NEIGHBOURS

An Estonian's favourite dish is reputedly another Estonian. It is also said that where there are two Estonians, there are three opinions. Estonians excel at neighbourly feuding. Neighbourhood watch seems to have a double meaning here: it is equally necessary to keep an eye on the property and to make sure that those living next door do not get the upper hand — especially in the material sense. Envy, anxious comparisons, putting the other in the shade, and bearing grudges are nothing new to the average Estonian. In our literary classics, spite between neighbours acquires philosophical dimensions, and under cover of rural disputes about land ownership, differences in worldly matters get sorted out.

Estonians display far more tolerance towards their neighbours beyond state borders than towards their fellow countrymen, although a folk tale or two tells how the Estonian epic hero Kalevipoeg, in passing, cut the ears off a neighbouring hero. Mostly, though, an Estonian does not vent his bad mood on his neighbour. Estonian humour is often impenetrable to foreigners, seeming too black and occasionally uncomfortably sarcastic. Sarcasm, however, is nearly always directed at one's countryman, i.e. oneself. Its expression in cartoons is a little man with a kind of oversized skull-cap and a woman clad in national costume with a kannel, the Estonian zither. The irony in these types may be hard for a stranger to perceive: where an Estonian sees irony and self-mockery, a bystander might easily take it for artless self-promotion. The same goes for advertising, where quite a few clips which are based on what is a completely neutral joke for Estonians could put a foreigner's 'politically correct' sensibilities to a severe test.

VANA TALLINN

Those who think that the Soviet period brought nothing good whatsoever to Estonia are mistaken. It did — it brought the sticky herbal drink Vana Tallinn (Old Tallinn) and the subsequent rather peculiar hangover in the event of over-eager consumption the previous night. The latter naturally falls in the category of negative phenomena. During the confusing days of planned economy, the dark brownish-red liquid was lavished on Moscow apparatchiks in the hope of obtaining a more substantial share of the money from the empire's piggy-bank, or offered to the odd foreign visitor.

In the opinion of some historians, the true Old Tallinn, capital of Estonia, was marked on the world map by al-Idrisi in 1154 at the court of the Norman King Roger II in Sicily, on the basis of information obtained from widely-travelled merchants. Thanks to a good deal of luck, the medieval town has survived quite well, as has much of the city wall. For those who find themselves here for the first time, the Old Town of Tallinn is in fact the biggest surprise of all: cool Gothic, burgeoning Baroque, flaunting Classicism represent a large chunk of European architectural history. So this is ultimately another of Estonia's treasures..

VANA TALLINN

CIBUS
KAMA

"What's this strange powder you've got here?" enquires the customs officer, meaningfully sniffing the brownish stuff in the luggage of a travelling Estonian. "That's kama," says the latter with admirable confidence. On the Finnish border this declaration sounds especially defiant: the innocuous Estonian word 'kama' means narcotics in Finnish slang. Customs labs would detect nothing but peas, barley and other coarse grains ground into the mysterious powder.

Kama is one of the undisputed classics of Estonian cuisine. Kama with strawberries is served at receptions and garden parties, where the hapless foreigner who has incautiously exhibited interest in Estonian cuisine is encouraged to try it.

KAMA

Kama is inseparably linked with soured milk. When milk (i.e. 'real' milk, not the variety that stays 'fresh' for months) is kept in a warm place, it turns sour. It sours but it does not go rancid. Such milk is sold in shops and consumed with mashed potatoes, mixed into pancake dough or combined with, for example, kama and fruit and served as a dessert.

Kama, by the way, is tasty, although you don't very often see Estonians consuming it. It's not that they don't like it, but it probably belongs among those things that an Estonian is not too keen to make a song and dance about, such as candles on window sills on All Souls' Day, or one's personal stone or tree somewhere at the edge of a forest. In a word — we do eat it, but we don't want to make a fuss about it.

GRAVEYARDS

Graves and hence the memory of the departed are long preserved in Estonia. People tend their burial plots with great care, as they would a garden. They plant flowers on them and surround them with arbor vitae. In comparison to West-European stone cemeteries, or rows of crosses on smooth lawns, Estonian graveyards seem like parks: green and shady, with crosses and tombstones poking up out of the ground, and trees all around. Despite Christianity, introduced by fire and sword some 800 years ago, it is not uncommon in Estonia for people still to bury their dead in half-pagan burial places — small graveyards in the forest near the farmhouse. Estonians have close contacts with the forest and with trees all their lives. Many a child has his own tree, planted after his birth, which then lives together with the child and reflects his fortunes. A birch or lime tree in one's home yard is a frequent image in songs and poems, and pre-Christian sacred groves and trees still linger somewhere in the nooks and crannies of popular memory. Spruce unites birth with death: a hedgerow of such trees surrounds a farmhouse like a protective palm of the hand, a spruce with a broken top is the sign of mourning, spruce branches mark the route the coffin takes on its way to the final resting-place. In addition to the Christmas tree, Easter willow catkins and birches are brought into the house — all to remind people of how humanity and nature function together in this world.

