

HANDMADE HUNGARIANNESS: THE CONSTRUCTION OF ETHNIC IDENTITY AMONG ELDERLY NOODLEMAKERS IN MICHIGAN

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Introduction

Thousands of people stopped by the Hungarian–American *csiga*-noodlemakers' tent at the annual Michigan Folklife Festival in East Lansing in August of 1989. Like some of the occasional visitors at the Wednesday morning *csiga*-noodlemaking sessions at the Hungarian Reformed Church in Allen Park, many of these people were perplexed about the reasons for what they viewed as a fascinating, exotic and absurd activity. While some asked, "How long have these noodlemaking-events been regularly going on", others said "Why would anybody waste time with such an inefficient mode of production?" A few people wanted to know the reasons for the noodle-making women spending so much time and energy on twirling these small square pieces of dough, when one can buy noodles of practically any size and shape for relatively little money in the supermarket. Especially men were curious about the *exact* amount of time it takes a woman to make a pound of these *csiga*-noodles, and several visitors suggested "more efficient" ways of preparing them.

As it turned out, these concerns make very little impression on the noodlemakers. None of them remember, or seem to care about the length of time their group has been regularly gathering. As far as they are concerned, this question is as irrelevant as the comments about how painstaking *csiga*-noodle twirling is, or about its tremendously "inefficient mode of production".

What, then, *is* important for the noodlemakers and why? This is the central issue of this paper. Social scientists contend that more attention needs to be devoted to the elderly in various ethnic groups to examine attitudes toward food and food preparation because food-related activities show explicit and implicit expressions of community cohesion, cultural identity, acculturation and other behavioral changes (Newman 1985). Some (cf. Pasquali 1985) not only recognize the significance of this, but also remind us that, while traditional eating patterns give a sense of well-being and security to the elderly, immigration and acculturation often change these patterns at the cost of identity-confusion and loss of comfort and security.

In the present endeavor I examine *csiga*-noodlemaking among members of the Ladies' Aid Society of the Church in the southeast Michigan city, Allen Park. As mentioned already, my main focus will be on what is important for the noodlemakers, why do they engage in it week after week. After a brief description of these regular *csiga*-noodlemaking sessions, and of their counterparts in rural Hungary, I will explore the

meaning of these social gatherings for the participants in southeast Michigan. Finally, I will place this activity in the comparative social and cultural context of foodways in general, and ethnic foodways among the elderly in particular. I will show that, while there is definite continuation in the practice of a rural Hungarian tradition of *csiga*-making, there is important transformation in the meaning and ideology attached to this endeavor. The vocabulary of noodlemaking clearly illustrates that this activity has key social, cultural, and integrative functions in the community. For the participants of the weekly ritual, *csiga*-noodlemaking means many things. Among these I discuss the periodical reconstruction of ethnic boundaries, the affirmation of community, the enactment of a particular ethnic identity: the redefinition, performance and maintenance of their "Hungarianness".

Festive food or ethnic symbol? The concoction of Hungarianness

Noodlemaking among elderly American-Hungarians in Michigan

The *csiga*-noodlemaking gatherings at the Hungarian Reformed Church in Allen Park, Michigan regularly draw between 40 and 60 older women, and six to eight older men. By seven o'clock on an average Wednesday morning Mrs. Juliska Bíró prepares the dough by hand using a total of 40–45 pounds of flour — and for each five pounds of flour she puts in two dozen whole eggs, a bit of salt, and a tiny amount of water. After kneading the dough, she makes small, tennis ball-sized forms, puts these into stainless steel bowls, which she covers with aluminum foil. The dough "rests" for an hour or so, until the other noodlemakers arrive at 8 : 00–8 : 30. One man — usually Mr. Steve Savel — stretches the balls of dough with a rolling pin into foot, foot-and-a-half-long flats. Then two men — or, if there are not enough men, a man and a woman — place these into an Italian-made, manual crank-type pasta machine with which they stretch the dough into very thin, elongated sheets. Yet another man cuts these sheets into small, half an inch, to three-fourth of an inch squares. Still another man puts these little dough pieces onto a plate, covers them with another plate and delivers these to the long tables, where the noodlemaking women do the actual twirling of *csiga*, this snail-shaped soup garnish.

