



Estonian Cuisine



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Estonia is a Nordic country, which also says a lot about the Estonian cuisine: eating habits, food, ways of cooking etc. The rather sharp contrast between seasons, quite unusual for a southerner, is also reflected in the rhythm of life of the people, closer to nature than the average European. An Estonian tends to be slow and introvert in autumn and winter, and much more energetic and communicative in summertime. How, what, and where an Estonian eats seems largely to be determined by the length and warmth of the days. Darkness and frost bring to the table sauerkraut and roast, brawn and black pudding, thick soup and stew. In summertime, on the other hand, it seems that people are able to survive on little but the warmth and sunlight, accompanied by everything light and fresh that gardens and forests have to offer.



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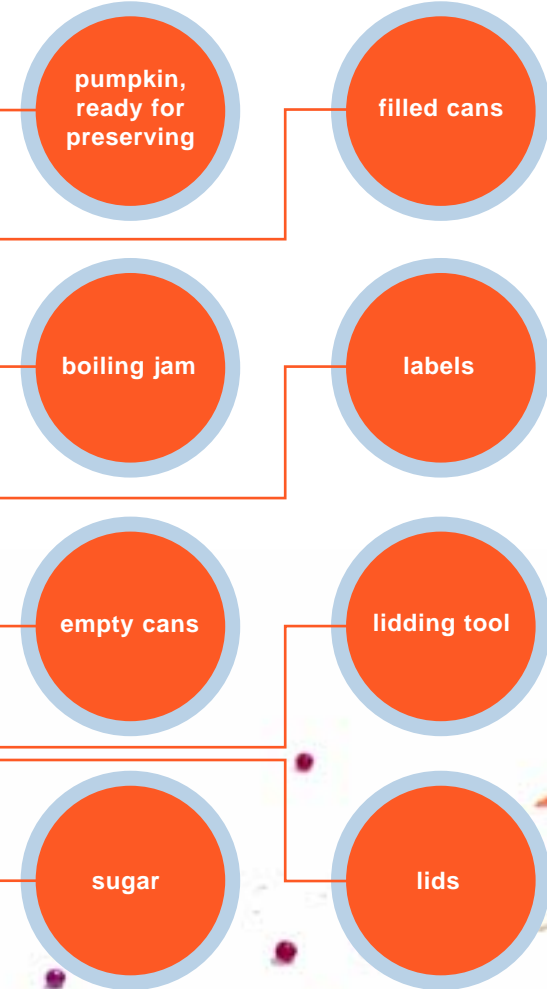
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When the first signs of autumn appear, in August, a sudden change of mood overcomes Estonians who have so far been enjoying a carefree summer. Clouds of steam and delicious smells emanate from the kitchens until the late hours; cellars, fridges and

larders fill up with jams, preserves and pickles. Late summer inevitably means weekends in the forest, often several hours' drive from home, and a triumphant return with basketfuls of berries and mushrooms.



Nowadays, gathering and conserving the fruits of the forest has retained a mainly ritual significance, though an instinctive desire to face the winter with a full larder is undoubtedly also important. A major motivation is probably the Estonians' strong attachment to the forest as a provider and protector. At times of trouble, people hid themselves there, and it has always offered herbs for healing the sick as well as everyday food. Thus, hunting and fishing - adventure and entertainment for the modern city folk - still provide a significant amount of extra food for country people.



Estonian fare has never been too plentiful, and this is perhaps the reason why the habit of wishing one another 'bon appetit' has not taken root here. Instead, people say: "May your bread last!" Apart from a few periods of famine, Estonia has not lacked black, leavened rye bread. Even those who have lived abroad for dozens of years still do not forget its characteristic taste.

To those Estonians who have moved to the cities over the last few generations, the cuisine of their mostly country-based forefathers of the late 19th century has become rather unfamiliar. Regional distinctions, sharply defined a hundred years ago, have now become fairly hazy. In the past, islanders

and coastal people, living on poor, stony land, mostly ate potatoes and salted, dried or smoked fish with their bread. Inland farmers raised cattle, of which only the milch cows and breeding animals were kept over the winter. The fatal day for rams was Michaelmas on September 29th; St. Martin's Day on November 10th always boasted a goose on the table, and on St. Catherine's Day (November 25th), one had chicken. Before Christmas, a fatted pig was killed. After the festive food was prepared, the salted meat and lard were supposed to last until next autumn. Seasoning was mostly done with salt: only urban artisans and the landed gentry could afford expensive spices. Honey was used rather than sugar, and was viewed as a medicine as much as a foodstuff.