During Christmas and on All Souls' Day, Estonian graveyards are full of flickering candles in remembrance of the dead. The belief that souls wander abroad at that time is kept quietly alive; in olden days a well-provided table was laid for them on this night so that the wanderers from beyond could take sustenance.

WHISPERERS

What does an Estonian do when he feels poorly? In the case of a light cold (quite frequent in these littoral climes), nothing much. He might make mugs of deer-moss tea, eat honey, and then turn up at work at the usual time, ignoring the sore throat and the slight temperature. As a rule, everybody knows that moss tea is good for coughs, marigolds take away spots, that cowslips help with joint troubles and vertigo, and that lime-blossom tea cures the common cold. An Estonian often leaves the chemist's with a little bag of herbal plants in addition to the prescribed pills.

For more serious problems, the Estonians naturally turn to a doctor. However, when medicine proves useless — something not all that rare in our era of multiple allergies — it is time to find a good whisperer, or healer. Simpler ailments can nearly always be treated by a greybeard or crone in one's own family, someone who will remove warts with words, or soothe arthritis by the laying on of hands. Over and above such people are 'full-time' shamans, or whisperers, who are just as widely known as Olympic winners or top politicians.

In the field of weather forecasting, well-worn methods also compete successfully with meteorological science: some forecasters use a pig's spleen, others rely on various phenomena in nature — people are mostly willing to trust them rather than a meteorologist standing by a map on the TV screen. As rumour has it, in more confusing cases even the latter tend to ask the weather sages to confirm the predictions produced by their machines.

BLACK BREAD

Estonian bread is black and has a sour taste. Only a few people can still make real rye bread at home. White bread is mostly eaten with something sweet, or baked for festive occasions.

Estonians living abroad ask visitors from Estonia to bring them black bread. Black bread denotes home. A slice of that coarse sour-sweet bread spans a bridge across time and geographical distance. The lines written by a poet about a young girl taking a loaf of warm bread from the oven, and breaking off a chunk for a passer-by, contain so much human mercy and goodness that the reader feels his soul contract.

Bread, black bread, is a symbol of survival. In olden times, if you dropped a piece of bread, you picked it up and kissed it: bread was sacred. It still is — communion wafers in Estonian are called 'communion bread'. The importance of rye bread on an Estonian dinner table is such that all other food is known as 'something to go with bread'.

Long rye stalks were used in thatching farmhouse roofs, and they lasted many decades. The Estonian national flower, the cornflower, is also connected with rye — it grows as a weed in rye fields. On many occasions, and certainly at song festivals, a cornflower is a frequent sight, adorning young girls' garlands or the buttonhole of a swanky suitor.

THE FINNISH BRIDGE

Some 80 kilometres separate Helsinki from Tallinn. It takes 15 minutes by helicopter and an hour-and-a-half by hydrofoil to cover the distance. The Estonian-Finnish 'bridge', however, unites the two countries more closely than any means of transport. This imaginary bridge has involved relations between the two countries throughout history. One rushed to help the other in their fight for independence; and during the years of prohibition, Finnish alcohol afficionados helped Estonian moonshine smugglers to accumulate great wealth. Again, the Finns stood by the Estonians despite their government's policy of Finlandisation and the Soviet occupation on the other side of the Gulf of Finland.

The significance of Finnish TV for Estonian culture and for the intellectual climate during the Soviet occupation is almost impossible to overestimate: after all, this was one of the very few chinks through which an Iron Curtain nation could view the world at large. The national anthems of Estonia and Finland have precisely the same melody, so it was easy for any seriously anti-Soviet Estonian to start his day by listening to the Finnish anthem on the radio and singing along in Estonian.

In the 1980s, the first international private businesses 'marched' to Estonia over the Finnish 'bridge'; today there is serious talk of an underwater tunnel between Tallinn and Helsinki, and even a future town called Talsinki or Hellinn.

