

Édes in the Streets, Csípős in the Sheets

*Paprika, British Tastes, and the Self-Tempering of Hungarian Spiciness, 1920–1940*¹

Andrew Behrendt

Abstract: British tourists played an oversized part in the imaginations of interwar Hungarian tourism promoters. Despite arriving in comparatively low numbers, they fell into a circle of privileged foreigners. When it came to tallying successes in attracting visitors from abroad, Anglophone tourists were “golden pheasants”: rich, glamorous, and willing to part with their precious currency—as long as they were courted in the right way. One of those ways was to manage British expectations when it came to Hungarian cuisine. Paprika was a particular cause for concern. With a reputation for intense spiciness, some tourism promoters worried that it would shock the mild Anglophone palate and attempted to reassure potential guests that Hungary would (literally) be to their taste. Yet their concern was largely unrequited. Why? My article investigates this mystery, and with it, explores the role of paprika both in promoting tourism to Hungary and in the broader management of national “branding” for foreign consumption in the uneasy postimperial cultural atmosphere. Drawing on guidebooks, travelogues, advertisements, periodicals, and films, it argues that the spice served as a symbolic marker of confidence (or lack thereof) in Hungary’s place in global affairs. behrendta@mst.edu

Keywords: *tourism, paprika, cuisine, national identity, Britain, cultural history*

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Paprika, it almost goes without saying, has long been a core marker of Hungarian national identity. It began its career as a feature of rustic gardens on the Great Plain (Alföld), an arrival from the Columbian Exchange introduced via global trade routes during the years of Ottoman

¹ Missouri University of Science and Technology undergraduate Peyson Davis contributed some of the English-language research that informs this article, as part of a First Year Research Experience (FYRE) project conducted in 2019. I would also like to thank Robert Nemes, Mary Neuberger, Alison Orton, and Kristina Poznan, my copanelists at the 2019 ASEEES convention, for their commentary, as well as the two anonymous *Hungarian Cultural Studies* reviewers for their constructive feedback.



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occupation, and it remained both a regional specialty and unappreciated by noble cuisine until the late eighteenth century (Smith and Juszti 2014: 56; Lang 1971: 131). It was only with the rise of nationalism and the endeavors of elite activists to distinguish "Hungarian" from "German" cuisine—especially as a key ingredient of new "national" dishes, such as *pörkölt* (goulash stew) and *gulyásleves* (goulash soup)—that this spice was elevated from its lowborn origins and invested with the symbolic power it now wields (Kisbán 1989: 99–100). Thus ensconced, it soon became the international flag-bearer of Hungarian cookery, with its apotheosis achieved through numerous mentions in the bible of twentieth-century high cuisine, Auguste Escoffier's *Guide Culinaire*, including, most notably, a recipe for goulash (Escoffier 1903: 388). Moreover, industrialization of paprika milling opened the world market to Hungarian exports, further cementing the red powder's status as a national emblem (Smith and Juszti 2014: 156).

This same moment also saw the dawn of concerted, professionalized efforts to market Hungary, especially Budapest, as a destination for foreign tourism (Vari: 107–08). Restaurants, from the modest *vendéglők* [inns] to the grand hotels and culminating in Gundel's crown jewel in the Budapest City Park, played an indispensable role here (Lang 1971: 64). In their dining rooms, paprika became one of the chief icons of the sensory experience. Eventually, paprika materialized as a saleable attraction in its own right. The practice of tempting visitors with the spectacle of peasant houses bedecked in strings of dazzling pepper pods hung out to dry emerged as early as the 1930s, when promoters in Kalocsa and Szeged, two major centers of the pepper-cultivation region of the Great Plain, organized visits to fields and factories (Halász 1963: 78; Smith and Juszti 2014: 62–63). Today, paprika is an inescapable presence in gift shops, whether clad in little canvas bags, decorative tins, or blue-on-white ceramics. It is, in short, both as product and symbol, a great asset for Hungary's tourist industry—perhaps, all told, even more than for agriculture (Gille 2009: 59).

But this was not always the case. Tourism promoters in the 1920s and 1930s seemed to feel that paprika had to be handled with care, as they feared it would sear the tongues—rather than warm the hearts—of their most prized targets: Anglophone visitors, especially those from Britain. They offered defenses of paprika, assuring readers it was not *that* spicy, and made disclaimers of Hungarian food in general, ostensibly to prepare English gullets for unfamiliar labors. But, as I have found, these worries appear overblown. British travelers and writers only rarely regarded paprika with the kind of skittishness their Hungarian suitors imagined. What explains the disharmony? How did Hungarian promoters, so invested in making their country a desirable stop for Anglophone tourists, come to misapprehend their audience?

