



THERE are still a few places on the Continent where people with enough money, especially American money, can get pretty good food, but since the Nazis started wrecking Europe, almost none of them have been able to carry on along the lines of the highest gastronomical tradition. No meal can be perfect if the ingredients that go into it aren't, and in most European countries it is quite difficult to obtain perfect ingredients. Besides, the number of potential patrons for such food is steadily diminishing. Europe's gourmets have always belonged to what were once the privileged classes—aristocrats, capitalists, diplomats, and prosperous artists and professional people—all of which have been hard hit by war, taxation, and socialization. As for the inevitable new rich, they don't seem to care or know anything about truly good food. Consequently, that formerly great epicurean institution, the European restaurateur who made an art of his profession, creating new dishes and inspired variations of old ones, is now almost extinct. One of the last practicing representatives of this art is Charles Gundel, a sixty-five-year-old Budapestian who has contributed more to the fame of Hungarian cooking than any other man and who is ranked by connoisseurs all over the world in a class with such restaurateurs as Escoffier and Voisin.

I met Gundel—the name is pronounced “Goon-del,” with the accent on the first syllable—one evening not long ago when I had dinner at Gundel's Restaurant, in Budapest's Városliget, or City Park. The restaurant, one of two he operates in Budapest, occupies the ground floor of a solid two-story building surrounded by a garden that in summer is used for outdoor dining. Cream-colored curtains in the windows, plain white lights, an incon-

## A REPORTER AT LARGE

### A BALATONI FOGAS TO START WITH

spicuous entrance, and soft music convey a nostalgic sense of Old World atmosphere rather than of contemporary flashiness. As I entered, an elderly doorman with a bushy hussar mustache uttered a reverent “*Alázatos szolgája. Jó napot kívánok*” (“Your humble servant. Good day”), which is still a familiar greeting in Budapest, Communists or no Communists. He apologized for his awkward bow, explaining that this was one of his rheumatic days, and led me to a patriarch in charge of the cloakroom who seemed to have trouble keeping his eyes open. This old man was apparently too decrepit to do any work, but he had two assistants, agile boys of a mere seventy years or so, who relieved me of my hat and topcoat and wished me good appetite. I was then taken in tow by a faultless maître d'hôtel, for whom a small army of no less faultless captains, waiters, and busboys stood aside. He guided me to a table not far from a seven-man gypsy band—two violins, a viola da gamba, a cello, a bass fiddle, a *tamboura* (big bass guitar), and a *cimbalom* (dulcimer). The *primás*, by way of tuning, expertly gave his men the D, not the A, as do the phony, Westernized gypsies in Paris and New York night clubs. Food and music don't ordinarily mix well, I think, each being too important in its own way, but as the evening progressed I found that Gundel's gypsy band did not intrude upon my enjoyment of what was served me. The musicians played their rhapsodic songs in a hauntingly soft way, ending each piece with a sad, lingering instrumental outcry. They seemed as essential a part of the Gundel establishment as the little busboys, the faint scent of wine and good food, the comfortably spaced tables, the mirrors and lights, the gleaming silver, and the fresh flowers on the tables.

The maître d'hôtel handed me the menu. It was printed in Hungarian and French, except for one line of English in small type along the right-hand margin. This read, “12% will be added to the amount of the bill, and 10% taxes, and in the evening 5% music.” While I was pondering this, a heavy-built man appeared, bowed in a courtly, though not at all deferential, manner, introduced himself as Charles Gundel, and welcomed me to his restaurant. He looked just like the description of him given to me by some Hungarian friends of mine who are now living in New

York and who become melancholy at the mere mention of his name—a massive, towering, oaklike man of great dignity, with a deeply lined face, a bald head, and an enormous double chin that half covered his black butterfly tie. He wore thick-lensed glasses, a black single-breasted suit, and an old-fashioned silver-gray waistcoat. I introduced myself, in turn, and said that I brought him greetings from my friends, who had been faithful clients of his for many years. He smiled benevolently at this and said that he would be glad to help me choose my dinner. My friends had warned me expressly against ordering dishes that were listed on the menu. “If you want to be respected, ask for something that's not on the bill of fare,” one of them had said.

