

Cook

Romanian

in America



Recipes with love from
The Robot Book Club

Cook Romanian in America

Traditional Flavors and Family Recipes for the Modern Kitchen

The Robot Book Club

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Preface

This book, and The Robot Book Club, is an experiment large scale AI generation. Every page, from layout to images to copy, was generated with zero human review.

The authoring and publishing teams were implemented in the Kaya scripting language. They were given only the input: Romanian Home Cooking.

This is the only page authored by a human: Hello there!

— Ted Benson

Prologue

A Romanian kitchen in America. It's rarely a romantic ideal, often just a visceral need. A quiet, sometimes desperate, attempt to conjure something from a different life, a different soil. The children of immigrants, navigating fluorescent-lit grocery aisles, searching for the ghost of a flavor that once meant home. That sharp tang of *bors*, the earthy comfort of slow-simmered garlic, the unmistakable scent of roasting eggplant—these are more than ingredients. They are anchors.

The old ways, the grandmother's secrets, those whispered instructions—they're not always built for Tuesday night in Ohio. Not when you're battling traffic, balancing budgets, and those esoteric ingredients are halfway across the city, or a continent away. You want the real deal, the stuff that mattered, not some watered-down approximation. You deserve it.

This book isn't a wistful fantasy. It's a blueprint. A roadmap back to the flavors that built you, without demanding you quit your job or ferment your own wheat bran in the garage. It understands the quiet dignity of a well-made *ciorbă*, the honest satisfaction of *mămăliță* that transports you, bite by bite, straight to a kitchen in Bucharest, or maybe just the indelible memory of your mother's. It respects the lineage, the honest toil, the cultural heft of what's on the plate.

It honors the pig's ritual, the arduous labor of the *cămară*, the unapologetic sizzle of *mici* on a weekend grill. It simply shows you how to pull it off, for real, with what you've got. No compromises on flavor, just smart, practical choices for where you are now. Because true authenticity isn't about scarcity; it's about ingenuity.

From the essential pantry hacks that unlock instant nostalgia, to the restorative soups, the daily comforts, the robust weekend gatherings, the revered holiday feasts, and the sugary treats that taste like childhood itself—these are the dishes that connect. Not a sanitized version, but the potent, undeniable real deal, ready for your kitchen, your family, your life. This is how you cook Romanian in America. Get to it.



Cămara: Afternoon Snacks & Pantry Hacks

Quick snacks and spreads built from the traditional Romanian pantry, adapted for the reality of a busy weeknight.

The Romanian cămara isn't just a storage closet; it's an insurance policy against winter, hunger, and a bad Tuesday. It's where jars of smoky eggplant and pickled green tomatoes sit shoulder-to-shoulder, waiting to be smeared on crusty bread the second you walk through the door. But let's be honest: you don't always have a village grandmother sweating over a backyard cauldron in late August to stock those shelves for you.

Here is the workaround. These are the spreads, dips, and sharp, garlicky snacks built for the reality of a busy weeknight. We're trading the open wood fire for the oven broiler to blister eggplant for *salată de vinete*, and hacking our way to a fast *zacuscă* that still hits those deep, sweet-and-savory notes of home. It's the quick, messy, profoundly satisfying side of Romanian eating—no wood-chopping required.





Salată de Ciuperci cu Maioneză

sah-LAH-tuh deh choo-PERCH koo my-oh-NEH-zuh

If you grew up in a Romanian household in the eighties or nineties, this unassuming dish was the soundtrack to every celebration. It's the kind of deeply comforting pantry staple that grounds a party. While the old guard relied on canned mushrooms out of necessity during harsh winters, the modern approach uses fresh ones, heavily browned to concentrate their savory depth. The real grandmother's trick, however, isn't the mushrooms at all—it's cutting the rich mayonnaise with sour cream and a sharp, unapologetic hit of raw garlic. It yields an earthy, pungent, velvety spread that tastes exactly like home. Smear it thick over toasted baguette and don't look back.

INGREDIENTS

1 lb	fresh white button or cremini mushrooms <i>wiped clean, trimmed, and finely diced</i>	1/3 cup	high-quality mayonnaise
1 tbsp	neutral oil	1/3 cup	full-fat sour cream
1/2 tsp	kosher salt	3 med	cloves garlic <i>pressed or grated to a fine paste</i>
1/4 tsp	black pepper	1 tsp	fresh lemon juice
		2 tbsp	fresh parsley <i>finely chopped</i>

PREPARATION

- **Keep the mushrooms dry.**

Never wash mushrooms under running water, as they act like sponges; simply wipe them clean with a damp paper towel to ensure they brown properly in the pan.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Dry-sauté the mushrooms for maximum umami.**

Heat the oil in a large skillet over medium-high heat, add the diced mushrooms in an even layer, and let them cook undisturbed for a few minutes before salting so they brown instead of steam.

- 2. Season and reduce the moisture.**

Once the mushrooms have reduced by half and released their natural water, stir in the salt and pepper and continue cooking until all the liquid evaporates and the mushrooms are golden and meaty.

- 3. Cool completely to protect the emulsion.**

Transfer the hot mushrooms to a paper-towel-lined plate and let them come to room temperature; mixing them while hot will break the mayonnaise and turn the salad into a greasy soup.

1. Build the garlic dressing.

In a medium bowl, whisk together the mayonnaise, sour cream, grated garlic, and lemon juice until the mixture is velvety and perfectly smooth.

2. Mix and mature in the fridge.

Fold the cooled mushrooms and parsley into the dressing to coat, then cover and refrigerate for at least an hour to allow the raw garlic to permeate the dairy and the spread to firm up.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Lactic balance is the secret.**

Cutting the heavy mayonnaise with sour cream mimics the fat content and lactic tang of Romanian smântână, taking this from a cloying deli salad to an authentic, craveable spread.



Salată Orientală

sah-LAH-tuh oh-ree-en-TAH-luh

If you grew up in a Romanian household, this is the smell of a Tuesday night when your mother claimed there was nothing in the house to eat. Born from the *cămara*—the traditional winter pantry—*Salată Orientală* relies on humble, shelf-stable ingredients transformed by a sharp, unapologetic vinaigrette. Forget the heavy, mayonnaise-bound potato salads of American barbecues; this is a bright, punchy, pragmatic dish that cuts right through the gloom of winter. The secret is entirely in the execution: boil the potatoes in their jackets to keep them intact, then peel and dress them while they're steaming hot so they drink up the oil and vinegar like a sponge.

INGREDIENTS

2 lb	waxy potatoes <i>scrubbed but unpeeled</i>	1/2 cup	pickled sweet red peppers <i>sliced</i>
1 med	red onion <i>sliced into thin half-moons</i>	1/4 cup	fresh parsley or dill <i>finely chopped</i>
4 large	large eggs <i>hard-boiled and peeled</i>	1/4 cup	neutral oil
1 cup	Kalamata or oil-cured black olives <i>pitted</i>	3 tbsp	white wine vinegar
3 large	Kosher dill pickles <i>sliced into thin rounds</i>	1 tsp	Dijon mustard
		1 tsp	kosher salt
		1/2 tsp	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Macerate the red onion.

Place the sliced onion in the bottom of a large serving bowl, sprinkle with a pinch of salt, and give it a quick toss. This classic trick softens the onion and pulls out its harsh, stinging bite while you prep the rest of the salad.

2. Boil the potatoes in their jackets.

Do not peel the potatoes before cooking, or they will become waterlogged and mushy. Place them whole in a large pot, cover with cold water, add a generous handful of salt, and simmer until a fork easily pierces the largest potato, about 20 to 25 minutes.

3. Emulsify the vinaigrette.

While the potatoes are boiling, vigorously whisk together the oil, vinegar, mustard, salt, and pepper in a small bowl or shake them in a jam jar until smooth.

4. Peel and cube the warm potatoes.

Drain the potatoes. When they are just cool enough to handle, use a kitchen towel and a paring knife to slide the skins off. Cut the warm potatoes into bite-sized cubes and drop them directly over the resting onions.

1. Dress the potatoes while they are steaming.

Immediately pour half the dressing over the hot potatoes and gently fold. Warm starches act like a sponge, deeply absorbing the sharp vinaigrette straight to their core. Let them sit for 5 minutes.

2. Assemble and fold.

Quarter the eggs and add them to the bowl along with the olives, pickles, and red peppers. Pour the remaining dressing over the top, add the fresh herbs, and gently fold everything together from the bottom up so the potatoes and eggs maintain their distinct shape.

3. Rest before serving.

Let the salad rest for at least 15 to 30 minutes at room temperature before eating, allowing the briny flavors to fully marry.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **The vegan pantry hack.**

During fasting weeks leading up to major holidays, Romanian grandmothers make this dish "de post" (vegan). Simply omit the eggs and double up on the olives and pickles for a brilliant, tangy, plant-based meal.

● **Avoid starchy potatoes.**

Floury varieties like Russets are strictly prohibited here; they will disintegrate into a paste when tossed with the dressing. Stick to waxy red or Yukon Gold potatoes.



Salată de Icre

sah-LAH-tuh deh EE-kreh

If you grew up in a Romanian-American household, the ultimate sign that company was coming over was the furious sound of a wooden spoon whipping against a glass bowl. Salată de Icre is a testament to the magic of the traditional pantry, transforming a humble jar of preserved fish roe and standard cooking oil into an appetizer of extraordinary elegance. While fishermen in the Danube Delta make this with nothing but pure roe and oil, the deeply comforting, nostalgic version our grandmothers made relies on a brilliant pantry hack: a spoonful of cold, cooked semolina and a splash of club soda. The

semolina ensures a foolproof, stable whip that isn't greasy, while the carbonated water turns the mixture brilliantly white and airy. This is weeknight luxury, born of necessity, ready in fifteen minutes.

INGREDIENTS

1/4 cup	fine semolina flour	3 tbsp	fresh lemon juice
3/4 cup	water	4 tbsp	club soda <i>ice cold</i>
3.5 oz	jarred salted carp or cod roe <i>brought to room temperature</i>	1/2 small	white or yellow onion <i>minced incredibly fine by hand</i>
1 1/2 cup	neutral sunflower or canola oil		

PREPARATION

- **Mince the onion by hand.**

Avoid using a food processor to chop the onion. The mechanical blades will puree the allium, releasing sulfurous liquids that will ruin the texture and turn the dip bitter.

- **Bring base ingredients to room temperature.**

Temperature shock is the enemy of a stable emulsion. Ensure your roe and oil are both at room temperature before you begin mixing.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Cook and chill the semolina binder.**

In a small saucepan, bring the water to a gentle boil. Whisking constantly to prevent lumps, pour in the semolina flour in a slow, steady rain. Cook for 2 to 3 minutes until it forms a very thick porridge. Transfer to a small bowl, cover with plastic wrap touching the surface, and refrigerate until completely cold and stiff. Do not skip the chilling; warm semolina will melt the oil and break the dip.

1. Assess and desalt the roe.

Taste a tiny pinch of your jarred roe. If it tastes aggressively, mouth-puckeringly salty, wrap it in a piece of cheesecloth, submerge it in a bowl of cold water for 30 to 60 minutes, and squeeze it completely dry. If it is only moderately salty, proceed directly. Ensure the roe is at room temperature.

2. Break the egg membranes to release emulsifying proteins.

Place the room-temperature roe into a medium glass or ceramic bowl. Add exactly 1 heaping tablespoon of your chilled, stiff semolina. Using an electric hand mixer on medium speed, beat the roe and semolina together for about 2 minutes until the roe begins to lighten in color.

3. Slowly begin the oil emulsion.

With the mixer running constantly, begin adding the neutral oil a few drops at a time, exactly as if you were making mayonnaise. Once the mixture begins to look creamy and opaque, you can increase the oil to a very slow, thin, steady stream.

4. Aerate and whiten the dip.

After you have incorporated about half of the oil, the mixture will become very thick and heavy. Begin alternating your liquids: add a teaspoon of lemon juice, whip it in, then stream in a little more oil. Next, add a tablespoon of the club soda. The dip will undergo a sudden chemical reaction, turning bright white, fluffy, and voluminous. Continue alternating until the dip is light, airy, and holds its shape on a spoon.

5. Fold in the onion and chill before serving.

Stop the mixer. Taste the dip and adjust the acidity with more lemon juice if necessary. Using a spatula, gently fold in the finely minced onion by hand. Do not use the mixer for this step, or the onion will release juices and make the dip bitter. Refrigerate in an airtight container for at least 1 hour to allow flavors to meld, then serve with a mountain of fresh crusty bread.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **How to fix a broken emulsion.**

If you pour the oil too fast, the dip might suddenly turn into a greasy, separated soup. Don't throw it away. Put one tablespoon of your broken mixture into a clean bowl, add exactly one teaspoon of boiling hot water, and whisk it vigorously with a fork until it binds into a thick, creamy paste. Grab your hand mixer and slowly trickle the rest of your broken soup into this new, stable base.

- **The fisherman's purist version.**

If you want to experience the intense, unadulterated flavor of the Danube Delta, omit the semolina. Beat the roe on its own, then slowly stream in the oil, alternating with the lemon and club soda. It yields a much richer, fattier spread.

- **Never use olive oil.**

Extra virgin olive oil introduces a bitter, grassy flavor profile that completely overwhelms the delicate marine notes of the roe and ruins the authentic flavor. You must use a highly refined, neutral oil.



Bulete de Mămăligă

boo-LEH-teh deh muh-muh-LEE-guh

If you grew up in a Romanian household, you know the quiet magic of leftover mămăligă. Carpathian shepherds used to roast massive spheres of cheese-stuffed polenta over campfires to survive the transhumance. Today, grandmothers have scaled those survival rations into a brilliant weeknight pantry hack. Authentic brânză de burduf—a funky, fermented mountain cheese—is notoriously hard to find in an American suburb. To hit that exact salty, tangy, sharp note of the homeland, we mix crumbled sheep's milk feta with sharp white cheddar. Baked hot, they yield a crispy, golden crust that shatters into a molten center of absolute comfort.

INGREDIENTS

4 cup	water	1/2 cup	sharp white cheddar cheese <i>grated</i>
1 1/2 tsp	kosher salt	1/2 cup	smoked sausage <i>finely diced and browned (optional)</i>
2 tbsp	unsalted butter	1 tbsp	olive oil <i>for brushing</i>
1 1/2 cup	medium or coarse yellow cornmeal	1/2 cup	full-fat sour cream <i>for dipping</i>
1/2 cup	feta cheese <i>crumbled</i>		

PREPARATION

- **Brown the diced smoked sausage in a skillet over medium heat.**
Let it cool slightly before mixing with the cheeses.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Bring the water, salt, and butter to a rolling boil in a heavy-bottomed pot.**
Do not skimp on the salt; the cornmeal needs it to taste like anything.
- 2. Stream in the cornmeal continuously like rain while whisking vigorously.**
This is the grandmother's secret to avoiding lumps. Keep whisking until the mixture is smooth, then lower the heat.
- 3. Cook the polenta until it pulls cleanly away from the sides of the pot.**
Switch to a wooden spoon and stir frequently to avoid burning. Be careful of sputtering. This should take about 15 to 20 minutes.
- 4. Remove the pot from the heat and let it cool just enough to handle safely.**
Give it about 10 minutes. Do not let it cool completely; if the polenta gets too cold, it will stiffen and crack when you try to shape it.

- 1. Toss the feta, sharp white cheddar, and browned sausage together in a small bowl.**

While the polenta rests, prep your filling and preheat the oven to 400°F. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper.

- 2. Form the polenta balls using wet hands.**

Wet hands prevent the starches from sticking. Scoop a golf-ball-sized portion of warm polenta, flatten it in your palm, add a generous teaspoon of the cheese mixture, and pinch the edges entirely shut to seal.

- 3. Bake until golden and crusty.**

Brush the tops lightly with olive oil and bake for 20 to 25 minutes. Serve immediately with cold sour cream for dipping.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **The Cheese Rule**

Stick to white cheddar. Yellow cheddar contains annatto for coloring, which will weep orange grease into your polenta and alter the visual authenticity of the dish.

- **Make-Ahead Hack**

If you are making polenta for dinner, purposefully make extra. You can store the formed, unbaked bulete in an airtight container in the fridge for up to 3 days and pop them directly into the oven on a busy weeknight.



Brânză Frecată

brin-zuh freh-cah-tuh

If there is a flavor that instantly drops a first-generation Romanian kid right back into their grandmother's kitchen, it is the sharp, herbal tang of this stuff. Before store-bought tubs of processed spread took over, grandmothers took fresh, sweet farmer's cheese, mixed it with a pungent wedge of sheep's milk feta, and beat the hell out of it with a wooden spoon and a knob of butter until it turned to velvet. It is a brilliant, utilitarian pantry hack born out of necessity that turns a heel of rustic bread into a feast. You don't need a dairy farm to pull this off; an American supermarket and ten minutes will get you the exact taste of home.

INGREDIENTS

8 oz	farmer's cheese	1 small	shallot <i>very finely minced</i>
4 oz	sheep's milk feta <i>finely grated or crumbled</i>	1/4 cup	fresh dill <i>finely chopped</i>
3 tbsp	unsalted butter <i>softened to room temp</i>	1/2 tsp	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>
2 tbsp	full-fat sour cream		

PREPARATION

- **Bring the butter completely to room temperature.**

Cold butter will not properly emulsify with the curds, leaving you with a lumpy mixture rather than a smooth, luxurious spread.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Whip the cheeses and fat into a smooth paste.**

In a food processor, combine the farmer's cheese, feta, butter, and sour cream. Pulse until it transforms from crumbly to a cohesive, velvety spread, about 30 seconds. If you want to channel your inner Romanian grandmother, skip the machine and aggressively mash the mixture against the side of a bowl with a sturdy wooden spoon for three to four minutes.

- 2. Fold in the aromatics by hand.**

Scrape the cheese mixture into a mixing bowl and stir in the minced shallot and dill. Never run the herbs and onions through the food processor, or the cheese will turn a sickly green and the alliums will become bitterly pungent.

- 3. Season and let the flavors marry.**

Add the freshly ground black pepper. Feta is notoriously salty, so taste before even thinking about adding extra salt. It is perfectly edible right now, but resting it in the fridge for 30 minutes elevates the dish exponentially.

1. Serve at room temperature.

Pull the spread out of the fridge a bit before serving so the butter softens. Slather it thick on dark peasant bread, or use it to stuff hollowed-out bell peppers and tomatoes.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **The Farmer's Cheese Hack.**

Farmer's cheese perfectly mimics the dry, slightly tart Romanian brânză de vaci. If you can't find it, buy standard whole-milk small-curd cottage cheese, place it in a fine-mesh strainer, rinse it briefly, and press out as much moisture as humanly possible.

● **The Transylvanian Variation.**

If you want to try the Austro-Hungarian influenced Liptauer variation, omit the dill. Instead, fold in 1 teaspoon of sweet paprika to dye the cheese a pale orange, along with a half teaspoon of caraway seeds.



Frigănele

free-guh-NEH-leh

If you grew up in a Romanian household, you know the smell. It's the scent of a lazy Sunday morning, or the ultimate after-school comfort food whipped up by your grandma in under ten minutes to resurrect bread that had gone hard. In America, it's called French toast, but the traditional Romanian way is fundamentally different—born of peasant frugality, devoid of vanilla or heavy syrups. The genius lies in the two-step dip: a rapid dunk in milk to soften the stale crumb, followed immediately by a dredge in salted, beaten egg. When it hits the hot oil, the egg instantly fries into a savory, crispy golden shell, locking in a soft, steaming interior. It's the definition of making something spectacular out of nothing.