The most popular drinks were light malt ale in North Estonia and light ale made from barley and rye in South Estonia, or birch sap in spring. Beer has been the traditional beverage for all occasions, having displaced mead, its ancient rival brewed from honey, several hundred years ago. Ale brewing, especially on our larger islands, has always been a serious and important business for the local people. The islanders' secret tricks of the trade remain a mystery to mainlanders even today. The beer, served in large wooden piggins, is all the more insidious for its mild taste.



On weekdays, a farmer would sit down to pearl barley porridge with sour milk, or boiled unpeeled potatoes with curd or salt Baltic herring; on festive days, he could also enjoy butter, meat or egg porridge. At more prosperous farms, where the purse strings were not so tight, farmhands and maids ate at the same table with the farmer and his wife. Farmhands at a stingy farmer's table had only potatoes, bread, thin gruel and salt herring, and occasionally porridge; the same food was given to cottagers.



fermented milk

butter

pearl barley porridge

unpeeled potatoes

small salt herring

beer

salt

rye bread

onion

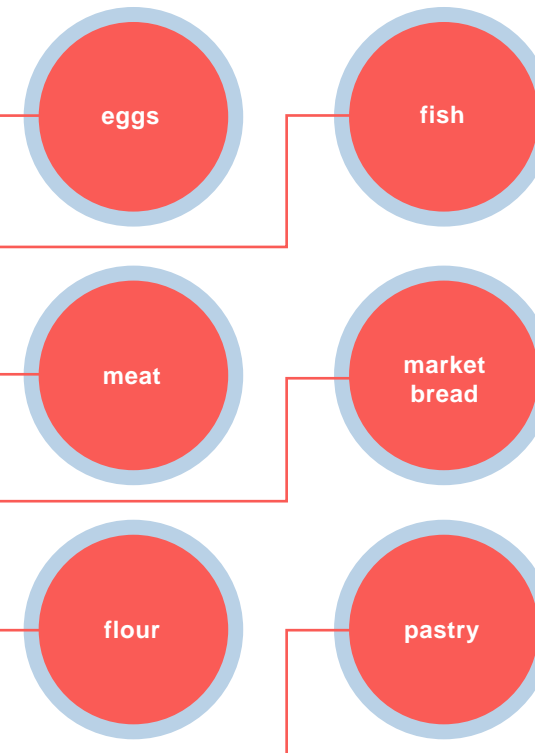
kama



The cultivation of potatoes, a crop introduced into manorial kitchen gardens by the 1740s, finally 'took root' during the 19th century. By 1900, potatoes had become a staple of regional food, competing with pearl barley porridge. Competing so successfully, in fact, that only recently Estonia came second in the world (after Poland) in per capita potato yield! Spices, and various new dishes such as semolina and rice porridge gradually made their way from manor

and city kitchens to the tables of wealthier farmers. On market-days, village boys could treat their girls to the sweet, yellow, white bread, which indeed was long known as 'market bread'. Grocers' shops now proudly offered salt herring, which, despite the wide variety of local fish, became instantly popular and remains one of the favourites on an Estonian's table even today.

As with potatoes, getting used to coffee, which arrived in Estonia as early as the late 17th century, took a long time. But by the end of the 19th century Tallinn had several cafés of quite the same standard as those in Central Europe, and at the same time the habit of drinking coffee also spread amongst the farmers. In the country, people drank home-roasted and hand-ground coffee on Sundays, as well as on festive days and when guests arrived. On weekdays, a simpler 'coffee' made from roasted grain and chicory was regarded as good enough.



Over the century, Estonians' everyday food has inevitably changed in line with the times and circumstances. The traditional dishes and customs are still in use on the more significant festivals of the folk calendar, the most important being the pagan 'Yuletide' (Estonian jõulud), celebrated long before the arrival of Christianity. The previously more frugal Christmas dishes became rather lavish during the 1930s and have not changed much since. Whether in the city or in the country, even an Estonian who might normally be constrained to tighten his belt must have his Christmas brawn, roast pork or goose, sauerkraut and black pudding, followed by apples, mandarins, nuts and gingerbread.

Despite having become increasingly similar, there are still some differences between the everyday meals of Estonians living in a city and those living in the country. Hard work in the fields even today requires substantial peasant dishes, like pearl barley porridge with bacon or pearl barley and potato porridge, thick flour or bacon sauce, kama (roast mixed grains) with fermented milk and sugar, milk soup with barley-flour dumplings, home-made rye bread and griddle-bread. With their lower energy consumption and their greater interest in slender waists, townfolk try to use less fat and flour and

more fruit and vegetables. Milk and all sorts of dairy products like fermented milk, yoghurts, and various tasty dishes made of curd are firm favourites.

