

recipe: Podbitá fazuľa



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One of my fondest memories from when I was around 5 years old, growing up near the East Carpathians, is from a late August afternoon in Zboj, northeastern Slovakia. I remember my dad lighting the fire with the branches and wood that we gathered from the nearby forest. The summer wood was so dry that it was consumed by the flames immediately—but we had to wait longer for the first hot coals to appear. My dad then added the potatoes, covered them with the coals,

and we waited again. I was so hungry. After 45 minutes, he took the potatoes from the ashes, placed them in a wooden basket, and shook them well so that the burnt pieces of skin fell off, leaving us with slightly charred, peeled potatoes. We'd take a potato, juggle it from one hand to the other to avoid burning our fingers, then smear a healthy amount of butter on top and sprinkle it with salt. Biting into it, you'd wonder—how can two ingredients create one of the most fascinating flavour combina-

tions you've ever tasted? I wish I could describe this experience better, but I can't—partly because I wouldn't be able to prepare it in our small Helsinki apartment, but mostly because it wasn't just the potatoes and butter for me; it was the connection to Rusyn traditions, family, and the beautiful environment of the primeval forests of Poloniny National Park that I can't recreate here.

Rusyn food is known for its simplicity, relying on locally available ingredients like potatoes, cabbage, beans, and mushrooms. This simplicity reflects the agrarian lifestyle of the region, where food was often a product of what was readily available. Meat was traditionally reserved for special occasions, such as Easter. North East Slovakia, along with the bordering regions of Poland and Ukraine, contains the largest concentration of Rusyns (Ruthenians) in Europe. Despite numerous challenges of forced assimilation, the Rusyns maintain a distinct culture, customs, and language—a unique blend of neighbouring Slavic languages that is sometimes unintelligible to speakers of Slovak. Imagine my amusement when I brought over friends from Central/Western Slovakia and found out they didn't understand what my grandma was saying!

After 41 years of authoritarian rule ended with the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia in 1989, Rusyns, along with other minorities, were able to freely reclaim their identity. They now com-

prise the fourth largest national minority in Slovakia and have their own recognized minority language, which was codified in 1995. In municipalities where over 15% of inhabitants speak Rusyn, the language can be used in official communication. The Rusyn community has established various cultural associations, hosted festivals, and operated institutions such as the Alexander Duchnovič Theatre in Prešov, which performs in Rusyn. In 1998, a Rusyn department was created at the University of Prešov's Institute of National Studies, later transformed into the Institute of Rusyn Language and Culture in 2008. The national public broadcaster also dedicates a television show in the Rusyn language, focusing on the lives and culture of the Rusyn community and promoting this cultural heritage to the broader Slovak population. And that's something I'd like to continue now by sharing my favourite recipe with you. While I only made it home a few times a year after I moved away for university, despite the distance and the long intervals between my visits, there is one constant that always awaits me: my mum's warm soup. She would make all kinds of soups over the years, but 'Podbitá fazuľa' was the one that I always looked forward to the most. Podbitá fazuľa, or creamy bean soup with sauerkraut, is a traditional dish in Rusyn cuisine that embodies the simplicity of the culinary traditions, while providing a hearty and rich flavour.

Here's how you can make it:

ingredients

1 cup of dried brown beans (soaked overnight)
1 bay leaf
1 tablespoon butter
1 onion, chopped
1 carrot, cubed
1 parsley, cubed
2 cloves of garlic, minced
1 cup of sauerkraut
1 cup of cream

Salt and pepper to taste
Water or broth to cover

**If you're like me and don't have dried beans on hand, you can substitute them for canned beans, but if you can, do use the dried ones for a deeper flavour.*

instructions

1. For dried beans: wash the beans and soak them in water overnight. When soaked, change the water and cook beans until soft (1 hour) together with bay leaf and salt. Drain, but keep the bean liquid.

For canned beans: strain the beans, but keep the bean liquid for later.

2. Get your ingredients ready.

3. In a pot, melt the butter and sauté the chopped onion, carrots and parsley for 5 minutes.

4. Add minced garlic, and, if using canned beans, bay leaf. Cook for another minute.

5. Gradually add the sauerkraut and cooked beans to the pot.

6. If using dried beans: add your bean cooking liquid and cream.

If using canned beans: use the canned bean liquid and top up with water. Add cream.

7. Simmer the soup on low heat for about 10 minutes, allowing the flavours to meld together.

8. Serve warm, and feel free to add a bit of chopped parsley on top for extra freshness.

Enjoy! 