INGREDIENTS

8 slices	white bread <i>cut 1/2-inch thick</i>	1 tbsp	unsalted butter
1/2 cup	whole milk	2 tbsp	granulated sugar
3 large	large eggs	1/4 cup	fruit preserves
1/4 tsp	fine sea salt	1/2 cup	sharp cheese <i>grated</i>
1/4 cup	neutral cooking oil		

PREPARATION

- **Stale the bread overnight.**

Do not use fresh, squishy sandwich bread. Buy an unsliced bakery white loaf or a mild country sourdough, slice it, and leave the slices on a wire rack on your counter overnight so it can hold its shape in the milk.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Set up the dipping stations.**

Pour the whole milk into one shallow wide bowl, and thoroughly beat the eggs with the salt in a second bowl until completely liquid.

- 2. Heat the pan and fat.**

Place a large, heavy-bottomed skillet over medium heat and add the oil and butter. Wait until the butter foams and subsides; the fat needs to be hot enough to sizzle the moment the bread touches it, otherwise the bread will absorb the grease and become heavy.

- 3. Submerge the bread in the milk.**

Take a slice of stale bread and dunk it in the milk for just 1 to 2 seconds per side. Do not let it soak or it will disintegrate.

1. Coat in the egg and fry.

Instantly transfer the milk-soaked bread to the egg bowl, coating both sides completely. Let the excess egg drip off for a second, then carefully lay the slice into the hot skillet.

2. Fry to golden perfection.

Cook for about 2 to 3 minutes on the first side until deeply golden brown and crisp, then flip and cook for another 2 minutes. Work in batches so you don't crowd the pan.

3. Drain the bread.

Transfer the hot frigănele to a plate lined with paper towels to absorb any excess oil.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Eat it sweet.**

For a classic childhood snack, generously dust the hot bread with sugar and serve immediately with a spoonful of tart jam on the side.

● **Eat it savory.**

Serve the bread entirely plain alongside a hearty weeknight vegetable stew to soak up the juices, or top it with a little grated sharp cheese right out of the pan.



Langoși Rapizi

lahn-gosh rah-pee-z

In a Romanian or Hungarian household, the smell of frying dough and raw garlic is the smell of pure, unadulterated comfort. A traditional langoș relies on yeast and hours of proofing, but this is the greatest trick in the grandmother's pantry: trading yeast for cultured kefir and baking powder to fake that complex, sourdough tang in fifteen minutes flat. It goes straight from a mixing bowl to hot oil, engineering the blistered, golden street food of the homeland for the reality of an American weeknight.

INGREDIENTS

3 cup unbleached all-purpose flour **1 tbsp** baking powder
plus extra for dusting

1 tsp fine sea salt

1 tsp sugar

1 cup plain whole milk kefir
at room temperature

2 tbsp neutral oil

1 qt neutral oil

3 med garlic
crushed into a paste

2 tbsp water

1 tbsp neutral oil

1 cup cultured sour cream

1 cup feta and Monterey Jack
cheese blend
grated

PREPARATION

- **Whisk the crushed garlic paste with one tablespoon of neutral oil and two tablespoons of water.**

This creates the sharp, savory garlic wash known as mujdei, an absolutely non-negotiable component of the traditional flavor profile.

- **Mix equal parts feta and a mild semi-hard cheese like Monterey Jack or farmer's cheese.**

This blend perfectly mimics the sharp, salty punch of traditional Romanian telemea and cașcaval cheeses, which can be hard to source in American grocery stores.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Whisk together the flour, baking powder, salt, and sugar in a large mixing bowl.**

Create a well in the center and pour in the kefir and the two tablespoons of oil.

- 2. Mix the ingredients with a wooden spoon until a shaggy dough forms, then knead gently in the bowl with your hands for two minutes.**

The dough should be soft, pillowy, and slightly sticky; do not over-knead or add too much flour, or the flatbreads will fry up tough.

- 1. Cover the bowl with a clean kitchen towel and let it rest for ten to fifteen minutes.**

This crucial rest allows the flour to fully hydrate and the baking powder to react with the acidic kefir, building the air bubbles that will make the dough puff.
- 2. Pour about one inch of neutral frying oil into a heavy-bottomed skillet and heat it over medium-high until a pinch of dough vigorously sizzles.**

You want the oil around 350 degrees Fahrenheit; too hot and the outside burns before the center cooks, too cold and the dough acts like a sponge, absorbing the grease.
- 3. Turn the dough out onto a lightly floured surface, divide it into six equal balls, and stretch each one outward with oiled fingers.**

Pull the dough into a seven-inch disc so the edges remain thick while the center becomes almost translucent, completely avoiding the use of a rolling pin so you don't crush the vital air bubbles.
- 4. Carefully lower the stretched dough into the hot oil and fry for about one and a half to two minutes per side until blistered and golden brown.**

It should puff up dramatically the second it hits the oil; use tongs to carefully flip it once the bottom edges are deeply golden.
- 5. Drain briefly on paper towels, then immediately bury the piping hot flatbread under garlic sauce, sour cream, and grated cheese.**

Brush the top generously with the mujdei garlic sauce while the oil is still sizzling on the crust so the flavors meld.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **You can keep this dough in the refrigerator for up to three days.**

Wrap it tightly in plastic wrap; the cold actually enhances the tangy sourdough-like flavor. Just let the dough balls sit at room temperature for ten minutes before stretching and frying.
- **Leftover plain dough makes an incredible sweet treat.**

Dust a hot, freshly fried langoş heavily with powdered sugar, or spread it with a sharp, tart preserve like sour cherry or apricot jam.



Slănină cu Ceapă Adaptată

slah-NEE-nah koo CHAH-pah

True slănină afumată—glorious slabs of cured, smoked fatback carved with a pocket knife—takes weeks in a chilly shed and a backyard smokehouse to achieve its magic. But there is a closely guarded grandmother's secret from Transylvania designed for instant gratification. By gently boiling fresh pork belly in a sour, acidic broth of sauerkraut juice, the fat becomes meltingly tender in under an hour. Slathered steaming hot with a pungent garlic paste and dusted heavily in sweet and smoked paprika, it slices like butter once chilled. Served cold on a wooden board with sharp red onions and crusty bread, this is the ultimate, unpretentious taste of the Romanian winter, hacked perfectly for an American weeknight.

INGREDIENTS

1 1/2 lb	raw skin-on pork belly <i>cut into 3-inch blocks</i>	6 large	garlic cloves <i>minced and mashed into a paste</i>
2 cup	sauerkraut juice	1 tsp	coarse salt
2 cup	water	1 tsp	neutral oil
1 med	yellow onion <i>peeled and halved</i>	2 tbsp	sweet Hungarian paprika
4 med	garlic cloves <i>smashed</i>	1 tsp	smoked paprika
2 med	bay leaves	1 large	red onion <i>sliced into thick wedges</i>
1 tsp	black peppercorns	1 large	crusty artisan bread <i>sliced</i>
1/2 tsp	dried thyme		

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. In a medium heavy-bottomed pot, combine the sauerkraut juice, water, halved yellow onion, smashed garlic cloves, bay leaves, peppercorns, and dried thyme, then bring to a gentle boil over medium-high heat.**
- 2. Carefully lower the pork blocks into the boiling liquid, reduce the heat to medium-low, cover, and let simmer gently for 40 to 50 minutes.**
You will know it is ready when a fork pierces the skin and fat with absolutely zero resistance, feeling like it is sliding into warm butter.
- 3. While the pork boils, combine your mashed garlic paste with the coarse salt and neutral oil in a small bowl to create a spreadable emulsion, and mix the two paprikas in a separate bowl.**
You can also use a spoonful of the hot broth instead of neutral oil to help the garlic paste come together.

1. **Use tongs to remove the tender pork blocks from the liquid, drain them on a wire rack for one minute, and immediately smear the garlic paste generously over all sides of the meat.**

Doing this while the pork is steaming hot is the secret to ensuring the pungent garlic flavors fully penetrate the fat.

2. **Immediately roll the garlic-coated pork in the paprika mixture until every surface is heavily coated in vibrant red.**

A fine mesh sieve can also be used to dust the paprika evenly over the meat.

3. **Allow the pork to cool to room temperature, then wrap loosely in parchment paper and refrigerate for at least 2 hours to firm up the fat before slicing thinly.**

Serve cold on a rustic wooden board with the raw red onion wedges and thick slices of crusty bread for a sharp, crisp contrast to the rich pork.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **If you want a slightly firmer texture, utilize the traditional Transylvanian pressing method before applying the aromatics.**

After removing the hot, boiled pork from the liquid, place the blocks between two wooden cutting boards with a heavy cast-iron skillet on top for 15 minutes to press out excess water and firm the structure.

- **This rich, calorie-dense snack was historically viewed as a natural antibiotic and is best paired with a traditional digestif.**

Serve it alongside a small glass of țuică or palincă (traditional plum brandy) for absolute authenticity.



Cașcaval Pane

kahsh-kah-vahl pah-neh

It is the ultimate after-school equalizer—a visceral memory of walking into a kitchen heavy with the scent of hot oil and the salty tang of melting cheese. This isn't your average bar-food mozzarella stick, but a foundational pillar of Romanian comfort eating that demands a sit-down and a little respect. The genius here lies not in imported luxury, but in a grandmother's ruthless technique: a reinforced double-breading and a stint in the freezer to ensure the crust turns to golden armor before the molten center can breach the walls.

INGREDIENTS

12 oz	semi-hard cheese block (Muenster, young Provolone, or Caşcaval) <i>cut into rectangles exactly 3/4-inch thick</i>	2 large	eggs <i>beaten vigorously</i>
1/2 cup	all-purpose flour	1 cup	fine plain breadcrumbs
		1/4 tsp	salt
		1/4 tsp	black pepper
		1 cup	neutral oil

PREPARATION

- **You can prepare large batches of breaded cheese in advance for quick weeknight cooking.**

Once double-breaded, store the slices in a freezer bag for up to three months and fry them directly from frozen whenever the craving hits.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Set up a standard breading station with three shallow bowls.**
Place the flour in the first bowl, the vigorously beaten eggs with a pinch of salt and pepper in the second, and the fine breadcrumbs in the third.
- 2. Execute the double-breading technique to build an impenetrable seal.**
Coat a slice of cheese completely in flour, submerge it entirely in the egg, and press it firmly into the breadcrumbs. Crucially, dip it back into the egg and into the breadcrumbs a second time to ensure every crevice is armored.
- 3. Freeze the breaded cheese slices uncovered for at least thirty minutes.**
This essential temperature manipulation gives the crust a head start in the hot oil, allowing it to solidify before the cheese reaches its melting point and causes a blowout.

- 1. Heat a half-inch of neutral oil in a heavy-bottomed skillet over medium heat.**
Wait until the oil is shimmering at roughly 350°F; high heat will bitterly scorch the crumbs while leaving the cheese cold.
- 2. Shallow-fry the cheese for roughly two minutes per side until deeply golden.**
Carefully lower the frozen slices into the hot oil, working in batches to avoid crowding the pan and dropping the oil temperature.
- 3. Turn the cheese gently using a spatula or blunt silicone tongs.**
Never pierce the crust with a fork, which will instantly release the pressurized, molten cheese into the hot oil.
- 4. Drain briefly on a paper towel and serve immediately.**
Give it exactly thirty seconds to rest before eating, allowing you to catch it while the center remains delightfully elastic and rich.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Strictly avoid coarse breadcrumbs like Panko.**
Large jagged crumbs leave microscopic gaps in the breading matrix, creating weak points where molten cheese will inevitably escape during frying.
- **The thickness of the cheese is non-negotiable.**
If the cheese is cut thinner than three-quarters of an inch, it will liquefy and burst before the crust has time to brown properly. If it is cut too thick, the center will remain solid.



Salată de Roșii cu Telemea și Zeamă

sah-LAH-tuh deh RO-shee koo teh-leh-MYAH she ZYAH-muh

If you grew up anywhere near a Romanian household, this is the undisputed taste of summer. It is less of a formal salad and more of an excuse to create zeamă—the glorious, salty, oily, tomato-infused juice that pools at the bottom of the bowl. Long before olive oil became a global staple, grandmothers in the Carpathian valleys dressed their garden tomatoes with cold-pressed sunflower oil, which tastes deeply of toasted seeds, earth, and sunshine. The secret here isn't technique, it's patience. You salt the tomatoes, step away, and let osmosis do the heavy lifting. By the time you return with a torn loaf of fresh, fluffy bread, the good juice is ready.

INGREDIENTS

1 1/2 lb	heirloom or high-quality beefsteak tomatoes <i>sliced into wedges or rounds</i>	1 tsp	white wine vinegar
1/2 med	red onion <i>sliced paper-thin</i>	1/2 tsp	flaky sea salt
3 oz	sheep's milk feta in brine	1/4 tsp	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>
3 tbsp	unrefined cold-pressed sunflower oil	1/4 cup	fresh flat-leaf parsley or dill <i>roughly chopped</i>
		1 large	fresh soft French or Italian bread <i>torn into chunks for dipping</i>

PREPARATION

- **Slice the tomatoes, never cube them.**

Slicing exposes the jelly-like seed cavities where the flavorful liquid lives, maximizing your yield of zeamă.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Macerate the tomatoes and onions.**

Transfer the sliced tomatoes to a large, shallow serving bowl, scatter the thinly sliced red onion over the top, sprinkle generously with the sea salt, and toss everything very gently with your hands.

- 2. Walk away and let osmosis do the work.**

Let the bowl sit on the counter for at least 10 to 15 minutes. Do not skip this; the salt draws the water out of the tomatoes, creating the foundation for your zeamă.

- 3. Dress the salad and crumble the cheese.**

Drizzle the vinegar and unrefined sunflower oil over the rested tomatoes, then take your block of feta and crumble it into large, uneven chunks directly over the bowl.

1. Toss to create the emulsion.

Add the black pepper and fresh herbs, then gently fold the salad together one last time to coax the oil, vinegar, tomato water, and salty whey into a golden-red broth.

2. Serve immediately with plenty of bread.

Place the bowl in the center of the table and dig in. The salad is great, but the true prize is dragging a piece of soft bread through the juice at the bottom.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **The oil is non-negotiable for authentic flavor.**

You can find unrefined, cold-pressed sunflower oil at Eastern European markets or online. It smells intensely of roasted seeds. Olive oil works in a pinch, but it changes the dish from a Carpathian classic to a generic Mediterranean one.

● **Use brine-packed sheep's milk feta.**

Romanian telemea is hard to find stateside, but a good block of sheep's milk feta packed in brine is nearly identical in saltiness and texture. Avoid pre-crumbled cheese, which contains anti-caking agents and will not melt into the juice correctly.



DETAILS

Ciorbă: Restorative Weeknight Soups

Deeply comforting sour soups and restorative broths, demystifying authentic tangy flavors for the American kitchen.

There is soup, and then there is ciorbă. One is a polite appetizer; the other is a life-affirming, unapologetically sour lifeline that pulls you back from the brink of a brutal winter chill or a truly punishing hangover. It's the acidic, garlic-laced

backbone of the Romanian kitchen, designed to cut through rich fats and smoky pork with sharp, restorative clarity.

You might not have a crock of fermented wheat bran bubbling on an American countertop, but a heavy-handed pour of sauerkraut brine or good apple cider vinegar works exactly the same working-class magic. From the velvet-smooth, garlic-heavy Rădăuțeană to a smoky, rib-sticking bowl of beans and pork, these are the unpretentious, necessary cures your grandmother always kept simmering on the back burner.





Ciorbă de Perișoare

chor-buh deh peh-ree-shwa-reh

If there is one aroma that acts as a time machine for a first-generation Romanian-American, it is the sharp, earthy scent of ciorbă simmering on the stove. This isn't just soup; it's an entire culinary genre defined by a bright, restorative sourness engineered to cure whatever ails you. The secret to this dish lies in the perișoare—tiny, delicate pork and beef meatballs studded with raw rice that plump up like little porcupines in the savory broth. Sourcing traditional fermented wheat bran (borș) in an American suburb is a fool's errand on a Tuesday night, so we rely on a grandmother-approved hack of fresh lemon or sauerkraut juice to deliver that exact, nostalgic punch right when you need it.

INGREDIENTS

2 tbsp	neutral vegetable oil	3 tbsp	short-grain rice <i>rinsed well</i>
1 large	yellow onion <i>finely diced</i>	2 large	egg whites
2 med	carrots <i>peeled and diced</i>	1 tbsp	fine cornmeal or semolina
1 med	parsnip <i>peeled and diced</i>	3 tbsp	fresh parsley <i>finely chopped</i>
1 small	celery root <i>peeled and diced (or substitute 2 celery stalks)</i>	1 tsp	salt
1 med	red bell pepper <i>cored and diced</i>	1/2 tsp	black pepper
2 qt	low-sodium chicken or beef broth	1/2 tsp	sweet paprika
1 cup	tomato puree	1/4 cup	fresh lemon juice <i>or substitute 1/2 cup strained unpasteurized sauerkraut brine</i>
1 tsp	salt	2 large	egg yolks
1/2 lb	ground pork	1/2 cup	full-fat sour cream
1/2 lb	ground beef <i>80/20 blend</i>	1/4 cup	fresh dill and parsley <i>finely chopped</i>
1/2 small	yellow onion <i>grated to a paste on a box grater</i>	1 tbsp	dried lovage <i>or finely chopped pale inner celery leaves</i>

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Sweat the root vegetables in oil to unlock their earthy fragrance.

In a large, heavy-bottomed soup pot or Dutch oven, heat the oil over medium-high heat. Add the diced whole onion, carrots, parsnip, celery root, and bell pepper, sautéing for 5 to 7 minutes until the onions are translucent.

2. Establish the liquid foundation.

Pour the broth and tomato puree into the pot, and add the salt. Bring the mixture to a rolling boil, then reduce the heat to medium-low, cover, and let it simmer gently for 15 to 20 minutes.

1. Combine the meatball ingredients without over-mixing.

In a large bowl, mix the ground pork, ground beef, grated onion paste, rinsed rice, egg whites, cornmeal, chopped parsley, salt, pepper, and paprika. Use your hands to form a cohesive, sticky paste, but do not add any extra rice, or the meatballs will explode in the broth as the grains expand.

2. Roll the meat into bite-sized spheres using wet hands.

Place a small bowl of cold water next to your workstation. Dip your fingers in the water, scoop up a small amount of the meat mixture, and roll it into a 1-inch ball the size of a large cherry. Re-wetting your hands seals the exterior and prevents the fat from sticking; you should yield about 40 to 50 tiny meatballs.

3. Gently poach the perişoare in the simmering broth.

Drop the meatballs into the gently simmering soup one by one, being careful not to stir immediately so you don't mash them. Once they float to the surface, skim off any gray foam with a slotted spoon, partially cover the pot, and simmer for 15 to 20 minutes.

4. Introduce the souring agent and the aromatic lovage.

Cut a test meatball in half to ensure the rice is completely cooked and tender. Stir in the lemon juice (or sauerkraut brine) and the dried lovage, let it simmer for 3 more minutes, then turn off the heat entirely.

5. Temper the sour cream and egg yolks to enrich the broth.

In a medium bowl, vigorously whisk the reserved egg yolks and sour cream until smooth. Slowly drizzle a ladle of the hot soup broth into the dairy while whisking furiously to prevent curdling, repeat with a second and third ladle, then gently stir the warmed mixture back into the main pot.

6. Finish with fresh herbs and adjust the seasoning.

Stir in the fresh chopped dill and parsley. Taste the broth to ensure it is savory, earthy, and distinctly tangy, adding more salt or lemon juice if necessary. Serve hot with a slice of crusty homemade bread and a raw green chili pepper on the side.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Sauerkraut juice is the ultimate weeknight borş substitute.**

Traditional borş is a fermented wheat bran liquid that provides a complex sourness impossible to replicate with plain vinegar. While fresh lemon juice works beautifully in a pinch, substituting a half-cup of strained brine from raw, unpasteurized sauerkraut (like Bubbies) perfectly mimics that authentic lactic-acid tang.