Gundel discreetly inquired about my health, digestion, and eating preferences, and then suggested that I start with *Balatoní fogas à la Rothermere*, made after a recipe that he created in honor of Lord Rothermere. “Just the filet of the fish, boiled in a court bouillon made with white wine, then covered with *sauce hollandaise* and topped off with a crayfish *pörkölt*, a ragout in a thick paprika sauce,” he said. He made a circle with thumb and forefinger, closed his eyes, and shook his head slowly, and for a moment there was an expression of ethereal delight on his face. “You can't get a better *fogas* than the one that comes from our Lake Balaton,” he went on. “This fish, called *Lucio-perca sandra*, is white and more tender than its brother in the Danube. Life is easier for the *fogas* in the soft, calm waters of the lake than in the swiftly flowing Danube, where he has to fight against the strong current and so develops his muscles. And the velvety sand of the lake whitens his skin.” Gundel gave me a questioning look. I nodded, overwhelmed by the avalanche of information. “Afterward, how about a filet of hare?” he asked. “Larded with bacon, grilled *à l'Anglaise*, and served with *sauce béarnaise*? Or perhaps the national specialty, breaded goose liver?” Before I could answer, he shook his head and said, “Might be too heavy for you, though. Let me order you a veal cutlet done in the Pittsburgh style. We call it that because we first made it for the Mayor of Pittsburgh, when he came here some fifteen years ago. A cutlet of veal filled with a purée of foie gras and served with *sauce Périgueux*. A little rice to go with it, and perhaps an

endive salad sprinkled with fresh chopped chives and tarragon leaves, which I was fortunate enough to find in the market this morning."

I murmured assent to all this, at which Gundel turned to the maître d'hôtel, who had been standing respectfully a short distance behind him, and gave him the order, speaking softly in the technical jargon of his profession, like one doctor conversing with another in front of a patient, and underscoring a few fine points with gestures of his big, expressive hands. The maître d'hôtel hurried away. "Suppose you try one of our Hungarian wines with your meal," Gundel said to me. "Egri Bikavér, perhaps—Bull's Blood, that is. It is a red, tart, mellow, aromatic wine, *genre de Bordeaux*, with just the right proportion of tannin." He wished me good appetite and said he would like to talk to me later. "I am particularly glad that you are from New York," he told me. "My oldest son is a neighbor of yours there. He is in charge of the restaurant in the Great Northern Hotel." I asked him to sit with me while I dined, but he refused. "Please enjoy your dinner in solitude," he said. "I'll be back."

**T**WICE while I was enjoying my dinner, Gundel came by, and both times he stopped to inquire whether everything was all right. He nodded in a matter-of-fact way when I replied that this was the best meal I had had during six months of travelling about the Continent. For dessert, he suggested fresh peach compote or pancakes filled with ground walnuts, sugar, and raisins and covered with chocolate cream, and I chose the latter. He sat down at my table while I was having a *barack* (dry apricot brandy) and *espresso* coffee, strong and black, served in a small glass. It was past ten o'clock now, and hardly a third of the tables had been occupied. Gundel sighed deeply. "Our prices are regulated by the government, and we don't charge more than the other comparable places in town," he said, "but there just aren't enough people left here who can afford to buy a good dinner." A complete meal at Gundel's, with a bottle of wine, will run to about a

hundred forint, approximately eight and a half dollars at the official rate of exchange, or about half the weekly salary of a run-of-the-mill white-collar worker. Gundel's guests these days are mostly government big shots, foreign diplomats, hard-currency tourists, and local black-marketeers. Occasionally, one of the former habitués of the place—an impoverished bank manager, possibly, or a dismissed government minister—sells one of his last Persian rugs or paintings and spends a good share of the money on an evening at one of Gundel's restaurants, pointing up the old Hungarian proverb "We are poor, but we live well." Such fleeting indulgence in high life is not without danger. An agent of the recently organized *Gazdasági Rendőrség*, the feared Economic Police, may happen into the restaurant, in which case he will almost surely visit the lavish spender the following morning and inquire about the source of his sudden wealth. No matter how reasonable the explanation, there is always the chance that it will be con-

sidered unsatisfactory, and, if so, serious charges will almost certainly be laid against the splurger.

"It's getting so I'm always amazed when anybody comes in at all," Gundel said. "In time, I suppose, there won't be any guests, and that will be the end of it." He gave a resigned shrug. Thirty-eight years of violent ups and downs have given him a philosophical attitude toward the vicissitudes of life. Since 1910, the year he became a full-fledged restaurateur in Budapest, Gundel has been, as he put it, "through two world wars, two inflations, two occupations, two revolutions, and one counter-revolution." In 1918, he was catering, in the grand manner, to a Hapsburg archduke, and the following year he was serving the wild-eyed followers of the Communist Béla Kun. "They would eat only the white stems of asparagus, because they considered the green tips inedible," Gundel said. "After them came Horthy and the White Terror, and we had guests who ordered roast goose and ate only the wings and legs,



"Now go out there and win!"

because they thought the breast wasn't good enough." During the Horthy regime, Gundel became what amounted to official caterer to the Hungarian government. Ten years ago, he was catering to the then King Carol of Rumania, and last winter to Ana Pauker, Rumania's Strong Woman, as well as to Marshal Tito and Georgi Dimitrov, the Prime Minister of Bulgaria.

