

The **Art** of
Romanian
Cooking

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Galia Sperber



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*To my mother, Miriam,
and to the loving memories of my grandmother Fanny
and my great-grandmother Sally—the three pillars on
which my existence stands*

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ABBREVIATIONS

STANDARD			METRIC		
tsp.	=	teaspoon	ml.	=	milliliter
tbsp.	=	tablespoon	l.	=	liter
oz.	=	ounce	g.	=	gram
qt.	=	quart	kg.	=	kilogram
lb.	=	pound	mg.	=	milligram

STANDARD-METRIC APPROXIMATIONS

$\frac{1}{8}$ teaspoon	=	.6 milliliter	
$\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon	=	1.2 milliliters	
$\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon	=	2.5 milliliters	
1 teaspoon	=	5 milliliters	
1 tablespoon	=	15 milliliters	
4 tablespoons	=	$\frac{1}{4}$ cup	= 60 milliliters
8 tablespoons	=	$\frac{1}{2}$ cup	= 118 milliliters
16 tablespoons	=	1 cup	= 236 milliliters
2 cups	=	473 milliliters	
$2\frac{1}{2}$ cups	=	563 milliliters	
4 cups	=	946 milliliters	
1 quart	=	4 cups	= .94 liter

SOLID MEASUREMENTS

$\frac{1}{2}$ ounce	=	15 grams	
1 ounce	=	25 grams	
4 ounces	=	110 grams	
16 ounces	=	1 pound	= 454 grams

Acknowledgments

My interest in cookery started early on in my life, but when I started to write this book, I never imagined the task that awaited me, having to detail how to produce every dish. Though I have to thank my late grandmother for doing the hard work—keeping an extensive recipe book—its translation from Romanian and adaptation to modern cooking was nevertheless something that kept me busy for over a year. I could not have done this work without the invaluable advice and support of both my parents, Miriam and Charles Sperber. Their memories of the tastes and smells of Romanian cooking are far more reliable and accurate than my own, and their enthusiasm and encouragement for this project are what drove me to complete it. I would also like to thank my brothers, Steve and Alex, for being my chief tasters over the years and never being afraid to tell me when I got it wrong. Finally, I would like to thank my fiancé, Eldad Avital, for becoming the latest addition to my tasters, and for supporting me in this literary and culinary adventure.

Introduction

Old family documents show that my mother's family lived in the green fields of northern Romania beginning in the 1500s. Fortunately, when my grandparents emigrated to the West in the 1960s, none of the old traditions were lost, and I was lucky enough to get a taste of this wonderful past.

My earliest memories of my grandmother's home have very vivid smells attached to them—little chocolate treats made with rum in pretty paper cupcake holders and white fish in a mouthwatering tomato sauce. Until about the age of six I spent most of this visiting time running through the rooms of the house, occasionally stopping to watch what was going on in the kitchen. I remember the time when my great-grandmother finally allowed me to help by grating some potatoes for her—a triumph of maturity for me—and cutting my finger five minutes into the task.

My interest in cooking started in Grandma's kitchen and by the age of seven I was making some easy dishes for my family (with the help of a chair, on which I stood to reach the kitchen counter more easily). To my great regret, my grandmother passed away much too early for me to have learned all her culinary secrets, but her recipes and the time we spent cooking together remain deeply cherished in my heart.

Romania lies in the center of Eastern Europe and has borders with the Ukraine, Moldova, Bulgaria, Serbia, Hungary, and the Black Sea. These boundaries were set in 1918, but previously the area was loosely held together by occupation by

various nations. Political changes and the influx of peoples over the centuries have resulted in a rich mix of cultural influences in Romania. This is evident in the country's architecture, culture, and cuisine.

The first united community in the region of Romania arose before the first century B.C. with the Dacian Kingdom. Dacia was centered in the mountains of southern Transylvania. The kingdom flourished until the first century A.D., when it was conquered by the Roman armies led by Emperor Trajan. The resulting Daco-Roman population adopted the Latin language and culture and accepted the Christian religion.

In A.D. 271 the Romans withdrew from all territories north of the Danube, but the Daco-Romans remained a united community, despite the centuries of invasions that followed. The Romanian language developed and the Christian Church was founded during the period of influence of the Orthodox Byzantine Empire.

At this stage, three feudal states emerged: Transylvania, Moldavia, and Wallachia. Together they fought to keep the Ottoman Empire out of Romania, but as this became more difficult the three principalities were forced to come under Turkish sovereignty, although they were never occupied.

The next big crisis in Romanian history occurred in the 18th century, when the principalities were caught in the middle of struggles among the Austrian, Russian, and Ottoman empires. This resulted in chunks of the area coming under separate rule by each of these empires. In 1918 Transylvania united with Romania to form the Romanian Kingdom, with its boundaries as they are today.

This summarized history of the country illustrates the origins of the cultural diversity apparent today in Romania. Slavic, Latin, and Balkan influences helped develop food that sometimes retained its origin and other times became totally Romanian. Polenta is very characteristically Romanian (*mămăligă*), but it is also found in Italian cookery. Another

example is traditional Turkish fare such as stuffed grape leaves, which have been adopted into Romanian cuisine.

The landscape of the country also allowed for a rich and varied diet. Romania is made up of mountainous terrains in the north and center, the Carpathian Mountains. Around them, the land is covered by hills and tablelands, which are well suited for orchards and vineyards. Fertile plains cover the rest of the country, where grains, vegetables, herbs, and other crops are grown.

A lot of care and devotion was traditionally given to cooking in Romania, and the meals that were prepared were always meant for sharing. Women cooking together to prepare a multitude of delicacies was a common sight in past times. Families were large and united and would seldom eat separately. This made the dining table a center of social interaction that often attracted numerous guests. The pride of a household was its ability to please those they served with foods of excellent quality and endless variety. That is why none of my grandmother's recipes are in small quantities and I have made them all to serve six.

I have tried to keep the instructions and ingredients for each recipe as uncomplicated as possible. This was in fact an easy task, because in the past most dishes were produced from memory and naturally it was necessary to keep things simple. I hope that both those with culinary curiosity alone as well as avid cooks will enjoy using the recipes of the wonderful Romanian cuisine and eating the food on which my ancestors were raised.

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