- **Lovage is non-negotiable for true Romanian flavor.**

Known as leuştean, lovage smells like a potent cross between celery leaves and citrus. If you can't find it dried at an Eastern European market, the best American supermarket hack is to harvest the pale yellow, tender leaves from the very center of a head of celery and chop them finely as a substitute.

- **Egg whites and cornmeal are the grandmother's secret to fluffy meatballs.**

Using only the egg whites ensures a tighter protein bind without the heaviness of yolks, while a tablespoon of fine cornmeal absorbs excess moisture from the grated onion, locking in juices and preventing the tiny meatballs from turning dense.



Ciorbă Rădăuțeană

chor-buh ruh-duh-oo-tsa-nuh

If there is a cure for what ails you, it was probably born out of necessity in a 1980s communist kitchen. Invented in northern Romania as a resourceful, everyday alternative to the beloved but laborious tripe soup, Ciorbă Rădăuțeană delivers the exact same restorative, garlic-heavy, velvet-textured broth—but swaps the stomach lining for tender chicken and sweet root vegetables. It is nostalgic, deeply comforting weeknight food. Getting that perfect golden hue without artificial spices requires a quick grandmotherly trick of sautéing a grated carrot, and keeping the sour cream from breaking requires a disciplined temper. Master those, and you're eating a bowl of pure Bucovina.

INGREDIENTS

2 1/2 lb	bone-in skin-on chicken thighs	2 med	carrots <i>peeled and finely diced</i>
12 cup	cold water	1 med	carrot <i>peeled and finely grated</i>
1 tbsp	kosher salt	1 tbsp	neutral oil
1 large	yellow onion <i>peeled and left whole</i>	1 1/2 cup	full-fat sour cream
1 med	celeriac <i>peeled and cut into large chunks</i>	2 tbsp	heavy cream
1 large	parsnip <i>peeled and cut into large chunks</i>	3 large	egg yolks
1 large	red bell pepper <i>cored and cut into large chunks</i>	1 tbsp	all-purpose flour
1 tsp	whole black peppercorns	6 med	garlic cloves <i>peeled and crushed into a fine paste</i>
		3 tbsp	white wine vinegar
		1/4 cup	fresh parsley <i>finely chopped</i>

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Extract the clear broth.

Place the chicken thighs, cold water, and kosher salt in a large heavy-bottomed pot over medium-high heat. As it approaches a boil, meticulously skim the grayish foam from the surface for 5 to 10 minutes until the liquid bubbles clear—don't skip this, it ensures a beautiful, clean soup.

2. Simmer the root vegetables.

Once the broth is clear, add the whole onion, chunks of celeriac, parsnip, red bell pepper, the two diced carrots, and the peppercorns. Reduce the heat, partially cover, and simmer for about 40 minutes until the chicken practically falls off the bone.

1. Extract the golden carrot oil.

While the soup simmers, heat the neutral oil in a small skillet over medium-low heat. Add the single grated carrot and gently sauté for 3 to 4 minutes until the oil turns a brilliant, vibrant orange. Remove from heat and set aside.

2. Shred the chicken and strain.

Carefully transfer the chicken to a cutting board to cool. Discard the large chunks of onion, celeriac, parsnip, and bell pepper, but leave the diced carrots in the pot. Shred the cooled chicken meat, discarding the skin and bones, and return the meat to the pot along with the golden carrot oil. Bring back to a gentle simmer.

3. Temper the sour cream liaison.

In a large mixing bowl, vigorously whisk the sour cream, heavy cream, egg yolks, flour, and crushed garlic paste until perfectly smooth. Turn the heat under the soup to its absolute lowest setting. Take a ladle of hot broth and slowly stream it into the cold sour cream mixture while whisking constantly. Repeat with three more ladles to slowly warm the dairy and prevent it from curdling.

4. Combine and finish with acid.

Slowly pour the tempered sour cream back into the pot, stirring gently in a continuous circular motion. Let it heat through for a couple of minutes without letting it boil, then turn off the heat entirely. Stir in the white wine vinegar, taste for seasoning, and serve garnished generously with fresh parsley.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **A note on American dairy.**

American sour cream lacks the fat content of traditional Romanian smântână and is prone to splitting when heated. Whisking in a splash of heavy cream and a spoonful of flour provides the necessary insurance policy to keep your soup velvety smooth.



Ciorbă de Fasole cu Afumătură

chor-bah deh fah-so-leh coo ah-foo-mah-too-rah

This is peasant food at its absolute finest—the kind of restorative, smoky, deeply comforting bowl that gets you through a bitter Eastern European winter. Traditionally, this means soaking beans for a day and boiling pork knuckles for hours. We're keeping the soul but saving your weeknight by rendering thick-cut bacon and smoked sausage, leaning on good canned beans, and insisting on the holy trinity of Transylvanian aromatics: parsnip, celery root, and tarragon. The real secret? A sharp hit of vinegar off the heat, and the patience to let it rest before you dig in.

INGREDIENTS

8 oz	thick-cut bacon <i>diced</i>	1/2 small	celery root <i>peeled and diced</i>
8 oz	smoked kielbasa <i>sliced into half-moons</i>	6 cup	chicken stock
1 med	yellow onion <i>finely chopped</i>	30 oz	canned cannellini or Great Northern beans <i>drained and thoroughly rinsed</i>
2 med	carrots <i>peeled and diced</i>	1 tbsp	dried tarragon
1 med	parsnip <i>peeled and diced</i>	2 tbsp	white wine vinegar

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Render the smoked meats in a large, heavy-bottomed pot.

Place the diced bacon in a cold pot over medium heat and render until crisp, then toss in the sliced smoked sausage to brown. This builds a deep, smoky foundation without requiring a whole smoked pork knuckle to boil for hours.

2. Sweat the root vegetables in the rendered fat.

Add the onion, carrots, parsnip, and celery root. Sauté until the vegetables are softened, about 8 to 10 minutes. Do not skip the celery root and parsnip; they are the non-negotiable anchor of the traditional Romanian flavor profile.

3. Simmer the beans and tarragon in the broth.

Pour in the stock, bring to a rolling boil, then stir in the drained beans and dried tarragon. Lower the heat and let it simmer for 15 to 20 minutes so the beans absorb the smoky, herbal broth.

4. Acidulate the soup off the heat and let it rest.

Remove the pot from the heat and stir in the vinegar. Adding the acid off the heat prevents the beans from toughening. Cover and let it rest for 15 minutes before serving so the smoke, herbs, and tang can properly marry.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Serve with a simple red onion salad and crusty bread.**

Thinly slice a red onion, massage it with a pinch of salt to soften, and toss with a splash of oil and vinegar. Eating a bite of this sharp, raw salad between spoonfuls of the rich, smoky broth is exactly how it is done in Romania.



Supă de Pui cu Găluște

soo-puh deh pooy koo guh-loosh-teh

This is the undisputed king of Romanian comfort food—the scent of this golden broth simmering on the stove means you are safe, warm, and likely standing in your grandmother's kitchen. The legendary, pillow-soft dumplings rely not on baking powder or modern flourishes, but on an uncompromising one-to-one mathematical ratio of egg to coarse durum semolina. Fortifying a high-quality store-bought bone broth with fresh chicken thighs delivers that rich, slow-simmered weekend depth on a Tuesday night without cutting corners on the soul of the dish.

INGREDIENTS

6 cup	low-sodium chicken bone broth	1 tsp	whole black peppercorns
1 1/2 lb	bone-in skin-on chicken thighs	1 tsp	kosher salt <i>plus more to taste</i>
1 large	yellow onion <i>peeled and left whole</i>	1 med bunch	fresh parsley <i>finely chopped</i>
2 med	carrots <i>peeled and left whole</i>	2 large	eggs <i>weighed in their shells</i>
1 med	parsnip <i>peeled and left whole</i>	120 g	coarse durum semolina <i>amount must exactly match the weight of the eggs</i>
2 large	celery stalks <i>left whole</i>	1/4 cup	cold water

PREPARATION

- **Weigh the eggs in their shells before you do anything else.**

Place your two large eggs on a digital kitchen scale and note the exact weight in grams to determine your precise semolina measurement.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Bring the broth and chicken thighs to a gentle boil in a heavy pot, diligently skimming off any foam that rises to the surface until the liquid is entirely clear.**
- 2. Add the whole onion, carrots, parsnip, celery, and peppercorns, then reduce the heat and simmer until the chicken is cooked through.**

This should take about 30 to 35 minutes.

- 3. Beat the eggs with a pinch of salt, then gradually stir in the precisely weighed semolina.**

Stop mixing as soon as it is combined and let the bowl sit completely undisturbed for 15 to 20 minutes so the hard wheat can absorb the egg and swell into a thick paste.

- 1. Remove the chicken and vegetables from the pot, discarding the onion and peppercorns.**

Slice the remaining root vegetables into bite-sized pieces and shred the chicken meat, returning both to the seasoned broth.

- 2. Reduce the heat to a barely bubbling simmer, dip a spoon into the hot soup to wet it, and gently slide half-tablespoon scoops of batter into the liquid.**

Repeat until all the batter is used, remembering to dip the spoon in the hot broth before every scoop to prevent sticking.

- 3. Pour the cold tap water directly into the pot the moment all the batter has been added.**

This traditional trick, known as *speriatul găluștelor*, shocks the dumplings and halts the aggressive boiling that would otherwise tear them apart.

- 4. Cover the pot and simmer on the lowest possible heat until the dumplings have doubled in size and are incredibly soft to the touch.**

This takes 10 to 15 minutes; do not under any circumstances let the soup boil aggressively.

- 5. Turn off the heat, stir in the chopped fresh parsley, and serve immediately.**

CHEF'S NOTES

- **The Golden Ratio is non-negotiable.**

Never measure your semolina with a spoon. You must weigh your eggs in their shells and match that exact weight in semolina to guarantee structurally sound, feather-light dumplings.

- **Source the correct semolina.**

Look for coarse durum semolina, which is often sold as Indian sooji in international aisles, rather than American Cream of Wheat which lacks the required structure and bite.



Ciorbă de Cartofi cu Afumătură și Tarhon

chor-buh deh car-toff koo ah-foo-muh-too-ruh shee tar-hon

If there is a single aroma that can teleport a first-generation Romanian-American back to a cold Tuesday evening in their grandmother's kitchen, it's the honest, earthy smell of smoked pork mingling with sharp tarragon. Transylvanian ciorbă is less a starter and more a religion, relying on a brilliant alchemy of cultured dairy and vinegar-steeped herbs. To pull this off on a weeknight without sacrificing the soul of the dish, we rely on high-quality slab bacon in place of a raw hock, and a quick-pickle trick that turns fresh supermarket tarragon into a dead ringer for the old country's winter pantry staple.

INGREDIENTS

1 small bunch	fresh tarragon <i>leaves stripped and finely chopped</i>	2 med	celery stalks <i>diced</i>
2 tbsp	white wine vinegar	1 med	red bell pepper <i>diced</i>
1 tbsp	neutral oil	1 tbsp	sweet paprika
12 oz	thick-cut smoked slab bacon or smoked kielbasa <i>cut into bite-sized cubes</i>	2 lb	Yukon Gold potatoes <i>peeled and cut into 3/4-inch cubes</i>
1 large	yellow onion <i>finely diced</i>	6 cup	water
2 med	carrots <i>peeled and diced</i>	2 tbsp	tomato paste
1 med	parsnip <i>peeled and diced</i>	1/2 cup	full-fat sour cream
		1/2 cup	heavy whipping cream
		to taste	salt and black pepper

PREPARATION

- **Quick-pickle the tarragon.**

In a small bowl, combine the finely chopped fresh tarragon leaves and the vinegar. Set aside to steep while the soup cooks. This quick extraction creates an instant replica of traditional tarhon în oțet.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Render the pork fat.**

Heat the oil in a large heavy-bottomed pot over medium heat, add the cubed pork, and sauté for 5 to 7 minutes until the fat renders and the edges crisp.

- 2. Sweat the vegetables.**

Toss in the diced onion, carrots, parsnip, celery, and red bell pepper, stirring to coat them in the smoky fat, and cook for 5 to 8 minutes until the onions are translucent.

1. Bloom the paprika.

Sprinkle the sweet paprika over the mixture and stir constantly for 30 seconds until highly fragrant, being careful not to let it burn.

2. Simmer the potatoes.

Add the cubed potatoes and water, scraping up any browned bits from the bottom of the pot. Bring to a gentle boil, reduce the heat to medium-low, cover partially, and simmer for 15 to 20 minutes until the potatoes are fork-tender.

3. Add the tomato and season.

Stir in the tomato paste, simmer for 3 more minutes, then taste and adjust the seasoning with salt and a generous crack of black pepper before turning off the heat entirely.

4. Temper the dairy.

In a medium bowl, whisk together the sour cream and heavy cream until smooth. Vigorously whisk in two or three ladles of the hot broth, one at a time, to warm the dairy, then slowly stir the mixture back into the main pot to create a velvety, golden broth.

5. Steep the tarragon.

Pour the reserved tarragon and vinegar mixture into the soup, stir once, cover tightly, and let sit off the heat for 5 minutes before serving.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Hold off on salting early.**

Smoked meats are heavily cured and will leach significant salt into the broth as they simmer. Wait until the potatoes are tender to adjust your final seasoning.

● **Heavy cream is your insurance policy.**

Standard American sour cream lacks the fat content of natural Romanian smântână and will inevitably split when it hits hot broth. Blending it with heavy cream stabilizes the emulsion for a foolproof finish.

- **Never boil the tarragon.**

Subjecting this delicate herb to a rolling boil destroys its volatile oils, leaving behind a bitter, grassy taste. Always steep it off the heat.



Ciorbă a la Grec

chor-bah ah-lah-greck

Ciorba a la Grec is a beautiful culinary paradox: a dish with Sephardic Jewish roots and a Greek name, wholly claimed and perfected by Romanian grandmothers. Unlike traditional sour bran bors, this iconic soup relies on an alchemy of lemon juice, egg yolks, and heavy sour cream to create a velvety, deeply restorative broth. To make it work on a Tuesday without losing an ounce of authenticity, bone-in chicken thighs build a fast, profound base while finely diced root vegetables cook in minutes. Sauté the carrots in rendered chicken fat first, as that is the secret to the soup's signature golden face.

INGREDIENTS

1 tbsp	neutral oil or rendered chicken fat	1/3 cup	short or medium-grain white rice <i>rinsed</i>
1 1/2 lb	bone-in skin-on chicken thighs	2 med	bay leaves
1 large	yellow onion <i>finely diced</i>	1 tsp	kosher salt
2 med	carrots <i>peeled and finely diced</i>	1/2 tsp	whole black peppercorns
1 med	parsnip <i>peeled and finely diced</i>	3 large	egg yolks <i>room temperature</i>
1/2 small	celeriac or celery <i>peeled if celeriac, finely diced</i>	1 cup	full-fat sour cream <i>room temperature</i>
1/2 med	red or yellow bell pepper <i>finely diced</i>	1 tsp	all-purpose flour
2 qt	low-sodium chicken stock	1 large	lemon <i>juiced</i>
		1/2 bunch	fresh dill <i>finely chopped</i>
		1/4 bunch	fresh flat-leaf parsley <i>finely chopped</i>

PREPARATION

- **Bring the dairy and eggs to room temperature.**

Set the egg yolks and sour cream on the counter before you begin cooking to reduce the risk of thermal shock during the tempering phase.

- **Chop the root vegetables uniformly.**

A fine brunoise dice on the carrots, parsnip, and celeriac guarantees they will soften entirely in the short boiling window.

INSTRUCTIONS

1. **Build the golden base.**

Heat the oil in a large Dutch oven over medium-high heat. Sear the chicken thighs, skin-side down, for 3 to 4 minutes until the fat renders. Temporarily remove the chicken, then saute the diced carrots in the fat for 2 to 3 minutes to release their beta-carotene and give the soup its traditional golden hue.

2. **Simmer the broth.**

Add the diced onion, parsnip, celeriac, and bell pepper to the pot and saute for 2 minutes until fragrant. Return the chicken to the pot, pour in the stock, and add the bay leaves, salt, and peppercorns. Bring to a gentle boil, skim any dark foam, then reduce the heat, cover, and simmer for 25 minutes.

3. **Shred the chicken and cook the rice.**

Remove the chicken thighs to a cutting board. Discard the skin and bones, chop the meat into bite-sized pieces, and return it to the pot. Stir in the rinsed rice and simmer gently for 12 to 15 minutes until the rice and vegetables are completely tender.

4. **Prepare the liezon.**

While the rice cooks, vigorously whisk the egg yolks, sour cream, lemon juice, and flour in a large heat-proof bowl until completely smooth. The flour is Grandma's insurance policy against the hot broth breaking the dairy.

5. **Temper the liezon to prevent curdling.**

Turn off the heat entirely under the soup pot. Slowly drizzle a ladle of hot broth into the sour cream mixture while whisking constantly. Repeat with 3 to 4 more ladles until the mixture is warm and fluid.

6. **Combine and finish the soup.**

With the pot still off the heat, slowly pour the tempered sour cream mixture back into the soup, stirring gently in a circular motion. Stir in the chopped dill and parsley, then serve immediately with crusty bread and a hot chili pepper.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Never boil the soup after adding the liezon.**

The residual heat of the broth cooks the egg yolks safely. Boiling will instantly break the emulsion and curdle the sour cream.

- **Reheat gently.**

Avoid microwaves or rolling boils when warming up leftovers. Heat in a saucepan over medium-low heat, stirring frequently until just hot.



Ciorbă de Salată Verde

chor-buh deh sah-lah-tuh ver-deh

To the uninitiated, hot lettuce soup sounds like a punishment. To anyone raised in a Transylvanian household, it is a brilliantly resourceful, deeply restorative staple built from the humblest spring garden trimmings. The true genius—the rural grandmother’s sleight of hand—lies not just in the aggressive punch of garlic and smoked pork, but in a rustic, freshly fried omelet, sliced into strips and set adrift in the tangy broth to soak up every drop. It is a working-class masterpiece masquerading as a quick weeknight dinner, demanding nothing more than basic pantry staples and a little respect for the process.

INGREDIENTS

6 oz	thick-cut applewood smoked bacon <i>diced</i>	1 cup	whole milk
2 large	Romaine or Boston Bibb lettuce <i>thoroughly washed and cut into 1-inch ribbons</i>	3 large	egg
1 bunch	scallion <i>chopped, white and dark green parts separated</i>	1 tbsp	olive oil
4 large	garlic clove <i>finely minced</i>	1 cup	full-fat sour cream
1 tsp	sweet Hungarian paprika	2 large	egg yolk
6 cup	water	1 bunch	fresh dill <i>finely chopped</i>
		2 tbsp	apple cider vinegar
		2 tsp	salt
		1 tsp	black pepper

PREPARATION

- **Wash the greens meticulously.**

Spring lettuce often harbors hidden grit near the stems. Separate the leaves and wash them thoroughly under cold water before slicing into ribbons to ensure your soup isn't crunchy.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Render the diced bacon until crisp.**

In a large Dutch oven or heavy-bottomed pot over medium heat, cook the bacon for 6 to 8 minutes until the fat is fully rendered. Use a slotted spoon to remove the crispy bacon to a paper towel, leaving the liquid bacon fat in the pot.