"I've been called a symbol of continuity through chaos," Gundel said. "Only a little over three years ago, during the three-month battle for Budapest, this place was a stable for Wehrmacht horses. Where we sit now, I saw a horse fall down and die. Practically everything I owned vanished—rugs, mirrors, curtains, linen, glassware, silverware. Shameful! I used to own enough gold plates and gold knives and forks and spoons to serve a hundred and twenty people. Where are they today? Only the chinaware was left. My great collection of rare cookbooks was burned. Some of them were five hundred years old, and contained the oldest known Hungarian recipes. Also among them was a very valuable cookbook of Roman times, in an English translation by a

physician of Queen Elizabeth. But the worst loss of all was the wines."

Gundel's eyes grew moist. He called a captain and asked him to bring one of the establishment's prewar wine cards. It was an eighteen-page booklet on parchment paper, arranged by categories—wines *en carafe*, *vins blancs du pays*, *vins rouges du pays*, Bordeaux wines, Burgundy wines, Rhine and Moselle wines, Tokay wines, dessert wines, Hungarian *vins mousseux*, French champagnes, cognacs, and liqueurs, as well as beers and mineral waters. Next to the name of each of the Hungarian wines were some numerals and letters, which, Gundel explained, were for the guidance of his foreign guests. A key card with corresponding numerals and letters accompanied each wine list, and from it a customer could ascertain the precise degree of sweetness or dryness, fullness, and flavor of the wines offered. A white wine from the Badacsony district, for example, called Badacsonyi Kéknyelű, was marked "7.III.a.," meaning that it was extra-dry, full-bodied, and aromatic, and a white wine called Keckeméti Edes Furmint, from the Royal Hungarian State Cellars in Budafok, bore the

marking "1.III.a.b.," meaning that it, too, was full-bodied and aromatic, and, in addition, *fin*, but sweet.

I asked about the Tokay wines on the list. Gundel took off his glasses, closed his eyes, and rubbed them with the palm of his hand, as if he were trying to bring back memories. "Here we say that Tokay is the wine of kings and the king of wines," he told me gently. "It has nothing artificial in it. You drink it just as it comes from grapes grown in the volcanic soil of the Tokay district, in the northeastern part of the country—an ideal natural blend of bouquet, alcohol, and sugar. There are four principal kinds of Tokay wine. Tokay Aszu is a wine that is graded on a basis of how many butts of dried-on-the-vine grapes went into its making. The more dried grapes, the sweeter the wine, and the types are numbered from one all the way to six. Next comes Muscatel Aszu, made of muscat grapes. Then there is Szamorodni—the name meant 'born by itself' in ancient Hungarian—a wine with a sugar content that varies according to climatic conditions. Thus there are both dry and sweet Szamorodni. Finally, there is

Essence of Tokay, the rarest of them all. To make Essence, one must wait until the grapes are dry on the vine. The grapes must never be pressed. The sheer weight of them brings forth just a little juice, which in due time matures into a heavy, sweet, liqueur-like wine that makes one think of honey. It is a wine that can be kept almost forever. At the time of the war, we still had a few bottles labelled 1811, the year Napoleon Bonaparte prepared to march on Moscow." He fell silent.

"How much did a bottle cost?" I asked.

"About twenty dollars a half litre," he replied. "I recall, too, that we had some other choice vintages—1815 and 1866, and an especially fine one of 1854. That must have been one of the greatest wine years. Who drank those wines that



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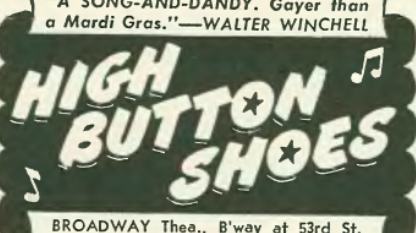
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were in our cellars? A lot of soldiers, I would guess, who were already intoxicated before they broke the heads off those precious bottles." He sighed and put his glasses back on. "I'm sorry," he said. "The memory of those old treasures always makes me sentimental. You know what Pope Benedict XIV wrote about some casks of Tokay that had been sent to him by Empress Maria Theresa? 'Blessed is the soil which produced thee, blessed is the queen who sent thee, and blessed am I who may enjoy thee.'" Gundel turned the pages of the old wine list. "We also had some fine Bordeaux and Burgundy wines," he said. "I remember a Château Cos d'Estournel 1928 and a great Puligny-Montrachet 1929." Gundel and I counted up and found forty-eight liqueurs listed, among them Dreher's cherry brandy, Gessler's Altvater, Zwack's Unicum and Paprika, Fratelli Branca's Fernet Branca, Campari Bitter, Jourdes' Cordial Médoc, and Pernod's absinthe. For abstainers, there were twenty-six mineral waters—Vichy, Karlsbader, Salvator, Apollinaris, Biliner, and so on.