The women pick up the flat squares one at the time and lay them on their *csiga borda*, a serrated board made of wood, or reed, or even stainless steel. With the help of a long, pointed instrument, called *orsó* or *penderítő*, they twirl the small square from one corner toward the opposite corner while pressing down on the serrated board. The result is a *csiga*, a snail-shaped, rolled up, nickel-size noodle. One man, using a flat spatula, collects the ready noodles, and takes them on plates to one of several covered long tables, where a woman devotes all her time to lay these noodles out and turning them periodically, so they dry. Finally, the dry noodles are bagged and sold for \$ 4.00 per pound. The production is rather slow and the demand is great. Therefore the waiting list is always long for *csiga*-noodles.

It deserves more than a mere footnote to call attention to the fact that, contrary to our usual practice in American anthropology, I am using actual names in this paper. I am doing this with the enthusiastic consent of my informants, who are explicitly proud about their role in the Wednesday sessions. Mrs. Bíró — who was born in 1905 in the village of Matolcs, Szabolcs-Szatmár County, in eastern Hungary — is very proud of the fact that she is acknowledgedly the most experienced among the noodlemakers of this group. And as such, she is the *gyűrőasszony*, the woman who is selected to kneed the dough. It is a sign of recognition, a highly prestigious achieved position among women in both the Hungarian village and the immigrant community, to be the *gyűrőasszony* (cf. Bakó 1987; Fél and Hofer 1969; Huseby 1983).

The tradition of csiga-noodlemaking among rural Hungarians

At a quick and decidedly superficial glance these Wednesday events appear similar to noodlemaking encounters during the preparation for wedding feasts in the still tradition-maintaining villages of the Great Hungarian Plain, and elsewhere in northern and eastern Hungary. Describing weddings in these regions, Mihály Márkus (1983 : 236) writes that

Csiga-leves [snail noodle soup] is considered among the most desirable foods at wedding feasts... It is believed to be endowed with magical powers, it helps to engender fertility. Its excellent flavor is attributed to the *csiga* [noodles] that are cooked into the soup. The snail-shaped noodles are made individually... [by the women of the kingroup] who help in its preparation the day before the wedding... The very best village cooks are invited to prepare this [soup base]...

I found the situation rather similar in the northern Hungarian village of Cserépfalu, although there groups of village women start preparing these noodles several months before each wedding (cf. Huseby 1983, 1984). Then on the day of the wedding the woman acknowledged as the best cook in the village leads other women in the preparation of a rooster or hen soup, which is served with boiled *csiga*-noodles as the first course both at noon and for the main wedding feast that is held in the evening. Here too, it is not only considered one of the most significant, indeed prominent of all foods at these festive events, but *csiga*-noodles are also endowed with fertility endowing magical powers. For instance in the late Summer of 1990, when with my husband I attended a wedding in this village, Ibolya, the mother of the bride proudly took us to one of the rooms where there were a couple of boxes filled with a total of 34 kilograms of dried *csiga* noodles. She picked up a handful of the *csiga* to show us their small size and fine, even grooves and said that, starting last January on dozens of evenings after work with the help of her female natal kin, fictive kin, and neighbors she prepared these noodles. When a few days after the wedding we were preparing to leave the village, Ibolya gave us a huge package comprised of meats, breads, and sweet baked goods. In a separate bundle she handed me a couple of kilograms of *csiga*-noodles. My protestations — about the weight of the package in air travel and the strict

rules about taking various edibles into the United States — did not dissuade her: “You know that you can’t get this tiny, finely-made *csiga* anywhere else!” she said. “And just tell them in America that you need these noodles for your children’s wedding. That even officials must understand.”

Why is csiga good to think, good to make, good to eat?

Despite apparent similarities regarding these noodles in the Hungarian setting and in the immigrant one, I propose that in the pluralistic setting of urban North America the noodle-making gatherings serve additional functions. On the one hand, they fill very different social and economic roles; and on the other, they are considerably dissimilar not only in their symbolic value, but also in their organizational/integrative structure.