- 2. Sauté the aromatics and bloom the paprika.**

Add the scallion whites and minced garlic to the hot bacon fat, sweating them for 1 to 2 minutes until fragrant but not browned. Stir in the sweet paprika for 15 seconds to toast the spice, then immediately pour in the water and milk to stop the cooking. Bring to a gentle boil.

1. Fry a rustic dill omelet in a separate skillet.

While the broth comes to a boil, heat a small non-stick skillet over medium heat. Whisk the whole eggs in a bowl with a pinch of salt, pepper, and a tablespoon of the fresh dill. Fry the eggs in the olive oil or a spoonful of reserved bacon fat as a flat omelet until golden on both sides. Let it cool slightly, slice it into bite-sized strips, and set aside.

2. Wilt the chopped lettuce in the boiling liquid.

Once the broth is boiling, season generously with the salt and black pepper. Add the chopped lettuce in handfuls. It will look like entirely too much, but it will rapidly wilt and collapse. Simmer gently for 5 to 7 minutes until the leaves are tender and silky, then completely turn off the heat.

3. Carefully temper the sour cream and egg yolks.

In a medium mixing bowl, vigorously whisk the sour cream and egg yolks until perfectly smooth. To prevent curdling, take a ladle of the hot broth from the pot and slowly drizzle it into the sour cream mixture while whisking constantly. Repeat this with 2 or 3 more ladles until the dairy mixture is very warm and fluid, then slowly pour it back into the soup pot, stirring gently to combine.

4. Assemble the remaining ingredients and balance the acid.

Stir the crispy bacon bits, sliced omelet, scallion greens, and remaining fresh dill into the warm soup. Add the vinegar a tablespoon at a time, tasting until the broth reaches a pleasant, restorative tanginess.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Do not boil the soup after tempering.**

Adding cold dairy directly to a hot, acidic liquid will instantly split the proteins, resulting in a grainy, unappetizing texture. Taking the pot off the heat and bringing the dairy up to temperature slowly with ladles of hot broth is non-negotiable.

- **Skip the store-bought stock.**

Resist the urge to substitute the water and milk with boxed chicken broth. The authentic flavor of this dish relies entirely on the magical interplay between the rendered pork fat, garlic, and fresh dairy.



Mămăligă: 30-Minute Daily Mainstays

The foundational cornmeal porridge of Romania, serving as a rapid, comforting base for quick weeknight dinners.

There is no Romanian table without mămăligă. Forget whatever fussy ideas the culinary world harbors about slowly stirred polenta; this is a working-class hero. It is the brilliant, steaming-hot anchor for the Tuesday night hustle, thrown together when the soul demands something real but the clock is stubbornly ticking. It exists to be the perfect vehicle for the unapologetic garlic punch of a bubbling pork tochitură, or simply a heavy dollop of smântână and sharp cheese.

These are the thirty-minute mainstays—the fast, fragrant stews and immediate comfort bowls that don't ask for hours of your life. They ask only for a heavy pot and the willingness to let standard supermarket cornmeal do what it was born to do: soak up the juices, carry the garlic, and feed the weary.



earth to veg



Mămăligă cu Brânză și Smântână

muh-muh-LEE-guh koo BRIN-zuh shee smun-TUU-nuh

If there is one smell that defines a Romanian childhood, it is the earthy, toasted aroma of cornmeal bubbling in a heavy pot. This isn't some truffled, fine-dining polenta; this is the bread of the ancestors, unforgivingly simple and profoundly comforting. Real mămăligă demands only water, salt, cornmeal, and the grandmother's trick: a preemptive pinch of dry meal into cold water to stave off lumps. You serve it piping hot on a wooden board, heavily blanketed with salty sheep's milk cheese and rich sour cream, exactly the way it's been eaten for generations.

INGREDIENTS

4 cup	cold water	2 tbsp	unsalted butter
1 1/2 tsp	kosher salt	8 oz	sheep's milk feta cheese <i>crumbled</i>
1 cup	medium-grind yellow cornmeal	1/2 cup	full-fat sour cream

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Combine the cold water and salt in a heavy-bottomed Dutch oven over medium-high heat.**
- 2. Immediately sprinkle exactly one pinch of cornmeal into the cold water.**
This old-country trick stabilizes the starches as the water heats, serving as an absolute guarantee against a lumpy mămăligă.
- 3. Once the water reaches a rolling boil, reduce the heat slightly and pour the remaining cornmeal in a slow, steady stream while whisking continuously.**
Do not dump it in all at once, or the starches will seize into hard bullets.
- 4. Switch to a wooden spoon, reduce the heat to low, and simmer for 20 to 25 minutes.**
Stir well every few minutes, scraping the bottom to prevent scorching, until the cornmeal pulls away from the sides and loses its raw flavor.
- 5. Remove from the heat and vigorously beat the butter into the hot mămăligă until melted and glossy.**
- 6. Turn the hot mass out onto a clean wooden cutting board.**
The wood absorbs escaping steam, preventing the bottom from getting soggy like it would on a cold ceramic platter.
- 7. Portion immediately onto plates and generously blanket with the crumbled feta and a large dollop of sour cream.**

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Replicate regional pungency.**

For a sharper flavor reminiscent of Transylvanian Brânză de Burduf, blend the feta with a half-cup of finely grated Pecorino Romano.

- **Save the leftovers.**

Leftover mămăligă will harden into a solid block as it cools. Slice it into wedges the next morning and pan-fry in butter or bacon fat until crispy.



Tochitură Moldovenească

to-ki-too-ruh mol-do-ven-yas-kuh

Deep in the harsh winters of historical Moldavia, a freshly slaughtered pig meant survival, and the first cuts were thrown straight into an iron cauldron over an open wood fire. This is that dish—a hyper-concentrated celebration of pork frying in its own fat with smoked sausages, garlic, and thyme. We've scaled Grandma's slow-simmered winter solstice ritual into a fast, aggressive thirty-minute weeknight pan fry. You don't mess with the serving architecture here: it requires a bed of hot polenta, a runny egg, a flurry of sharp sheep's cheese, and a cold, sour pickle to cut through the beautiful, unapologetic richness.

INGREDIENTS

1 1/2 lb	boneless pork shoulder <i>cut into 3/4-inch cubes</i>	1 tbsp	tomato paste
1/2 lb	smoked sausage <i>sliced into thick coins</i>	1 tsp	kosher salt
2 tbsp	pure lard	1/2 tsp	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>
1/2 cup	dry white or red wine	1 cup	medium-grind yellow cornmeal
4 large	garlic <i>minced or crushed</i>	4 large	eggs
1 tsp	dried thyme	4 oz	salty sheep's milk cheese <i>grated</i>
1 tsp	sweet paprika	4 med	brine-fermented dill pickles
1 large	dried bay leaf		

PREPARATION

- **Cut the meat uniformly.**

Sizing the pork shoulder into small, even 3/4-inch cubes is the core mechanical secret that allows this traditionally slow-braised dish to cook flawlessly in thirty minutes.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Render and sear the pork.**

Heat a large cast-iron skillet over medium-high heat and melt the lard. Add the cubed pork shoulder in a single layer, letting it sear deeply until a golden-brown crust forms on all sides, about 8 to 10 minutes.

- 2. Introduce the smoke and spice.**

Lower the heat to medium and toss in the sliced sausage, dried thyme, sweet paprika, and bay leaf. Sauté for another 3 to 4 minutes until the sausage is browned and its vibrant, smoky oils bleed into the fat.

1. **Deglaze and steam.**

Pour in the wine and scrape up all the browned bits stuck to the bottom of the pan. Stir in the tomato paste, drop the heat to low, cover tightly, and let it rapidly braise for 10 to 12 minutes. This is when you should whisk up a quick batch of polenta in a separate pot.

2. **Finish with raw garlic.**

Remove the lid. The liquid should be reduced to a thick, glossy glaze coating the meat. Turn off the heat entirely, stir in the crushed garlic, and let the residual pan heat cook it for exactly one minute so it retains its sharp, pungent bite.

3. **Assemble the feast.**

Spoon a generous mound of hot polenta into a wide bowl and ladle the glossy pork, sausage, and pan juices directly into the center. Crown with a sunny-side-up egg, shower with the grated cheese, and serve immediately with a sour pickle on the side.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Respect the lard.**

Do not substitute olive oil or standard vegetable oil. The authentic flavor of tochitură relies entirely on pork fat cooking pork meat, creating a sweet, nutty undertone that triggers instant nostalgia for the homeland.

- **The organ meat rule.**

If you want the true, unadulterated historical experience favored by Romanian purists, add half a pound of chopped chicken or pork livers to the pan at the exact same time as the sausages.

- **The cheese compromise.**

True Romanian Brânză de burduf is hard to find in American supermarkets. A 50/50 blend of Greek Feta and grated Pecorino Romano mimics its salty, pungent profile perfectly.



Ostropel de Pui

os-tro-pel de poo-ee

If there is a singular aroma that defines a Romanian childhood, it is the smell of garlic blooming in hot chicken fat, closely followed by the sweet, acidic tang of tomatoes. This isn't high-end restaurant food; it's the deeply domestic, agrarian soul of Romania in a bowl. Historically made with a freshly slaughtered yard bird and thickened with lard, modern grandmothers have streamlined it into a vibrant, fast-cooking stew for the weeknight table. The secret is patience with the alliums—sweat the garlic gently so it sweetens and melts into the sauce without a hint of bitterness.

INGREDIENTS

1 1/2 lb	boneless skinless chicken thighs <i>patted dry</i>	1 tbsp	all-purpose flour
1 tsp	kosher salt	1/4 cup	dry white wine
1/2 tsp	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>	1 1/2 cup	tomato passata
1 tbsp	neutral oil	1/2 cup	chicken broth
1 tbsp	unsalted butter	1 large	dried bay leaf
1 small	yellow onion <i>finely diced</i>	1 tsp	sugar
8 large	garlic cloves <i>half grated and half thinly sliced</i>	1/4 tsp	dried thyme
		1/4 cup	fresh parsley <i>finely chopped</i>

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Sear the chicken aggressively to build a foundation of flavor.

Season the chicken evenly with the salt and pepper. Heat the oil and butter in a large skillet over medium-high heat until the butter foams, then sear the meat for 4 to 5 minutes per side until deeply browned. Remove the chicken to a plate, leaving the rendered fat in the pan.

2. Sweat the aromatics carefully without letting the garlic brown.

Immediately drop the heat to low. Add the diced onion to the hot chicken fat and cook gently for about 2 minutes until translucent. Stir in all the garlic and cook for exactly one minute—do not let it turn brown, or the oils will turn bitter.

3. Build the sauce using a quick micro-roux.

Sprinkle the flour over the onions and garlic, stirring for 30 seconds so it absorbs the fat. Pour in the white wine to deglaze the pan, scraping up all the beautiful browned bits of chicken stuck to the bottom, and let it evaporate almost completely.

1. Construct the tomato base and simmer vigorously.

Pour in the tomato passata, chicken broth, bay leaf, sugar, and dried thyme, stirring until smooth and glossy. Nestle the chicken thighs and any resting juices back into the sauce, bring to a bubble, then partially cover and drop the heat to medium-low. Simmer for 10 to 12 minutes until the sauce has thickened and the chicken is fully cooked.

2. Garnish with fresh herbs and serve.

Remove the skillet from the heat, discard the bay leaf, and stir in the freshly chopped parsley. Ladle immediately over a wide bowl of hot mămăligă.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **The garlic quantity is non-negotiable.**

Do not skimp on the alliums; an entire head of garlic is standard for this dish, providing the essential flavor backbone that separates it from a generic Italian marinara.

● **Manage your timeline for the mămăligă.**

Start boiling water for your polenta right after you sear the chicken to ensure everything finishes in exactly thirty minutes.



Ficăței de Pui la Tigaie cu Ceapă

fee-kuh-TSAY deh pwee lah tee-GAH-yeh koo CHYAH-puh

For a first-generation kid, the smell of sweet onions hitting hot oil, followed by the iron-rich sizzle of chicken livers, is the undeniable scent of coming home. In Romania, offal isn't a trendy butcher's flex; it's deeply respected, unapologetic comfort food. This dish is cheap, intensely savory, and on the table in under thirty minutes. The only absolute grandma-level mandate you must follow: never salt the liver while it cooks. Salt it raw, and you're eating rubber. Cook it gently under a lid, and season it only when the heat is entirely off.

INGREDIENTS

1 lb	fresh chicken livers <i>trimmed, rinsed, and patted completely dry</i>	1 tsp	sweet paprika
2 large	yellow onions <i>halved and thinly sliced</i>	2 tbsp	dry white wine
3 tbsp	sunflower oil	to taste	kosher salt
1 tbsp	unsalted butter	to taste	freshly ground black pepper
4 cloves	garlic <i>minced</i>	1/4 cup	fresh parsley <i>finely chopped</i>

PREPARATION

- **Clean the livers meticulously.**

Drain the livers and use a paring knife to separate the lobes. Trim away all white connective tissue and any visible fat. Rinse them under very cold running water until the water runs clear, then dry them completely with paper towels. Wet livers will boil in the pan instead of searing.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Melt the onions down to a sweet, translucent jam over medium-low heat.**
Heat the sunflower oil and butter in a large skillet with a tight-fitting lid. Add the sliced onions and let them sweat slowly for twelve to fifteen minutes. If they start to fry or brown too fast, hit the pan with a tablespoon of hot water to steam them into submission.
- 2. Nestle the dried livers into the pan in a single layer and dust with paprika.**
Push the soft onions to the edges of the pan, bump the heat to medium, and lay the livers down. Do not even think about adding salt right now. Sprinkle the paprika over the meat and let it sear undisturbed for two to three minutes.

1. Flip the livers gently, add the garlic and wine, and cover the pan tight.

Use tongs to carefully turn each liver without tearing the delicate membrane.

Scatter the minced garlic over the top, pour in the white wine, and immediately slam the lid on. Drop the heat to medium-low and let them steam in those aromatics for exactly five to seven minutes.

2. Remove from the heat entirely before applying the crucial seasoning.

Take the lid off. The livers should be cooked through but still springy, sitting in a glossy onion glaze. Turn the burner off completely. Now, and only now, fold in a generous dose of kosher salt and black pepper, letting the pan rest for two minutes for the flavors to marry.

3. Garnish aggressively with fresh herbs and serve immediately.

Shower the pan with chopped parsley. Eat this straight away over a steaming mound of hot mămăligă, preferably with a sharp, acidic pickle on the side to cut through the beautiful, earthy richness.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Mămăligă is non-negotiable.**

This unctuous dish demands a neutral starch to catch the juices. While the onions sweat, whip up a quick batch of polenta using medium-grind yellow cornmeal.

- **Inspect the livers ruthlessly.**

Commercially processed chicken livers often hide small, dark green or yellowish spots of bile. Cut these away immediately; a single drop of bile will render the entire dish bitterly inedible.



Tocăniță de Ciuperci

to-kuh-nee-tsoh deh choo-perch

The smell of yellow onions sweating into sweet Hungarian paprika is the homing beacon of the Romanian diaspora. Back in the motherland, this dish was built on wild porcini pulled from the damp floors of the Carpathian forests, but you don't need a plane ticket to replicate that deep, woodland umami. The secret isn't the fungi—it's the technique. Sear everyday supermarket mushrooms with fierce heat until they caramelize, coax the onions into a sweet jam, and finish it with a rich liaison of sour cream. Spooned over hot mămăligă, it's a thirty-minute masterclass in working-class cooking that tastes like it simmered for days.

INGREDIENTS

1 1/2 lb	cremini mushrooms <i>wiped clean and thickly sliced</i>	1/2 cup	tomato puree
3 tbsp	neutral oil	1/2 cup	vegetable broth
1 large	yellow onion <i>finely diced</i>	1/3 cup	full-fat sour cream
1 small	sweet red bell pepper <i>finely diced</i>	1 tsp	all-purpose flour
4 clove	garlic <i>minced and divided</i>	1/2 cup	fresh dill <i>finely chopped</i>
1 tbsp	sweet Hungarian paprika	1 tsp	kosher salt
1/3 cup	dry white wine	1/2 tsp	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>

PREPARATION

- **Wipe the mushrooms.**

Use a damp paper towel or a pastry brush to clean the dirt off the mushrooms rather than rinsing them.

- **Mince and divide the garlic.**

Keep the minced garlic separated into two piles so you have a mellow cooked base and a raw, pungent punch right at the end.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Sear the mushrooms in batches over medium-high heat.**

Heat 1 tablespoon of oil in a wide skillet, add half the mushrooms, and let them sit untouched until a deep brown crust forms. Toss, cook until their water evaporates, remove to a bowl, and repeat with another tablespoon of oil.

- 2. Cook down the alliums into a sweet jam.**

Reduce heat to medium-low, add the final tablespoon of oil, the diced onion, red pepper, and a generous pinch of salt. Sauté for about 10 minutes until completely soft and translucent before stirring in half of the minced garlic.

1. Toast the paprika and build the sauce.

Pull the skillet off the heat to stir in the paprika for 30 seconds without burning it, then return to the heat to deglaze with the white wine, scraping up the browned bits until the liquid nearly evaporates.

2. Simmer and marry the flavors.

Stir in the tomato puree and broth, return the browned mushrooms to the pan, cover, and simmer on low for 5 minutes.

3. Temper the sour cream liaison.

In a small bowl, whisk the sour cream and flour together, then vigorously whisk in two tablespoons of the hot stew liquid to prevent the dairy from curdling.

4. Thicken the stew off the heat.

Turn off the stove entirely, stir the warmed sour cream mixture into the skillet, and fold in the remaining raw minced garlic, fresh dill, salt, and heavy black pepper.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Make it a fasting dish (De Post).**

To honor the traditional Romanian orthodox fasting days, simply omit the sour cream and flour. The paprika-tomato base provides immense, historically accurate richness all on its own.

● **Mind the moisture.**

Never wash your mushrooms under running water; they act like sponges and will boil in the pan rather than achieving the necessary hard sear.



Pește Prăjit cu Mujdei

pesh-teh pruh-zheet koo moozh-day

If you grew up in a Romanian household, the crackle of a hot pan and the sharp, undeniable scent of raw garlic meant one thing: peasant cooking at its finest. This is the ultimate weeknight comfort, but an authentic, golden crust requires a grandmother's touch. The secret is twofold. First, cut the cornmeal with a little wheat flour to glue the crust to the fish. Second, slowly whip oil into the crushed garlic to create a thick, fluffy emulsion before folding in sour cream and a splash of sparkling water. It takes thirty minutes, requires nothing you can't find at a Midwestern supermarket, and tastes exactly like home.

INGREDIENTS

1 1/2 lb	white fish fillets <i>rinsed and patted aggressively dry</i>	1/2 tsp	coarse salt
1 tsp	kosher salt	3 tbsp	sunflower oil
1/2 tsp	black pepper	1/2 cup	full-fat sour cream
1 cup	yellow cornmeal	1 tbsp	sparkling mineral water
1/2 cup	all-purpose flour	1 tsp	fresh lemon juice
1 tsp	sweet paprika	1 med	lemon <i>cut into wedges</i>
2 cup	sunflower oil <i>reserved for frying</i>	2 cup	polenta <i>cooked hot for serving</i>
1 large head	garlic <i>peeled</i>		

PREPARATION

- **Remove all surface moisture from the fish.**

Use paper towels to pat the fillets aggressively dry, as any remaining water will turn to steam in the hot oil and blow the breading right off the fish.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Season the fillets and let them rest.**

Season the dried fish heavily with kosher salt and black pepper on both sides, letting them sit at room temperature for 10 to 15 minutes to draw out slight moisture and create a tacky surface.