I argue here that the Hungarian assumptions about British tastes had less to do with real Britons than it did with a certain conception of "English cuisine" (*angol konyha*) that had developed over the preceding century and a sense of Hungarian culinary supremacy that it reinforced. I also propose that the apparent lack of evidence of an actual British aversion to—or even discussion of—Hungarian food strikes an odd, ironic contrast to the image of Hungarians themselves in

European and transatlantic popular culture. There, heat and “spiciness,” often with erotic overtones, dominated; there, the insistence that Hungary was a land of *édes* paprika gave way to tropes that portrayed it as one of *csípős* (biting, spicy) “paprika”—that is, of hot blood and sex appeal. Ultimately, what we are presented with is a case study in two forms. First, there is the complex relationship between cuisine, national identity, and the business of tourism, a suite of subjects that have generated a robust transnational literature in recent times. Dean MacCannell famously proposed that the touristic impulse boils down to a desire to witness social difference, embodied in the “authentic” otherness of another culture (MacCannell 1999). As a marker of ethnic distinction, food appears tailor-made as a way to reify, package, and market a culture for the consumption of outsiders (Chapple-Sokol 2012; Metro-Roland 2013). Yet scholars have demonstrated many times over that cuisine, far from cooking undisturbed on a single hearth, is subject to perpetual tinkering on the part of global as well as local forces (Pilcher 2012; Di Giovine 2016; Porciani 2019; Neuberger 2022). Authenticity is chimeric, resting on pillars of sand formed from mythologizing, reputation, and the infinite rehearsing of comfortable tropes. And it requires constant reaffirmation, perhaps all the more in a region like East Central Europe, where common foodways make for ambiguous national ownership (Horel 2019). Thus, what follows is, second, a study in the construction and—crucially—(mis)application of national stereotypes, resulting here in an overcompensation that says more about interwar Hungarian insecurities than it does about British dining habits.

The Golden Pheasants

Technically speaking, Hungarian paprika—the dried, milled pods of the *Capsicum annuum* chili pepper—falls into eight categories, scaled according to relative spiciness. At the mildest end is *különleges* (special), with a Scoville heat rating hovering around zero. At the sharpest end is *erős* (strong), which can attain a Scoville rating of 2,500 units, or approximately the same heat level as the mildest jalapeño (Bray 2018; *Chili Kalauz Scoville*). The kind most familiar to the international home cook is the rather lyrically named *édesnemes*, “noble sweet”: aromatic, scarlet-orange, and imbued with a suspicion of delicate piquancy. To the uninitiated, one bottle of the stuff, probably turned a discouraging brownish-red under supermarket lights, looks quite like another. But to the gourmand and the professional, not all paprika is created equal.

It was likewise for Hungarian tourism promoters of the interwar years: not all tourists were the same. Any paying visitors were welcome; those coming from Western Europe were even more cordially invited; and Britons² and Americans were most welcome of all. The appeal was

² Throughout this paper, I have tried to use the term “British” as a general one covering any inhabitant of the United Kingdom, especially those from the home islands, regardless of ethnicity. My Hungarian sources almost exclusively use the term “English” (*angol*), which may or may not have been intended to convey a specifically English national identity. Because of the basic ambiguity of Hungarian usage, and because that ambiguity favors the conflation of all United Kingdom national identities with a hegemonic “English” one, I have chosen what I

certainly not in their numbers. Between 1924 and 1937 (the years for which statistics are most reliable), there were 73,587 tourist arrivals to Budapest from the United Kingdom, plus 97,574 from the United States, for a grand total of 171,161 arrivals from the two sources—an average of 12,226 annually (Magyar Gazdaságkutató Intézet 1938: 32–47; Kovács 1930: 756). At no point did either British or American tourists amount to even 10 percent of total yearly foreign tourist arrivals to Budapest, with the British averaging just 4.3 percent and the Americans 6.4 percent.

Rather, Hungarian promoters considered Anglophone tourists worthy of special attention for two main reasons: their wealth and their perceived international influence. Simply put, British and American tourists were, in the words of one Hungarian tourism promoter, “golden pheasants” [*aranyfácánok*]—rare but prodigiously valuable symbols of good fortune (“A vendégforgalom” 1939: 2). Their currencies were hard and stable, and the fact that they traveled farther meant that they usually stayed longer and thus spent more money (Kovács 1930: 760). Anything that could be done to attract them, should be done, wrote one promoter: “Bring [them] here, keep them here, get them to buy from us, and make them spend, spend, spend” [... *idehozni, itt tartani, vásároltatni velük, költetni, költetni-költetni*] (Dán 1935: 135).

Moreover, Anglophone tourists bore an additional political significance on top of their obvious economic one. They figured heavily into the pacific branch of the campaign to revise the Treaty of Trianon, for every foreign guest that could be seduced by Hungarian charms was, at least potentially, a friendly voice abroad. George A. Birmingham (pseudonym of James Owen Hannay; see Bellasis and Taylor 2004), a strongly sympathetic observer who wrote about Hungary while serving as chaplain to the British legation in Budapest, recounted a neat summation of this tendency.

Now the Hungarians are, of all people I have met, the most sensitive to foreign criticism. They take an enormous amount of trouble over what they call ‘propaganda,’ by which they mean direct and indirect endeavors to produce a favorable impression on strangers, especially strangers who may be supposed to be influential in their own country, such as journalists and politicians. ... Even a casual and unknown tourist comes in for a share of attention, and behind the charming manners of the Hungarians there is always discernable a desire to win the good opinion of the traveler (Birmingham 1925: 7).

