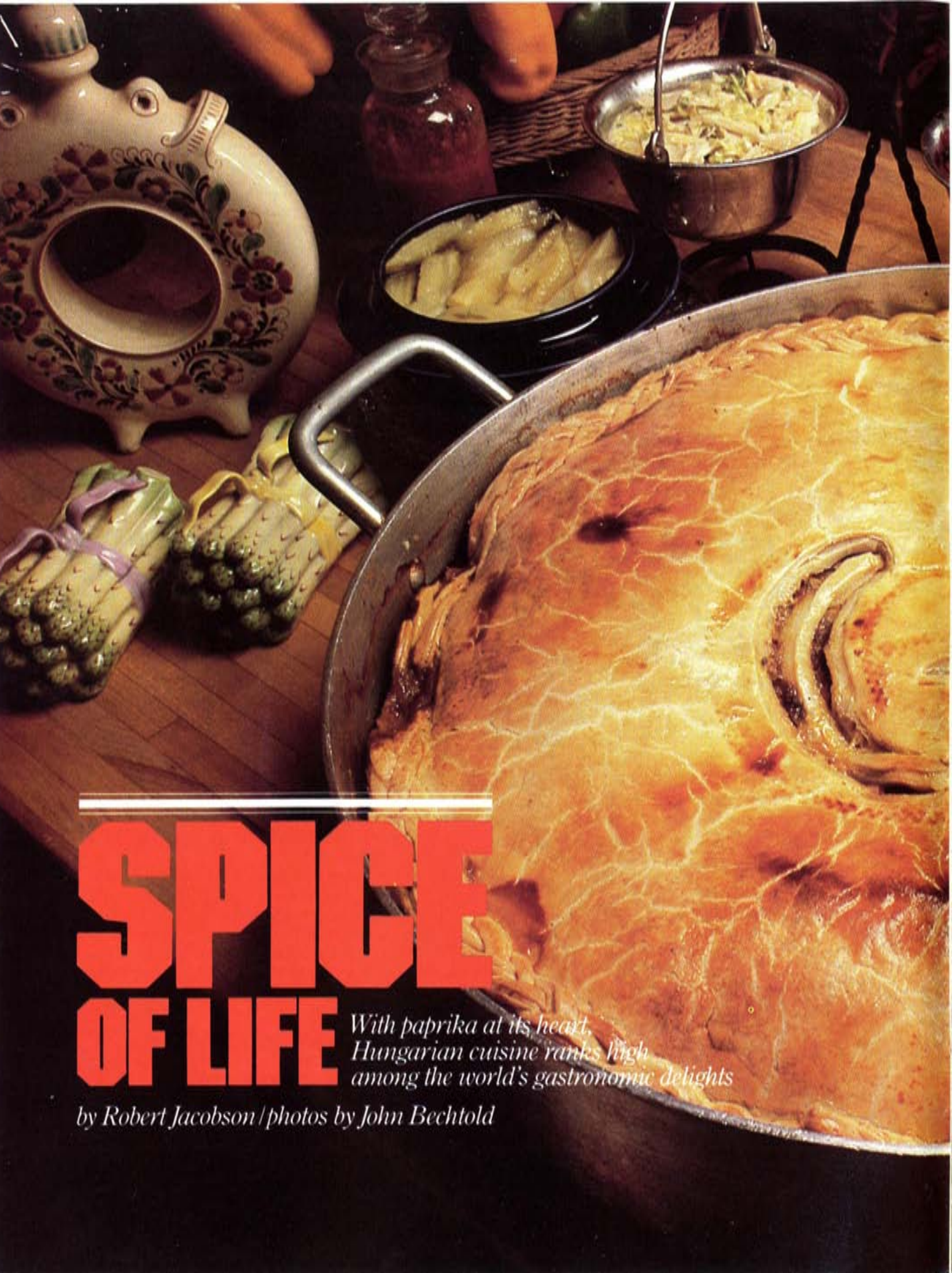
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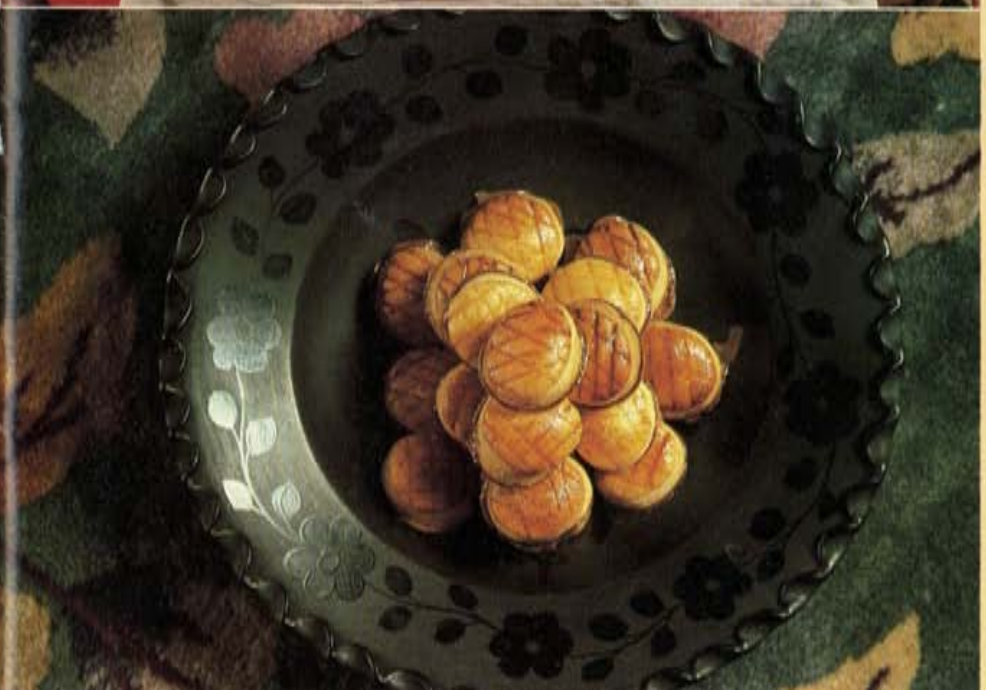
SPICE OF LIFE