- 2. Whip the garlic sauce.**

Smash the garlic and coarse salt into a fine paste in a mortar and pestle. Stirring continuously, add the three tablespoons of oil drop by drop to create a thick emulsion, then fold in the sour cream, sparkling water, and lemon juice.

1. Heat the oil and mix the breading.

Pour about a half-inch of sunflower oil into a heavy-bottomed skillet over medium-high heat. In a shallow dish, whisk together the cornmeal, flour, and paprika.

2. Dredge and fry the fish in batches.

Press each fillet firmly into the cornmeal mixture, shake off the excess, and lower away from you into the hot oil. Fry 3 to 4 minutes per side until deep golden brown, being careful not to crowd the pan.

3. Drain and serve immediately.

Transfer the fish to a paper towel-lined plate to drain, but never cover them, as trapped steam will quickly destroy the crust. Serve piping hot alongside fresh lemon wedges, a steaming heap of polenta, and the fluffy garlic sauce.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Mind the crust ratio.**

The 2-to-1 ratio of cornmeal to flour is the absolute secret to a crust that stays crispy but sticks to the fish perfectly without sliding off in the pan.

● **Sparkling water is the secret.**

A splash of highly carbonated mineral water aerates the heavy garlic paste, creating the signature fluffy texture grandmothers are famous for.

● **Watch the smoke point.**

Stick to neutral oils like sunflower or canola for frying, as butter or extra-virgin olive oil will burn long before the crust can crisp properly.



Sunday Grătar: The Romanian Backyard BBQ

Merging the American love for weekend cookouts with unapologetic, authentic Romanian flavors.

There is a universal language to meat hissing over live fire, but the Romanian grătar speaks its own distinct, unapologetically pungent dialect. Come Sunday, the American backyard transforms. The air grows thick with the scent of charred pork, beef, and an offensive, glorious amount of garlic. It's an uncompromising ritual of smoke and cold beer, where the grill dictates the rhythm of the afternoon and nobody goes home hungry.

You don't need a village in the old country to pull this off; you just need good meat, hot coals, and a heavy hand with the seasoning. Sizzling, skinless mici demand to be dragged through sharp mujdei, while platters of crispy chiftele and dense, mayo-bound salată de boeuf hold down the picnic table. This is how the culture does the weekend cookout—loud, messy, and deeply satisfying.





Mititei

mee-tee-tay

Ask any Romanian what home smells like, and they'll point to the scent of mici sizzling over charcoal. These intensely garlicky, skinless sausages are the undisputed kings of the backyard grătar. The secret to their improbable, bouncy juiciness isn't breadcrumbs or egg, but raw kitchen chemistry: baking soda and ice-cold bone broth worked violently into fatty ground meat. Make the paste on a lazy Sunday, let the alchemy happen overnight in the fridge, and you've got an instant, unapologetically glorious weeknight dinner.

INGREDIENTS

1 lb 80% lean ground beef

1 lb ground pork

1 tsp	baking soda	1 tbsp	kosher salt
1 tbsp	fresh lemon juice	1 tsp	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>
3/4 cup	beef bone broth <i>chilled until ice-cold</i>	1 tsp	ground coriander
6 large cloves	garlic <i>crushed into a fine paste</i>	1/2 tsp	ground allspice
1 1/2 tbsp	dried summer savory	1/2 tsp	sweet paprika

PREPARATION

- **Activate the baking soda.**

In a small bowl, mix the baking soda and lemon juice until the aggressive foaming subsides, then stir the mixture directly into the ice-cold bone broth.

- **Knead the meat aggressively.**

In a stand mixer fitted with a paddle attachment, combine the beef, pork, garlic paste, summer savory, salt, pepper, coriander, allspice, and paprika. Turn to medium-low, slowly stream in the cold broth, and beat the mixture for 5 straight minutes until it transforms from a loose crumble into a unified, sticky paste.

- **Rest the meat overnight.**

Transfer the paste to an airtight container, press plastic wrap directly against the surface of the meat, and refrigerate for a minimum of 12 hours and up to 48 hours to allow the baking soda to tenderize the proteins.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Shape the sausages.**

Set up a foil-lined baking sheet and a small bowl of water. Dipping your hands in the water to prevent sticking, scoop up a quarter cup of the cold meat and roll it between your palms into a smooth, plump cylinder about three inches long and an inch and a half thick.

1. Sear to a crusty finish.

Heat a large cast-iron skillet or grill pan over medium-high heat with a light drizzle of neutral oil, then place the sausages in the pan and leave them undisturbed until a deep brown crust forms. Turn to cook all four sides for about 8 to 10 minutes total, leaving the inside slightly pink and heavily juiced.

2. Serve immediately.

Eat them piping hot with a heavy dollop of sharp yellow mustard, crusty bread, and an ice-cold beer.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **The authentic flavor secret.**

Most English recipes mistakenly call for thyme, but the soul of the Romanian grătar demands summer savory, known locally as cimbru. It delivers a peppery, piney bite that thyme simply can't match.

● **Fat is non-negotiable.**

Do not attempt this with lean meat. Standard 80/20 ground beef and un-trimmed ground pork are essential to hydrate the sausage properly and carry the heavy spice load.

● **Build a weeknight freezer stash.**

Mici freeze exceptionally well. Freeze the shaped, raw sausages solid on a baking sheet, then bag them up to cook straight from frozen on a busy weeknight.



Ceafă de Porc Marinată

chah-fuh deh pork mah-ree-nah-tuh

Walk through any Romanian neighborhood on a Sunday and the air is thick with the smoky, garlicky perfume of a backyard grătar. The undisputed king of that grill is ceafă de porc, heavily marbled cuts of pork neck that sear into juicy, crusty perfection. In the States, true pork neck steaks are scarce, but slicing a boneless Boston butt yields the exact same rich, forgiving bite. The real grandmother's secret is cimbru—summer savory—a peppery herb routinely mistranslated as thyme, which provides the unmistakable, nostalgic backbone of a proper Romanian feast.

INGREDIENTS

2 lb	boneless pork shoulder <i>cut into 3/4-inch steaks</i>	1 tbsp	dried summer savory
3 tbsp	sunflower oil	1 tbsp	sweet paprika
2 tbsp	dry white wine	1 1/2 tsp	coarse kosher salt
1 tbsp	Dijon mustard	1/2 tsp	black pepper <i>freshly cracked</i>
5 med cloves	garlic <i>crushed into a paste</i>		

PREPARATION

- **Prick the meat to help the marinade penetrate.**

Poke shallow holes into both sides of the pork steaks with a fork.

- **Mix the bait.**

Whisk the oil, wine, mustard, garlic, summer savory, paprika, salt, and pepper together in a large bowl or zip-top bag.

- **Marinate the pork.**

Massage the marinade deeply into the steaks, seal, and refrigerate for at least 3 hours or up to 12. Do not exceed 24 hours, or the acid will begin to make the meat mushy.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Temper the meat.**

Remove the pork from the fridge 30 to 45 minutes before cooking to take the chill off, preventing the meat fibers from seizing up on the hot grill.

- 2. Preheat the grill.**

Get an outdoor grill or a heavy cast-iron skillet roaring hot over medium-high heat, lightly oiling the grates or pan with a neutral high-smoke-point oil.

1. Wipe away excess moisture.

Just before grilling, lightly pat the steaks with a paper towel to remove the wet marinade so the meat sears beautifully rather than steaming.

2. Sear and flip exactly once.

Place the steaks on the heat and leave them completely undisturbed for 6 to 7 minutes to build a caramelized crust, then flip once and cook for another 5 to 6 minutes until the internal temperature reaches 145°F.

3. Rest before serving.

Transfer the steaks to a platter, tent loosely with foil, and let rest for 5 to 10 minutes to redistribute the juices.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **The savory substitution.**

If you cannot source summer savory, mix 2 teaspoons of dried thyme with 1 teaspoon of dried oregano to mimic its sweet, peppery profile.

● **Indoor grilling.**

If cooking indoors on a cast-iron skillet, add a pinch of smoked paprika to the marinade to replicate the flavor of backyard charcoal.

● **Finding the right cut.**

If you have an Asian market nearby, you can often find anatomically accurate pork collar or neck steaks sold for Korean BBQ.



Frigărui de Pui

free-gə-ROOY de POOY

If you grew up in a Romanian-American household, the smell of rendering chicken fat hitting hot charcoal and the sharp bite of garlic is the smell of a perfect Sunday. These skewers are the vibrant, vegetable-packed cousins to the heavier pork barbecue meats, optimized here for a weeknight grill pan by swapping dry chicken breast for forgiving thighs. The secret to making them taste exactly like a backyard in Bucharest lies in one specific herb: dried summer savory, which translation dictionaries have stubbornly and incorrectly called thyme for decades. Buy a jar of true summer savory and instantly transport yourself home.

INGREDIENTS

1 1/2 lb	boneless skinless chicken thighs <i>trimmed of excess fat and cut into 1.5-inch cubes</i>	1 large	red onion <i>cut into 1.5-inch chunks and separated into stacks of 2 to 3 layers</i>
3 tbsp	olive oil	2 large	bell peppers <i>cored and cut into 1.5-inch pieces</i>
3 tbsp	fresh lemon juice	1 med	zucchini <i>sliced into 1/2-inch thick half-moons</i>
4 large	garlic cloves <i>crushed or finely grated</i>	4 med	garlic cloves <i>peeled</i>
1 tbsp	sweet paprika	1/2 tsp	coarse kosher salt
1 tbsp	dried summer savory	2 tbsp	neutral oil
1 1/2 tsp	coarse kosher salt	1/2 cup	sour cream
1/2 tsp	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>	1 tsp	fresh lemon juice

PREPARATION

- **Soak the skewers.**

If using wooden bamboo skewers, submerge them in cold water for at least 30 minutes before grilling so they do not incinerate over the heat.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Marinate the chicken.**

In a large mixing bowl, whisk together the olive oil, 3 tablespoons of fresh lemon juice, 4 crushed garlic cloves, sweet paprika, summer savory, 1 1/2 teaspoons salt, and black pepper. Toss the cubed chicken until fully coated, cover, and refrigerate for 30 minutes to 2 hours.

1. Make the creamy mujdei.

While the chicken marinates, smash the 4 peeled garlic cloves and 1/2 teaspoon coarse salt into a sticky paste in a mortar and pestle. Slowly drip in the 2 tablespoons of neutral oil, stirring vigorously and continuously until emulsified into a thick mayonnaise-like paste, then fold in the sour cream and 1 teaspoon lemon juice and refrigerate.

2. Assemble the frigăruți.

Thread the ingredients onto the soaked skewers, alternating between a piece of chicken, red onion, bell pepper, and zucchini. Leave a microscopic bit of breathing room between the pieces so the heat can circulate and char everything evenly rather than steaming them.

3. Grill the skewers.

Heat a cast-iron grill pan over medium-high heat until very hot and slightly smoking, then lightly brush with oil. Cook the skewers in batches for 3 to 5 minutes per side, rotating until the chicken is cooked through and the vegetables boast beautiful black char marks.

4. Serve immediately.

Transfer the hot skewers to a platter and serve alongside the cold garlic sauce for dipping.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Mind the clock on the marinade.**

Do not leave the chicken in this marinade for more than two hours. The highly acidic lemon juice will chemically cook the meat, resulting in a chalky, tough texture when grilled.

● **The translation trap of cimbru.**

For decades, dictionaries have told Romanian-Americans that cimbru means thyme. It does not. True Romanian cimbru is summer savory, possessing a distinct peppery, piney bite. If you absolutely cannot find it, substitute 2 teaspoons of dried thyme mixed with 1/2 teaspoon of dried oregano.



Salată de Vinete pe Grătar

sah-LAH-tuh deh VEE-neh-teh peh gruh-TAR

If you grew up in a Romanian household, the smell of eggplants carbonizing over an open flame is the official scent of summer. This isn't the heavy, garlic-laden dip of the Middle East, nor should it ever be desecrated with mayonnaise or extra-virgin olive oil. Authentic salată de vinete relies on four accessible ingredients and a grandmother's unyielding technique. You burn the skin to ash, drain the bitter juices like a religion, and manually beat in neutral sunflower oil until it magically whips into a pale, smoky cloud. Make it on a Sunday, stash it in the fridge, and drag thick cuts of bread through it all week long.

INGREDIENTS

2 large	Globe or Italian eggplants	2 tbsp	fresh lemon juice
1/2 cup	sunflower oil	1/2 tsp	fine sea salt
1/2 small	yellow or white onion <i>minced incredibly fine</i>		

INSTRUCTIONS

1. **Char the eggplants without mercy.**

Pierce the eggplants with a fork so they don't detonate, then place them directly over a medium-high gas flame or under a screaming-hot oven broiler. Turn them with tongs until the skin is completely carbonized and the flesh collapses utterly, about 15 to 20 minutes.

2. **Peel and drain the roasted flesh.**

Let the eggplants cool just enough to handle, then strip away every fleck of blackened skin. Place the pale, steaming flesh in a non-metallic strainer over a bowl and walk away for at least 45 minutes to let the bitter, astringent juices drain off.

3. **Hand-chop the eggplant into a rustic paste.**

Transfer the drained flesh to a cutting board. Attack it repeatedly with a knife until it breaks down into a textured, homogeneous paste—keep the food processor in the cupboard, or you'll obliterate the seeds and ruin the texture.

4. **Beat in the oil like your life depends on it.**

Place the chopped eggplant in a bowl with the salt. Using a wooden spoon, stir briskly and continuously in one direction while drizzling in the sunflower oil literally drop by drop. As the oil incorporates, the dark mash will magically whip into a pale, cohesive, and remarkably fluffy cloud.

1. **Balance the flavor and chill.**

Fold in the minced onion and lemon juice, tweaking the salt and acid until it tastes right. Cover and stash it in the fridge for at least an hour so the raw onion mellows before serving.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **The oil matters.**

Do not substitute extra-virgin olive oil; its assertive, peppery flavor will completely bully the delicate smokiness of the eggplant. Stick to neutral sunflower oil, the undisputed king of Eastern European pantries.

- **Draining is non-negotiable.**

Skipping the 45-minute drain time is a rookie mistake that guarantees a watery, muddy-tasting salad with a sharp, bitter finish.

- **The mayonnaise abomination.**

While modern shortcuts might tempt you to fold in a spoonful of mayo for immediate creaminess, true Romanian purists achieve that fluffy texture solely through the mechanical emulsion of eggplant and oil. Earn it.



Salată de Ardei Copti

sah-LAH-tuh deh ahr-DAY coptz

The scent of blistering peppers is the olfactory trigger of the Romanian diaspora, a heavy, smoky perfume drifting over Midwestern fences and apartment balconies. This is the noble salad of the Sunday backyard barbecue, a masterclass in agrarian simplicity where technique means everything. You roast the sweet peppers until they collapse into ash, let them sweat, and—most importantly—never let water touch them once they are charred. The dark, smoky liquid they release in the bowl isn't waste; it is the absolute soul of the dish.

INGREDIENTS

2 1/2 lb	sweet pointed peppers or red bell peppers	2 small cloves	garlic <i>peeled and sliced paper-thin</i>
1 tsp	kosher salt	1/2 tsp	granulated sugar
3 tbsp	sunflower oil	1 pinch	dried thyme
2 tbsp	apple cider vinegar	1 tbsp	fresh parsley <i>finely chopped</i>

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Char the peppers completely over an open flame or under a broiler.**

Prepare a grill for high heat or set your oven broiler to high. Roast the peppers, turning every 4 to 5 minutes, until the skins are completely blackened, blistered, and collapsed. This should take 15 to 20 minutes.
- 2. Steam the peppers in a sealed bowl to loosen the skins.**

Transfer the blazing hot peppers immediately into a large mixing bowl and sprinkle them generously with the kosher salt. Cover the bowl tightly with plastic wrap or a lid and let them sit for 20 to 30 minutes. The trapped steam and salt will separate the charred skin from the sweet flesh.
- 3. Peel the blackened skin using only your bare hands.**

Uncover the bowl and set up a workstation with a serving platter and a small side bowl of cold water. Working one pepper at a time, gently pinch and peel away the blackened skin, dipping your fingers into the cold water to rinse off the sticky ash. Never rinse the pepper itself under the faucet, or you will wash away the smoky essence.
- 4. Tear the peeled peppers into thick strips.**

Pull out the stem and seeds, discard them, and tear the clean flesh into strips, arranging them on your serving platter.

1. Build the vinaigrette using the reserved smoky pepper juices.

Return to the bowl you used to sweat the peppers. Do not discard the dark liquid at the bottom. Add the sunflower oil, apple cider vinegar, sugar, paper-thin garlic slices, and dried thyme directly into that pepper juice and whisk vigorously to combine.

2. Dress the peppers and let the salad marinate before serving.

Pour the smoky vinaigrette over the peeled peppers on the platter, gently lifting them so the dressing gets underneath. Cover and refrigerate for at least 1 hour, or up to 48 hours, allowing the peppers to drink up the dressing. Garnish with fresh parsley before serving.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **The golden rule is to never rinse the peeled peppers with water.**

Washing the charred peppers under a running tap destroys the delicate, smoky flavor profile. Keep a bowl of water nearby to dip your sticky fingers into, but keep the water away from the peppers themselves.

● **Sunflower oil is traditional and superior here.**

While extra virgin olive oil is great for Italian food, its peppery profile fights the delicate smokiness of this dish. Neutral sunflower oil allows the roasted pepper to remain the star.



Ciuperci Umplute la Grătar

choo-PERCH oom-PLOO-teh lah gruh-TAR

While the men hovered over the coals arguing the precise thermodynamics of a pork sausage, the real magic of the Romanian Sunday grătar was quietly happening on the cooler edges of the grill. Grandma would stuff hollowed-out mushroom caps with pungent, salty brânză de burduf, letting the smoke and heat do their slow work. Since raw sheep's milk shepherd's cheese is a tough find in the American Midwest, a sharp feta and whole-milk mozzarella blend flawlessly mimics that rich, molten bite. The golden rule here is absolute: once they are stuffed, do not touch them, do not flip them, and let the mushroom act as a self-contained vessel for its own earthy, buttery juices.

INGREDIENTS

1 lb	large white button or cremini mushrooms <i>wiped clean and stems carefully snapped off at the base</i>	1/2 cup	whole milk mozzarella or provolone cheese <i>shredded</i>
3 tbsp	unsalted butter <i>kept cold and cut into tiny cubes</i>	2 cloves	garlic <i>minced into a paste</i>
1/2 cup	feta cheese <i>finely crumbled</i>	2 tbsp	fresh dill <i>finely chopped</i>
		1 pinch	black pepper

PREPARATION

- **Clean the mushrooms with a damp paper towel.**
Do not run them under water, or the delicate cellular structure will waterlog and steam instead of roast.
- **Gently snap the stems off right at the base to create a deep, hollow bowl in the cap.**
Reserve the stems in the fridge for tomorrow's morning omelet or a quick soup.
- **Toss the crumbled feta, shredded mozzarella, minced garlic, and fresh dill together in a small bowl.**
Add the pinch of black pepper, but skip the salt entirely, as the feta carries more than enough.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Drop a tiny cube of cold butter directly into the bottom of each hollowed-out mushroom cap.**
As the mushroom hits the heat, this butter melts first, mingling with the natural juices before the cheese even begins to drop.
- 2. Generously pack the cheese and herb mixture into each cap.**
Press it down slightly so it mounds over the top rim.

- 1. Place the stuffed caps directly onto a medium-heat grill, cheese side up, and close the lid.**

If you are working on a stovetop grill pan, cover them with an inverted metal bowl to create an oven effect that melts the cheese before the bottom chars.

- 2. Leave them entirely alone for 10 to 12 minutes.**

Do not flip them under any circumstances; the cap must hold the boiling liquid gold inside until the mushrooms are tender and the cheese is bubbling.