Hungarians involved in such activities privileged the British for reasons of both historical and immediate relevance. A small but powerful section of the aristocracy had indeed nursed a current of Anglophilia since the 1820s–1830s, notably István Széchenyi, who sought industrialization on the British model and introduced a fascination with upper-class British culture and manners, exemplified in clubs and horses (Frank 2006: 63). Accordingly, British travelers were often received with enthusiasm and indulgence that, according to Géza Jeszenszky, “went beyond commercial self-interest” (Jeszenszky 2020: 91). More recently, as late as 1938 Britain appeared

consider is the more inclusive “British,” except where I have more specific information. My use of “Hungarian,” for present purposes, means “inhabitant of the Kingdom of Hungary,” unless further clarified.

to be the most sympathetic of the non-fascist states to Hungarian revisionist claims—or so was the hope of the Hungarian diplomatic establishment. By far the most famous (and indeed significant) episode of British sympathy for Hungarian irredentism was Lord Rothermere's "Justice for Hungary" crusade. Rothermere used his power as a press magnate (principally the *Daily Mail*) to excoriate the Treaty of Trianon on a global scale (Zeidler 2007: 103–41). The move caused an enormous sensation in Hungary, and though it ultimately had little practical effect on international realpolitik, it did nothing to discourage Hungarian revisionists from viewing the British as "representatives" of a world hegemon and key players in postwar diplomacy. As Zsolt Nagy has shown, tourism was an important component of revisionist cultural diplomacy (Nagy 2017: 165–228). Since it was likely that only wealthy and well-connected Britons would make their way to Hungary, it stood to reason that they should be targets of priority in the Hungarian charm campaign.

Hungarian promoters imagined the English as desirous of the familiar rather than the exotic, and took pains to show them that this is what they would find when visiting Hungary. "It is little known in Great Britain how highly the English are esteemed by the Hungarian," assured Cornelius (Kornél) Tábori, author of the 1928 pamphlet *What Interests Englishmen in Budapest?* (Tábori 1934: 10)³. Tábori's attempt to persuade his readers of this claim comprised a rather bizarre combination of flattering—indeed almost obsequious—cultural propaganda and a smattering of practical information, which he cemented awkwardly to the end of the text. The "Englishman" of Tábori's imagination emerges as a stuffily highbrow figure bearing only a nominal interest in other cultures. On the one hand, Tábori pointed out the "ancient and modern connections between the highest classes of the Hungarian and English nations," referring to alleged political affinities reaching back to the Middle Ages, as well as local admiration for British artistic and scientific achievements. On the other hand, he illuminated the many ways that Englishmen could find the familiar in Budapest, as reflected in genteel clubs, hotels with English-speaking staff and "real English comfort," English paintings, "every kind of food you want, from the heaviest to the lightest," and "Hungarian products of industrial art" of the kind already "conserved among the treasures of many an English castle" (Tábori 1934: 14–16). Clearly, Tábori expected the accommodation of *English tastes* to be what most interested Englishmen in Budapest. And he was not alone in doing so.

Paprika Apologia

The solicitousness with which Hungarian tourism promoters flattered English tastes also included a concern for literal English tongues. Those same privileged Anglophones seemed to present a unique challenge to the boosters so desperate to lure them in: they might have neither the palate nor the stomach for the rich, pungent local cooking in which paprika played an

³ The second edition is cited here, but at one point the text declares, "Today, in 1928," which hints pretty clearly at the original date of publication.

indispensable role. Thus it fell to the promoters to convince their favored guests otherwise that Hungarian cuisine was more *édes* ("mild," in paprika terms) than its reputation. Throughout the English-language promotional literature on Hungary produced in the 1920s and 1930s, one often finds a defense of Hungarian cuisine against implied charges of being unsuitable for the Anglophone palate. At the heart of many of these vindications is paprika. They betray a persistent anxiety that the mere sight of paprika will set English mouths aflame and bead English brows with sweat. Other sources dismiss the idea that Hungarian food is overly rich. Such comments typically have a prophylactic character, resembling something between sincere apologia and annoyed myth-busting: a maneuver to forestall inevitable criticism, or an encouragement for the reader to banish a thought they are already assumed to have entertained.

One of the earlier publications directed at Anglo-American tourists from this period, *All That is Interesting in the Hungarian Capital* (1927), produced in part by the Budapest municipal government, lamented that other guidebooks said too little about Hungarian cuisine. Immediately after declaring confidently that "Hungarian cooking is famous," the text adopted a touchy, proleptic tone: "Some people consider it too highly seasoned and object to the red pepper, although the Hungarian variety of red pepper is sweet and is used more on account of its color than its taste." It cast an accusatory finger to the west—indeed, at the very fountainhead of global *haute cuisine*—claiming, "Many French hors d'oeuvres are much sharper, and irritate the palate and stomach much more than Hungarian red pepper. If it is desired, excellent Hungarian dishes can be prepared without the addition of any red or black pepper at all" (Municipal Information Office 1927: 27).

