

Chovlent

by Andriy Lyubka

for Josef Zissels



For this dish we need three basic ingredients: beans, meat, and pearl barley. It is best to have equal proportions of them in weight. As a result, the volume of barley and beans will increase, and the volume of meat will decrease, and the ratio among them will be ideal in the finished dish. Additional ingredients include onions and carrots. You can add a bit of hot pepper (if you like it), salt, and spices. It is good to use various kinds of meat: beef, goose, or chicken. The aroma will be denser and more appetizing if you use meat that has been smoked.

Preparing chovlent takes quite a long time, but it is not complicated. Most of the work is done by heat and time. Rinse the beans and pearl barley separately. Then let them sit for a few hours. Place the meat in a pot, small cauldron, or heavy saucepan. Brown it and add the onions and carrots. Add the beans and pearl barley. Finely mince a few cloves of garlic to taste. Put the cover on and braise on very low heat for five to seven hours, stirring occasionally and adding water. Bon appétit!

In my house chovlent was and is one of our most favorite dishes. It became especially popular during the winter months because this is quite a heavy and filling dish. Chovlent is popular in Vynohradiv, Mukachevo, and Uzhhorod, but I have never encountered this dish

on the menus of other Ukrainian regions. That's why for some time I thought that this was a typical "Transcarpathian" dish, that is, a blend of elements from Ukrainian cuisine and Hungarian, Romanian, Slovak, Czech, German, and even Serbian culinary traditions and recipes. Living in Kyiv, I prepared chovlent several times for people who are dear to me, holding forth on the possible Hungarian or Romanian origins of this dish.

I was sure that chovlent was a traditional dish from one of our neighbors. But which one? This was a real Central European culinary mystery. The Slovaks and Czechs (our neighbors in interwar Czechoslovakia) were eliminated right away because this dish is too dissimilar from their cuisine. It is unlikely that this dish would appeal to Hungarians. They would use more meat and peppers, and would fry it quickly. No one would wait around ten hours for it to cook. Only the Romanians were left. It would suit their mountainous and capricious climate, where you can't cultivate too many peaches and peppers, but beans—definitely.

Before long I found confirmation of this hypothesis. It was waiting for me two years ago in Romania. A friend and I were traveling across the country by car. We were in a terrible hurry, and we were hungry. So we decided to stop by a supermarket on the way out of some town to buy water, food, plus some local chocolate and wine for presents. Luckily, the supermarket had a section of prepared foods, so we decided to have a bite on the spot. Among the various dishes I spotted a familiar one. Something along the lines of "chalent" was written in Romanian underneath it. Smoked veal ribs, beans, pearl barley, the aroma of garlic—everything was very appetizing, and tasty too, as it turned out. The chovlent was prepared correctly. When you braise it for a long time, the meat becomes soft and falls off the bone. It was tasty, just like at home. The issue of its origins was settled, and I placed it on the designated shelf of Romanian cuisine in my memory.

But I was mistaken, that is, my first hypothesis that this dish belongs to one of our neighbors was correct, but I drew an incorrect conclusion from it. It takes fifteen minutes to drive from Hungary, twenty-five to Romania, and an hour to Slovakia. I followed this logic, searching for neighbor-authors of recipes for chovlent. It was really about our closer neighbors, from our very own city, from the next street over. Because chovlent is a Jewish dish.

Jews prepared chovlent (they call it "chount," with an unstressed "u," something in between "cholnt" and "chovnt") for their Sabbath, that is, for the day when they are forbidden to work or perform even the lightest work, like lighting a fire. How do you eat a hot meal in these circumstances? Beans and pearl barley are foods that require long and patient preparation. Jews would place all the ingredients for the chovlent into a pot on Friday and the meal would cook all night. The oven would cool and slowly lose its heat. When the homeowners returned from the synagogue on Saturday, the chovlent was ready and still warm.

There are hardly any of these neighbors left in our cities, but they are still in our homes and our traditions, although we—I, for one—do not always deduce this. One could gaze for a long time at a map, rejecting the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary from the list of possible owners of this brilliant dish. But we are talking about neighbors not in the geographic, but in the most literal sense, about those who lived not across the border but alongside us, in the next house over. You will practically not encounter them on the streets in our part of the world, but they still treat us to their finest dish on days when the first frost comes.

Without them we are all a bit like orphans; that is precisely what this recipe teaches us. Because if you remove meat, beans, or pearl barley from chovlent, the dish will not come out right. For harmony, all the ingredients are necessary. That is why without the Jews our landscapes, cities, and traditions look more solitary, poorer. Unfortunately, history cannot be changed, but we can still spend time together, if only for a moment, and remember all the neighbors next to whom we lived and sat at the same table. For example, when you prepare chovlent, you can make it in the manner described in the first two paragraphs of this text.

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*Translated from the Ukrainian by Marta D. Olynyk.
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