- 3. Remove the mushrooms carefully with tongs, keeping them perfectly upright.**

Serve immediately alongside the heavy grilled meats.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **The golden rule of Romanian stuffed mushrooms is that they are never flipped.** Flipping them empties the rich, buttery mushroom liquor into the coals, leaving you with a dry, rubbery husk.



Mujdei de Usturoi

mooj-day deh oo-stoo-roy

If there is a scent that defines a Romanian summer weekend, it is woodsmoke from the backyard grătar mingling with the sharp, intoxicating bite of freshly pounded garlic. Mujdei is the undisputed soul of the feast, a pungent emulsion meant to cut straight through the rich, charred fats of grilled meats. While some regions dilute it into a broth or mask it with heavy dairy, the canonical move is mujdei bătut —whipped to a creamy, mayonnaise-like suspension. The absolute genius of the old-school home cook lies in a final splash of ice-cold sparkling mineral water, a humble trick that aerates the potent paste into something breathtakingly light, fluffy, and completely unforgettable.

INGREDIENTS

1 large	head of garlic <i>peeled</i>	1/4 cup	sunflower oil
1 tsp	coarse Kosher salt	3 tbsp	sparkling mineral water <i>chilled ice-cold</i>

PREPARATION

- **Remove the green sprouts from the garlic cloves.**

American supermarket garlic can harbor bitter, older centers; halving the cloves and plucking out the green germ mimics the sweeter, fresher profile of native Romanian garlic.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Crush the garlic and salt into a perfectly smooth paste.**

Use a traditional mortar and pestle to pound the cloves and coarse salt until thoroughly broken down, or press the garlic into a heavy bowl and mash it fiercely against the sides with the back of a spoon.

- 2. Emulsify the paste by slowly drizzling in the oil.**

Switch to a wooden spoon and add the sunflower oil a few drops at a time, stirring vigorously and continuously in one direction until the mixture lightens and thickens into a dense, creamy base.

- 3. Aerate the sauce with ice-cold sparkling water.**

Gently whisk in the mineral water one tablespoon at a time; the carbonation will immediately lift and lighten the heavy emulsion into a luxurious, pourable consistency.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Don't panic if your leftovers turn blue-green.**

When stored in the fridge, a harmless natural reaction between the garlic's sulfur compounds and its natural enzymes can change the sauce's color, but it still tastes brilliant for up to three days.

- **Respect the wooden spoon.**

A wooden spoon provides the perfect surface area and friction for smearing the oil into the garlic paste against the sides of your bowl, building a tighter emulsion than a metal whisk.



Cartofi Prăjiți cu Telemea

car-TOAF pruh-ZHEETS koo teh-leh-MYA

In Romania, french fries aren't fast food—they're profound comfort food. The magic happens when hot, oil-glistening potatoes are pulled from a heavy cast-iron pan and instantly buried under an avalanche of salty, tangy sheep's milk cheese. To get that violently crispy crust and fluffy interior without the hassle of a deep fryer, we rely on an old village secret: parboiling the potatoes with a splash of vinegar to lock in their structure. Use a good block of Greek feta to stand in for traditional telemea, and never skip the mujdei—a sharp, creamy garlic sauce that cuts right through the richness.

INGREDIENTS

2 lb	Russet potatoes <i>peeled and cut into 1/2-inch thick rustic batons</i>	4 oz	sheep's milk feta cheese <i>kept in a solid block</i>
1 tbsp	white vinegar	4 large	eggs <i>fried sunny-side up</i>
1 tbsp	kosher salt	3 med	garlic cloves <i>peeled</i>
1/3 cup	sunflower oil	1/2 cup	full-fat sour cream
1 tbsp	bacon grease		

PREPARATION

- **Prepare the mujdei cu smântână.**

Crush the garlic cloves with a generous pinch of coarse salt in a mortar and pestle until it forms a fine paste. Vigorously stir the garlic paste into the sour cream and set aside to let the flavors meld.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Boil the potatoes with vinegar.**

Place the cut potatoes in a large pot, cover with cold water, and add the kosher salt and white vinegar. Bring to a boil over medium-high heat and cook for exactly 5 minutes so they soften slightly but hold their shape firmly.

- 2. Dry the potatoes completely.**

Drain the potatoes carefully and spread them out on a paper towel-lined baking sheet to pat dry. Moisture is the enemy of a good crust, so let them sit in the fridge for 10 minutes to flash-dry if you have the time.

- 3. Fry until blistered and golden.**

Heat a large cast-iron skillet over medium-high heat and add the sunflower oil and bacon grease. Add the potatoes in a single layer—working in batches if your pan is crowded—and let them fry undisturbed for 3 to 4 minutes before gently turning. Cook for 10 to 12 minutes total until deeply browned on all sides.

1. Grate the cheese and serve immediately.

Transfer the hot potatoes to a warm platter and immediately grate the block of feta directly over them using the large holes of a box grater. The residual heat will soften the cheese. Crown with the fried eggs and serve with the mujdei on the side.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Why the vinegar?**

Boiling the potatoes with a splash of vinegar lowers the pH of the water, which stabilizes the pectin in the potato. This ensures a creamy interior without the exterior turning to mush before it hits the hot oil.

- **The bacon grease is optional but essential.**

Traditional Romanian rural cooking relies heavily on rendered pork fat (untură). Cutting the neutral sunflower oil with just a tablespoon of bacon grease adds a massive depth of savory flavor that mimics the homeland authentic taste.



Chiftele

keef-TEH-leh

If you grew up in a Romanian household, the smell of garlic, fresh dill, and frying pork is permanently etched into your memory. Chiftele are the undisputed champions of Eastern European comfort food—standalone masterpieces meant to be eaten hot with mashed potatoes or snatched cold from the fridge the next day. The secret to their impossibly pillowy texture, what Romanians call *pufoase*, isn't a heavy load of eggs or Italian breadcrumbs. It's milk-soaked bread completely wrung of its moisture, kneaded vigorously into the meat by hand. This is the canonical taste of home, equally perfect for a weeknight dinner or handed out as instant appetizers while the weekend barbecue coals come up to temperature.

INGREDIENTS

1 lb	ground pork	1/2 cup	fresh parsley <i>finely chopped</i>
1/2 lb	ground beef	1 large	egg
2 slice	white sandwich bread <i>crusts removed</i>	1 1/2 tsp	kosher salt
1/3 cup	whole milk	1 tsp	black pepper <i>freshly cracked</i>
1 med	yellow onion <i>finely grated</i>	1 tsp	sweet paprika
5 clove	garlic <i>minced into a fine paste</i>	1 tbsp	cold water
1/2 cup	fresh dill <i>finely chopped</i>	1/4 cup	all-purpose flour
		1/2 cup	neutral oil

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Soak and completely wring out the bread.

Place the crustless slices of bread in a shallow bowl and pour the milk over them. Let them soak for a few minutes, then scoop up the bread and squeeze it as hard as you possibly can over the sink. You want to extract all the liquid, leaving you with a dense, damp paste of starches.

2. Vigorously knead the meat and aromatics together by hand.

Crumble the bread paste into a large mixing bowl and add the pork, beef, grated onion, garlic, dill, parsley, egg, salt, pepper, paprika, and cold water. Form your hand into a claw and aggressively knead the mixture for two to three minutes until the fat and proteins emulsify into a cohesive, sticky mass.

3. Let the mixture rest in the refrigerator.

Allowing the meat to sit for 20 minutes gives the bread starches time to fully hydrate and lets the raw garlic and fresh dill perfume the pork fat.

1. Form the meat mixture into small, slightly flattened spheres.

Keep a small bowl of water nearby to wet your hands so the fat doesn't stick to your skin. Pinch off golf-ball-sized pieces, roll them smooth, and gently press them between your palms into mini-burger shapes so they cook evenly and quickly.

2. Fry the chiftele until they develop a deeply browned, crispy crust.

Pour about a half-inch of neutral oil into a heavy-bottomed skillet and heat until shimmering. Lightly dust each meatball in the flour, tap off the excess, and fry in batches for 3 to 4 minutes per side. Transfer to a paper-towel-lined plate to drain.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Cooking them on the grill.**

If you want to cook these directly over coals, skip the flour dusting entirely. Mold a larger handful of the meat mixture around a soaked wooden skewer to form a long kebab. Because the meatball is delicate, ensure your grill grates are meticulously clean, screaming hot, and heavily oiled with a piece of raw bacon fat before laying them down.

● **The lean pork dilemma.**

American supermarket pork is often bred to be exceptionally lean, which guarantees a dry, crumbly meatball. If you can only find 90/10 lean pork, you must compensate by adding fattier beef or asking the butcher to grind in extra pork fat.

● **The mandatory onion texture.**

Do not take a shortcut and roughly chop the onion. It must be grated down to a virtual paste on a box grater so it melts into the meat. Large, raw chunks of onion will compromise the structural integrity of the meatball.

● **Serving the traditional way.**

These are phenomenal meal-prep items that hold up beautifully in the fridge. Serve them warm over buttery mashed potatoes for a comforting dinner, or do as the locals do and snatch them cold out of the fridge the next day with a slice of rustic bread and sharp yellow mustard.



Salată de Boeuf

sah-lah-tuh de buff

Despite the aristocratic French name, this is the meticulously diced, pragmatic soul of Eastern European comfort food. It is a monumental mosaic of root vegetables, chicken, and sharp, briny pickles bound in a mustard-spiked mayonnaise. Every Romanian backyard barbecue relies on this chilled, creamy centerpiece as the essential counterpunch to hot, garlicky sausages and charred pork. Achieving the authentic flavor profile requires no culinary sorcery—just proper starch management, intensely sour pickles, and the meditative patience to chop every ingredient to the exact size of a green pea.

INGREDIENTS

1 lb	boneless skinless chicken breast	3/4 cup	pickled sweet red peppers
1 3/4 lb	waxy red potatoes <i>scrubbed clean</i>	1/4 cup	pitted black olives
14 oz	carrots <i>peeled</i>	1 small bunch	fresh parsley
7 oz	parsnip <i>peeled</i>	3/4 cup	neutral vegetable oil
7 oz	celeriac <i>peeled</i>	2 large	large eggs <i>brought to room temperature</i>
1 cup	frozen green peas	1 tbsp	Dijon mustard
10 1/2 oz	brined dill pickles	1 tbsp	lemon juice
		1/2 tsp	fine sea salt
		1/4 tsp	freshly ground black pepper

INSTRUCTIONS

1. **Simmer the meat and root vegetables until just fork-tender.**

Cook the whole, unpeeled potatoes in a large pot of salted water, and the chicken, carrots, parsnip, and celeriac in another. Do not let them boil furiously or overcook. Remove them from the water as soon as they are tender and let them cool completely to room temperature so the starches set up firmly.

2. **Blanch the frozen peas.**

Drop the peas into boiling water for exactly two minutes, then immediately drain and rinse them under ice-cold water to stop the cooking process and preserve their bright color.

3. **Dice the cooled meat and vegetables perfectly.**

Peel the cooled potatoes; the skins should easily slip off. Using a very sharp chef's knife, meticulously dice the potatoes, carrots, parsnip, celeriac, and chicken breast into identical, pea-sized cubes. Combine them in a large mixing bowl along with the blanched peas.

1. Dice and thoroughly dry the pickles and peppers.

Cut the pickles and pickled sweet red peppers to the exact same size as the vegetables. Press them in a fine-mesh sieve or pat them completely dry with paper towels to prevent their excess acidic liquid from breaking the mayonnaise emulsion, then add them to the main bowl.

2. Blend the two-minute mayonnaise.

In a tall cylindrical container, combine the vegetable oil, eggs, mustard, lemon juice, and salt. Plunge an immersion blender to the very bottom and run it on high without moving for five seconds, then slowly tilt and raise the blender to pull in the remaining oil until a thick, luxurious emulsion forms.

3. Bind the salad with the mayonnaise.

Fold three-quarters of the mayonnaise into the diced ingredients using a large spatula, working gently until the mixture is cohesive but not drowning in dressing. Taste and adjust the seasoning with additional salt and black pepper as needed.

4. Shape, frost, and decorate the salad.

Pack the salad onto a flat serving platter, smoothing it into a neat dome or rectangular block. Spread the remaining mayonnaise over the entire surface in a thin, opaque layer like cake frosting, then decorate the top with sliced olives, reserved pickle strips, carrot rounds, and fresh parsley. Chill in the refrigerator for at least two hours before serving.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **For a weekend project, prepare the purist's beef version.**

Swap the chicken breast for one and a half pounds of bone-in beef shank. Slow cook it with the root vegetables, a bay leaf, and whole peppercorns for six hours until meltingly tender, then cool and dice as instructed.

● **The salad easily adapts for vegetarians.**

Simply omit the chicken entirely. The root vegetables and mayonnaise are robust enough to stand on their own as the classic, meatless Salată a la Russe.



Sărbătoare: Streamlined Holiday Feasts

Preserving the sacred kitchen for Christmas and Easter with approachable, practical adaptations.

The Romanian holiday kitchen has always been a theatre of endurance—a chaotic, sacred space where grandmothers historically proved their devotion through sheer culinary labor, rolling endless sarmale until their hands cramped

and guarding the friptură like sentinels. But reverence doesn't require martyrdom, and nostalgia is ultimately useless if it's too exhausting to actually recreate.

These are the heavy hitters of Christmas and Easter, stripped of the agonizing prep work but keeping every ounce of the soul. Adapted for the reality of modern schedules and local grocery aisles, these recipes ensure the heritage survives. The memories aren't housed in the exhaustion, anyway; they live in that first, unmistakable aroma of slow-roasted pork and steamed cabbage that hits you at the door.





Varză à la Cluj la Tigaie

var-zuh ah lah klooj lah tee-guy-eh

For a child raised in a Romanian-American household, the scent of pork fat, sweet paprika, and fermented cabbage hitting a hot pan is the ultimate olfactory trigger for home. This seventeenth-century Transylvanian invention is the working cook's brilliant answer to laborious holiday sarmale. Stripped of the tedious cabbage-rolling and moved from a baking casserole to a heavy skillet, it delivers the profound, unmistakable comfort of the homeland on a frantic Tuesday night.

INGREDIENTS

4 slice thick-cut smoked bacon
finely diced

1 large yellow onion
finely chopped

1 lb	ground pork	1/2 tsp	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>
1/2 cup	medium-grain white rice <i>rinsed well</i>	1 1/2 lb	refrigerated sauerkraut <i>rinsed thoroughly in cold water and squeezed completely dry</i>
1 tbs	sweet paprika	1 cup	tomato passata
1 tsp	dried thyme	1/2 cup	chicken broth
1/2 tsp	ground caraway	1/2 cup	full-fat sour cream

PREPARATION

- **Wring out the sauerkraut.**

Place the refrigerated sauerkraut in a colander, rinse it thoroughly under cold running water to remove the harsh vinegar brine, and squeeze it completely dry with your bare hands before cooking.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Render the bacon.**

Place a large, deep skillet or Dutch oven over medium heat and cook the diced bacon until the fat renders out and the meat is crispy, about 5 to 7 minutes.

- 2. Soften the aromatics.**

Add the chopped onion to the bacon fat and sauté until soft and translucent, about 5 minutes.

- 3. Fry the pork.**

Increase the heat to medium-high, add the ground pork, and use a wooden spoon to break it apart, cooking until the water evaporates and the meat begins to truly brown and fry in its own fat.

- 4. Bloom the spices.**

Reduce the heat to low, add the sweet paprika, dried thyme, ground caraway, and black pepper, and stir continuously for exactly 30 seconds so the spices release their essential oils without scorching.

1. Incorporate the rice and liquids.

Stir in the rinsed rice, tomato passata, and chicken broth, scraping the bottom of the pan to lift up any browned bits of flavor.

2. Fold in the cabbage.

Add the rinsed, squeezed-dry sauerkraut and use tongs to mix everything thoroughly until the cabbage is evenly coated in the deeply red, spiced pork mixture.

3. Simmer and steam.

Cover with a tight-fitting lid, reduce the heat to the lowest setting, and simmer for 25 to 30 minutes until the rice is perfectly tender and the flavors have deeply melded.

4. Serve with sour cream.

Remove from the heat, let the skillet rest for 5 minutes, and serve hot in shallow bowls with a heavy dollop of full-fat sour cream on top.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Respect the kraut rule.**

Canned, shelf-stable sauerkraut in America is often too mushy and overly acidic. Buying bagged sauerkraut from the refrigerated deli section and thoroughly rinsing and squeezing it dry perfectly replicates the traditional Romanian desalting process.

● **Bloom the paprika carefully.**

Never let dry paprika scorch in a hot, dry pan or it will turn horribly bitter. Adding it directly to the rendered pork fat just before the liquids unlocks its vibrant color and earthy sweetness.

● **Embrace the fat.**

Standard supermarket ground pork works perfectly here; avoid lean turkey or chicken, which will dry out the dish and ruin the crucial acid-fat balance.



Drob de Pui în Forme Mici

drohb deh pooy uhn for-meh meech

If you ask a first-generation Romanian-American what spring smells like, they won't say flowers. They'll tell you it smells like mountains of fresh dill, green onions, and savory roasted meats. Drob is the undisputed king of the Romanian Easter table. Traditionally made with lamb, this weeknight-friendly chicken version captures that exact, undeniable taste of a holiday at home. Baked in muffin tins to halve the time and maximize the crust, the real secret here is Grandma's non-negotiable rule: don't you dare boil those chicken livers. Sear them in butter. That is the difference between a good drob and a masterpiece.

INGREDIENTS

1 lb	chicken livers <i>cleaned of connective tissue</i>	1 large bunch	fresh flat-leaf parsley <i>finely chopped</i>
1/2 lb	chicken gizzards and hearts <i>rinsed</i>	4 large	eggs <i>lightly beaten</i>
3 tbsp	unsalted butter <i>divided</i>	2 tbsp	plain breadcrumbs <i>plus more for dusting the tins</i>
1 med	bay leaf	1 1/2 tsp	kosher salt
1 tsp	black peppercorns	1 tsp	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>
3 large bunches	green onions <i>finely chopped</i>	12 small	quail eggs <i>hard-boiled and peeled</i>
4 large cloves	garlic <i>minced</i>	1 tbsp	unsalted butter <i>softened, for greasing the tin</i>
1 large bunch	fresh dill <i>finely chopped</i>		

PREPARATION

- **Preheat the oven.**

Preheat your oven to 350°F (180°C) before you begin chopping the cooled meats.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Boil the tough cuts until tender.**

Place the gizzards, hearts, a generous pinch of salt, the bay leaf, and peppercorns in a saucepan covered with water. Bring to a boil, reduce to a simmer, and cook for 30 to 40 minutes, then drain and cool.

- 2. Sear the livers in butter.**

Heat two tablespoons of butter in a large skillet over medium-high heat. Pat the livers completely dry and sear them in a single layer until beautifully browned outside but slightly pink in the center, about 3 to 4 minutes per side. Do not salt them yet; transfer to a cutting board to cool.

1. Sweat the greens to remove moisture.

Reduce the skillet heat to medium and sauté the green onions and garlic in the leftover butter and fond for 5 to 7 minutes. This step is critical; wet onions will make your drob fall apart. Remove from heat and stir in the dill and parsley to wilt.

2. Chop the meats into a rustic texture.

Using a chef's knife, chop the cooled livers, gizzards, and hearts into pea-sized pieces. Do not puree this in a food processor; you want a coarse, structural mixture with just a little bit of natural paste from the livers.

3. Mix and bind the ingredients.

In a large bowl, combine the chopped meats, sautéed greens, salt, black pepper, breadcrumbs, and three of the beaten eggs. Mix with your hands until it binds together like a sticky meatloaf, adding the fourth egg only if it feels too dry to hold its shape.

