

Paprika lady Darina Eyre tells Diane Cooke how her career took a different path following her battle with cancer

WHEN cancer caused Darina Eyre to close her Slovakia travel agency, the accomplished cook threw what little energy she had into cooking meals for friends in traditional Eastern European style.

The secret ingredient of the Czech mum's hearty dishes was Hungarian paprika, a spice little known to the British palate which can't be found on supermarket shelves. Such was her friends' enthusiasm for her cooking that they encouraged her to open a restaurant. She knew she didn't have the energy for such a venture, but it sowed the seeds of enterprise in her mind.

"I was brought up on a farm in an agricultural region near Bratislava and I've always loved cooking. My country is very close to Hungary and we share a lot of the cuisine. I had the know-how, but running a restaurant would have been too much for me."

Importing the delicious secret ingredient — Hungarian paprika — was her Plan B. So with her son Igor, 23, who is studying for a Phd in European Politics and Diplomacy, she set off for Hungary to research the market.

"I knew it was not something I could do on my own and Igor has always been so incredibly passionate about food, he was happy to get involved."

Darina, from Barrowford, gleaned that there were two Hungarian regions, Kalocza and Szeged, famed for growing the sweet peppers used to make the distinctive spice.

"The black soil and sunny days help grow the best quality red peppers. When they are ripe, they are dried and ground to a powder of excellent taste, flavour, aroma and colour. They take out all seeds before grinding. The hot version is ground with seeds. That is why the sweet version has a deep red colour and the hot version is brighter with a hint of orange."

"When I was a child I couldn't understand why my grandmother was always buying paprika from Hungary. As I grew older and started enjoying cooking I realised why it was so important to use the right spices."

"Paprika is widely used in Hungarian, Austrian, Mexican and Indian cookery. Spanish Paprika is becoming well known in this country, but it's a very different taste to the Hungarian variety. It's bitter and some people don't like it. Hungarian Paprika is sweet and even the hot version has a sweet after taste. People love it."

In fact, it's becoming such an



Above, Darina with Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall at Browsholme Hall, and right, her son Igor



A taste of

acquired taste by those in the know that Darina and Igor are in talks with upmarket London department store Fortnum and Mason with a view to supplying it exclusively.

The product has also been endorsed by celebrity chef Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall whom Darina met recently at Browsholme Hall farmers' market. "I sent him a sample and he sent me an endorsement for the website. It read, 'The Paprika Lady's paprika is the real deal — fresh, zesty and full of flavour'. My son and I never expected that, but we were delighted that he would make the effort to do that."

After undergoing major surgery and several bouts of chemotherapy, Darina, who came to Britain 12 years ago and met her husband, a lecturer at Burnley College, has now been in remission for two years.

"There are hundreds of Hungarian

Goulash recipes. Traditionally it was shepherd's peasant fare made with beef, pork, and even duck in a huge cauldron. My recipe has been modified for English tastes."

HUNGARIAN BEEF GOULASH

Ingredients:

- Oil
- 5 onions (medium size or 4 big)
- 1 tsp sugar
- 1 tsp caraway seeds
- 2 red peppers
- 3 cloves crushed garlic
- 2 tsp. marjoram
- 1.5kg shin beef
- 1 tsp. Hungarian sweet



- (edes) paprika
- ½ tsp. Hungarian hot (csipos) paprika
- 1 tsp Hungarian goulash spice mix sweet (edes)
- ½ tsp Hungarian goulash spice mix hot (csipos)
- Salt, black pepper
- 100ml red wine
- ½ litre beef stock