With paprika at its heart, Hungarian cuisine ranks high among the world's gastronomic delights

by Robert Jacobson / photos by John Bechtold







"There is no cure for taxes, death or a hangover save a good dinner and good music." Good food and good music reigned when celebrated restaurateur and food consultant George Lang staged a dinner in honor of his countryman Eva Marton and her tenor colleague in the Metropolitan Opera's *La Gioconda*, Placido Domingo. An intimate gathering of food- and music-lovers celebrated and partook of the riches of Hungarian cuisine and Magyar music, in the kind of evening only Lang knows how to produce. For the occasion he and his food-writer/chef wife, Jennifer, created a Hungarian fantasy pie to celebrate their two opera stars, calling it "an inventory of childhood dreams"—a double-crust pie whose full list of ingredients, says Lang, "will have to be kept secret for the next 100 years."

Guests include Miss Marton's doctor husband, Zoltán, Domingo's wife, Marta, Diego and Tiqui Arria (he is former governor of Caracas), Kati Windischgrätz (of the Austro-Hungarian aristocracy), Paul Kovi (co-owner of New York's Four Seasons restaurant), Eva Pusta (international liaison for East-West publications) and Mr. and Mrs. Guillermo Martinez (close friends of the Domingos, he the artistic director of Opera de Puerto Rico).

For his Hungarian dinner, Lang greets guests with two plum brandies, one imported from Hungary, the other personally flavored in a spicy experiment of clove, cinnamon, whole black pepper and toasted caraway and cardamom seeds. For those in search of less powerful apéritifs, there are 1975 Perrier-Jouet champagne and a sparkling light white wine from the Lake Balaton region called Badacsonyi Kéknyelü, probably the superior wine of the Transdanubia area. Over her brandy, Miss Marton, tall and statuesque in black lace, is telling new acquaintances that her father was a famous chef in his time, associated with the old Hotel Bristol in her native Budapest. "When he cooked, no one came in the kitchen! When we asked what he was doing, he would say, 'I don't know. It's a composition, a work of

101-ingredient double-crust pie (left); paprika-red double fish broth served in Hungarian plates (top); table set for banquet (middle); miniature cottage-cheese biscuits accompany soup (bottom)

"Paprika is our national spice, and we can't be without it...

art.' He was the cook, *not* my mother, and she was always jealous. She would say, 'When father cooks, we eat better!' "

Today, the Martons with their two children make their home in Hamburg, far from Budapest but in the mainstream of global opera life. She keeps in touch with her native cuisine, talking of an elegant, special "prima donna dinner" she makes when she chooses to cook: peach-in-champagne soup, braised steak in chef Csáki's manner with egg dumplings (Galuska), and for dessert Palacsinta à la Gundel with walnuts and chocolate. For wines she prefers the Villányi Burgundi ("drier than the fruitier Bikaver, or heavy bulls' blood") and after dessert a 1972 or '74 Tokaj Eszencia, (from the northeastern region), which the Hungarians consider medicinal as well as delicious. "My husband tells me I cook when we have good friends, but for us alone it's a cold plate." She laughs ebulliently.