4. Assemble the small molds.

Generously butter a 12-cup standard muffin tin and dust lightly with breadcrumbs. Spoon a tablespoon of the meat mixture into each cup, press a peeled, hard-boiled quail egg into the center, and top with the remaining mixture, pressing down gently but firmly to seal the egg inside.

5. Bake until set and browned.

Bake at 350°F (180°C) for 25 to 35 minutes. They are done when the tops develop a deeply savory, golden-brown crust and the internal mixture is firm to the touch.

6. Cool completely before serving.

Let the mini drobs cool in the tin for 15 minutes before gently popping them out with a knife. Authentic drob is served cold or at room temperature, ideally alongside sharp mustard, radishes, and crusty bread.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Substituting gizzards and hearts.**

If you are strictly opposed to—or simply cannot find—gizzards and hearts, substitute half a pound of ground dark-meat chicken or minced chicken thighs to maintain the structural bite.

- **Finding quail eggs.**

Quail eggs are easily sourced at Asian supermarkets, but if they are unavailable, simply nestle a quarter of a standard hard-boiled chicken egg into the center of each muffin cup.



Friptură de Porc Rapidă cu Mujdei

frip-TOO-ruh deh pork rah-PEE-duh koo moozh-DAY

If you grew up in a Romanian-American household, the smell of pork sizzling in a skillet next to crushed garlic and thyme is the undeniable scent of home. During the winter holidays, a traditional sărbătoare centers around the pig, but you don't need a whole roasting joint to capture that feeling on a weeknight in Ohio. By hard-searing well-marbled pork shoulder and steam-braising it briefly in white wine, you get perfectly tender meat in twenty minutes. Paired with a potent, emulsified mujdei—a creamy garlic sauce that cuts right through the rich pork fat—it's an uncomplicated, deeply honest plate of food that tastes exactly like the homeland.

INGREDIENTS

1 1/2 lb	bone-in pork shoulder steaks or blade chops <i>patted completely dry</i>	4 large cloves	garlic <i>smashed, skins left on</i>
1 1/2 tsp	coarse kosher salt	1/3 cup	dry white wine
1 tsp	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>	5 large cloves	garlic <i>peeled</i>
1 tsp	dried thyme	1/2 tsp	coarse kosher salt
1 tbsp	bacon fat	2 tbsp	sunflower oil
1 tbsp	unsalted butter	1/2 cup	full-fat sour cream
		1 tsp	fresh lemon juice

PREPARATION

- **Bring the pork to room temperature.**

Pull the pork steaks from the fridge 20 minutes before cooking and pat them completely dry to ensure an even, hard sear.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Pound the peeled garlic and salt into a smooth, sticky paste.**

Use a mortar and pestle to crush the 5 peeled garlic cloves with the half teaspoon of salt until it forms a paste, which releases its pungent oils far better than any standard garlic press.

- 2. Emulsify the sunflower oil into the garlic paste to build the base of the mujdei.**

Whisking continuously, drip the sunflower oil in a few drops at a time until the mixture turns thick and mayonnaise-like, then gently fold in the sour cream and lemon juice and set aside in the refrigerator.

- 3. Aggressively season the dry pork steaks with salt, pepper, and thyme.**

Press the one and a half teaspoons of salt, black pepper, and thyme firmly into both sides of the meat so the seasoning sticks properly during the high-heat sear.

1. Sear the pork in shimmering bacon fat until a deep crust forms.

Heat the bacon fat in a large, heavy-bottomed skillet over medium-high heat, drop in the steaks, and leave them completely undisturbed for 4 to 5 minutes before flipping.

2. Introduce the aromatics and deglaze the skillet with white wine.

Immediately after flipping the meat, drop the butter and smashed garlic cloves into the gaps, pour in the wine to lift the caramelized fond, and instantly turn the heat down to medium-low.

3. Cover the skillet and steam-braise the pork until perfectly tender.

Cover the skillet tightly with a lid and let it braise for 10 to 12 minutes, allowing the thick cut of shoulder to cook through completely without drying out.

4. Rest the meat and serve with the pan juices and garlic sauce.

Transfer the steaks to a platter, spoon the reduced, glossy pan juices and softened garlic over the top, and let them rest for 5 minutes before serving with a generous dollop of the cold mujdei.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Seek out well-marbled cuts to mimic traditional Romanian ceafă de porc.**

If you cannot find shoulder steaks, thick-cut blade chops offer the required web of fat and collagen necessary to keep the meat incredibly juicy under high heat.

● **Do not skip the physical garlic emulsion step.**

Simply stirring minced garlic into sour cream will not yield the authentic depth of a true mujdei; pounding and emulsifying it with oil first unlocks a profound, spicy flavor.



Pască Fără Aluat

pas-kuh fuh-ruh ah-loo-ah

Traditional pască is an all-day affair of intricate, yeasted doughs, but at some point, the grandmothers of Romania recognized a universal truth: everyone is really just here for the magnificent, cloud-like cheese filling. Stripped of the hours of kneading, this crustless evolution relies on a clever blend of farmer's cheese and a quick spin of semolina to create a soufflé-like masterpiece that effortlessly translates a Romanian Easter Sunday to a busy American weeknight.

INGREDIENTS

1/2 cup golden raisins

2 tbsp dark rum

1 lb farmer's cheese

8 oz full-fat cream cheese
softened at room temperature

1 cup full-fat sour cream
1/2 cup unsalted butter
melted and slightly cooled
5 large large eggs
separated into yolks and whites
3/4 cup granulated sugar

1 tbsp vanilla extract
1 large lemon
finely zested
1/4 tsp kosher salt
3 tbsp semolina flour
3 tbsp all-purpose flour

PREPARATION

- **Bring your cream cheese fully to room temperature before beginning.**
Cold cream cheese will leave stubborn lumps in the batter that cannot be whisked out later.
- **Ensure your egg-white bowl is spotlessly clean.**
Even a microscopic trace of fat or leftover yolk will prevent the egg whites from reaching the stiff peaks required to lift the dessert.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Plump the raisins in rum to build the flavor base.**
In a small bowl, combine the golden raisins and dark rum, letting them sit and absorb the liquid while you prepare the remaining ingredients.
- 2. Preheat the oven to 325°F and prepare the springform pan.**
Do not use the convection fan setting, as a gentle bake is required. Generously butter an 8-inch or 9-inch springform pan, line the bottom with a circle of parchment paper, and lightly dust the sides with a pinch of semolina or flour.
- 3. Grind the semolina into a fine powder to ensure an invisible bind.**
Place the three tablespoons of semolina into a clean coffee or spice grinder and pulse for five to ten seconds. Toss this ground semolina together with the all-purpose flour in a small dish.

1. Build the cheese base by combining the dairy, aromatics, and egg yolks.

In a large mixing bowl, mix the farmer's cheese and softened cream cheese until perfectly smooth. Whisk in the sour cream, melted butter, the five egg yolks, sugar, vanilla extract, lemon zest, and salt until beautifully creamy, then stir in the semolina-flour mixture and fold in the plumped raisins along with any unabsorbed rum.

2. Whip the egg whites to stiff peaks and fold them into the batter for a soufflé lift.

In a spotlessly clean bowl, use an electric hand mixer to whip the egg whites until the peaks hold their shape without flopping. Briskly stir one-third of the whites into the cheese mixture to lighten it, then gently fold in the remaining whites using an under-and-over motion to retain as much air as possible.

3. Bake the pască until the edges are golden and the center holds a gentle jiggle.

Pour the airy batter into the prepared pan and tap it gently on the counter once to release any massive air bubbles. Bake in the center of the oven for 60 to 70 minutes. Do not open the oven door for the first 45 minutes to prevent the soufflé from collapsing.

4. Cool the cheesecake gradually in the oven before a mandatory overnight chill.

Turn the oven off, crack the door slightly, and let the pască cool inside for 30 minutes to prevent temperature shock and cracking. Transfer to a wire rack to cool completely to room temperature, then cover and refrigerate for at least 4 hours, or ideally overnight, allowing it to set into a sliceable masterpiece.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **The cheese substitution is everything.**

Romanian brânză de vaci is dry and slightly tangy. American ricotta is too wet and bland. Blending dry farmer's cheese with a touch of cream cheese perfectly mimics that rich, melt-in-your-mouth homeland tang. If you absolutely cannot find farmer's cheese, use full-fat small-curd cottage cheese that has been rinsed and aggressively squeezed dry in a clean kitchen towel.

- **The coffee grinder trick is grandma's textural secret.**

Semolina perfectly binds the excess moisture expelled by the cheese as it bakes, but whole grains can swell and leave a gritty mouthfeel. Pulsing it into a fine powder thickens the custard invisibly, yielding a perfectly smooth bite.



Melci cu Nucă și Rom

mel-chee koo noo-kuh shee rom

Whether you grew up in Bucharest or an Ohio suburb, you know the smell. It's the intoxicating aroma of toasted walnuts, enriched dough, and the sharp, undeniable punch of synthetic rum essence. In Transylvania, these aren't baked separately like American cinnamon rolls; they are nestled together like a wasp's nest. The defining grandma secret happens ten minutes before they finish baking, when the pan is drenched in hot vanilla milk. The milk steam-bakes the crumb into a cloud while combining with the melting butter and sugar to forge a sticky, toffee-like caramel crust at the bottom.

INGREDIENTS

4 cup	unbleached all-purpose flour	1 med	lemon <i>zested</i>
2 1/4 tsp	instant yeast	14 tbsp	unsalted European-style butter <i>softened to room temperature</i>
1/4 cup	granulated sugar	2 cup	English walnuts <i>finely ground in a food processor</i>
1/2 tsp	kosher salt	1/2 cup	granulated sugar
1 1/4 cup	whole milk <i>warmed to 110°F</i>	1/2 cup	whole milk
4 tbsp	unsalted European-style butter <i>melted and cooled</i>	1/3 cup	granulated sugar
2 large	egg yolks <i>room temperature</i>	1 tsp	vanilla extract
1 tsp	Dr Oetker Rum Essence		

PREPARATION

- **Plan ahead for the proof.**

The overnight cold fermentation is the ultimate weeknight secret. Mix the dough on a Tuesday evening, let the fridge do the hard work, and bake on Wednesday.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Mix the enriched dough.**

In the bowl of a stand mixer fitted with the dough hook, whisk the flour, instant yeast, 1/4 cup granulated sugar, and salt. Whisk the warm 1 1/4 cups milk, melted butter, egg yolks, rum essence, and lemon zest together in a measuring cup, then pour into the dry ingredients. Knead on medium speed for 8 to 10 minutes until a very soft, sticky, and highly aromatic dough forms.

1. Cold ferment the dough overnight.

Scrape the dough into a lightly oiled bowl, cover tightly with plastic wrap, and place it in the refrigerator for 12 to 24 hours. This slow, cold ferment develops the deep, yeasty flavor of a traditional Romanian bakery without requiring you to babysit it.

2. Prepare the walnut filling.

In a medium bowl, use a fork to mash the softened 14 tablespoons of butter, ground walnuts, and 1/2 cup granulated sugar into a thick, uniform paste.

3. Roll and assemble the pastries.

Generously butter a 9x13-inch baking dish. Punch down the cold dough, turn it out onto a lightly floured surface, and roll into a 16x12-inch rectangle about 1/4-inch thick. Spread the walnut-butter paste evenly across the surface all the way to the edges, tightly roll it into a log starting from the long side, and slice into 12 equal pieces.

4. Proof the rolls.

Arrange the rolls cut-side up in the prepared baking dish. Cover loosely with a clean kitchen towel and let rise in a warm spot for 45 to 60 minutes until puffy and touching each other.

5. Begin baking.

Preheat the oven to 375°F and bake the rolls for 20 minutes until the tops just begin to turn golden brown.

6. Prepare the milk syrup.

While the rolls bake, gently simmer the remaining 1/2 cup milk and 1/3 cup sugar in a small saucepan until the sugar completely dissolves. Remove from the heat and stir in the vanilla extract.

7. Drench the rolls.

At the 20-minute mark, carefully pull the hot pan from the oven and evenly pour the milk syrup entirely over the rolls, ensuring it seeps down into the spirals and around the edges of the dish.

1. Bake to a caramelized finish.

Return the pan to the oven for 10 to 12 minutes. The rolls will absorb the milk, the tops will become a deep golden brown, and the bottom will bubble with a sticky walnut caramel. Let cool for 15 minutes before tearing them apart and serving warm.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Sourcing the essence.**

You cannot substitute real rum or American rum extract in this recipe if you want it to taste like home. You must procure Dr. Oetker Esență de Rom, which is widely available online or at local European markets.



Sarmale de Post la Tigaie

sar-MAH-leh deh post lah tee-GAH-yeh

The undisputed king of the Romanian table is the sarmale—intricate, labor-intensive cabbage rolls that demand hours of reverence. But for a first-generation American cooking on a busy Tuesday night, those hours are a luxury. This is the working-class grandmother's brilliant workaround: sarmale leneșe, or lazy cabbage rolls. By braising fresh cabbage with rinsed jarred sauerkraut, then layering it with a deeply caramelized base of mushrooms and short-grain rice, the exact olfactory hit of the homeland is achieved in a fraction of the time. The real secret is a humble spoonful of cornmeal—an old Moldovan trick that binds this fasting-friendly dish into something rich, hearty, and profoundly comforting.

INGREDIENTS

1 lb	fresh green cabbage <i>cored and finely shredded</i>	1/2 cup	short-grain white rice <i>rinsed until water runs clear</i>
1 lb	jarred sauerkraut <i>rinsed well in cold water and drained tightly</i>	2 tbsp	yellow cornmeal
6 tbsp	neutral oil <i>divided</i>	2 tbsp	tomato paste
1 cup	tomato juice	1 tsp	dried thyme
1	bay leaf	1 tsp	sweet paprika
1 large	yellow onion <i>finely diced</i>	1/2 tsp	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>
1 large	carrot <i>peeled and grated</i>	1 tsp	kosher salt
10 oz	cremini mushrooms <i>finely minced</i>	1/2 cup	fresh dill and parsley <i>finely chopped and divided</i>
		2 1/2 cup	vegetable broth <i>hot</i>

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Soften the fresh and pickled cabbage base in a large Dutch oven.

Heat 3 tablespoons of the oil over medium-high heat and sauté the fresh cabbage for 5 to 7 minutes until it collapses. Add the drained sauerkraut, cook for 5 more minutes, then remove half the mixture to a bowl and spread the remaining half evenly across the bottom of the pot.

2. Patiently build the umami by caramelizing the vegetables.

In a separate pan, heat the remaining 3 tablespoons of oil over medium heat and cook the onion and carrot for 6 to 8 minutes until deeply translucent. Add the minced mushrooms and cook until their released water completely evaporates and the mixture begins to sizzle and caramelize, about 8 to 10 minutes.

1. Bloom the spices and stir in the binders.

Lower the heat to medium-low, stir in the tomato paste, thyme, paprika, salt, and pepper, and cook for 2 minutes to toast the paste. Stir in the rinsed rice and the cornmeal, cooking for 1 minute until every grain is coated in the seasoned oil, then remove from heat and fold in half the fresh herbs.

2. Assemble the layers without mixing them together.

Spoon the mushroom and rice mixture evenly over the waiting bed of cabbage in the Dutch oven, then top with the reserved cabbage mixture to sandwich the rice and protect it from the direct heat.

3. Simmer gently until the rice is tender and swollen.

Pour the tomato juice over the top, tuck in the bay leaf, and gently pour in enough hot broth to just barely reach the top layer of cabbage. Bring to a gentle simmer, reduce heat to the lowest setting, cover tightly, and cook undisturbed for 40 to 45 minutes.

4. Let the dish rest off the heat before serving.

Turn off the heat and let the pan sit covered for at least 15 minutes to allow the rice to finish steaming and the juices to thicken. Garnish generously with the remaining fresh dill and parsley.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Don't rush the călirea.**

The savory backbone of this meatless dish relies entirely on taking the time to properly sauté the mushrooms and onions until the water is gone and the oil separates.

● **The grandmother's secret.**

The cornmeal is critical here; it absorbs excess vegetable juices and binds the filling, providing a satisfying, dense texture that perfectly mimics the mouthfeel of meat.

- **Serve it right.**

To eat this the way it was intended, serve alongside hot polenta (mămăligă), a spoonful of sour cream or plain cashew yogurt, and a crisp raw hot pepper.



Dulciuri: Weekend Mornings & Nostalgic Sweets

Childhood sweets, breakfast treats, and foolproof baked goods.

There is a specific, beautiful chaos to a Romanian kitchen on a Saturday morning. It smells loudly of frying dough, toasted walnuts, and the unmistakable, heavy hit of rum extract. These aren't precious, twee pastries engineered for a glass case. This is the unapologetic, heavy-hitting comfort of childhood—the ritual of dragging a hot papanași through cold sour cream, or

waiting for the holiday cozonac to rise while a stand mixer does the grueling work grandma used to do by hand. Here are the unvarnished sugar rushes, the after-school lifesavers, and the grand holiday breads, stripped of their intimidation but keeping all their soul.





Papanași Prăjiți

pah-pah-NASH pruh-ZHEET

It looks like a magnificent, towering restaurant set-piece, but underneath the crown of sour cream and cascading sour cherry preserves, the papanași is pure, unadulterated peasant genius. Born in the Carpathian mountains to use up the daily milking, this isn't a delicate pastry—it's a dense, deeply comforting marvel engineered from dry farmer's cheese and rich egg yolks. The magic lies in doing less: skip the yeast, ditch the egg whites, and barely mix the dough. Fried gently, the crisp, golden crust gives way to an impossibly light, cheese-scented cloud. It's the canonical taste of the Romanian homeland, dialed in for an American kitchen, and fast enough to pull off on a Tuesday night.

INGREDIENTS

1 lb	farmer's cheese <i>drained of excess moisture</i>	1 tsp	baking powder
2 large	egg yolks <i>room temperature</i>	1 3/4 cup	all-purpose flour <i>plus extra for dusting</i>
3 tbsp	granulated sugar	1 qt	neutral oil <i>for frying</i>
1 tsp	vanilla extract	1 cup	sour cream or crème fraîche
1 med	lemon <i>zested</i>	1 cup	sour cherry or blueberry preserves
1/2 tsp	kosher salt		

PREPARATION

- **Prep the cheese.**

Ensure your farmer's cheese is thoroughly drained of any excess whey.

- **Warm the eggs.**

Pull the eggs from the fridge 30 minutes prior to let the yolks come to room temperature.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Mix the wet base vigorously.**

In a large bowl, mash the farmer's cheese, egg yolks, sugar, vanilla, lemon zest, and salt with a fork until combined. Small lumps of cheese are expected and welcome.

- 2. Incorporate the dry ingredients.**

Sprinkle the baking powder over the flour, then add the dry mixture to the cheese bowl.

- 3. Fold gently and absolutely do not knead.**

Use a spatula to fold the mixture just until a shaggy dough forms. Overworking it develops gluten, which restricts leavening and creates heavy, dense doughnuts.

1. Rest the dough.

Let it sit for 10 to 15 minutes to allow the flour to hydrate, making the slightly sticky dough easier to handle without adding excess flour.

2. Shape the doughnuts and caps.

With oiled or lightly floured hands, divide the dough into 6 equal large balls and 6 ping-pong sized small balls.

3. Punch the center holes.

Flatten the large balls slightly and use a floured finger to punch a generous hole directly through the center of each. This thermodynamic trick ensures the interior cooks before the exterior burns.

