of exquisite gratification raiding my senses, something porcine but with no suggestion of cholesterol, a perfect embrace of pork pining for the absent presence of an imaginary homeland.

Szalonna (SULL-oh-nuh) foils translation. “Smoked back bacon” doesn’t do justice to this primal miracle. Szalonna’s supercharged wallop of calories is an unparalleled alchemy of fat. Pick up a chunk. It jiggles. With the rind attached, sometimes with an errant hair or two sticking out, this crucible of Hungarian cuisine is an irrefutable slab of pig. It’s love, Hungarian style.

The beefy paprika zing of goulash is certainly a tasty delight, but even Magyar cowboys venerate the pig. The ability to deliver calorie upon disaster-thwarting calorie is such an impeccable fit of place and pantry that it is the ultimate Hungarian argument for intelligent design. Even more incredible is how the rhapsody of szalonna’s terroir can enigmatically reconfigure itself in the New World.

It also refuges the New World. One of my many machinist uncles eventually acquired some marginal land outside of town. We kept a few chickens and pigs; the gnarled vegetables that we grew were inevitably boiled or pickled. It seemed absurd to drive all that way, daily, to gather eggs that weren’t even white and take care of pigs when there were pork chops in the supermarket. What today would be a chic locavore project was, to my young eyes, a humiliating immigrant anachronism.

Nevertheless, a freshly slaughtered pig slowly charring on a bed of burning straw was an irresistible spectacle. In the primeval smoulder of nascent pork, my mom was transformed, aglow and complete: the world made sense again to a displaced gal who had once spun hemp into cloth, threshed wheat to bake huge loaves of bread, and stood trembling as soldiers ransacked her home looking for hidden provisions (stashed safely in the woodstove).

The epic saga of the hidden meat changes depending on who tells it. It always starts with a piglet that was not reported to the authorities. Two of the children, on their own hungry initiative, enticed the creature with pieces of corn to follow them to a distant clump of trees where it was ineptly dispatched and butchered. The kids—and the pig, of course—had never done this before. They weren’t very discreet, and somebody with a grudge contacted the authorities. Without phones or cars, this process took a while; there was time to cook the meat in a big pot and hide it. The Stashing of the Pork in the Woodstove could have gone very wrong. Instead, it helped my mother’s large family survive a difficult winter.

Maybe this is why we had an ancient (and inefficient) hand-cranked meat grinder and a leaky (and inefficient) corrugated metal smokehouse: not slow food avant la lettre but a ticket home that no hogwash of a pork hock in a shopping cart could ever replicate. The liminal cadence of our harvest...
rituals blossomed the tender magical transport of diasporic pork (most concentrated, of course, in szalonna). Mom would deftly cut off a warm, nearly charred and smoky chunk of skin, and we would gnaw its Old World essence with abandon. It was a rubbery and thrilling transgression, chewing a piece of animal that lay smouldering on the November ground.

This New World pig kill—grisly and delicious as it may have been—was but a faint echo of what happened in the villages “back home.” Back in the day, this was a time for the men to drink (a lot) as they worked in the cold autumn air, dismembering the pig as the women dictated the size of the cuts. Some of the meat was immediately delivered to members of the extended family. These “tasters” would be reciprocated when somebody else butchered a pig. This custom, and the carefully staggered timing of the pork harvest, ensured a greater circulation of fresh meat than would otherwise be possible in a place with no freezers (or electricity).

Tail and snout, nothing was thrown out. Intestines were turned inside out, cleaned out with boiling water and the dull side of a knife to make sausage casing. The same was done with...
the stomach to prepare a kind of Hungarian haggis. Meat was salted. Lard was rendered in a huge vat, carefully simmered so that it would melt but not burn. The resulting lard had to last the year. It was strained and teperto—the crispy leftover bits—were sprinkled on hearty bread smeared with tasty lard. Belly fat was cured in salt, hung and smoked for weeks from a tapered ceiling below a large chimney. My octogenarian uncle fondly recalls sneaking up a makeshift ladder to snatch morsels of ham, sausage, and szalonna from the family larder.

For millennia, szalonna’s calorie maximization was not a health risk. It was salvation. A nibble of pork lard provided energy to fight or flee Ottomans, Russians, or Genghis Khan’s rampaging hordes (which must have been quite something, since Hungarians still speak of this like it happened last Saturday). The national narrative of victimization has yet to catch up with reality though, for yesteryear’s enemies are now allies. Likewise, centuries of culinary tradition have not caught up with the fact that meat is now a mass commodity in Hungary. A tripe of fatty meat, tobacco, and pessimism has drastically lowered the life expectancy of Hungarian men. An earlier collision of pork and plenitude hit Hungarian refugees in North America (albeit with better cigarettes but, surprisingly, a stubborn amount of pessimism). Displaced and anxious, they did what their ancestors did in times of upheaval: they foisted an abundance of meat, specifically pork, into their children (hence, my enduring love of szalonna).