From her childhood Eva Marton recalls Wienerschnitzel and sweet dessert dumplings with apricot or plum. Or that unforgettable party on Lake Balaton, the inland sea not far from Budapest, where one night as a youngster she became dead drunk on local red and white wine—"the best wine I ever had"—eating bread with bacon, onion and paprika and experiencing the mountains, the water, the walnut trees. "Paprika is our national spice, and we can't be without it, even if it is so hot as to make you cry. It's a purification!"

When the soprano is home, a rare occurrence these days, she is inclined to make goulash (Gulyás), the national meat kettle dish, but with a difference, "because I put in red wine and soy sauce. Or I make goulash soup with dumplings. But I also love to make Chinese food and have many books on it. You know, Hungarians are always eating and drinking," she declares, sipping the spicy brandy. "There is a belief that a Hungarian must cook when guests come." She oohs and aahs over the hundreds of varieties of Palacsinta (dessert pancakes) or over Transylvanian kraut, a potted sauerkraut layered with rice and meat.



Miss Marton is confiding to the Arrias, "We Hungarians have much temperament," a statement hardly necessary after one has spent five seconds with the singer. "We drink wine and sing and dance and enjoy living after work. We are well brought-up people, with great interests in art, books, music, theater, a Renaissance-type people. We have twenty-five theaters and two opera houses in Budapest, and all are sold out. We are immediately very friendly—after five minutes you can talk about anything. But when you get pushy, we get closed up!" She left Hungary in 1972 and has not been back to sing but longs to. Says Miss Marton, "The Hungarian character can assimilate anywhere in foreign lands. We keep the language and play with it. We can always begin anew and are not afraid to work. We're industrious and optimistic, not melancholic in the Slavic way. Oh yes, there are some sad ones, but they don't go far." Her laughter shakes Lang's baronial living room.

Dynamic George Lang—violinist, linguist, bibliophile, food columnist for *Travel and Leisure*—is proud of his Hungarian heritage of food, the arts, whatever. He has perpetuated the history and traditions of his country in *The Cuisine of Hungary*, recently released in paperback by Atheneum. As he is telling a group of guests, when he was born, the midwife kept dipping him back and forth between ice water and hot water, as was her habit to confirm that everything was fine with the baby. Since then, Lang has lived by the credo "Pleasure in variety," and there isn't much he hasn't put his creative hand to over the years. He grew up surrounded by musicians, and "When I was four, I got a cigar box in the neighborhood tobacco shop and asked one of my father's workers to put in two nails and a string, and I used a stick. That was my first violin." Today he proudly plays a priceless Stradivarius at home. As a child he studied in Hungary—including Latin, literature and philosophy at the University of Szeged—and then in master classes at the Salzburg Mozarteum. When he came to America, he eventually put down his bow and picked up the cook's knife.

"I knew I was a good cook," he recalls, "and I knew more about the classical repertory than most chefs, but I hadn't worked in a professional kitchen. I did have manual dexterity." Starting as a $46-a-week cook, he became what *Gourmet* calls "a renowned restaurant consultant whose imagination is as fertile as the Indus Valley" via George Lang Corp., which creates restaurants world wide. He wrote his cookbook in 1973, returning home five times for research to make it the definitive volume.

Lang picks up a rare book of sixteenth-century cities that includes his hometown of Székesfehérvár, the coronation site of Hungarian kings—the name means "tower with white throne" —fort of St. Stephen. It's forty-five miles from Budapest, near Lake Balaton. He is swapping stories with

Dessert's pièce d'occasion, *Lang's "Eva Palacsinta," crepe with apricot filling, whipped cream garnish*

. . . even if it is so hot as to make you cry. It's a purification!"





Kovi and Pusta, recalling how his mother baked bread that was then delivered to the bakery a few houses away. "Bread was almost sacred in our home. My father took the fresh loaf, blessing it, and as a ritual he cut a little piece for both of us. He broke off a small chunk for himself and invariably told my mother after tasting—I'm sure meaning it—that 'This time it is the best ever.'" He also recalls the goose farms of his region and helping his mother stuff the geese in the back of their garden. "One morning when I was ready to go to school, my mother gave me my Tizorai, or ten o'clock snack. Suspiciously I opened it up and started to complain miserably, 'Do I have to eat goose liver and green pepper again?' There was the balloonlike bread, spread with paprika, goose fat and thickly cut roast goose liver, not to mention the medium-hot, fleshy, canary-yellow-green peppers. Not only youth but goose liver is wasted on the young."