GOOD food and good drink have been Gundel's chief interest in life for as long as he can remember. He was born in Budapest in 1883, and his first recollection is of hanging around the kitchen and wine cellars of the Erzherzog Stefan, a hotel that was owned by his father. In his middle teens, he set out to learn the profession of hotel-and-restaurant management in the famous cities and resorts of western Europe. He worked in Neuchâtel, and then in Frankfurt am Main, where he met the famous hotelman César Ritz, who was impressed by his ability and took him on to Paris and then London. "Monsieur Ritz was a great man," Gundel said feelingly. "He always used to tell me, 'Charles, be creative and inspired about new sauces and new ragouts but remain old-fashioned about your table arrangements.'"

Two or three years later, Gundel was home on a visit when his father became ill, and he felt that he ought to remain in Budapest to help out at the hotel. Its restaurant was noted for its cuisine, and with reason; Gundel, who remembers in detail the menus of distinguished dinners he has served the way Toscanini remembers scores, told me with particular enthusiasm about a luncheon party given there on his parents' wedding anniversary in 1903, when he was twenty. The meal consisted of *potage Windsor*, cold sturgeon

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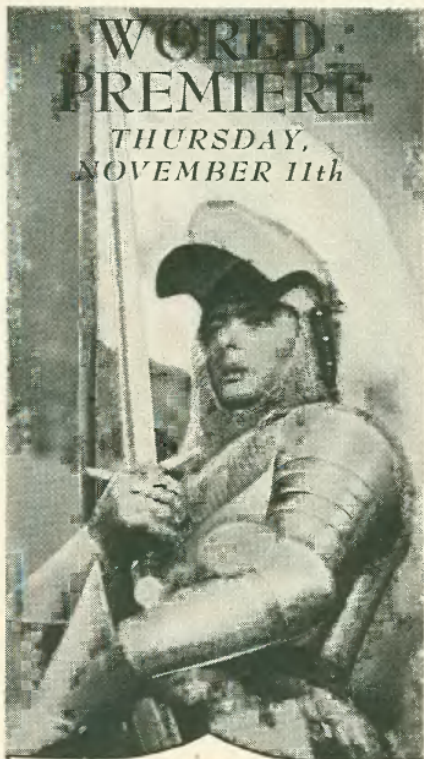


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In 1910, Gundel and his family moved to Budapest, where he bought a once well-known but by then run-down restaurant called the Wampetits. It was in this restaurant that I was dining. Gundel renamed it after himself, and hired musicians and singers, and, later, whole symphony orchestras and opera companies to entertain his guests. There were partitioned sections in one part of the garden for private open-air parties and a terrace for socially and otherwise prominent folk. "People with good food and wine manners would in due time graduate to the terrace," Gundel said. He seems to look back on this era as the golden period of his life. The end came abruptly when the first World War broke out. Gundel, after engaging a

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manager to help his wife run the restaurant, served forty-four months in the Army, most of the time with the rank of captain and as executive officer of a battalion. He now feels that through inattention to his duties he may have contributed to the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, for he spent most of his time in the kitchen of the officers' mess, trying to drill some sense into the cook, a stubborn Czech who before the war had been a taxidermist in Prague. "That's the way he cooked, too," Gundel said, shuddering at the recollection.

Gundel returned to Budapest after the war and guided his restaurant through the various revolutions that swept the country. In 1926, while continuing to operate the City Park establishment, he took over the restaurant in the St. Gellért Hotel, at the foot of St. Gellért Mountain, on the opposite side of the town. The St. Gellért was a vast complex of thermal springs, parks, gardens, terraces, playgrounds, and two big swimming pools, one enlivened by artificial waves, the other by invigorating air bubbles that were forced up through the floor of the pool. The restaurant itself contained spacious banquet rooms for large gatherings, small chambers for private parties, a beer tavern, and two public dining rooms, one with a dance orchestra and the other with a gypsy band. Gundel called in a brother of his named François and his old friend Josef Marchal to assist him with this huge enterprise. At the St. Gellért, he often had as many as twenty private parties and two or three banquets a night. A banquet might be served for as many as nine hundred people. Importers of sea food sold more of their wares to Gundel's restaurants than to all the other restaurants in Budapest combined.

Within a few years, Gundel's reputation had become international. When King Victor Emmanuel of Italy visited Hungary in 1937, the government opened up the banquet hall of an old castle for him in the ancient coronation city of Székesfehérvár and asked Gun-