In *What Interests Englishmen in Budapest*, discussed above, Kornél Tábori tackled the issue head-on. He rebuffed as mere "legend" that Hungarian cooking was "too heavy," promising that a visitor to Hungary would easily find "every kind of food you want, from the heaviest to the lightest." Furthermore, he hinted that British ideas about paprika were misinformed by wrongheaded labeling abroad. "What they call a typical Hungarian spice in foreign lands, the 'paprika,' is not what is employed in Hungary. The real sweet pepper is never disagreeable, but it gives an agreeable piquant taste to the cooking" (Tábori 1934: 14). Kornél's son Pál (writing as Paul) echoed these sentiments in his own, later book, *The Real Hungary* (1939). "Sweet pepper in Szeged is something quite different from the spice commonly sold under this name," he wrote of paprika. "It has the color of rose and is not at all 'hot' like curry or other spices" (Tábori 1939: 126–27).

Under the direct influence of the Táboris was the Liverpool-born novelist John Brophy, whose peculiar travelogue *Ilonka Speaks of Hungary* (1936) led British readers through the country with the accompaniment of a fictional, sexualized young woman named Ilonka. Brophy vouched for the safeness of paprika, even for the weakest constitution: "At its fiercest it has a flavor by no means so 'hot' as cayenne pepper or curry powder, and, as it is used in Hungarian cookery, it does not intimidate even my stomach, which rejects all the usual condiments except salt" (Brophy 1936: 182).

As a final example, we find that Chef Károly Gundel, the grandfather of modern Hungarian *haute cuisine*, also lent his weight to upholding paprika’s good name. He mounted his defense in the introduction to *The Best Hungarian Dishes*, an English-language cookbook touting dozens of recipes aimed at foreign kitchens. Appropriate to his role as global ambassador of Hungarian cuisine, Gundel wrote at length to inoculate the would-be home cook against possible apprehensions:

There is no need for those who know it only by hearsay to be afraid of it. Red, though it is, as fire, good paprika is never too hot or biting. [...] It has a specially fine aroma, and is in no way more biting than pepper, indeed it is far less so than the cayenne or curry used in English and American kitchens. The dishes and sauces seasoned with it are milder to the palate than the highly-seasoned English sauces and condiments, such as ketchup, chutney, mustard, etc. Unless one is a victim to indigestion or put on a diet by doctors [*sic*] orders, one need not be afraid of even the queerest colored Hungarian dish (Gundel 1932: 7).

Sources from outside Hungary also dabbled in the spiciness/heaviness discourse, although they lacked the same defensive character. No less a source than Baedeker, the *grande dame* of Continental guidebooks, assured its readers that paprika was “more aromatic than black pepper and less biting than is generally believed.” But immediately thereafter, the authors seemed to disparage “Hungarian national dishes,” other than those served in “better-class hotels and restaurants,” for being “cooked with large quantities of lard and paprika” (Baedeker 1929: xxvi). The German edition of the same guide used, word for word, a matching line about paprika as the English one, but notably assumed a more positive tone regarding the quality and expected popularity of Hungarian cuisine in general (Baedeker 1931: xvi). The first-ever Fodor’s guide discussed Hungarian food not as part of the entry on Hungary, but on Austria. There, journalist Louis Barcata advised, “The soups are quite safe—international broths with the most wonderful names, but agreeable to every English palate. The meat dishes are rather more risky, as under the Hungarian influence these are often highly seasoned, a thing which you may not appreciate. It would be better perhaps to choose the various plain roasts until you have found your way around a bit” (Barcata 1936: 793).

The British were not alone in receiving attention for their supposed paprika intolerance. Hungarians, or at least the Hungarian press, seem to have had low expectations when it came to foreign taste buds the world over. When the 4th World Scout Jamboree came to Gödöllő in 1933, a watershed event for Hungarian tourism and cultural diplomacy, the organizers approached their planning of the options at mess with a globalized caution. “There should be no grumbling at the peculiarities or variety of foreign foods,” observed the *London Times*. “National tastes have been carefully provided for in case any of the visiting boys should take a dislike to gulasch and paprika” (“World” 1933). And when paprika exports began flowing to Japan in 1935, the newspaper *Nemzeti Ujság* asserted that success would hinge upon good advertising to pave the way, because the Japanese were said to “fear its flavor and its fire” [*féltek ízétől és tüzétől*] (“Magyar győzelem” 1935). Indeed, throughout the 1920s and 1930s Hungarian scientists labored to perfect a process for taking the bite out of paprika, out of a concern that foreign markets found Hungarian paprika too spicy, especially compared to the “inferior” Spanish

variety (Horváth 1935: 226; Izsáky 1937: 9). Ernő Obermayer finally accomplished the feat in 1935 (Greguss 1935: 466).

Nevertheless, it seems there was something about the British that made Hungarian tourism promoters appear particularly anxious when discussing food. Did it perhaps have something to do with the fact that Britain and Western Europe were accustomed to milder paprika from Spain—Hungary's fiercest competitor—whereas Austria, Germany, and Czechoslovakia were the domain of the historically sharper Hungarian version (Lukácsy 1931)? Or had British self-stereotyping given Hungarians the impression that they could handle none but the blandest of foods?

