

Finnish Championship in Food Craftmanship. Oral presentation at Mini-seminar.

Novia University of Applied Sciences in Ekenäs, Raseborg, Finland, 10.-13.10.2016

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Artisan/local food in the West Nordic countries

The West Nordic countries, Faroe Islands, Greenland and Iceland are islands with unique nature and culture. Their food traditions are directly related to their environment. Isolated islands, in the North Atlantic with small population. The sea has been the main food source for centuries and still is. Fish, sea mammals and birds. Short summers and small portion of arable land has made agriculture more difficult than in many other places. Most settlements are along the coast, small and often far from each other. Transport costs are high, especially in Greenland where there are few roads and the main transport is by sea or helicopters.

The seafood industry is large in these countries, making up a significant portion of the export value, and highly competitive, whereas the agricultural industry is almost only for domestic use, vulnerable and non-competitive. The local market is small so it is very difficult for the processing industry to gain from the benefit of scale and the industry produces a wide range of products in very small quantities.

The cuisine of Faroe Islands and Iceland has Nordic origins, in Iceland there are some Gaelic influences (and later USA), in Faroe Islands there are mainly British influences. In Greenland, the origin is however Inuit cuisine with some Danish influence.

The Greenlandic people have a strong connection to the nature and hunting is still a strong tradition, whether you are a lawyer or a fisherman. Most people have a boat or access to one; fish their own fish, seals, collect berries and when a whale is available, they buy a lot and put it in the freezer. Many hunt the muskox and reindeer for own consumption. There are still significant number of people in Greenland that rely on hunting as their main source for food and continue hunting traditions that were established by previous generations. Large meals are not uncommon and it is considered normal for families to share their game meat with others in their area. In every town is *Brættet* or "The Board", where hunters/fishermen sell their catch. The catch is cut into pieces according to the needs of the consumer and sold directly to them.

Sea mammals provide important staples to Greenlandic diets. The national dish is *suaasat* or seal soup. It is often made from seal but whale, reindeer or seabirds can as well be used. The soup often includes onions and potatoes and is thickened with rice, or by soaking barley in the water. A traditional Inuit specialty is *mattak*, a Greenlandic term for the raw hide of narwhal or white whale. *Mattak* can be prepared with blubber, and occasionally dried reindeer meat. When eaten raw, *mattak* is an important source of vitamin C. Also popular is *arfivik*, or bowhead whale, smoked whale meat served with onions and potato. Dried cod and whale with whale blubber is a popular lunch and snack food as well as dried capelin or *ammasat*.

At the supermarkets in Greenland is a good variety of "western"/Danish food. This food is cheaper than the Greenlandic food but the typical Greenlander still prefers the local food which is served at every party or festivity: shrimps, whale skin (*mattak*), dried fish, whale blubber etc.

When asked to describe their food, Faroese say: simplicity. Traditional foods from the Faroe Islands include *skerpikjøt* (dried mutton), seafood, whale meat, blubber, *garnatálg*, puffins, potatoes and few fresh vegetables. Much of the taste of this traditional country food is determined by the preservation methods used; brining, drying and the maturing of meat and fish, called *ræstkjøt* and *ræstur fiskur*.

Ræst (fermented), comes from semi-drying either meat or fish outdoors, where the aging and fermenting process will take place. Whether the taste is acquired or not, however, is up to nature to decide. The fermentation is possible due to the relatively constant temperatures brought on by the gulf stream, too cold to rot, too warm to freeze. It is characterised by its strong umami flavour, the fifth flavour. *Ræstfisk* is eaten by everyone, it used to be eaten at Christmas but is now eaten as everyday food.

There are twice as many sheep in the Faroe Islands than people, hence the name (sheep islands). The Faroese eat their lamb fresh, *ræst* and wind-dried. Dried lamb is aged in traditional drying sheds, *hjallur*. The whole carcass hangs for three months, then it is semi-dried, *ræst*. At this point it is taken down and cut into pieces and consumed as *ræst kjøt*. The hind legs are left to hang longer to become *skerpikjöt* - "sharp meat", for about three more months or longer. Then it is taken down and put into the freezer until consumed. *Skerpikjøt*, is eaten as a snack or put on *smorrebrød*. It is the most popular version of dried lamb and is served at most Faroese celebrations.

Fylltur lundi (looks like a whole chicken) is a special treat. It is a puffin filled with a dough of a sand cake, boiled (traditional) or roasted in the oven. Another Faroese specialty is *Tvøst og spik*, pilot whale meat and blubber. The meat and the blubber can be preserved and prepared in different ways. Often it is cut into long thin slices, which are called *likkja* (*grindalikkja*) and hung up to dry. It is common to boil whale meat and blubber, and serve with potatoes and mustard, as a standard family meal. The consumption of blubber and dried whale has reduced a lot in the last years due to high mercury content.