THE JUNIPER

The juniper is spiky and scratchy. The bushes are stubborn and grow dense and tough. "Fierce as a juniper on fire," goes the saying in Estonia for a hot-headed person, because when juniper burns it crackles and scatters sparks all around. "He seems to have a juniper bush in his trousers," is said about someone who can't stop fidgeting. Although a scratcher, the juniper is something familiar and homely. In olden days, bows and pikestaffs, spoons and tubs were made of juniper. It was the strongest and thus most valued material for a walking stick. Additionally, a juniper stick was said to protect the bearer from witchcraft and revenants.

The smell of a juniper instils a sense of security. Faux-ethnic juniper table-mats spread its fragrance in places where the association is perhaps no longer perceived. Surprisingly enough, a juniper berry contains more vitamins and sugar than a grape. It has been believed for centuries that juniper smoke can expel both bad smells and disease. This belief might even contain a grain of truth — grain dried in smoke in Estonian barns was greatly valued during the days of the Hanseatic League, because it was fit to eat and sow even after long sea voyages.

The juniper is also a successful real-estate development project invented by spiders. There are just as many Arthropoda living in coastal junipers as there are people inhabiting dormitory towns in Estonia. A juniper bush lives to be truly ancient, its wood lasts forever; a juniper bush remembers bygone days; a juniper bush is like your great grandmother.

THE SUIT-AND-TIE MAN

When Estonia regained its independence in 1991, it became apparent that society offered a great many jobs about which no one had had the faintest idea during the period of Soviet occupation: real-estate agents and stockbrokers, copywriters, spin-doctors, business consultants, politicians, company heads, PR-people, insurance agents, investigative journalists. Demand creates supply, and the brave new generation adapted to the new situation with miraculous speed.

A minister under thirty raises no eyebrows here. Fresh views and daring enterprise was just what the country needed. Those over forty were regarded with a little suspicion — after all, they had adjusted to the Soviet way of things. The suit-and-tie man (*pintsaklipslane*) is an Estonian word for yuppie. This graphic expression denotes successful, upwardly mobile young people who are prepared to toil away for 27 hours a day in the name of a dazzling career and loads of money. While nicely decorated with a tie in the daytime, they relax to neurotic club music at night, or do violence to marine tranquillity with the roar of their motor scooters.

The first burnouts have now gone on to a second round. And, when old bankers elsewhere in the world worry that young people are avoiding their profession, in Estonia a young banker is annoyed that, by the time he is forty, there will be no further rung on the career ladder for him to climb.

APPROVED ESTONIAN TASTE
ECAC
ESTONIAN AIR

BARN SWALLOW

In spring, by May at the latest, the barn swallow (Hirundo rustica rustica) returns from its yearly winter exile. It casually sits on an old, slightly mossy, pole over a well, and sings its head off. Hearing the swallow, a winter-weary man looks up, trying to spot the tiny black bird in the blue sky. A smile spreads across his face.

A barn swallow goes together with the barn house, erratic boulders, the smells of the stable, cornflowers, black bread and soured milk. The little bird, awarded the status of a national bird half a century ago, is part of the Estonian archetype. Attempts have been made occasionally to remove it from the official emblems, when attempting to re-brand or modernise them, but when putting his identity into words, the Estonian himself is bound to mention the barn swallow — quite often as the very first symbol.

Exactly how the barn swallow became the Estonian national bird is perhaps no longer so important. What matters is the eager question a child asks when he arrives in the country to spend his school holidays: "Grandpa, have we got swallows' nests this year?"

THE SAUNA

The notion of a 'Finnish sauna' is nothing short of sacrilege to Estonians: the 'saun' as it is called here is, after all, something purely Estonian.

What, then, is a sauna? A small wooden room that can be heated until the sweat starts pouring in rivulets. It cleanses your body and soul — from the inside. Especially when you give yourself a proper 'thrashing' with birch or, even better, with juniper branches, and then plunge into the nearest body of water to cool off. Even into a hole cut in the ice in winter. Practically all Estonian detached houses and quite a few flats have a sauna, by no means a status symbol – as a jacuzzi would be — but just as natural as having a stove in the kitchen.

This unpretentious bath-house, which today is mostly used for health and relaxation, used to be a place where people were born — and whence they left the mortal world behind. Travellers arriving from a freezing winter journey were warmed up in the sauna. To this day, (male) sauna-conversations are taken very seriously, and a word given there is honoured without fail.

THINGS ESTONIAN

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