British literature holds some promise for revealing British attitudes about spiciness in general and paprika in particular. Perhaps, at least, it might work to explain how the British acquired a reputation for having sensitive taste buds. In Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1848), for instance, heroine and aggressive social climber Becky Sharp finds out about capsaicin the hard way, as she tries to impress Mr. Sedley, a potential suitor. Sedley, an East India Company nabob who takes delight in the heat of colonial cuisine, has a curry prepared just for him. Becky gamely samples it, but soon rues the decision. She "suffer[s] tortures with the cayenne," then finds that a green chili is even worse, leaving her begging for water—all to Sedley's amusement (Thackeray 1848: 20). Another example of British self-parody involving encounters with spiciness—and this one centered specifically on Hungary—comes from *Dracula* (1897), Bram Stoker's fin-de-siècle masterpiece of armchair tourism and Orientalist horror. Narrator Jonathan Harker's first reported meal—in fact, one of his first experiences—in Transylvania is "paprika hendl" (chicken paprikash). In a foretaste of the interwar promotional literature, he calls the dish "very good, but thirsty," and eventually drains an entire carafe of water to extinguish the heat (Stoker 1975: 1). Harker later suspects the paprika of inspiring "all sorts of queer dreams," hinting at the vampiric nightmare to come (Stoker 1975: 5).

Beyond these comparatively famous examples, however, I have found only thin affirmative evidence. Mentions of paprika in pre-World War II Anglophone travel writing on Hungary, dating back to the 1840s, often enough pass by without any reference to spiciness (Pardoe 1840: 240; Fletcher 1892: 12; Browning 1897; Holland 1935: 136), only to color, fame, and particularity. In her two-volume travelogue, Elizabeth Mazuchelli testified that "it must not be supposed, however, that this condiment at all corresponds with cayenne. It is made from the long red pods of a plant called in France *poivreon*, which, though a species of chili, is not very pungent" (Mazuchelli 1881: 173). Grenville Cole, for his part, professed infatuation with the "beautiful scarlet pepper," the later absence of which stirred "an aesthetic want even in the most polite society" (Cole 1894: 97).

Major British press outlets yield little more. Searches for "paprika," "Hungarian cuisine," and several other related terms in the electronic archives of the *Times* (London), *Guardian*, and *Observer* (both of Manchester) from 1868 through 1955 present few relevant hits. One of those is a 1946 advertisement from the UK Ministry of Food, wherein an asterisk-footnote explains,

"Paprika is a spicy but mild seasoning, red in color. Look out for it at your grocer's" ("Food Facts" 1946). A decade later, we find the eminent food writer Ambrose Heath celebrating the belated return of sweet paprika to Britain (thanks to the Austrian firm Kotanyi) following the war and the subsequently disrupted trade with East Central Europe. He muses on his homeland's distorted attitude toward the spice: "Paprika pepper has mostly been misused in this country, I think. [...] Indeed, many people are a little nervous of using it freely, fearing that its color betokens the heat of the fiercer [cayenne] pepper" (Heath 1954). Neither of these definitively confirms a generalized British aversion to spiciness—although they do help corroborate Hungarian fears that foreigners were either ignorant of paprika or, worse yet, had mistaken it for something non-Hungarian.

"Spicy" Hungarians

The apparent dearth of evidence for a British discourse on paprika and its spiciness would not be terribly remarkable were it not for the fact that Hungarians *themselves* were so often portrayed as "spicy" in European and American popular culture. The stereotype of the tempestuous Hungarian, whose temper is short and passions profound, has a long history within and outside Hungarian culture. At least as far back as the mid-nineteenth century, we encounter such descriptions *en plein aire*. In the postrevolutionary year of 1849, British newspapers reported on the conditions in Pest, which, compared to the relatively refined (and Germanic) Buda, was "where the wild Magyar peasant, with swarthy complexion, fiery eyes, and nomad-like sheepskin dress, has just arrived from the puszta" ("State" 1849: 4). Nearly a century later, one contributor to the influential volume *Mi a magyar?* [What is the Hungarian?] acknowledged that "fiery" [*tüzes*] and "sensitive" [*kényes*] were commonplace tropes of national self-characterology (Bartucz 1939: 186). The image was not necessarily a source of pride among Hungarian intellectuals. Some resented it as an inescapable trap that reduced Hungarian identity abroad to paprika, cowboys [*gulyások*], bandits, drunk hussars, dancing the *csárdás*, and, perhaps most distressingly to them, "Gypsies" [*Cigányok*] (Megyery 1929; Balassa 1930). Of course, this did nothing to stop foreigners from trafficking in those caricatures anyway.

In European and transatlantic popular culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these traits were not infrequently transposed into an erotic register. The dashing cavalry officer and the dissolute-yet-chivalrous nobleman were stock figures of Viennese and Budapest operettas, as in Strauss's *Zigeunerbaron* (Gypsy Baron, 1885) or Emmerich (Imre) Kálmán's breakout hit *Tatárjárás* (The Gay Hussars, 1908). In Geoffrey Moss's *Sweet Pepper* (1923), a now-obscure but contemporarily bestselling novel of counterrevolutionary Hungary, the first love interest of young English heroine Jill Mordaunt is of this mold. The book's title resonates from a moment deep into the story when Jill reflects on how "everything in Hungary is paprika," and how, "sweet pepper ... with its caustic, honied tang, was bound up for ever with Hungary

and adventure" (Moss 1923: 284).⁴ Jill's appetite for the taste of "paprika" was whetted by her early romantic entanglement with Count Tibor Arkoczi, a character whom even she recognizes as fantastically stereotypical: wearing a "tall fur cap set jauntily," exuding an aristocratically "dilettante carelessness," and possessed by fierce patriotism. Indeed, "patriotism" is a severe understatement, as the first encounter with Arkoczi has him smuggling a Bolshevik prisoner into Budapest, so inflamed with hatred for his "dirty Jew" [*sic*] of a prisoner that he will stop at nothing to see him punished (Moss 1923: 56–57).