Lang and Kovi joke about the "Hungarian Mafia" in this country. "A Hungarian," he offers, if you talk to him living here, informs you he has no Hungarian friends. Nevertheless, when you become his friend, you realize he is surrounded mostly by close Hungarian friends." His own number the various guests as well as the brilliant cellist János Starker. "You know, Budapest has two million people and all of Hungary ten million, and all Hungarians will say they were born in Budapest. Do you know this story? Why do Arabs have oil and Hungarians paprika? Because when God gave out the goodies, the Hungarians were pushier!" Then there's "the joke vitamin, the Vicc vitamin, which keeps Hungarians going from one disaster to another. Disaster is a natural state in Hungary. Every situation there is hopeless—but not serious." Laughter all around.

While the final touches are put on the dinner, Lang is in a mood to reminisce, recalling how his parents took him to Budapest for his first opera. "I was eight, and it was *The Marriage of Figaro*, and I fell in love with it—that love endures, too! It is the sum of public pleasures—theater, love, music, *homo ludens*, the man who remains a child. When the *Figaro* overture begins, immediately I smile. And there is nothing like the arias, because the singer is exposed, naked, needing artistry, subtlety, technique, and I love it."

During Lang's childhood, the now venerated Belá Bartók was considered a rebel, either ridiculed or swept under the rug. "I was brought up on Kodály in school, because singing his songs was part of the curriculum. No one was able to handle children's voices like he did. His *Háry János* became the Hungarian national folk opera and is based on a character of an amusing, gifted, creative liar, like Baron Münchhausen."

Though the Celts had settled the same land, Budapest is one of the oldest yet youngest of European capitals, since Buda, Pest and Oruda were unified only in 1873, bringing 250,000 people into one city. Lang, Pusta, Kovi and Countess Windischgrätz are full of tales of the city of the Danube. From the time of the Roman legions, when grape-growing was introduced, Buda wines became famous throughout Europe, and today one can visit state wineries in the southernmost part of Budafok. The city was originally built as part royal castle and part civilian town after the 1241 Mongol Invasion. It was destroyed several times before a baroque town was built atop the medieval ruins at the beginning of the eighteenth century.

Lang talks of his favorite pastime, long walks in Budapest, starting with morning hot chocolate in a café, sharing new jokes with breakfasters. Like Vienna, the city is full of cafés and pastry shops for writers, composers, artists. During its first fifty years, the Hungária coffeehouse was never closed, because the celebrated playwright Ferenc Molnár and his friends threw the key into the Danube on opening day. At the indoor Tolbuchin Market, on the Danube, Lang revels in the

After-dinner relaxation with Toni Koves—at the cimbalom—and Marton (left), Lang joining Domingo—at the piano

"We Hungarians have much temperament. We drink wine and sing and dance."

mounds of green, red and yellow peppers, pickled green watermelons the size of tomatoes, the Vecseri sauerkraut and chunks of hot sausages, eaten with thick slices of bread to catch the golden-red drippings of sweet onion, pungent garlic, marjoram, paprika "and 1,000 years of love of good food. This snack should be and often was praised by a poet's art."

Hungarians love to boast about Budapest, claiming the Danube is the bluest here, that the annual average of 1,992 hours of sunshine is much higher than that of surrounding Central Europe, and "Even the midgets there are taller." Lang's guests compare notes on restaurants, placing Dunakorzó Etterem first, with its home-style specialties—goose crackling, bone marrow on toast, fish-roe soup, wild mushrooms stuffed with goose liver, chocolate pancakes. At Alabárdos there is Fogas, the famed snow-white fish of Lake Balaton, and spit-roasted wild boar. Apostokok offers atmosphere with its 1902-style grill room, serving appetizers and beer and Gyulai sausage and suckling pig. Kárpátia features pig's knuckles, Baker's Wife Style. Then there are the neighborhood taverns with Gypsy songs, charcoal-cooked meat and fish and such regional specialties as mushrooms stuffed with sheep's-milk cheese.

Lang's dinner for sixteen begins with a double fish broth in the style of Zala County, the traditional fisherman's broth with crabmeat as garnish, floating in the strained, transparent "angry" red broth made sweet by fish skin and bones. Accompanying this are miniature cottage-cheese biscuits, like buttery folded puff pastry, light in taste and texture. The wine is Gouriet, a white Burgundy that is a George Lang Selection, according to its label.