Of course it is significant that many Hungarian–American residents of Michigan were either born in the eastern or northern parts of Hungary, or are the offspring of immigrants from those regions. Listening to the noodlemakers discloses several key themes. One is that *csiga*-noodlemaking is a major philanthropic undertaking. As most of the women and a couple of the men stress, “we give to our church”, and this means an ongoing economic benefit. Indeed, they contribute their time and labor, all the ingredients for the preparation of *csiga*-noodles, and the profit from this enterprise.¹ Also, individuals alternate in donating on Wednesdays hot lunches for the entire group, as well as for the Church office staff, and the Pastors and their families.

Another major theme is that these sessions are both significant and fun. It is evident from the behavior of the people, and the rapport between the individuals that these weekly gatherings offer for all present a very important social forum. No wonder, since most of the women and all the men who participate are in their late 70s, or early to mid-80s, and the majority live alone. Their children and grandchildren — even if they live close by, even if they do keep in touch regularly — are too busy to be *really* there for them. On Wednesdays, however, in the great *halle* of the church among their fellow *csiga*-noodlemakers, there is warmth. There is talk. There is singing. There is joking. There is gossip. There is exchange of information. Most significantly, there are Delray² anecdotes and much reminiscing about the old days. As 86 year old Mariska Takács mused, “did you notice, [that] when we make *csiga* we always talk about the time when we were young?!”.

In addition, there is also a bit of flirting between some widows and widowers. Flirting that is not at all hindered by the sharp division of labor along gender lines. Rather, this obvious sexual division of labor gives rise to much of the light banter and to the substantial verbal sexual innuendo which accompanies it. With rare exception, the six or seven men do the chores that require walking around. As one of the regulars, Joe Pagan said, “here we men service all these women”, while the women just “sit and twirl [the noodles]” and “when they want more” [dough, that is], they merely knock [on their plates]. Let me note here that in rural Hungary, where as I stressed, *csiga*-

noodlemaking is strictly women's activity, the "vocabulary" of *csiga* also includes a number of very explicit sexual denotations but of the type which I have not heard in Allen Park.³ For example, Bakó (1987 : 168) notes that at the beginning of the wedding feast among the Palóc of northern Hungary the best man serves the first tureen of *csiga*-noodle soup and recites a clearly suggestive rhyme about the phallic-shape of *csiga*. Bakó also found (ibid: 164) that, in addition to her *csiga*-noodle soup, the bride is frequently served one huge *csiga*-noodle, "the 'size of a gopher' along with a spoon that has a hole in it 'because [as they say] 'she likes its thickness and stiffness'". Thus, in rural Hungary the *csiga* itself is a sexual and reproductive metaphor, while in the North American immigrant setting it is the production of *csiga* that evokes sexually-loaded references.

The Wednesday sessions at the Allen Park church are significant for the majority of the participants. They are also important for those who identify themselves as either second, third, or even fourth generation Hungarian-Americans; or some widows of Hungarian men, 'Wednesday Hungarians' who do not speak or do not do anything else Hungarian, but, as they declare, because they do a specifically Hungarian thing: make *csiga*-noodles on that day they are self-ascribed Hungarians. The Church's great hall on Wednesdays is the only public place where many of them say they feel really comfortable. "Because the others here really listen and care," Helen Kulcsár told me, "I miss coming, and feel genuinely missed if, for whatever reason, I cannot make it one week." Another woman said "I am Catholic, but I still rather come here than anywhere else".

A clearly stated and recognized sense of continuity is another salient theme that is ever present on these Wednesday sessions. As the older of two widowed sisters — born in 1911 and 1912, respectively, in Filbert, West Virginia of Szabolcs-Szatmár County villagers, and raised in Delray — said.

[W]hen mother died... she impressed it upon us on her deathbed 'don't leave your church, do go regularly, do your work there properly'. The church was mother's life before she got so sick, you see. Besides, we both feel very comfortable here on Wednesdays among the Hungarian ladies... we like the social aspect of the church... Even though we often do not make it for the Sunday [church] services, we make sure to be here every Wednesday for the noodle making and we always help prepare for all the big church suppers and [other] fund raising events too...