A hundred years ago, an Estonian farmer's family always ate at home and the whole family would sit down to their meal together. Eating was a serious, even sacred activity. The meal was accompanied by numerous customs, to be strictly observed lest the household should be plagued by hunger or other misfortunes.

Modern Estonia has no fixed times for meals. Breakfast is usually eaten at home before hurrying off to work, but to save you the trouble, the coffee shops open their doors early. Those who fancy porridge, have oat porridge or a quick cereal snack, while coffee-lovers choose sandwiches to go with their favourite beverage.

hazelnut

walnut

sweets

cinnamon roll

gingerbread

coffee grinder

apple





After midday it is time for lunch. For an average office worker this means a cup of coffee at the office accompanied by sandwiches brought from home, or a light meal at a nearby fast food outlet. Successful businessmen, following the western example, have business lunches at restaurants. Schoolchildren waste their pocket money on junk food, chips or trendy sweets.

Only about ten years ago, an Estonian family still usually sat down to dinner together; sadly nowadays everyone tends to eat separately and at different times. The family meets only for Sunday dinner, and often not even then.



But changes in Estonian cuisine have not been limited to mere ripples on the surface in the form of new eating habits. Staggering innovations and changes in society have created strong undercurrents which have raised eating - something that was previously done quietly at home within family circle - to the focus of unflagging public interest. Every respectable paper or magazine prints an obligatory food column, every slightly longer interview tackles the respondent's opinions about food and cuisine. The public also avidly wants to know who dines with whom and where, and, of course, what exactly they eat and drink. Wining and dining places are regularly



reviewed and compared, and rankings drawn up. Estonian cuisine, as a trade, has no objections to all this: it is a well-known fact that whoever or whatever is continually in the spotlight has no choice but to offer the best.



Leavened rye bread

Ferment:
2.5 dl lukewarm (37-40 °C) water
2.5 g yeast
2.5 dl rye flour
48 hours later:
25 g yeast
7 dl lukewarm water
3 tbsp oil
ca 2.5 l (ca 1.3 kg) rye flour or
a mixture of wheat and rye flour
2 tsp salt
2 tsp sugar

The ferment with its long rising period adds to the taste of rye bread, gives it a moist texture, and keeps it from drying out. You can make a double quantity of the ferment, and keep the rest in an air-tight container in a freezer or a fridge. Bread made solely from rye flour is heavy and dense and does not rise very well. This is why rye flour is usually mixed with wheat flour in equal measures. Though the taste of rye will predominate, the bread will rise better and will therefore be more 'airy'.

Measure the ferment flour into a bowl, add the water, mix well and leave covered with clingfilm in a warm, draught-free place to ferment. On the third day crumble 25 g yeast into a large bowl, add a little water and sugar and mix until it is dissolved. Now add the rest of the water, oil, ferment and salt, and then about 2 l of the flour. Knead, adding flour, until the dough no longer sticks to the bowl or



your hands. Sprinkle the dough with flour, cover it, and leave to rise in a warm place for 50-60 minutes. Outturn the dough onto a table sprinkled with flour, and gradually knead in the remaining flour, until the dough no longer sticks to the table. Mould the dough into two smooth loaves, place them on baking sheet covered with a greaseproof paper, cover them with a tea-towel and leave to rise in a warm place for about 30 - 40 minutes. Prepare oven to 175 °C, brush loaves with lukewarm water or milk, bake on the lower shelf for 50-60 min. You can find out whether the bread is ready by the following method: take the loaf out of the oven, turn upside down and tap a few times; if you hear a hollow sound, it is ready, if the sound is muffled, it should be placed back into the oven. Cool on a rack under the tea-towel.

Pickled gherkins

ca 2 kg small hard gherkins
a few woody dill stalks with the flowers on cut into 15 cm lengths
handful of blackcurrant leaves
1 clove of garlic, sliced
1 l water
2 tbsp salt
1 dl vinegar (5% concentration)
1 tbsp sugar

Traditional Estonian pickled gherkins are made in a large wooden barrel. Cucumbers are placed between layers of blackcurrant leaves, dill stalks and slices of horse radish. Chilled water, containing 4 - 6%



salt is poured over the cucumbers, then a weight is placed on them. The barrel is then taken into a cool cellar with even temperature, where bacteria will produce lactic acid which will ferment the cucumbers. In about 30 days, the cucumbers acquire a pleasant, distinctly sour taste. Those who do not possess a cellar have devised new methods of pickling cucumbers in modern apartment buildings.

