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Štrukli

“The Best Dish in the World”



A HUGE BOWL OF ORANGE-GOLD SOUP is placed before us at our table at the Old Clocks restaurant in Samobor, Croatia. We are just a few minutes' walk from the main square of the town, which lies about twenty kilometers from the country's capital, Zagreb. Samobor is one of Croatia's oldest tourist destinations, well known for its alpine walks and the charm of its Austrian-style architecture. Old Clocks offers a homey interior, decorated with antique furniture and objects of everyday life (most notably, old clocks), along with excellent regional cuisine, including dishes prepared using old, nearly forgotten recipes.

Our soup consists of a fragrant broth in which float fat pillows of dough—*štrukli*—filled with a mixture of beaten eggs, sour cream, and fresh, local farmer's cheese. Called

Above: Photograph of štrukli as prepared by chef Marc Fontenelle at the Regent Hotel Esplanade in Zagreb.

PHOTOGRAPH BY VELIMIR CINDRIC © 2008

štruklova juha, this soup is an old-time favorite in the villages surrounding the Žumberak Hills that rise beyond Zagreb to the southwest. On weekends visitors from nearby Zagreb flock to the local restaurants for lunch or dinner to enjoy traditional Croatian fare, including *štrukli*, which remain a rustic, everyday dish enjoyed by people from all walks of life.

In the past many different regions gave their name to *štrukli* (pronounced “SHTROOK-lee”), even though the preparations were virtually identical. Thus we find *Zagorski štrukli* (from Zagorje), *Podravski štrukli* (from Podravina),

and *Prigorski štrukli* (from Prigorje, where Samobor is located). In 1813, when Croatia's official languages were German and Hungarian, the Zagreb clergyman Ivan Birling published the first Croatian-language cookbook, *Nova z-kup szlosena zagrebeckha szokachka kniga* (Newly Assembled Zagreb Cookbook), intended for professional cooks who, in early nineteenth-century Croatia, were mainly Italian. Among the 554 recipes are seven different kinds of *štrukli*, which begin the section on "All kinds of soups, egg dishes, semolina, milk and pastry dishes with butter": cheese *štrukli* (which are baked), cream *štrukli* (containing a filling of heavy cream and egg yolks), semolina *štrukli* (filled with semolina cooked in milk, butter, and eggs), roll *štrukli* (whose filling consists of rolls that have been soaked in milk and mixed with butter and eggs), spinach *štrukli* (filled with cooked spinach, breadcrumbs, and eggs), almond *štrukli* (a sweet dish filled with a mixture of almonds, sugar, egg yolks, and beaten egg whites), and Tyrolean *štrukli* (an elaborate baked version with a butter- and egg-rich dough filled with almonds, sugar, whole eggs, and egg yolks).

Most of these *štrukli* have been lost to history, although they sometimes appear at special culinary events. The best way to taste them is to visit *Stari puntijar*, a restaurant in the northern part of Zagreb, where they are regularly on the menu. The restaurant's owner, Zlatko Puntijar, collects old Croatian cookbooks and recipes (he has published a facsimile edition of Birling's book) and is dedicated to preserving local culinary traditions. Baked *štrukli* are most popular in the Podravina region north of Zagreb. As part of a more lavish meal, these "dumplings" are served as either a main course or as an accompaniment to game, especially game stews. While *štrukli* soup is typical for the cuisine of the Žumberak Hills, sweet dessert *štrukli* are most common in Zagorje, to the northwest of Zagreb. Throughout Croatia, the standard contemporary version of *štrukli* calls for boiling them in salted water and serving them with a topping of sour cream and butter-toasted breadcrumbs. This simple preparation appeals to Croatia's modern working women, who buy readymade frozen *štrukli* at the supermarket and need only cook them and add the topping to get a quick meal on the table.