Often women related *csiga*-noodlemaking with their own upbringing. They asserted that they are continuing something they learned as very young children either in the Hungarian village or in the United States from their Hungarian-born mother, grandmother, or other female natal kin. Recalling her childhood in Delray, Michigan, where the family moved from West Virginia, the younger sister of the woman cited above commented that

Grandmother had a nice philosophy about raising us. She said that we must properly learn everything as children, so we could become decent and diligent adults. She taught us how to knead dough, and how to make *csiga* even before we could reach the top of the kitchen table without the help of standing on a bench...

Unlike in traditional rural Hungary, in the North American urban setting *csiga*-noodle soup is not served only or primarily — in Goode's (1984) words — at the highest feast, the weddings,⁴ but also at lower feasts as Sunday dinners, name-days, anniversary celebrations, and similar meals (cf. Szathmáry 1983). For some immigrant women just simply having *csiga*-noodles in the cupboard at home, and the mere act of regularly making these noodles signify upward social and economic mobility. For example, Mrs. Juliska Bíró, the *gyúróasszony* in her eighties, who was raised as the daughter of a very poor peasant family, commented that in America she always keeps some *csiga* noodles at home, but "in the old country having *csiga* in the soup was *olyan úri dolog*", meaning roughly that it was such an upper-class-like thing" (cf. Fél and Hofer 1969; Kisbán 1989; Szathmáry 1983).

In spite of this transition from the highest level to lowest level feast, *csiga* is still considered a ritual food that symbolizes celebration.⁵ Besides, the women in the Hungarian Reformed Church still clearly distinguish its original structural/temporal function: the serving of *csiga*-noodle soup — as the signal for the wedding feast to commence — continues to hold what Farb and Armegelagos (1980 : 104) call a "special place in the metaphors" of a real and proper Hungarian wedding meal. In other words, the traditional notion so evident in Cserépfalu and elsewhere in northern and eastern Hungary persists in the immigrant setting: i.e. that it would not be a wedding, or certainly not an *our kind of proper Hungarian* wedding without *csiga* in the soup. This was underlined during a conversation I had with the woman who was still outraged when she recalled the time when her son described a Hungarian-American wedding in California as "really very fancy and nice, but not properly followed by a Hungarian feast: they failed to put *csiga*-noodles into the soup. Imagine", she said, "what kind of a Hungarian wedding feast is that?!"

The manner in which this type of situation is publicly evaluated and retraced between the women on Wednesdays lead to still other active involvement in the continuation of what the noodlemakers interpret as their specifically Hungarian craft. For instance, when hearing about an upcoming wedding in the family of relatives, former neighbors, or friends in "remote settlements of [North America]" the women sign up on the waiting list. Then, in time, they could buy several pounds of dried *csiga*-noodles from the church which they then either take or send as gifts to the new couple and thus assure a "proper Hungarian wedding feast".

Discussion and conclusion

Students of immigrant communities and ethnic groups observed that foodways are very slow to change. Why? Because, some suggest (Childe 1933; Spiro 1955), they belong to the specific culture stratum which is formed very early in life, in one's family of origin, and which is the last to fade, to disappear.

It is also the case "[that] the preparation and presentation of food becomes the most accessible of crafts", as Molly Schuchat (1971) notes. Curiously, most of the meals

served at the various functions in the Church in Allen Park are decidedly not Hungarian. The lunches that are provided at the Wednesday noodlemaking sessions are the hamburger-helper, *paprikás* casserole, and macaroni-and-cheese types of cuisine. But so what? The *paprikás* casserole brings to mind Schuchat's notion, "the authenticity of recipes and other foodways are less important than making a recognizably ethnic dish. One does not have to be authentic to be ethnic" (ibid.). Based on some of my unforgettably woeful culinary experiences, I would hasten to add that simply *naming* or *labelling* an unrecognizable dish with a recognizable ethnic name, like *gulyás*, works too in this kind of ethnic construction.