The Faroese are fond of British food, in particular fish and chips, British-style chocolate and tea. Despite these influences, the average family prepares its meals today in practically the exact same way as their ancestors did centuries ago (simplicity). When asked about their favourite dishes, many Faroese will name local dishes: whale meat and blubber, *skerpikjøt*, seabirds, fish or geese.

The food traditions in Iceland are in many ways similar to the traditions of the Faroe Islands, except for the use of smoking and pickling with fermented whey. *Porrámatú* is a buffet with traditional food served at a midwinter festival called *Porrablót*. *Porrámatú* includes a selection of traditionally cured meat and fish products served with *rúgbrauð* (dense dark and sweet rye bread) and *brennivín* (an Icelandic aquavit).

As in Faroe Islands and Greenland, fish has been dried for centuries in Iceland and is still consumed today. In Iceland, the *harðfiskur* is mostly haddock, catfish and cod. The traditional way of drying the fish is to hang it up in *hjallur*, a special type of shed where air can circulate easily. *Harðfiskur* is eaten with butter in Iceland, in Greenland and the Faroe Islands it is however eaten with blubber and cold potatoes. In the past it was eaten as a substitute to bread but today it is eaten as snack and is quite popular among all age groups.

Saltfiskur or salted fish (mostly cod) was the main export for many centuries both for Iceland and Faroe Islands and it is still exported to southern Europe (*Bacalao*). The fish is cured in salt for several weeks and then stored. As such it can be kept for a long time and develops a distinctive rancid flavour. Desalted, it is eaten in a similar way as fresh fish. With the freezing and cooling technology the importance of *saltfiskur* for export has diminished, most of the fish now being exported is fresh.

Similar to the Faroese *skerpikjöt*, Iceland has its *hangikjöt*. It is a leg of a lamb that has been hung and then smoked. Due to lack of trees, Icelanders used dried sheep dung, giving it its distinct flavour. *Hangikjöt* is served at Christmas. It is also popular on top of a bread and is eaten as such all year round. Often with *flatkaka* (flat bread). At Christmas, as a condiment to *hangikjöt*, *laufabrauð* (leaf bread), a crisp flatbread, is served. It is first cut into intricate geometric patterns, then deep-fried. Traditionally, a special tool called a leaf bread cutter is used to cut the patterns.

Skyr is a dairy product that has probably been produced in Iceland since the settlement of the country. Despite being defined as a cheese, traditional *skyr* is consumed today in a similar way as yogurt. Artisan/traditional *skyr* is quite different in texture and flavour to the industrial version of *skyr* which is now becoming internationally known. Traditional *skyr* is now part of the Slow food presidia.

Berries, such as blueberries and crowberries, and various herbs and seaweed have been and are still collected in the West Nordic Countries and processed into products. The variety of plants is low and growing rate is slow due to their geographical position. Vegetable cultivation is small but growing, none of the countries producing enough to fulfil the needs of the local market. There have however been interesting developments over the last few years i.e. experiments conducted on various types of vegetables at Upernaviarsuk research station, Greenland's experimental farm and school for the agricultural industry.

For the last ten years or so, a growing momentum has been for artisan food products in the West Nordic countries. Number of new artisans have started production and the variety of products produced is growing extensively. Several innovative initiatives have taken place involving artisan food i.e. cooperation between design students and farmers resulting in products such as rhubarb caramel, black budding cake and *skyr* confectionary in the shape of a cow's mammary glands.

The situation in regard to assistance provided to artisans is quite different between the West Nordic Countries. In Iceland, Matís Ltd. runs innovation centres: facilities with equipment and licence for production that producers can rent. Consultancy and courses are available as well. In Faroe Islands, iNOVA houses an experimental kitchen and runs projects with artisans. Currently, Greenland has no similar research/consultancy place. Inuili culinary school has however been working on several projects with artisans. In 2018, the University of Greenland will open a natural science division which might start cooperation with artisans.

The West Nordic countries are working together on supporting artisans, sharing experiences and providing access to consultancy. One good example of this is the [Nordbio Innovation project](#) where more than 50 producers were supported, resulting in 66 new products in, including fish chips, honey, crab burgers, goose liver pate, beer vinegar, rabbit meat, meadowsweet syrup and turnip chips.

There are now many interesting artisan products on the market in the West Nordic countries and more are entering the market as we speak. You are welcome to try!

References

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