It is hard to imagine any Magyar who does not worship szalonna. I once gingerly asked a Hungarian Muslim friend if he missed szalonna. He was instantly effusive, insisting that “szalonna” can be made from turkey (“although it’s more like bacon”) and that crunchy, fried teperto can be obtained from poultry: “Goose is best, but year-old village hens are often used.” Even farmed carp is a source of fatty goodness. Cows, sheep, and goats have no szalonna per se, but they do have faggut—fat removed from the meat, used for soap and candles. Yusof noted that “You can’t eat it like szalonna because it’s disgusting, but many old peasants enjoy it cooked along with the meat in birkapörkölt [mutton stew].” Turks and Arabs cut up the fat and lay it below ribs before roasting them with rosemary (Turkish pizzola lamb chops).” There are, indeed, halal ways to chew the fat.

Hungarians aren’t the only ones under the spell of pork. Germans and Austrians enjoy kaiserspeck, baked smoked bacon rubbed with caraway seeds, a meatier cut from the lower side of the animal. It’s harder, saltier, and a touch leaner than szalonna with a somewhat sharper flavor. It bites back. Hedonistic Tuscans had the time to cure pancetta in fennel and nutmeg. Relatively speaking, Italy had it easy. While Hungarians were busy dodging Ottoman arrows (with nary the time to quickly salt and cure bacon, let alone the luxuries of fennel and nutmeg), Italians were crafting the Renaissance. They bequeathed the world Michelangelo and a universe of pasta. Hungarians gave us Zsa Zsa Gabor, an impenetrable language, and fortunately a sublime connoisseur of fatty pork products.

American ingenuity has fashioned bacon gumballs, bacon ice cream, and the Baconator, products of a food industry that Arun Gupta claims makes bacon into a “weapon of mass destruction.” This is possible, he notes, because six of bacon’s eighteen ingredients are types of umami. What other meat would be made into a lollipop? I would argue that szalonna has a secret seventh charge of umami, but that is just my szalonna-smitten tummy talking. Or heart. Every culture has a transcendent taste of home.

Szalonna is best enjoyed roasted over a summer fire. Cigany (gypsy) szalonna is the cultural equivalent of a backyard barbecue. Since Budapest has courtyards, not backyards, urbanites visit relatives in the countryside or stay at simple “weekend houses” where they grow grapes, tend gardens, and roast szalonna. A thick chunk is skewered on a freshly whittled branch, never an old stick lying around that we might roast a marshmallow on (perhaps a meat-and-tree symbiosis that gets trees pruned, but probably an eco-crime). Maybe it keeps the stick from burning, for the szalonna is slowly sizzled over a fire, its drippings caught on dark rye bread. Once upon a famine, this was healthy, a meal to fuel tough agricultural work—shepherds lit a fire wherever they were and devoured a little smoked bacon. Elemental bliss.

It took me many years to integrate into the North American culture I was born into. With the schoolyard-approved brand of blue jeans, long hair, and floral-patterned polyester shirts, I came to pass as a Smith, McMahon, or Jones. I listened to Kiss, watched hockey, and looked forward to driving a car. Indeed, at the age of sixteen, I suffered through Driver’s Ed. There were two sets of brakes, two teenage girls, and an instructor with a perm whose celebrity gossip was insufferable to my adolescent soul. This was healthy, a meal to fuel tough agricultural work—shepherds lit a fire wherever they were and devoured a little smoked bacon. Elemental bliss.

One long drive, the instructor announced that her brother-in-law was Hungarian and—can-you-believe-this?—he would take a piece of bread, rub a clove of garlic on it, and then smeer it in leftover fat! I immediately thought “Delicious! Zsáros kenyer (greasy bread)!” as the girls squealed a teen shriek of horrified disgust. I was devastated. And confused. The apex of my family’s cuisine was revolting? Who knew? I vividly recall the shame and insight that swept through me in the back seat of that green Chrysler, suddenly and devastatingly realizing that I was not supposed to like pork lard.

But I did. And still do. A lot. Yet I don’t eat it often. My belly is more Asian than Hungarian. In the intervening years, I have...
learned about maguro, toro, and pho; shao mai and char siu; and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. On a recent visit to Hungary, a cousin honored me with cubes of almost translucent mangalitsa pork fat, my first katona in decades. Truth be told, its anticipation was better than its actual (too fatty) flavor. I’ll take szalonna from regular pigs, thank you. And at the risk of apostasy, I also confess that I avoid abált szalonna, the one that is simmered and coated with paprika. But even this permutation is comfort food.

Today, my last name offers a benign patina of otherness, the empty signifier of the “Mad Hungarian” perched nearby, ready to be played at my convenience. But it’s been a lifetime since embers charred my family’s harvest pig. I’m ashamed to admit that when I recently bought smoked bacon from a Polish butcher at the local farmer’s market, I had to ask if I could eat it raw. He dismissively offered a gruff best-play-it-safe explanation that I interrupted with “My background is Hungarian.” He paused, smiled, and gently noted, “It’s okay then. You understand.”

FIGURE 3: Pork products, Budapest style
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