The fact that all versions of *štrukli* are basically very similar in preparation (boiled in soup, boiled in water, or baked) is evidence that the dish is very old and widespread; the main differences lie in the quality of the ingredients. Even the poorest of households could turn savory *štrukli* into a dessert by sprinkling the dumplings with sugar after baking them. No matter the final form, the basic preparation for *štrukli* is the same: the dough (made from fine

white flour) is rolled, flattened, and stretched with a rolling pin, brushed with melted butter, then spread with filling of fresh cow's cheese and eggs. The dough is rolled up like a strudel into a long, tubular shape and cut into short sections, traditionally by using the rim of a small porcelain plate. These rectangles are cooked like pasta in boiling, salted water. As noted above, the simplest version of *štrukli* calls for drizzling them with sour cream and topping them with breadcrumbs. For *štrukli* soup, a broth is made by sautéing chopped onions in oil (or, traditionally, butter), then seasoning them with paprika before adding water. When the broth comes to a boil the *štrukli* are dropped in and cooked until tender. Rich sour cream is then stirred into the broth. To serve, two *štrukli* are placed in a soup bowl before ladling broth over them. Baked *štrukli* are arranged in a gratin pan, drizzled with sour cream, sprinkled with breadcrumbs, and set in a hot oven (preferably wood-fired) until the top is nicely browned.

Today, *štrukli*, like many traditional dishes throughout the world, are being reinterpreted by both home cooks and professional chefs, and the trendiest chefs are giving these beloved dumplings new forms. Such transformations pose a risk to culinary tradition, since modernizing a dish can elevate or obliterate it. Not so long ago the updating of the classical *štrukli* recipe in Zagreb carried an additional risk: one of the chefs who shaped its destiny was not Croatian but Belgian. Until August 2008 Marc Fontenelle was executive chef at Zagreb's Regent Hotel Esplanade (he has since moved to Nairobi, Kenya, where he is executive chef at the Intercontinental Hotel). Fontenelle introduced a subtle yet profound change to the preparation of *štrukli*, choosing to steam them instead of boiling them in the traditional manner. The new hotel chef, Jeffrey Vella, a native of Malta, continues to steam them as Fontenelle did, which results in a more delicately structured dumpling.

Štrukli have long been associated with the restaurant of the Hotel Esplanade, a marvel of Art Deco architecture that dates back to 1925, when it was built to serve passengers of the Orient Express traveling between the romantic endpoints of Paris and Istanbul. At that time the Hotel Esplanade was deemed the most fashionably appointed hotel in all of Central Europe, even inspiring Agatha Christie to set a crucial part of her 1934 novel, *Murder on the Orient Express*, aboard the train just after it left the Zagreb station (the passengers had spent the previous night at the Hotel Esplanade, which was conveniently located right next to the station). The hotel's reputation as "the last civilized stop before the mysterious east"—as advertised in the Orient Express brochures, which also recommended

that travelers try the hotel's specialty of *štrukli*—has attracted many famous personalities, and it is safe to say that many of them enjoyed *štrukli* there. First prepared in this hotel in 1951, when the chef decided to collect recipes from the various Croatian regions, *štrukli* soon became the signature dish of the hotel dining room. Orson Welles is said to have polished off a dozen *štrukli* in one sitting—an impressive number considering how filling they are. Arthur Rubinstein asked for his *štrukli* to be served with caviar for breakfast, while Anita Ekberg apparently enjoyed hers in the privacy of her room.

The hotel capitalizes on its Orient Express associations. The salons are named Paris, Venice, and Istanbul after the original railway stops. And what has been dubbed "*kava u Orient Expressu*" ("The *Orient Express* coffee break") is enjoyed as the modern version of the journey's sumptuous, time-killing ritual. With the coffee and tea are served plates of seductive delicacies, from canapés of highly sought-after Kvarner Bay scampi to miniature cakes reflecting the golden age of Austro-Hungarian patisserie. Before emerging from the kitchen, they are all closely inspected with an eye as exacting as that of Christie's hero. This attention to detail, begun by Marc Fontenelle, continues under the watch of the thirty-five-year-old Vella.

Vella is content not to tamper with the *štrukli*'s perfection—perfection that came only after considerable trial and error on the classically trained Fontenelle's part. Before coming to Zagreb Fontenelle had cooked in countries as diverse as France, Gabon, Russia, and Cameroon, in addition to his native Belgium, where he worked with chef Pierre Wynants, winner of three Michelin stars for his Brussels restaurant, *Comme Chez Soi*. "Because I come from Belgium, I am very keen on tradition," he explained to me several years ago. "But having worked all over the world, I don't close the door to any culinary style." When faced with a new dish and challenged to make it his own, he insisted, "I don't change anything. To do something drastic to a traditional dish is to make confusion. What I do is analyze." After five years in Croatia Fontenelle turned his analytical gaze to *štrukli*: "*Štrukli* is, actually, a very interesting dish," he said. "I was not familiar with it before I came here, but the first thing I heard was that it is 'the best dish in the world.' Of course I wanted to learn about *štrukli* as soon as possible. But first, I had to understand what it was."

