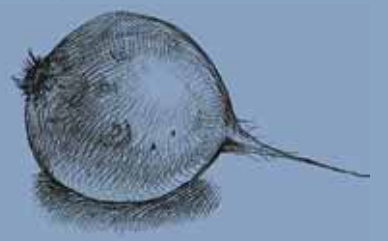
ESTONIAN CUISINE

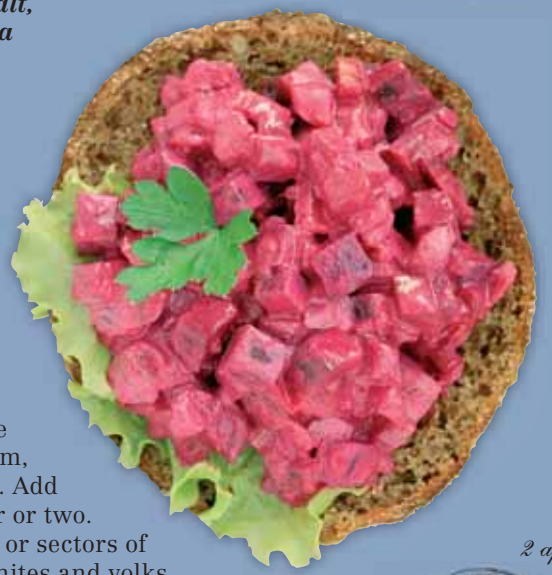
From the heyday of the Republic of Estonia in the 1930s until the late 1950s, no decent party in the country was held without beetroot salad. This fashionable dish was gradually replaced by potato salad that is much easier to prepare. Besides, the latter contains no herring, a fish not to everyone's liking. It is worthwhile recalling this nearly forgotten dish, as correctly prepared beetroot salad is quite exceptional and resembles no other mixed salad today.

Beetroot salad

700 g boiled beetroot



Dressing:
5 dl thick soured cream (may partly be replaced by thick yoghurt), salt, 0.5 teaspoonfuls mustard, a pinch of sugar



1–2 pickled cucumbers

400 g boiled potatoes

2 apples

Cut everything (except eggs) into small cubes. For the dressing, mix soured cream, mustard, salt and sugar. Add the cubes, leave for an hour or two. Cover the salad with ribbons or sectors of crushed egg whites and yolks.

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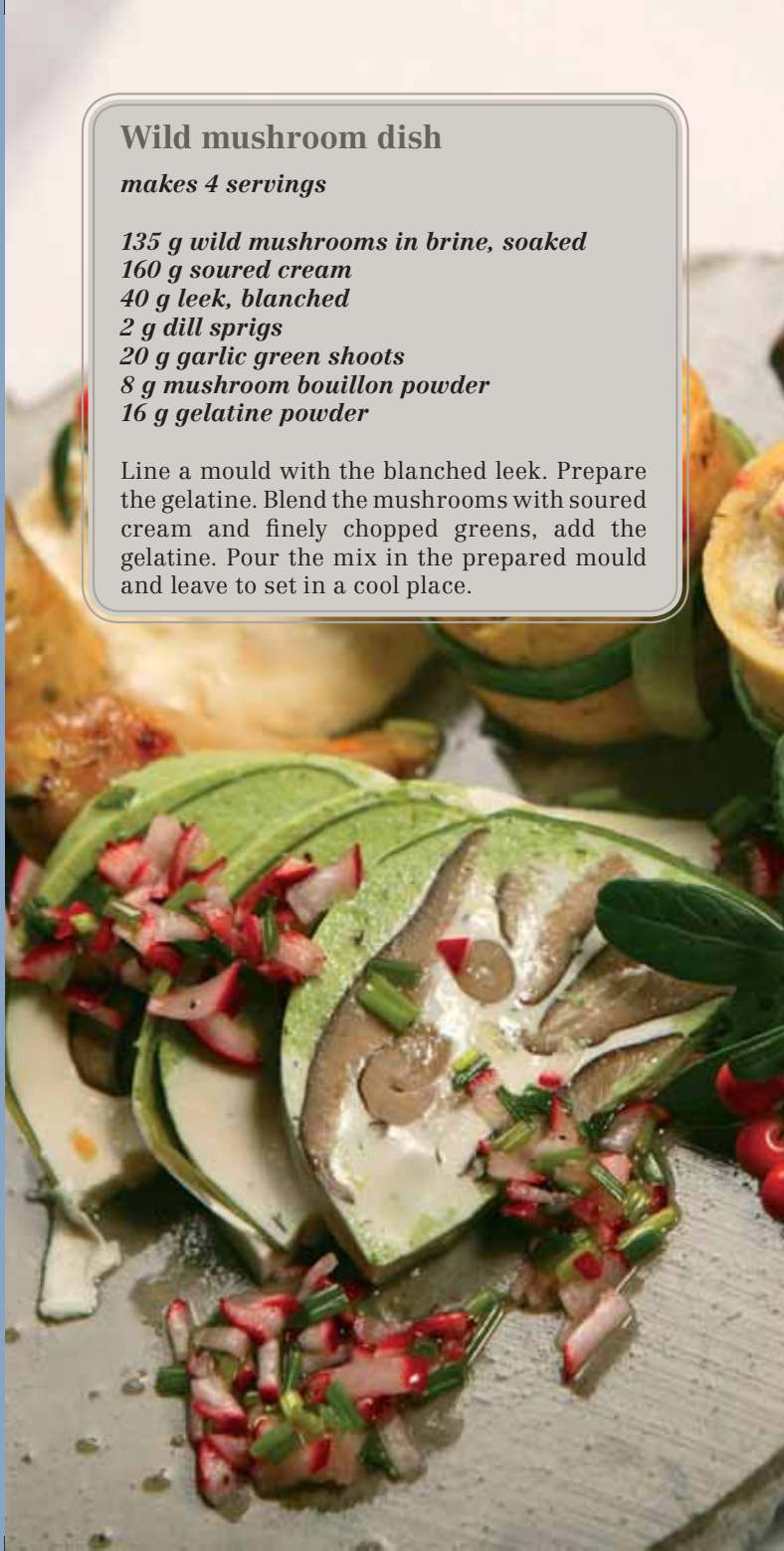