All the hussars and Arkoczis of page, stage, and screen, however, took a distant second place to the truly dominant "spicy Hungarian" of the interwar years: the feisty, seductive Hungarian lass. She was, as Réka Gulyás has shown, a fixture of German cinema of the 1920s–1940s, in the figure of the *Ungarmädel* (Hungarian maiden). Typically, the *Ungarmädel*—personified for German audiences above all by the actress Marika Röck—combined girlish naiveté with an eroticized volatility: hot-bloodedness (*heisses Blut*) or, most evocatively, "paprika in the blood" (Gulyás 2000: 86–87; Wahl 2007). *Paprika* (1932; dir. Carl Boese), a vehicle for Franciska Gaál, the Budapest-born darling of Universal Studios, made the connection between sex appeal and *Capsicum annuum* as explicit as could be. Gaál plays Ilona von Takacs, an *Ungarmädel* trying to make her way as a modern woman in Berlin. She sets her romantic sights on Dr. Paul Schröder (played by Paul Hörbiger, also a native of Budapest), pledging to capture him by a judicious combination of charm and guile—which she mischievously dubs "paprika."

Anglophone authors and playwrights of the period, for their part, also took inspiration from the "spicy" Hungarian girl. The basic conceit of James Brophy's aforementioned *Ilonka Speaks of Hungary* is that a beautiful, young, and entirely fabricated Hungarian woman—modeled on the film star Lili Muráti, whose photo graces the frontispiece—enters the scene now and then to serve as his muse and local expert. While Ilonka is not particularly temperamental, her coquettishness is set to a perpetual simmer, and she gives as many meaningful glances to Brophy as she does pieces of advice on Hungarian culture. More squarely in the vein of stereotype is Eric Maschwitz's 1938 musical *Paprika*. Evidently an effort to cash in on the popularity of his earlier *Balalaika*, a tale of love in the time of the Russian Revolution, *Paprika* is the story of a Hungarian actress, Rozsi, who, eventually, finds love in Victorian London with a well-to-do Englishman. (The debut run was a flop, as critics complained of stodgy pacing and poor performances, and the show was restaged more successfully a few months later as *Magyar Melody*.) Described in not one but two reviews as "wild" and "rebellious," Rozsi bears the marks of the classic *Ungarmädel*—that is, with paprika in her blood ("His Majesty's Theatre" 1938; "His Majesty's Theatre" 1939). As one reviewer put it, the work owed its name to the fact that "it begins in Hungary and its heroine is said to have the pungency of that same scarlet condiment" (A.D. 1938: 8).

⁴ The book was originally published in the UK by Constable & Co. The copy I cite here is the ninth US printing, *all nine* from July 1923—a testament to its popularity!

Surely, however, the apex—or is it nadir?—of the “spicy” Hungarian in interwar Anglophone culture must be Erich von Stroheim’s pulpy novel *Paprika* from 1935. What possessed Stroheim, the celebrated Viennese-born, American-assimilated actor (e.g., in Jean Renoir’s *The Grand Illusion*) and director (e.g., *Greed*, 1924), to pen something so lurid and exploitative is a mystery worthy of its own investigation. In his panning of the book, Adam de Hegedus marveled that Stroheim “leaves the reader to decide whether his intention was to present a grand satire on ‘Hungarian romance a la Hollywood.’ If such be the case, ‘Paprika’ must be regarded as comic literature of the first order” (de Hegedus 1935).

Paprika, the tragic, hypersexualized heroine, is the illegitimate, “half-white” child of a Roma mother and a Hungarian military officer (von Stroheim 1937: 47). Her name, which derives from the field of pepper plants in which she was born, is also her destiny: the local “wise woman” who delivered her foretells that “fire and passion will be her lot” (von Stroheim 1937: 18–19). Both of these are in abundance throughout the book, as *Paprika*’s exceptional beauty is also a font of bitterness. White-blonde with green eyes, she looks like a “Parisian *cocotte*.” An aberration among the “swarthy brotherhood”—just one of Stroheim’s innumerable racist descriptors—she is irresistibly desirable to men and correspondingly loathed by women (von Stroheim 1937: 64). Ultimately, her passions lead her to a premature and violent end.

No Spice, Please—They’re British

There existed, then, a special Anglophone (and German) connection between *paprika*, uncontrollable “heat,” and Hungarianness. While one might say it dealt with a kind of metaphorical consumption, in the sense of sexual possession or gratification, actual food had little to do with it. It does not provide a direct explanation for the anxieties of Hungarian tourism boosters and promoters of the national image regarding *paprika* as such. If foreigners were more inclined to talk about “spiciness” in romantic terms than they were about peppers, whence the Hungarian notions of British tastes?