Many people tried to describe *štrukli* to him. One told him it resembled lasagna. "So I had this image of lasagna—layered pasta with sauce in between. And then I saw a demonstration of how you prepare *štrukli*." What

Fontenelle saw was the traditional method of preparing *štrukli*, the way it has been done for centuries in the region's farmhouses. "I realized that *štrukli* was absolutely not lasagna," Fontenelle said. "It has nothing to do with that dish. If I had to compare *štrukli* to something else, based on my experience, I would say they are closer to a soufflé, given their billowy filling."

The one thing Fontenelle did not like about the traditional preparation of *štrukli* was the boiling. "When you boil something, the taste dissolves—it disappears into the water. What a pity if you are dealing with fresh, natural products, like cheese and eggs." So instead of boiling, Fontenelle decided to try a different cooking method. "The only thing I changed in the way *štrukli* had been prepared in this hotel for decades was to steam them. This way the cheese still has the power to puff up once the *štrukli* go into the oven. If you overcook something in the first step, it doesn't have any power left for the later part of the procedure. So now we steam our *štrukli*, let them cool at room temperature, and then bake them with the sour cream and breadcrumbs."

Fontenelle was well aware that *štrukli* are tied to the history of the Hotel Esplanade, as they are to the history of Croatia. He did not want to tamper too much with this dish, yet he did toy with the thought of offering new variations. "French cuisine has proven that cheese can be wonderfully married to other ingredients," he said. "It would be interesting to make lobster or truffle *štrukli*, or even *štrukli* with some kind of meat," he mused. "But we have to be careful. When a guest orders *štrukli*, he may well have the image of how the dish was served in this hotel in the past, or perhaps how it was served at home. The important thing is to be careful. When you offer something new, you have to prime the guest to be ready for a touch of adventure—but not too much. You have to make sure that the essence is there, but improved." The Hotel Esplanade agrees with Fontenelle's approach. Thus Croatia's traditional *štrukli* continue to be made there in a slightly untraditional way, thanks to the experiments of a Belgian chef.

At home, however, the citizens of Zagreb still like to boil their *štrukli*. They are very proud of this preparation, which represents the transformation of everyday ingredients into a transcendent dish. *Štrukli* are simultaneously simple and complex, rustic and elegant, hearty and light. For those of us born in Zagreb they trigger memories of childhood, when we watched our grandmothers cutting the long rolls of *štrukli* with the rim of a small porcelain plate, just as generations of women had done for hundreds of years before them. For us, *štrukli* are indeed the best dish in the world. ●

Zagorje Cheese Štrukli (*Zagorski štrukli*)

SERVES 8 TO 10

5 ½ cups all-purpose flour

5 eggs

1 tablespoon cooking oil

Pinch of salt

2 ½ pounds dry-curd cottage cheese or ricotta

1 cup (2 sticks) butter, melted

4 cups heavy cream

In a large mixing bowl make a dough from the flour, 1 egg, the oil, and a small amount of salted water. Keep kneading the dough, either in the bowl or on a floured surface, until bubbles start to form and the dough becomes smooth. Then shape the dough into a ball. Coat the surface with cooking spray, cover with a clean dishtowel, and let stand about 15 minutes.

While the dough is resting, make the filling: Mix the cheese with the remaining 4 eggs in a mixing bowl. Add salt and ½ cup of the melted butter. Blend until the mixture is smooth.

Sprinkle a large work surface such as a kitchen table with flour. Roll out the dough to paper-thin thickness. Then spread out the cheese mixture evenly over the dough. Brush the dough with the remaining ½ cup melted butter. Roll up jellyroll fashion. Cut the roll into 20 pieces (the cutting is traditionally done with the rim of a plate).

Boil the *štrukli* in boiling salted water for about 10 minutes. Drain and arrange in a greased ovenproof dish. Preheat oven to 400°F. Pour the remaining ½ cup butter over the *štrukli* and top with cream. Bake for 20 to 30 minutes until golden.

Adapted from *The Best of Croatian Cooking* by Liliana Pavicic and Gordana Pinker-Mosher (New York: Hippocrene Books, 2007).