*Five o'clock*

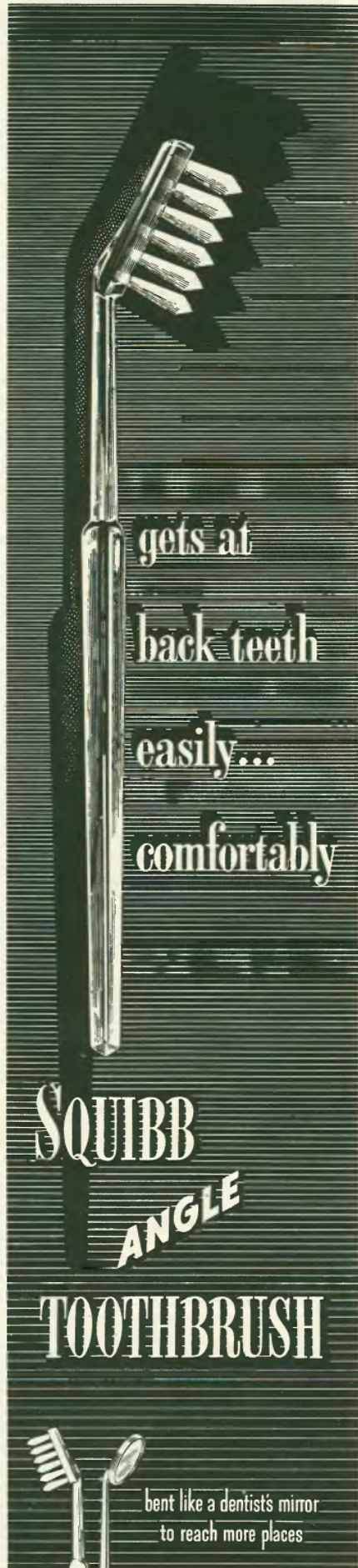
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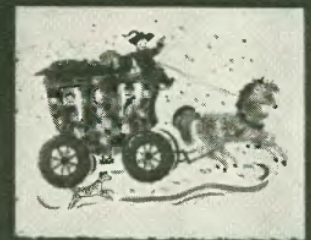
del to equip and staff it and to provide a meal there. This association with royalty made Gundel sought after by nearly all Hungarian aristocrats who could afford entertaining on a feudal scale. Gundel emphasized to me that in spite of the volume of his business in those years he never lowered his standards. "We were lucky in having first-class personnel," he told me. "Every once in a while, I would send my chefs, *sous-chefs*, and *maîtres d'hôtel* to France to brush up a little. The French are our masters, unsurpassed. Our payroll was quite large for a place like Budapest, which, after all, has never been a very big city. Here at the City Park restaurant alone I had a steady crew of sixty-five waiters and busboys, and the basic crew in the kitchen consisted of a head cook, two butchers, two cold men, three pastry cooks, a roast man, a *saucier*, an *à-la-minute* cook, and two specialists in Hungarian dishes. We also had a few women working here, one specializing in Wiener schnitzel, one in hot pastry and strudel, a vegetable woman, a cheese woman, and, during the summer months, two girls for fruit. Of course, there would always be a number of apprentice cooks and various other helpers around, too."

**G**UNDEL thinks diligence, a little luck, and a continuous study of what people like are responsible for success in the restaurant business. "The work of a competent restaurateur doesn't begin with keeping an eye on the kitchen," he said. "He must go to the market himself to get the best there is. Even then the outcome is often doubtful. It is difficult to make something good out of second-class materials, but it is also quite easy to spoil first-class ones. People often appreciate a superb meal without quite realizing what makes it better than another meal of apparently much the same sort. You can't distinguish between fresh fruits and the very freshest ones unless you have eaten, let us say, wood strawberries newly picked in a sunny glade or tasted a ripe apricot straight from the tree. Yet it is this almost imperceptible difference between fresh and freshest that is all-important. That is why even during my most prosperous years I made it a habit to do all the marketing myself. Every morning at eight, I would go to the market with a list of our needs that my chef had compiled the evening before. In addition, I would always buy whatever seemed to be exceptionally good that day—new asparagus, perhaps, or some outstandingly beautiful apples, or

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fresh *süllő*, as young *fogas* is called, or *kecsege*, a fish that looks something like sturgeon and is very tasty, hot or cold, and has no bones at all. Beef is always a problem for the one who buys. It must be aged, but it mustn't be frozen. Did you ever take meat from a freezer and watch it thaw out? The little bit of pink juice that has formed under it is now lost, and that little bit makes so much difference in the taste! We used to get beef from steers that had been fed on sugar-beet mash, but they aren't feeding cattle that way any more."

His marketing done, Gundel would proceed to the St. Gellért and busy himself in his office until noon. Then he would make the rounds of the kitchens and dining rooms. At one-thirty, he would drive over to inspect his City Park place. "Your customers should always know that you are on hand," he said to me. At three o'clock, he went on, he would sit down to lunch with his family, and then, after a short nap, spend the rest of the afternoon at a business meeting or a funeral. He has always been a zealous pallbearer. "In the years just before the second war, it seemed to me that almost every day one of my old guests was buried," he said. By six o'clock, Gundel would be back at the St. Gellért, and later in the evening he would go to the City Park restaurant. It was a busy life, but he found time for discussions with his chefs, in the course of which many new delicacies were developed. "Only a genius like Escoffier actually invented dishes," he said with what I gathered was excessive modesty. "You don't *invent* a dish by spreading mint sauce over a pork roast. All we did was make new variations on classical recipes."