4. Fry gently in batches.

Heat 1 1/2 inches of neutral oil in a heavy skillet over medium-low heat to 325°F. Fry the large bases for 3 to 4 minutes per side until deeply golden. Fry the smaller caps for slightly less time.

5. Drain and assemble the tower.

Transfer to paper towels to drain excess oil. Plate each hot base with a generous dollop of sour cream over the hole, followed by a spoonful of jam. Place the small dough cap on top, and finish with more cream and jam cascading down the sides.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **The Cheese Rule.**

The foundation of fluffiness is dry cheese. If you must substitute whole-milk ricotta for farmer's cheese, drain it in a cheesecloth over a bowl in the refrigerator for at least 4 to 8 hours.

● **The Yolk Trick.**

Resist the urge to use whole eggs. Egg whites contain proteins that toughen the crumb when fried; relying solely on the rich fats of the yolks provides the necessary binding.

- **Weeknight Strategy.**

The dough can be mixed up to 24 hours in advance and stored tightly wrapped in the refrigerator. Cold dough is actually easier to shape and requires less dusting flour, making a Tuesday night fry incredibly fast.



Clătite de Duminică

cla-TEE-teh deh doo-MEE-nee-kah

If you grew up in a Romanian household, you know the weekend hasn't truly begun until the smell of warm vanilla and sizzling butter fills the kitchen. Clătite are the Romanian answer to the French crêpe, but entirely devoid of pretense. Every grandmother made these strictly by eye, flipping them effortlessly and stacking them a mile high. There are only three uncompromising rules to replicate that perfect, lacy texture of the homeland: keep the sugar low so they don't scorch, use highly carbonated mineral water to aerate the batter instead of chemical leaveners, and immediately stack the hot crepes under a plate to trap the steam. They are fast enough for a weeknight, but special enough to anchor your Sunday.

INGREDIENTS

3 large	eggs <i>room temperature</i>	1 tbsp	granulated sugar
1 1/2 cup	whole milk <i>room temperature</i>	1 tsp	pure vanilla extract
1 cup	all-purpose flour	1/4 tsp	kosher salt
1/2 cup	highly carbonated sparkling water <i>freshly opened</i>	3 tbsp	neutral oil <i>plus extra for greasing the pan</i>
		1 cup	fruit preserves <i>sour cherry, apricot, or plum</i>

PREPARATION

- **Bring your dairy to room temperature.**

Using room temperature eggs and milk ensures the batter comes together smoothly without seizing the fat or creating stubborn lumps.

- **Rest the batter.**

Letting the fully mixed batter sit at room temperature for 20 minutes allows the flour to hydrate and the gluten to relax. Skip this, and your crepes will tear.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Whisk the wet ingredients.**

In a large bowl, vigorously whisk the eggs, salt, and sugar until pale, then whisk in the milk, vanilla, and oil.

- 2. Incorporate the flour.**

Gradually whisk in the flour a quarter cup at a time until the mixture looks like heavy cream, ensuring no lumps remain.

- 3. Fold in the sparkling water.**

Gently pour in the sparkling water and whisk just enough to combine, taking care not to destroy the carbonation.

1. Heat and grease the skillet.

Heat an 8 to 10-inch non-stick skillet over medium heat, lightly wiping the surface with an oiled paper towel.

2. Coat the pan.

Lift the pan off the heat, pour in about a quarter cup of batter, and immediately swirl to coat the bottom in a thin, even layer.

3. Flip and finish.

Cook for about a minute until the edges turn golden and curl away from the pan, confidently slide a spatula underneath to flip, and cook for 30 seconds more.

4. Create the steaming stack.

Slide the cooked crepe onto a plate and immediately cover it with another inverted plate to trap the steam while you cook the rest.

5. Fill and roll.

Spread a thin layer of preserves across the crepe and roll it into a tight cylinder to serve.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **The first crepe is always a sacrifice.**

Consider the first one a chef's snack to gauge pan temperature; the pan gets better seasoned and hotter as you go.

● **Respect the sugar limit.**

American pancake batters are sweet, but authentic Romanian batter contains very little sugar to prevent the thin dough from caramelizing and scorching upon contact with the hot pan.



Salam de Biscuiți

sah-LAHM deh bees-KWEETS

If there is a dessert that distills the essence of a Romanian childhood into a single bite, it is this. Born of necessity during a bleak era when fine chocolate was a fairy tale, resourceful grandmothers worked absolute magic with subsidized pantry staples. They boiled cocoa, milk, and butter into a rich, fudgy syrup, folding it over hand-broken biscuits, toasted walnuts, and jewel-like cubes of Turkish delight. It is a humble, no-bake masterpiece unapologetically laced with the dark, unmistakable scent of rum. The only unbreakable rule? Never pulverize the biscuits in a machine. You want an irregular, mosaic

texture, not a muddy paste. It demands twenty minutes of honest work and a few hours of patience in the fridge. The reward is pure, unadulterated nostalgia.

INGREDIENTS

14 oz	plain butter biscuits <i>broken by hand into almond-sized pieces</i>	1/2 cup	unsweetened cocoa powder
1 cup	walnut halves <i>lightly toasted and roughly chopped</i>	2 tbsp	dark rum
1 cup	Turkish delight <i>cut into 1/2-inch pieces</i>	1 tsp	pure vanilla extract
1 cup	whole milk	1/4 tsp	kosher salt
3/4 cup	granulated sugar	1/2 cup	golden raisins
6 oz	unsalted butter <i>cubed</i>	1/2 cup	unsweetened desiccated coconut

PREPARATION

- **Soak the raisins.**

If you have an extra thirty minutes, submerge the golden raisins in the dark rum before starting. It plumps them up and infuses the dessert with an even deeper warmth.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Prepare the dry base.**

Toss the hand-broken biscuits, chopped walnuts, and diced Turkish delight together in a large mixing bowl.

- 2. Brew the syrup base.**

In a medium saucepan over medium heat, combine the milk and sugar. Stir until dissolved, then add the cubed butter and heat until fully melted.

1. Thicken the cocoa.

Whisk the cocoa powder into the hot milk mixture until completely smooth and glossy. Let it gently boil for exactly one to two minutes to cook out the raw cocoa flavor and slightly thicken the syrup, then remove from the heat.

2. Aromatize and cool.

Stir in the dark rum, vanilla extract, kosher salt, and golden raisins. Crucially, let the syrup sit and cool for about ten minutes—pouring it boiling hot will instantly turn your biscuits into an irredeemable mush.

3. Fold and rest the mixture.

Pour the warm cocoa syrup over the dry ingredients. Fold gently but thoroughly with a rubber spatula until every biscuit piece is coated, then let it rest in the bowl for ten minutes so the biscuits can absorb the excess liquid.

4. Shape the logs.

Lay two large sheets of plastic wrap on your counter and sprinkle a line of desiccated coconut down the center of each. Divide the rested mixture onto the plastic wrap and use your hands to mold each half into a rough log shape.

5. Roll and compress.

Pull the edge of the plastic wrap tightly over the log, rolling it to form a dense, uniform cylinder. Twist the ends of the plastic wrap tightly like a candy wrapper to force out any air pockets and compress the salami.

6. Chill and serve.

Refrigerate the wrapped logs for at least four hours, or ideally overnight, until completely firm. Unwrap and use a sharp knife to cut into half-inch slices.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Tame the Turkish delight.**

Turkish delight is notoriously sticky. Lightly dust your knife blade with powdered sugar or cornstarch to prevent it from sticking aggressively while dicing.

- **Accept no substitutes for the hand-break.**

A food processor will pulverize the biscuits into dust, destroying the foundational structural integrity of the dessert. Let the kids break them by hand if you need to save time.

- **Sourcing the rum.**

If you live near an Eastern European market and can find Romanian rum essence (Esență de Rom), use 2 teaspoons instead of the dark rum. It delivers the most canonical, concentrated flavor profile possible.



Macaroane cu Nucă și Zahăr

mah-kah-roah-neh koo noo-kah shee zah-hahr

In the American culinary mind, pasta belongs strictly to the realm of garlic, tomatoes, and cheese. But if you grew up in a Romanian household, you know the deep, soul-soothing comfort of sweet pasta. Born of economic scarcity when walnuts were abundant but chocolate was a pipe dream, this dish is unapologetic, rustic perfection. The secret lies in a handful of toasted breadcrumbs acting as a sponge for the butter and walnut oils, ensuring the sweet, rum-scented grit clings to every single shell. It's the ultimate taste of childhood nostalgia, ready in the time it takes to boil water.

INGREDIENTS

12 oz	medium shell pasta	1/3 cup	granulated white sugar
1 1/2 cup	raw walnuts <i>pulsed in a food processor to a coarse, crumbly texture</i>	1 tsp	vanilla extract
4 tbsp	unsalted butter	1/2 tsp	rum extract
1/4 cup	unseasoned plain breadcrumbs	1/4 tsp	ground cinnamon
		1 tsp	kosher salt

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Boil the pasta until al dente.

Bring a large pot of water to a boil, add the kosher salt and pasta, and cook according to package directions. Drain well, but absolutely do not rinse it—you want the residual starch and heat to build the glaze.

2. Toast the breadcrumbs in butter.

About three minutes before the pasta is done, melt the butter in a large skillet or Dutch oven over medium-low heat. Add the breadcrumbs and cinnamon, stirring constantly for about a minute until deep golden and fragrant.

3. Briefly toast the walnuts.

Dump the ground walnuts into the buttery breadcrumb mixture. Stir for just one to two minutes to trigger the Maillard reaction and release their natural oils, then immediately pull the pan off the heat so the nuts don't turn bitter.

4. Combine the hot pasta and walnut mixture.

Add the freshly drained, hot pasta directly into the skillet. Toss thoroughly to coat the shells in the buttery grit.

5. Sweeten and serve immediately.

Sprinkle the sugar, vanilla, and rum extracts over the pasta. Toss vigorously for another minute; the heat will slightly melt the sugar while leaving a distinct, satisfying crunch.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **The breadcrumb trick.**

Toasted breadcrumbs (pesmet) act as a microscopic sponge to absorb the butter and nut oils. This prevents the mixture from turning into a greasy puddle and ensures it clings perfectly to the pasta.

- **Respect the crunch.**

Resist the urge to use powdered sugar or honey. The juxtaposition of soft pasta and the crystalline crunch of granulated white sugar is a non-negotiable hallmark of the dish.

- **The rum extract is mandatory.**

Real rum won't cut it here. The slightly synthetic, highly aromatic profile of baking aisle rum extract is the exact flavor engine of traditional Romanian sweets.



Cornulețe Fragede

kor-noo-LET-seh FRAH-jeh-deh

If you grew up in a Romanian household, the smell of these baking means it's a holiday, a Sunday, or Grandma is visiting. These aren't the heavy, bread-like imposters lurking in corner bakeries. Authentic cornulețe fragede are defined by their name—fragede means tender, short, and flaky. They shatter on the bite and melt on the tongue. The secret is unapologetic and twofold: high-quality pork lard for a flakiness butter can't touch, and a splash of vinegar to chemically inhibit the gluten. Filled with magiun de prune—a dark, sugar-free plum butter—they represent the uncompromising, authentic tastes of

an old-world childhood. The mandatory resting period makes them perfect for the modern schedule: mix the dough on a Tuesday, leave it in the fridge, and roll them out Wednesday night.

INGREDIENTS

1 cup	rendered pork lard <i>at cool room temperature</i>	3 1/2 cup	all-purpose flour <i>plus more for dusting</i>
3/4 cup	full-fat sour cream	1 tsp	baking powder
2 large	egg yolks	1/2 tsp	kosher salt
1 tbsp	white vinegar	1 cup	Magiun de Prune
1 tsp	vanilla extract	1 1/2 cup	powdered sugar
1 med	lemon <i>zested</i>	1 tsp	vanilla sugar

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Mix the wet ingredients to form the base.

In a large mixing bowl, blend the cool lard and sour cream until creamy. Add the egg yolks, white vinegar, vanilla extract, lemon zest, and kosher salt, mixing until completely smooth.

2. Incorporate the dry ingredients with a light touch.

Sprinkle the baking powder over the wet mixture, then add the flour one cup at a time. Switch to using your hands to gently bring the dough together. Do not over-knead; stop the exact moment the dough forms a smooth, soft ball that no longer sticks to your hands.

3. Divide and chill the dough.

Divide the dough into four equal discs. Wrap each tightly in plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least one hour, or up to overnight. This essential resting period lets the fat firm up and the flour hydrate evenly.

1. Roll out and portion the dough.

Preheat the oven to 350°F and line two baking sheets with parchment paper.

Working with one disc at a time on a lightly floured surface, roll the dough into a circle about 1/8-inch thick. Cut the circle into 8 equal wedges, like slicing a pizza.

2. Fill and shape the crescents.

Place a small, half-teaspoon dollop of the magiun de prune at the wide base of each triangle. Roll the dough up snugly toward the pointy tip, gently curving the ends inward to form a crescent moon. Space them an inch apart on the baking sheets.

3. Bake until barely golden.

Bake in the center of the oven for 15 to 20 minutes. You want a very light golden color on the tips and bottom, but they should remain quite pale on top.

4. Apply the hot sugar dusting.

Mix the powdered sugar and vanilla sugar in a wide, shallow bowl. Let the baked cornulețe cool on the baking sheet for just 2 to 3 minutes, then gently toss the hot cookies in the sugar. The heat will melt the innermost layer slightly, locking a thick, powdery coating onto the pastry. Transfer to a wire rack to cool completely.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **A note on sourcing.**

Magiun de Prune is a deeply traditional, sugar-free plum butter made by slow-cooking European prune plums for hours. Look for imported jars at local Eastern European delis or online. A very thick, high-quality apple butter makes a passable substitute.

● **The virtues of aging.**

Store the cooled cookies in an airtight container at room temperature. Thanks to the lard, they will stay fresh for up to three weeks—and actually taste even better by day three.



Griș cu Lapte

greesh koo lahp-teh

Ask any first-generation Romanian-American what childhood tastes like, and they will point to griș cu lapte. Before the tyranny of boxed cereals, this humble, unpretentious porridge of milk and wheat was the ultimate ten-minute comfort. The magic lies entirely in the technique: you do not just dump the semolina into the pot, you let it fall in ploaie—like rain—whisking frantically to guarantee a velvety texture. Finish it with a defiant knob of butter and a heavy spoon of sour cherry preserves, and you are right back in a kitchen that smells exactly like the old country.

INGREDIENTS

2 cup	whole milk	1 tsp	pure vanilla extract
3 tbsp	granulated sugar	1 tbsp	unsalted butter
1/4 tsp	kosher salt	1/4 cup	sour cherry preserves
1/4 cup	fine wheat semolina		

PREPARATION

- **Gather and measure all ingredients before you begin.**

Once the milk is hot, the process moves quickly and requires continuous whisking. Have your semolina measured and ready to pour.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Bring the milk, sugar, and salt to a gentle simmer.**

Rinse a medium, heavy-bottomed saucepan with cold water first to prevent the milk from scorching. Place it over medium heat and warm the milk just until simmering, being careful not to let it boil over.

- 2. Whisk the semolina into the milk like rain.**

Reduce the heat to low. Whisking vigorously with your dominant hand, use your other hand to sprinkle the semolina into the pot in a very slow, steady, fine shower. Do not dump it in all at once, or you will end up with stubborn lumps.

- 3. Simmer and thicken the pudding for 5 to 8 minutes.**

Continue to cook over low heat, whisking gently but constantly. The pudding is ready when it thickly coats the back of a spoon and the whisk leaves brief trails in the mixture. It will look slightly looser than you want the final dish to be, but it sets up significantly as it cools.

1. Off the heat, whisk in the vanilla and butter.

Remove the pot from the stove and instantly drop in the vanilla extract and butter. Whisk until the butter is completely melted, emulsifying the fat to create a glossy, rich finish.

2. Divide into bowls and top with sour cherry preserves.

Pour the hot pudding into shallow bowls immediately. Let it sit for a few minutes so a delicate skin forms on the surface, then drop a generous spoonful of sour cherry preserves right into the center.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Do not substitute cornmeal or grits.**

You need fine wheat semolina, often found in the baking aisle near the specialty flours or Italian pasta flours. Coarse semolina, cornmeal, or Southern grits will yield a completely different, incorrect texture.

● **Rescue an overcooked pudding with warm milk.**

If you left it on the stove a minute too long and it turns into a brick, do not panic. Vigorously whisk in a splash or two of warm milk off the heat until it returns to a creamy consistency.



Chec Marmorat

kek mar-mo-rat

If there is a scent that defines a Romanian childhood, it is the intoxicating hit of vanilla, citrus, and cheap imitation rum extract rising from a freshly baked chec. Forget the dense, butter-logged pound cakes of the West; a proper Romanian marble cake is an exercise in economy and texture. It yields an impossibly light, cloud-like crumb built on neutral oil, the aggressive carbonation of mineral water, and the meticulous whipping of egg whites. This is pure grandmother magic—a pragmatic, weeknight-friendly domestic bake that delivers a masterclass in stretching humble pantry staples into something spectacular.

INGREDIENTS

5 large	eggs <i>strictly separated into whites and yolks, at room temperature</i>	1 1/2 cup	unbleached all-purpose flour
1 tsp	white vinegar	1 1/2 tsp	baking powder
1/8 tsp	fine sea salt	1 tbsp	vanilla extract
1 cup	granulated sugar <i>divided</i>	1 med	lemon <i>finely zested</i>
1/2 cup	sunflower oil	2 tbsp	unsweetened cocoa powder
1/2 cup	plain sparkling water <i>at room temperature</i>	3 tbsp	warm water
		1 tsp	imitation rum extract

PREPARATION

- **Preheat the oven to 350°F.**

Liberally spray a 9x5-inch loaf pan with non-stick baking spray, or line it with parchment paper leaving an overhang for easy removal.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Whip the egg whites into a stiff meringue.**

In a meticulously clean bowl, beat the egg whites, salt, and vinegar until foamy, then gradually add half a cup of the sugar and beat until stiff, glossy peaks form.

- 2. Emulsify the yolks like a mayonnaise.**

In a separate bowl, beat the yolks with the remaining half cup of sugar until pale and thick, then slowly stream in the oil with the mixer running on low.

- 3. Whisk in the aromatics and carbonation.**

Stir the vanilla extract, lemon zest, and sparkling water into the yolk mixture until it bubbles and visibly thins out.

1. Incorporate the dry ingredients into the yolks.

Whisk the flour and baking powder together, then sift them over the wet yolk mixture, folding gently with a spatula just until the flour disappears.

2. Fold the batters together without losing the air.

Sacrifice a scoop of the egg whites into the yolk batter to lighten it, then gently fold that entire mixture back into the remaining egg whites using a sweeping bottom-to-top motion until no streaks remain.

3. Hydrate the cocoa powder to prevent a sunken marble.

Scoop about a third of the batter into a separate bowl; in a small ramekin, mix the cocoa powder and warm water into a thick paste with the rum extract, then gently fold this paste into the separated third of batter.

4. Layer and swirl the batters in the loaf pan.

Pour the white batter into the prepared pan, pour the chocolate-rum batter straight down the center line, and drag a skewer through in a continuous figure-eight motion from end to end.

5. Bake undisturbed until a toothpick comes out clean.

Bake on the middle rack for 45 to 55 minutes, resisting the urge to open the oven door for at least the first 35 minutes to prevent the delicate structure from collapsing.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Do not substitute the imitation rum.**

Using real rum will bake off the alcohol and alter the flavor; the artificial extract is the defining, nostalgic taste of a Romanian childhood bake.

● **The vinegar is a structural necessity.**

A few drops of acid stabilize the egg whites, ensuring the meringue doesn't collapse when folding in the heavier, fat-laden ingredients.