I think the answer lies in what Hungarians told *themselves* about “English” cookery, and how that determined their assumptions about Anglophone visitors. The Hungarian discourse on *angol konyha*, “English cuisine,” from the 1830s through the early 1940s was remarkably consistent—and consistently judgmental. Often, it was blatantly disparaging. The earliest instance I have uncovered of Hungarians describing, and insulting, English cuisine comes from 1837, in an article that had no other point than to throw a critical light on another nation’s dining habits:

For those who don’t know the English customs of eating and drinking from experience, it is impossible to picture it. Dinner begins with soup, fish, cabbage, and potatoes. “Soup or fish?” asks the lady of the house. The foreigner marvels at this question and asks for soup. This is usually the so-called turtle soup; and for those who aren’t accustomed, a second spoonful of it can rarely be swallowed down.

[*Ki az angol konyhát és az angol evés- ivásmódot saját tapasztalásából nem ismeri, annak nem lehet arról képzete. Az ebéd kezdődik levessel, hallal, káposztával és kolompérral. “Leves vagy hal tetszik?” kérdi a’ házi asszony. Az idegen elbámul e’ kérdésre, és levest kér. Ez rendszeren az*

úgy nevezett tekenősbéka leves; és az aki hozzá nincs szokva, az ugyan a második kanálai ritkán nyelheti-le.] ("Angol ebéd" 1837: 86)

Hungarian opinions did not grow much kinder as the decades wore on. At its most positive, the discourse on English cuisine held that it valued simplicity and naturalness as the basis of healthy eating. "Excellent and nutritious meat dishes, prepared simply: this is the hallmark of English cuisine" [*Kitűnő és tápláló huseledek egyszerűen elkészítve: ez jellemvonása az angol konyhának*], wrote one early twentieth-century journalist (Hajdu 1903). Boiled potatoes, boiled beef, and boiled vegetables were its staples (Fodor 1873: 442). An industrious, pragmatic people with a "conservative" palate, the English viewed the kitchen as a workshop, whereas the more daring French saw it as an art studio (S.E. 1938: 805).

While a few Hungarian voices may have sung the praises of minimalism and practicality, most bemoaned English cooking as hopelessly invariable. Indeed, "monotonous" [*egyhangos*] is one of the words Hungarian observers used most frequently. "The other bad side of London is the cuisine" [*Másik rossz oldala Londonnak a konyha*], a correspondent for the Budapest daily *Magyarország* sneered in 1900. "Half-raw meat (of which one only has the choice of either roastbeef or mutton chop) and unsalted vegetables will soon drive a person to boredom" [*A félnyers húst (ugyszólván csak roastbeef és mutton chop között lehet válogatni), a sótalán főzeléket csakhamar megunja az ember*] (K. A. 1900: 16). Some forty years later, the journal *Új Idők* served up a slate of recipes "improving" on traditional English puddings, stating with conviction that "we know that English cuisine is very monotonous. Even in the wealthiest homes they do not cook as opulently as our middle-class families" [*Tudjuk, hogy az angol konyha nagyon egyhangú. Még a leggazdagabb emberek házaiban sem főznek olyan dúsan, mint nálunk polgári családoknál*] ("Konyhaművészet" 1939: 620).

Prevalent among the Hungarian charges of stupefying monotony was that the English ate beef obsessively, virtually refusing any other main dish. "The English person will raise a tremendous stink if they have to wash their hands in cold water even once" [*Az angol ember hangos botrányt csapna, ha egyszer hideg vízzel kellene kezet mosnia*], railed *Magyarság*. "But they will wordlessly gulp down warm beef on Sunday, cold beef on Monday, beef hash on Tuesday: so great is the amount of unlovingly prepared food they passively and thoughtlessly consume" [*de szótalanul nyeli le vasárnap a meleg beefet, hétfőn a hideg beefet, kedden a vagdalt beefet, megannyi szeretetlenül elkészített ételt, amelyeket közönyösen, figyelmetlenül fogyaszt el.*] (F. K. 1931: vi). The pseudonymous Big Boy laid into English ladies' housekeeping methods, condemning their cooking—"except for roast beef" [*kivéve a rost-beaf-ot*]—as "flavorless and bad" [*ízetlen és rossz*]. But their table decorating, he said, "is much prettier" [*De annál szebb az asztal*] (Big Boy 1899: 568).

Simplicity, monotony, tasteless carnivorism; all of this added up to a nation that could handle neither the spiciness nor the richness of superior Hungarian cuisine. There was, perhaps, only one advantage to this: the English were healthier than the Hungarians. Fewer of them wound up in Karlsbad, where those who supped on "excessively fatty and over-spiced foods" [*túlságosan*

zsiros és fűszeres] sought spa cures for their ailing stomachs ("Mit eszünk" 1940). One observer went so far as to claim, "In England there are scarcely any fat men and women. The secret to this, always and without fail, lies in their cooking. English cuisine, though diverse, is, to our eyes, monotonous unto boredom and flavorless, weak, and meager" [*Angliában kövér férfi, kövér nő alig van. Ennek a titka mindenesetre és feltétlenül a konyhájukban rejlik. Az angol konyha—bár változatos, de a mi szemünkkel nézve az unalmasságig egyhangú és izetlen, gyenge, sovány*] ("Korunk táplálkozása" 1929). Clearly, however, Hungarians tended to view their heavy, paprika-laden dishes as worth the risk. Not only that, but they seem to have been supremely confident that bland English roasts and soups stood no chance against them. Pál János Tencer, writing on London, delighted in undermining English pride by reporting that the Hungarian Restaurant and its incomparably "tasty" fare was one of the city's most successful venues (Tencer 1929). So thoroughly entrenched was the Hungarian idea that Brits—unlike Hungarians—were incapable of preparing food worth eating that by 1939 it could serve as a casual dig at them, even in their own language. On a page of phrases and lessons for students of English to practice, the newspaper *Újság* helpfully offered the following: "Can you stand English cooking or do you prefer Hungarian food?" ("Az UJSAG," 1939: 32).