Most people associate paprika with Hungarian cuisine, but I noticed that there were only two or three paprika dishes on Gundel's menu. "The French influence," he said when I asked him about this. "For years now, we have been using fewer and fewer condiments. Above all, we have cut down on the use of paprika. Few Hungarians today realize that paprika, the Hungarian national spice, was hardly used at all in this country a century ago. In Hungarian cookbooks of the early nineteenth century, there is scarcely any mention of it. It isn't a native Hungarian plant, either. Columbus brought one variety of it to Spain from America. When the Turks overran Hungary, early in the sixteenth century, they brought with them another variety, some think from India. Today, in our cooking, we use



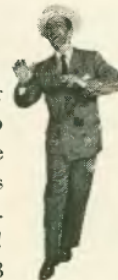
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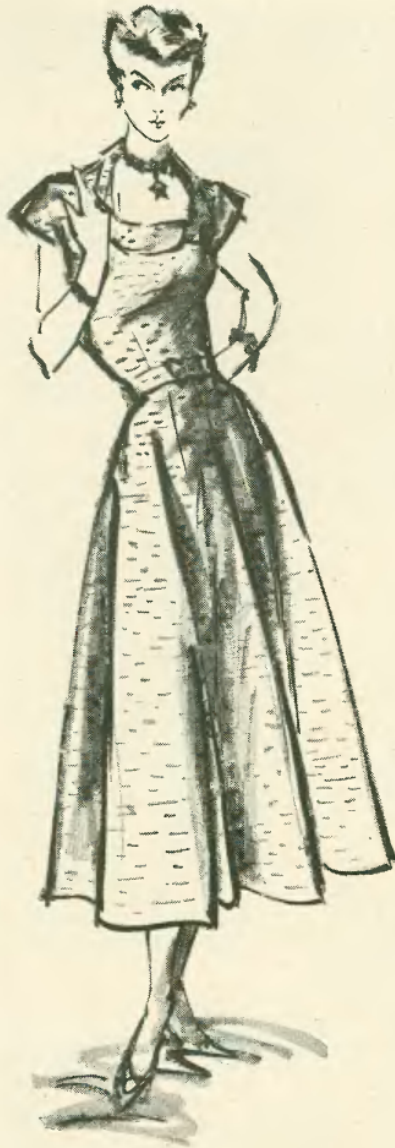
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paprikas that aren't too hot but are sweetish and piquant rather than sharp, and much milder than cayenne pepper or curry. Good paprika has a certain sugar content. It mustn't be overheated or the sugar content will turn too quickly into caramel and both the color and the flavor will be spoiled. Most foreigners call all dishes that contain paprika *gulyás*. We Hungarians divide paprika dishes into four varieties—*gulyás*, *pörkölt*, *tokány*, and *paprikás*." He looked at me inquiringly through the thick lenses of his glasses and said, "I am not boring you?"

I assured him that I was glad to learn about paprika dishes from the greatest living authority on the subject. He nodded absently. "*Gulyás*," he continued, "is prepared by cooking together finely chopped onions, cubes of potatoes and meat, green peppers and tomatoes, caraway seeds, garlic, salt, and paprika, and sometimes a dough that is nipped off, bit by bit, between the forefinger and thumb. The meat used is beef, and there is plenty of gravy, almost like a soup. *Pörkölt* also contains finely chopped onions, paprika, and meat, but in bigger pieces and from fatter animals—veal, mutton, game, pork, goose, and duck. For *tokány*, the meat is usually cut in lengthwise pieces. It may contain sweet or sour cream, or no cream at all, mushrooms, asparagus tips, and parsley roots. As for *paprikás*—the finest of them all, to my taste—it is made of fish, fowl, lamb, or veal, and either sour or sweet cream, or a mixture of both."

TWO men and a woman came in and were seated at a table near us. They were, Gundel said, Americans, and one of the men was with the United States Legation. He rose, went over to greet them, and asked what they would like. The woman said, "Oh, a steak, I suppose, medium rare," and one of the men said, "Same for me. French fries, please, and a couple of vegetables." The other said, "Same here." Gundel recoiled, but only slightly, and relayed the order to a captain. Then he came back to my table. "They're fine people, generous and kind," he said. "Unfortunately, they never learned to eat. They just feed themselves. I must say, though, that I did have some American guests here occasionally, between the two wars, who appreciated good food. In fact, one of the great banquets of my career was given on June 12, 1931, in honor of a number of American businessmen, or maybe they were hotelmen. I have forgotten which, but I