The main course is the fabled 101-ingredient double-crust pie, an inventory of all things Lang has loved since childhood: boned squabs stuffed with layered cabbage, duck-liver dumplings, stuffed ripe red peppers, singed Debrecen pork sausages, the Hungarian vegetable stew called Lecsó and other dishes combined for the occasion. With it are served three sour relishes, instead of salad, to complement the flavors and textures of the pie—homemade peeled dill pickles, Savoy cabbage and apple salad, red cabbage slaw—together with homemade hot sauce to test the strongest palate. With this we drink a Villanyi Burgundi, as expert Kovi puts it, "a big red wine with enough guts to stand up to the pie." For dessert, crowning the meal, comes a specially created Palacsinta (the Hungarian crepe of Rumanian origin), a cold dish filled with that most characteristic of Hungarian flavors, pungent apricot, made into a mousse with apricot brandy for filling, then topped with whipped cream and christened "Eva Palacsinta" for all time. A 1974 Tokay is offered, followed by coffee and various after-dinner drinks.

Lang calls his dinner "personal Hungarian haute cuisine," inventive cooking of restaurateurs and chefs, based on traditional dishes and eventually accepted as part of the standard repertory —much as the famous chef Károly Gundel elevated simple peasant dishes to a high art. "None of this could have been created without the 1,100 years of Hungarian tradition. Jennifer, who is a food columnist for the *Washington Post*, and I cooked this, and even though we are both professional chefs, it took us about a day and a half over the weekend." We can believe that.

The elegant mirrored dining room is alive with Hungarica. Lang points to the dark-blue-and-white soup plates he designed and had made in Hungary especially for him. Here and there are colorful objects: a mid-nineteenth-century coffeepot from an old coffeehouse, brilliant ceramics holding paprika and hot-pepper sauce, hand-painted circular plum-brandy holders, contemporary ceramic candle-holders and the colorful peppers themselves. Elsewhere Lang points to his Hungarian library with first editions of celebrated Hungarian poets, eighteenth-century Hungarian herbariums, a large collection of Hungarian cookbooks and a lovely candy box once belonging to József Dobos, who created Dobos Torte.

And the talk? Fast, furious, gossipy, in true Hungarian fashion. "Capitalism is man's inhumanity to man—communism is vice versa," one offers. Lang and his three glamorous Hungarian ladies talk of early experiences in America. Only Zsa Zsa is missing. "What was the first sentence you learned in English?" Each comes out with "How do you do?" or "Thank you very much." Lang tells of Molnár, who replied to the question, "Separate checks, please." Jennifer Lang: "Miss Piggy never eats more than she can lift—nor do I." Eva Pusta observes in inimitable style, "Platonic relationship is definitely possible, but only between husband and wife." Another: "High C used to replace sex, but nowadays it only replaces good singing." Politics and economics of Hungary today come up, since the country is a marvel of constant economic recovery. Kovi mentions that whenever the Hungarians seem ready to start another revolution, Premier Kadar releases another recipe for goulash.

Observes Kovi of the occasion, "It's the Middle European, Molnár kind of thing—humor all around." There is talk of soccer, since Kovi was a soccer star in Italy, and he tells of meeting Umberto Giordano, composer of *Andrea Chénier*. Domingo recalls singing in Budapest, and he still wants the local china with hand-painted birds on it. He talks too of a famed Hungarian photographer in Madrid, Juan Gyenes, who has photographed kings and queens. Toasts all around with Tokay, "the king of wines and wine of kings."

After dinner, guests retire to the duplex living room, where Toni Koves sits at her cimbalom. She is perhaps the only professional player in the U.S., and Lang explains the instrument originated with the thirteenth-century Persian psalterium, evolving from a lap instrument to one on legs, its strings struck by mallets and controlled with a pedal. Budapest restaurants exude Gypsy music. By the end of the seventeenth century, the Gypsy-style orchestra was complete, consisting of violins combined with a wind instrument, the cimbalom and a cello or double bass.

People cluster for more animated conversation, but Marton and Domingo drift to the piano and cimbalom, while Lang tunes his Strad. He tries to talk but can't get past the two chattering Evas—"The Bible and Shakespeare and Dante nor anything else would not have been written with these two around," he declares, laughing. The cimbalom revels in folk tunes and Hungarian operetta of Lehár and Kálmán, Domingo playing the tunes by ear at the piano, singing, commenting, "So little time and so much to sing." The evening is complete—good food, good music. It's noted that the flags of Hungary and Spain are both white with green and red. There's a Latin saying that has existed like carved graffiti for the past thousand years: *Non est vita extra Hungariam*, there is no life outside Hungary. Hungarians believe the whole world is Hungarian, that Hungary is truly the Garden of Eden. And on such a night, it might be true. □