Conclusion

That the Hungarians painted such a broad target on the "English" seems rather unfair—not to mention that their accusations reveal a knowledge of actual British cuisine that was, at best, superficial. They rarely took into account the British taste for curry, which had become commonplace by the mid-nineteenth century (Collingham 2006: 138; Panayi 2008: 27), or the presence of sinus-clearing hot mustards, such as Colman's (introduced in 1814), on British tables. In fact, spicy things were hardly out of place in the British culinary canon. Cayenne pepper, in particular, features in numerous Victorian-era recipes: not only in obvious dishes like Mulligatawny, a curry-based soup present in England since at least 1798, but in entirely humble ones such as "devilled bones," which were nothing more than scrap-ends of meat covered in hot sauce (Hughes 2017: 91 and 276). Calls for cayenne are scattered densely throughout Isabella Beeton's *The Book of Household Management* (1861), that landmark tome of bourgeois cookery, in soups, seafood, cheeses, and sundry other preparations. Furthermore, aversion to heat, real or imagined, was hardly exclusive to the British Isles. Food historians document a turn away from spiciness in western and northern European cuisine in the early modern period, especially in the classical French cuisine of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Flandrin 1999: 423; Laudan 2013: 207). French cooking, with its heavy fat-based sauces and dogmatic classifications of flavor, became the hegemonic high cuisine of Europe well into the twentieth century. Nevertheless, it seems to have escaped Hungarian disdain.

However, being "fair" was probably not the point. It seems more likely that Hungarians' durable conviction that "English" food was objectively bad, and the *schadenfreude* they displayed when reaffirming it, acted as a cultural subversion of British imperial hegemony. In other words, embarrassing the unimaginative, unimpressive tastes of the "English" was a way to let Hungarian

national identity, and thus Hungary itself, punch above its weight. The British may dominate the world, but at the expense of eating the least interesting food conceivable; Hungary may be part of a second-rate empire (before 1918) or an empire déclassé (after 1918), but at least the food is something to be proud of.

This "internal" discourse—i.e., among an exclusively Hungarian-reading audience—helps explain why Hungarian promoters presumed the British would fear the local cuisine and illuminates the otherwise mysterious force that compelled them to issue preemptive disclaimers for it. But it also stands in remarkable contrast to the flattery and solicitude of the English-language tourism literature, even muddling the current of Anglophilia running through interwar Hungary. Some of this seems easy to comprehend as a two-faced attitude regarding the British within Hungarian national discourse. As with paprika, Hungarians presented a "sweet" version of themselves for the pleasure of valued foreigners—and kept the "sharp" stuff for domestic consumption. However, it may also indicate that Anglophilia broke along class and/or professional lines, with its greatest concentration among the gentry and agrarian elite, as the late Tibor Frank suggested, rather than among urban journalists (Frank 2006: 70).

Finally, an additional wrinkle may reside in the economics of paprika itself. Interwar newspapers nervously reported on the condition of the paprika trade, regarding it as a barometer of both national commercial success and Hungarian cultural prestige abroad. Anything that menaced the good reputation of Hungarian-produced paprika—such as mislabeling and outright counterfeiting ("Sürgös" 1922), or proof of adulteration (Gille 2016: 32)—or that otherwise weakened sales also threatened the country's already precarious international standing. In this regard, Spain loomed as the archrival, especially because (before 1935) its paprika was believed to be milder and more colorful than even the sweetest Hungarian variety (Lukácsy 1931), which made it more popular among Americans and Western Europeans. Market competition, evidently, inspired the quest to make Hungarian paprika less biting; and it rings plausible that anxieties about the perceived spiciness of Hungarian cuisine tied into to a fear of commercial impotence.

None of these attitudes, however, reflect anything about the might of paprika as an actual factor, good or ill, in the interwar tourist trade. The numbers of British arrivals rose steadily, if not spectacularly, after 1932, as international travel rebounded from the shock of the Great Depression (Magyar Gazdaságkutató Intézet: 32). It is hard to imagine that cuisine was decisive either way, with much larger structural issues at work—such as the struggle to entice Britons to keep going east once they made it to Vienna (Kovács házy 1933)—and paprika not even being a focal point of major advertising campaigns (Jusztin 2005). Those attitudes point instead to a complex symbolic relationship between Hungarianness and foreignness, with paprika as the nexus. As a beloved totem of nationhood, it was close to the "self"; but one also seemingly vulnerable to the revulsion of a desired "other," who, it was assumed, might not go in for that sort of thing. And so the Hungarians tempered their spiciness in one arena—just as, all the while, their prized Anglophones were seeking it in another.

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