Wild mushroom dish

makes 4 servings

135 g wild mushrooms in brine, soaked
160 g soured cream
40 g leek, blanched
2 g dill sprigs
20 g garlic green shoots
8 g mushroom bouillon powder
16 g gelatine powder

Line a mould with the blanched leek. Prepare the gelatine. Blend the mushrooms with soured cream and finely chopped greens, add the gelatine. Pour the mix in the prepared mould and leave to set in a cool place.

The most popular drinks were light malt ale in North Estonia and light ale made from barley and rye in South Estonia, or throughout the country 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 tankards, is all the more insidious for its mild taste.

Estonia is a Nordic country, which also says a lot about Estonian cuisine: eating habits, food, ways of cooking, etc. The considerable contrast between seasons, quite unusual for a southerner, is also reflected in the rhythm of life of our people, being 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 sauerkraut and roast, brawn and black pudding, thick soup and stew to the table. In summertime, on the other hand, people seem to survive on little but the warmth and sunlight, accompanied by everything light and fresh that gardens and forests have to offer.

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. Thus, hunting and fishing – adventure and entertainment for the modern city folk – still provide a significant amount of extra food for country people.

To those Estonians who have moved to the cities over the last few generations, the cuisine of their mostly country-based forefathers from 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, from which only the milch cows and breeding animals were kept over the winter. The fatal day for rams was Michaelmas on 29 September; St. Martin's Day on 10 November always had a goose on the table, and on St. Catherine's Day (25 November), there was 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.

On weekdays, a farmer would sit down to pearl barley porridge with sour milk, or boiled unpeeled potatoes with curd or salted 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 rural labourers.

Baltic herring soufflé pie

makes 4 servings

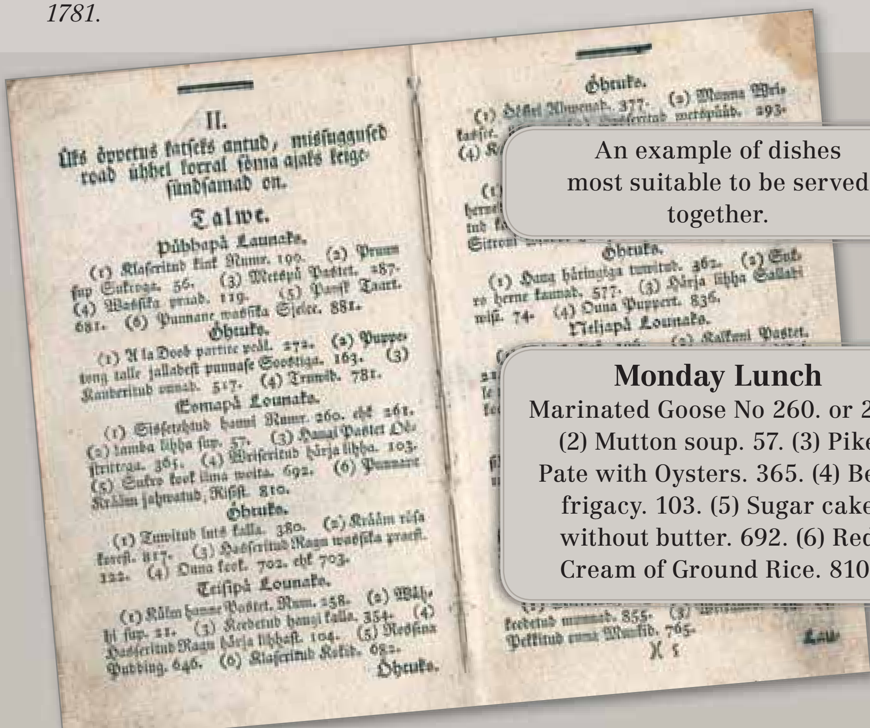
120 g wheat flour
25 g butter
10 g fresh dill, chopped
4 Baltic herring fillets, finely chopped
50 g cream cheese
25 g egg white
20 g leek, finely chopped
crushed black pepper

Make shortcrust pastry, add some fresh dill. Roll the dough out and use pastry cutters to make 4 thin containers. Whisk egg whites, add the fish fillets and the leek, season with pepper. Fill the containers with the mix and bake in the oven at 200° C.