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have not forgotten the menu." Gundel stared up at the ceiling, like a high priest summoning divine inspiration, and said, "Cantaloupe, chicken consommé *au tokaj*, *vol-au-vent Aurora*, saddle of venison *rôti à l'Anglaise* with *sauce béarnaise*, a *salad des primeurs*, strawberries *à l'Anthéor*, hot savories, *petits fours*." He lowered his eyes and came back to earth. "Don't be deceived by the simple names. I've never been in the habit of giving fancy names to dishes. The chicken consommé, for instance, had nothing in common with the chicken consommés that one finds on most menus. A classic chicken consommé must have a distinctive flavor, and it takes a good chef to prepare one. The *vol-au-vent Aurora* was made with a ragout of crayfish and *sauce Cardinal*. Only a thoroughly trained chef can do it properly. And the *salad des primeurs*! Americans would probably call them fresh young garden vegetables. My son Charles sometimes sends me menu cards from New York, where, it seems, they use the word 'fresh' with everything. As if in a good place it should be considered necessary to point out that the food is fresh! Also, I am told, 'fresh' does not necessarily mean fresh in America. Here, when we say 'fresh,' we mean, of course, vegetables that are served the very same day they come out of the garden. But I am becoming garrulous. Believe me, that banquet was one of those memorable affairs that don't happen any more. I can only quote from Berchoux:

Il se mettait à table au lever de l'aurore.  
L'aurore en revenant l'y retrouvait encore."

Gundel raised his hands in a gesture of despair and said, "People are too busy in these times to care about good food. We used to spend months working over *bonne-femme* sauce, trying to determine just the right proportions of paprika and fresh forest mushrooms to use. And take carp. Over in America, carp isn't too popular a fish. People don't like that muddy taste. Well, I've



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always maintained that carp can be very good. We would put live carp taken from still lakes into screened tanks and lower them into the Danube and leave them there for two weeks. The current would wash away that muddy taste, and in the end the carp were delicious."

**G**UNDEL got up, and came back after a while with a photograph of a group of youngsters—six boys and five girls. "My children," he said, and for the first time I saw real pride on his face. "Eleven of them, and I also have seventeen grandchildren. You must go and see my son Charles when you get back to New York. He used to help me here. He was expert at making, among other things, a delicious dessert called *rêtes*, a strudel with extremely thin dough. In 1939, he went over, accompanied by a staff of four cooks and five waiters, to manage the Hungarian Pavilion at your World's Fair. I understand they did quite well, although they served a number of strange concoctions, like a drink they called a Pish-ta. They made it of blackberry liqueur, brandy, orange juice, lemon juice, and seltzer. And then there was another something, called the Attila Cup, made out of Hungarian *mousseux*, Bull's Blood, curaçao, fruit, mint, and sugar." Gundel reflected gloomily on these formulas, and then shook himself like a wet dog. "When war came," he said, "Charles and his nine companions stayed on in New York. They found good jobs there, all of them. Charles later managed a restaurant called Hapsburg House and then one called the Caviar. You must go and see him at the Great Northern when you get back.

"Two of my other sons were not so fortunate. Franz was taken prisoner by the Russians. He did not return home until last year, and then I put him in charge of the St. Gellért restaurant. Josef, after being taken hostage by the Germans, was confined for many months in a displaced-persons camp in Germany. He now hopes to join Charles in America. Stephen and Emery are with me, learning the trade, and Andreas works at the Hungarian Tourist Office in Budapest. Of my daughters, Elizabeth is living in Venezuela with her husband, and the four other girls—Margaret, Katherine, Anna, and Palma—are all married, too, and living here in Budapest. People sometimes ask me whether my children were brought up on fancy Gundel food. Naturally, they were not. They had to



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eat whatever came to the table, and most of the time the food was strictly middle-class. Only once in a while, on Christmas or Easter, there would be something special. It's nice to have so many children, but in times like these I worry about them."

**D**URING the German occupation, Gundel's City Park place was patronized almost exclusively by generals and colonels of the Wehrmacht and the S.S. at lunch and dinner, but late in the evening some of his many Jewish friends who were hiding out would sneak in through a back door for a quick meal in the kitchen. (Almost half of Budapest's prewar Jewish population has survived—a larger percentage than in any other big Middle European city.) In the course of the Russian siege, the St. Gellért Hotel, which had also been a favorite of Hitler's officers, was bombed and partially burned out, while the City Park restaurant underwent its conversion into a stable. Gundel and his wife were permitted to stay on in a tiny room in the cellar of the City Park place. Gundel lost eighty pounds during the siege and came, he said, to look "almost normal." While the battle of Budapest was still going on, he began talking to contractors about yanking the horse stalls out of his City Park restaurant and making it into a dining room again. He also set about collecting glassware, mirrors, and pots and pans wherever he could find them, and succeeded in reopening both his restaurants not long after the Red Army marched in.

