

I

Romanian vegetable dishes

mămăligă / aubergines/ cabbage/
mushrooms/ potatoes/ celery



LAYERED MĂMĂLIĞĂ

In Maramureş, “Layered Polenta” is one of the most widespread and most ingurgitated festive dishes of the descendents of the free Dacians (they say that the mixed descendents of Decebal and Trajan multiplied further south). It is easy to make, tasty, and spectacular. It has countless versions, and every village and even every sheepfold has its own recipe for “leaves” of mămăligă with filling. In fact, it is sometimes even known as mămăligă stew or filled mămăligă. So, I shall present in turn a few of the basic possibilities, each more attractive than the other, from whence you will be able to ramble through gastronomy as your fancy and creativity take you (what do you say to the idea of “gastromanía”? and what about the wholly irreverent idea of “gast-Romanía?”).

1KG MAIZE FLOUR
 3 LITRES OF WATER
 1 TABLESPOON OF SALT
 100G BUTTER
 200G SOFT COW’S CHEESE
 400G FRESH EWE’S CHEESE
 300G *BURDUF* CHEESE (CHEESE
 FERMENTED IN A SHEEP’S STOMACH)
 200G CREAM
 400G SALTED, CURDLED EWE’S CHEESE (A
 WEDGE, AS MUCH AS A WHETTED, HUNGRY
 KNIFE CAN CUT)

SHOULD THE OCCASION ARISE:
 200G. SMOKED HARD CHEESE (AND HENCE
 WE ARRIVE IN ARGES !)

The mămăligă should be somewhere between watery and stony, and so, for a start, set 3 litres of water to boil, in the very pot in which the final wonder will cook, and throw in a handful of maize flour.

When the water comes to the boil, add salt and then pour in the maize flour (it shouldn’t be of the sort that is too finely sifted or ground), little by little, and keep stirring it until it starts to bind and there are no longer lumps.

Leave it to cool for a little, empty it from the pot, and cut it into slices lengthwise with a piece of string.

When the mămăligă splits in twain on the table, thou shalt go on a journey.
 Whither points the crack, thither thou shalt wend. (*Gorovei*)

First of all, we clean the cast-iron pot until we can see our face in it, then we grease it well with butter, just as we would smother our loved-one in reproaches and countless kisses

We heat up the pot: when the butter has run into a puddle, we add the first layer of *mămăligă*, which should be less than two centimetres thick (best of all is for it to be one centimetre thick)

Then spread a soft and innocent layer of sweet ewe cheese

Then a layer of *mămăligă* (now it shouldn't be thicker than one centimetre!)

Then there follows the well-grated salted hard cheese (henceforth it's like a soap opera: everything is predictable: *mămăligă*, soft cow's cheese, *mămăligă*, fermented cheese, *mămăligă*, ewe's cheese again (or hard cheese, if we are no longer in the Iza Valley, where *telemea* – which is to say pickled cheese – and hard cheese are unheard of, but rather in the Vîlsan Valley) and thick cream. And there you have it!) The whole thing goes into the oven (or over the coals) for about an hour, at a low heat, so that the cheeses will slowly melt, kiss the *mămăligă*, and brown.

The shepherds of Bran, when they make this wonder, also spread some pressed ewe's cheese in a layer on the top and at the bottom, in order to delight not only the eyes and mouth but also the nose.

If someone is injured on Saint Toader's day – a day of exceptional magical properties – the healer woman makes nine cakes of maize flour, stamps them with a horseshoe, casts a spell over them, and lays them at the boundary between two villages for whoever finds them to eat, and thus the man will be cured. (Gorova)



MĂMĂLIĞĂ WITH CHEESE AND CREAM

A caprice and a treat from town, but tasty all the same, one which recalls to my mind lawyers dressed in peasant garb while pleading in lawsuits for the restitution of tracts of forest, or the lasses from Auntie Elvira's pub going to church in white bridal gowns.

In Făgăraş, on market day – which was Friday for us, and when the shepherds come back from holiday for you (i.e. never) – a custom of our (mother's!) house, otherwise widespread throughout the town, used to dictate that there should be an entire sheepfold laid on the table. And so, that morning, the milk-woman used to bring, besides the usual litre of thick buffalo-cow's milk, a canteen of cow's cheese and a jug of cream (thereby weaning us off the morsel of meat mother would scrape together for us on other days and drawing us just a wee bit closer to the idea of fasting).

We, the little ones, would scowl scornfully and, somewhat amazed at the bits and pieces of Hurez crockery brought out – this was the sole occasion! – from dusty chests, at the dubious ceremonial of the mămăligă cauldron, and would even openly express, amid lupine growls, our discontent, permanently frustrated carnivores that we were (the times were harsh). We used to greet each Friday as a day of punishment, with sulks and tantrums.

But this was merely childhood hypocrisy, one of those old infantile stratagems to lay the blame on and manipulate parents. In the depths of our soul we could hardly wait for Fridays, to be carried away on a (well-tempered) festive wave, for Friday was the day when we once more became possessors of the incomparable treasures of the (still faraway) holidays. From the warmth of the mămăligă, from the gleam of the cream and the cheese, our imaginations extracted the tale and the memory of an enchanted world: the scent of pine resin and fermented cheese at the sheepfold, the harsh reek of sweat and smoke from the shepherds' woollen mantles, play with the sheepdogs, catching trout in the gushing stream,

the brutal taste of *mămăligă* from the cauldron, of the avalanches of cheeses, thick from the cask, the panting hike up to the high pastures amid the peaks with the flocks and shepherds.

We dissembled perfectly, every time we mimed the same pained compromise, with toleration and understanding for the naïve effort of parents (who were otherwise so nice), and in the end we would eat. The *mămăligă* was, alas, merely one boiled in haste, the cheese was, it is true, sweet, and the cream, hmm, was scant, as it was too expensive... But with them they brought miraculous portents, the only true joy of childhood, the illusion of wild freedom.

What's the recipe? Combine *mămăligă*, cow's cheese and cream, then eat.

Don't give somebody cheese with cream, it's a bad thing. (*Govorei*)



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