Considering the entire complex of *csiga* production — particularly its vocabulary and labor intensity — I contend that, concurrently with the processes I just mentioned, some additional related processes are involved as well. For example, constructing boundaries around the group, defining social relations within it, and creating and perpetuating ethnic identities. Of course, the boundaries are rather permeable, the social relations are inherently changing, fluid, and the ethnic identities are potentially shifting and "nesting", as the case of Wednesday-Hungarians, or the Roman Catholic noodlemakers in the Reformed Church illustrate. Indeed, *csiga*-noodlemaking functions not merely in preserving a sense of who the majority of these participants are or think they are, but in most cases, particularly in those of the self-ascribed 'Wednesday Hungarians', it is used to negotiate various ethnic boundaries, and such "nested" identities as American, Hungarian-American, Magyar, Catholic, Calvinist, one from Szabolcs-Szatmár County, or Matolcs village, and so on. And, of course we know that ethnic identity is realized most dramatically in the negotiating of boundaries among (and certainly *within*) ethnic groups.

Even though *csiga*-noodles have not and are not likely to become such a generally recognized Hungarian national symbol like *gulyás* (cf. Kisbán 1989 : 54), in the multi-ethnic setting of North America these noodles are infused with particular meanings and properties that give them a mobilizing role. Similarly to other specialized foods, for example like *babka* and *pierogi* that are examined by Goldstein and Green (1978) *csiga*-noodles also obviously "carry cultural and ethnic associations; likewise the work itself [their preparation] is an act of symbolic as well as culinary significance" for the women. "Through their labor they express and affirm the values which shaped their lives."

Certainly for many of the participants the once-a-week event belongs to what some scholars call situational, and/or symbolic ethnic identity. After all, some merely display their ethnicity here, through the particular symbols of *csiga* noodles, in specific, bounded situations in which Hungarianness and its construction is most favorably looked upon. When ethnic identity is no longer taken for granted, and a person's group membership is no longer obvious, then, as Gans (1979) tells us,

identity becomes the primary way of being ethnic, ethnicity takes on an expressive rather than instrumental function in people's lives, becoming more or less a leisure time activity and losing its relevance say, to earning a living, or regulating family life.

In summary: For most of the participants the very act of *csiga*-noodlemaking means *doing* something specifically Hungarian in both the social and the cultural sense of the word. To borrow Susan Kalčík's (1984 : 58) phrase, these elderly folks become "public producers of special ethnic foods, who are in a sense ritual specialists... [who thus] express their cultural identity through this particular activity". Wednesday noodlemaking becomes an ethnic construction of social reality on two distinct, yet related levels. The actual weekly process of making noodles redefines and rejuvenates an aging and dwindling community. And, simultaneously, the shared, communal production of valued physical objects — the *csiga*-noodles — is the material expression of that community. Yes, these gatherings are important weekly rituals that give both the individual participants and the entire community new life and then sustain and reproduce that life. And thus, through this "handmade Hungarianness", the generating and sustaining powers of *csiga* endure — in both the material and spiritual sense — in the urban-industrial milieu of North America.

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Notes

1. The clear profit is rather considerable. For example, in the early and mid-1980s there were times when the annual donation of the Women's Aid Society of the Hungarian Reformed Church of Allen Park from noodle-making and directly related activities was in excess of \$ 30 000 (information courtesy of Bishop Dezső Ábrahám). The participants at the 1989 Michigan Folklife Festival presented their honorarium to their church.
2. Delray (cf. Hauk-Abonyi and Anderson 1976; Huseby-Darvas 1984b), was the principal site of Hungarian settlement in southeast Michigan between the last years of the nineteenth century and the late 1930s, was the neighborhood where the majority of these noodlemakers grew up.
3. Certainly we should not forget, as Benedek (1972) reminds us in another context, that in social connotations and courtship situations food does indeed influence sexual behavior.
4. On the significance of the preparation and use of *csiga*-noodle in rural Hungary see Bakó 1987; Fél and Hofer 1969; Hofer and István 1977; Huseby 1983, 1984a; Györgyi 1977; Márkus 1983; Kisbán 1977.
5. In his study of acculturation among recent Hungarian immigrants Weinstock (1964) notes that those who cooked exclusively Hungarian foods to be the lowest acculturation group.