Soak the cucumbers in cold water for 24 hours, wash with a brush and rinse. Put the gherkins in a large jar, add dill stalks, currant leaves and sliced garlic. Bring the water with salt and sugar to the boil, allow it to cool until it is lukewarm, then pour it over the gherkins. Cover the jar with a saucer and leave to stand. In two -

three days the liquid will turn cloudy, as the fermenting process caused by lactic acid, and speeded up by vinegar, will start. When the cucumbers have turned more sour (in 2-3 days), strain the salty liquid into a saucepan and throw away the stalks, leaves and garlic. Bring the liquid to the boil, and boil for 2-3 minutes to kill the bacteria. Wash the cucumbers under running water, then pour boiling water (this is a 'new' boiling water) over them. Put them in jars which have previously been sterilised with boiling water or in a hot oven. Pour the hot salty liquid (this is the 'old' salt water which was boiled to kill the bacteria) over them and seal the jars immediately. Pickled gherkins will keep in a dark cupboard at room temperature for up to two years.

Brawn

2 - 2.5 kg leg of pork or veal with bones and skin (trotters can be included)
1 yellow onion with skin (for colour), chopped
1 carrot, chopped
8-10 peppercorns
6 kernels of allspice
1 bay leaf
salt

Rinse the meat and place in a saucepan of cold water. Bring to the boil and boil fiercely for 1-2 minutes; pour away the water, rinse the meat and the pan, removing all scum. Pour clean boiling water over the meat and simmer gently over a low heat without the lid until meat comes off the bones (3 - 4 hrs). Do not let it boil too rapidly, or the brawn will be cloudy. Skim the fat as it rises to the surface, adding more boiling water if necessary. Add the carrot and onion after an hour or two, the spices and 2-3 tsp of salt for the last 10 minutes. Remove the meat, cool, and cut into small pieces. Strain the broth, place the meat and broth in the pot, and add a substantial amount of salt because cooling reduces the taste. Bring to boil once, leave to cool for a few minutes, then place it in moulds or small bowls, previously rinsed with cold water. Cover the set brawn with clingfilm or foil and leave in a cool place. It should be eaten within 5 - 7 days. If there is not enough gluten in the meat, the brawn will not set. In that case add a few tablespoonfuls of gelatine powder to the cooled off brawn broth in a bowl and dissolve by placing the bowl in saucepan of hot water. Do not freeze the brawn, this will damage the jelly. Brawn can be equally well served on a dinner table with hot potatoes, and in a cold buffet. In both cases, either mustard, mild vinegar or pickled horseradish are used for seasoning.



Potato salad with red be<None>et

700 g cooked beet
400 g cooked potatoes
200 g cooked carrots
1 medium salted herring (kipper can do)
1 - 2 pickled cucumbers
2 apples
200 g roast pork or cooked beef
2 - 3 hard-boiled eggs
6 dl sour cream
salt according to taste
1/2 tsp mustard
a little sugar
spring onions to garnish
Makes salad for 10 - 12 persons.

This salad contains lots of cooked red beet, the sweet taste of which goes well with salt herring and pickled cucumber. Peel the potatoes, carrots and beets, and core and peel the apples. Fillet the herring, removing the skin and even the smallest bones. Cut everything (except eggs) into tiny cubes. Stir sour cream, mustard, salt and



sugar together to make a sauce. Mix all the ingredients with the sauce, leave covered in the fridge for an hour or two, and take out about one hour before serving. Put a nice heap of salad in a dish or a bowl, cover the surface with finely chopped eggs, egg slices or segments, and decorate with chopped spring onion.

Shrove Tuesday buns

2.5 dl lukewarm milk
25 g compressed yeast or 11 g dry yeast
1 egg
1/2 tsp salt
1 dl sugar
1 tsp ground cardamom
7 dl wheat flour
100 g soft margarine
for glazing: 1 egg
for filling: 3 dl double or whipping (35-38% fat) cream
2 tsp vanilla sugar
Makes about 10 - 12 buns

If using the compressed yeast dissolve in lukewarm milk; dry yeast can simply be mixed into the flour. Add egg, sugar, salt and cardamom to the milk, mixing continuously, then gradually add flour. Add soft margarine at the final phase of kneading. Knead the dough by hand or machine until it is smooth and does not stick to your hands or the bowl. Leave to rise in a warm place under a cloth,



until it has doubled in size. Mould small buns from the dough, place them on greaseproof paper on a baking sheet, and leave them to rise again under the cloth. Prepare oven to 225 °C, brush the buns with beaten egg and bake in the oven for 10 minutes. Allow to cool. Cut off the top of the buns, pile whipped cream mixed with vanilla sugar on the lower halves, and replace the lids..