Hungarian government officials immediately found Gundel's establishments highly acceptable places for the entertainment of their Russian liberators. The people of Budapest were near starvation; in the last weeks of the siege they had grown so hungry that they ate some of the animals in the Municipal Zoo. It was impossible to get much food in the city. The peasants in the surrounding countryside didn't want to sell what little they had in return for badly inflated paper money. Gundel hired a cart and drove out to their farms to bargain. He traded the few shoes, shirts, and bits of jewelry he had left for butter, flour, eggs, and meat. His lifetime savings, two and a half million pengő, which had made him a rich man, had disappeared. The only guests in his restaurants were Russian officers and, later, a sprinkling of British and Americans. By February 1, 1946, a not very lavish meal at a Gundel restaurant cost over a million pengő, or what it would

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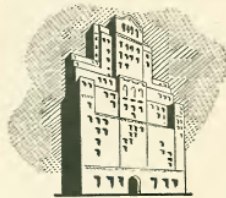
FIFTH AVE. AT 52nd ST., N. Y. 19

take a Budapest worker a month to earn. (For an American, it was only \$1.66.) On the City Park restaurant menu of January 6, 1946, a cold fogas with sauce tartare was listed at 80,000 pengö; on February 3rd, at 130,000; on May 12th, at 350,000; on July 15th, at 26,000,000. On August 1st, the day the currency was stabilized and the forint was introduced as the new unit of currency, at the rate of one to 400,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 pengö, Gundel customers were charged twelve forint, or a dollar, for a fogas. Today the price has gone up to fifteen forint.

"Our bookkeeper, poor fellow, almost went crazy," Gundel told me. "Here, let me show you." He called a captain and instructed him to bring one of the ledgers that showed the firm's financial transactions during the inflation period. Gundel opened the book at random. On June 24, 1946, the restaurant had taken in the improbable amount of 30,382,752,000,000,000 pengö, and at that, Gundel said, he was going farther and farther into the red. The value of the pengö dropped so rapidly that frequently he lost a small fortune between eight in the morning, when he bought food at the market, and early afternoon, when he sold it. Perfidious customers would come in, enjoy a good meal, and then "discover" that they didn't have enough money with them to pay for it. "They would pay the bill three days later, when the amount wouldn't buy a ride on a streetcar," Gundel said. "We'd always thought the inflation was bad after the first World War, when English workers and clerks could and did come to live at the St. Gellért like millionaires on their old-age-pension checks, but during that period prices went up only twelve thousand per cent. This time, it was astronomical."

**G**UNDEL closed the book and asked the waiter to bring him the guest-book. It was a bright, leather-bound volume that might well have served as the basis for a *Who Was Who* of Europe between the wars. It seemed as if every tourist, painter, banker, singer, diplomat, king, ex-king, musician, politician, and fellow-restaurateur on the Continent, and many from elsewhere, had been a Gundel guest. Gundel is most impressed by the tributes and signatures of playwrights, poets, and novelists. Like a great many other Hungarians, he likes to think of himself as something of a writer. He has written essays on Hungarian food and Tokay wines, a highly diverting cookbook, and

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two other books—"The Art of Entertaining" (1938), a practical guide for hostesses, and "The Profession of Entertaining" (1940), a compendium of tips for the ambitious restaurant owner. Perhaps the most notable of all the scribbles in Gundel's guestbook is a poem that John Galsworthy wrote one night after a dinner at Gundel's. It is called "The Prayer" and reads:

If on a spring night I went by  
And God were standing there,  
What is the prayer that I would cry  
To him? This is the prayer:

O Lord of Courage grave,  
O Master of this night of spring,  
Make firm in me a heart too brave  
To ask Thee anything!

A distinguished-looking elderly man in a shabby suit entered the dining room, and Gundel excused himself and hurried over to him. As the newcomer sat down at a nearby table, Gundel remarked that it seemed like ages since he'd seen him there. The man nodded sadly, saying something about the bad times, and Gundel agreed, nodding equally sadly. Both men sighed, and then Gundel said, "And now may I ask what will be your pleasure? A pheasant *aux choux rouges*? Or a veal cutlet, as in the old days? Dipped in egg and flour, covered with mushrooms and finely shredded ham, sprinkled with . . ." —JOSEPH WECHSBERG

Featuring full-length twin beds in all sedan models, the new 1949 Nash went on display today at dealers' showrooms throughout the city. Boasting a new "teardrop" design, the car's twin-bed arrangement can be converted into a single bed while the car is in motion.—*The Post*.

Somebody grab that wheel!

Moulton bought a run-down farm, uses four heavy oxen, keeps only four cows from which he raises calves, sheep, pigs, young cattle, and last year gathered 500 bushels of corn and 1,000 bushels of potatoes.—*Hampton (N.H.) Union & Rockingham County Gazette*.

He better forget corn and potatoes, and concentrate on those four cows.

**LIFE IN HOLLYWOOD DEPARTMENT**  
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[*Hedda Hopper in the News*]

Montgomery Clift took off for New Orleans with a trunkful of scripts before deciding what picture he will do next. Clift isn't interested in money—only in good screen parts. "I don't care if I make no more than \$30,000 a year," says he, "as long as I do a good job."

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