



## CORRECT LINE COOKING

### Penelope on Paprika

I love people and books with a fixation or obsession. Pigeons, Lolitas, motorbikes or matchboxes, that sort of thing. I have already referred to a massive and learned text about the potato in this column. Personally, I would love to focus my mind on one food or object long enough to write a book about it. In years, if not centuries, to come people would speak in hushed tones about Cottier on Creamcakes or Penelope's Big Book of Carrots. It shows true intelligence to free the mind from the dross of everyday life and to concentrate exclusively on a fruit or vegetable.

In moments of quietude I dream of the book I would write if my mind were not of the grasshopper variety. And who knows, one day I may yet write the definitive tome on bananas. I would open with a chapter on myths surrounding the banana like a second skin, from both a human and chimpanzee perspective. A serious (and mercifully brief) section on the United Fruit Company's geopolitical grasp on the desirable fruit would follow. I suppose I'd include something about the nasty practice of gassing bananas to ripeness here, so that people could skip all the serious bits without too much trouble. Then we

would slip into a discussion of the sexuality of the banana, its use in desserts and how to spot a limp one at 50 paces...Such dreams enfold me as I cradle the yellow crescent in my hand. Unfortunately, my enthusiasm is not long-lived.

No such problems of concentration afflict Zoltàn Halász, author of *The Little Book of Hungarian Paprika* (Corvina Publications, Budapest 1987). I located this modestly titled book in Acland Street, St Kilda—which, given the cultural roots of the area, seems appropriate. I had just eaten an excellent Jewish/Russian meal and, barely able to walk, still managed to flick through cookbooks. My eye was caught by the red/orange cover of the aforementioned text. In other words, the book is paprika-coloured. Even the pages are somewhat paprikaed, as if Mr Halász, unable to contain his enthusiasm for the blessed condiment, had sprinkled select amounts into the paper during manufacture. Unfortunately, the book does not smell of paprika—at least not until careless use by the reader remedies this lack.

*The Little Book of Hungarian Paprika* delighted me. Section headings include "A simple history, with complications", "From magic potion to a source of vitamins" and "Is paprika really hot?" (The answer to the last question is: not necessarily, depending on the variety.) The illustrations show various happy Hungarians and capsicums performing unusual functions, such as the latter (from which paprika comes) acting as the barrel of a cannon alongside a description of the really hot paprika.

The recipes in this book are not for the faint-hearted, and certainly not for the vegetarian; even the fresh green bean soup is made with beef stock, for example. It may be that a really cold climate is necessary to appreciate fully the passionate beauty of paprika in a meat stew. (I will ignore curry and Asia at this juncture.) However, why not experiment with the following soup, and hopefully discover the reason for Zoltàn's en-

thusiasm. The recipe calls for "noble sweet paprika", which is one of the milder but flavoursome paprikas and can therefore be used in greater quantities.

### Gulyás Soup

*Ingredients: 500g good quality stewing beef, 100g lard or 8 tablespoons oil, 2 medium onions, 1 clove garlic, 2 teaspoons noble sweet paprika, 2 pinches caraway seed, 3-4 large potatoes, 2 medium green or yellow peppers (ie, capsicums), 2 small tomatoes, salt.*

*Wipe the beef carefully, then cut into small cubes. Heat the lard or oil in a large pan and fry the finely chopped onions until golden brown. Sprinkle with a little of the paprika, add the meat and fry until slightly browned. Then add crushed garlic, the remaining paprika and the caraway seed. Season to taste with salt. Mix thoroughly together and add a little water. Cover with a lid and simmer, stirring frequently. Add a little more water from time to time if necessary to prevent the meat from sticking. When the meat is tender, add the sliced peppers, the tomatoes cut into quarters and the peeled and cubed potatoes. Finally, pour in enough water to cover well and continue cooking until the potato is done. Serves 4.*

When I look at books like *The Little Book of Hungarian Paprika* my mind dwells more and more on what my *Big Banana Book* would look like. It will definitely have a yellow cover. The pages will peel off from the spine centripetally. It will have to be read in one day or it will go brown and soggy. A condensed version will be available, to be known as *The Little Sugar Banana Book*. I will insist that it be hung in bunches above the bookshelves, and the customers will have to clamber up to get it. But enough of this beckoning fruit—for the moment, anyway. In the meantime, turn your hand to Hungarian Red, and appreciate the little things which outlast political systems.

Penelope Cottier.