Alongside the meagre peasant fare, refined and ample manorial cuisine flourished in Estonia. The local landed nobility who prospered on the lucrative distilling trade in the late 18th century, had the best French and German wines together with exotic fruits and other extravagant food, e.g. fresh Atlantic oysters, packed in ice, on their table.

Café Energy in Tallinn, late 1950s.

The first Estonian language cookery book providing daily menus for the whole year was translated from Swedish – so it could be understood by chefs and kitchen hands of native origin – and published in 1781.



II.
Üks öppetus katsets antud, missuggused road ühhel korral söma ajaks kigge sündsamad on.
Talwe.
Pühhapä Lounats.

An example of dishes most suitable to be served together.

Monday Lunch

Marinated Goose No 260. or 261. (2) Mutton soup. 57. (3) Pike Pate with Oysters. 365. (4) Beef frigacy. 103. (5) Sugar cake without butter. 692. (6) Red Cream of Ground Rice. 810.

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. It competed 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.

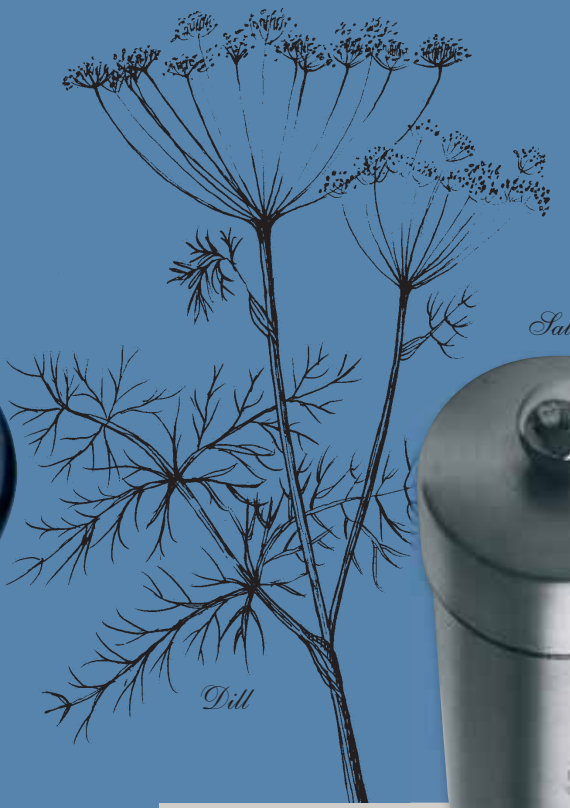
As with potatoes, getting used to coffee, which arrived in Estonia in the late 17th century, took a long time. By the end of the 19th century, however, Tallinn had several cafés of almost the same standard as those in Central Europe, and at the same time the habit of drinking coffee also spread amongst 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.

In the course of the century, Estonians' everyday food has inevitably changed in line with the times and circumstances.

The most impressive period in people's memory was the 1930s – the years of stability, an increasing sense of national awareness and wellbeing in the Republic of Estonia. The more progressively-minded women who usually studied at various housekeeping schools and courses, were no longer satisfied with traditional simple peasant food. European recipes of meat dishes, oven-baked items and desserts promoted in women's magazines and cookery books were eagerly tried out. A considerably swifter development occurred in towns where the choice in shops was wider and where more information was available about the rest of the world. An urban citizen could additionally entertain his guests outside his home as the best restaurants in the capital and summer resorts could stand comparison with similar establishments in other parts of Europe.

All these links abroad were broken by the Second World War, the end of which brought along not only an alien power, but also the closing of the borders. Two subsequent generations had to adapt to a strange culture of cooking, much limited choice of food products and difficulties in obtaining them. People were not exactly hungry but their daily food became extremely boring and haphazard, particularly towards the end of the Soviet period in the late 1980s. At that time, planning a meal was pointless – people simply cooked whatever was available. The shops were increasingly empty, whereas various foodstuffs were sold at workplaces: the package with 200 g of sausages always included 5-6 compulsory and rather useless items. Cookery books with titles such as „100 Sausage Dishes" or „Porridges" reflected perfectly the general situation.

Estonia regained its independence about a decade before the turn of the millennium. Besides freedom, people acquired a wealth of food, hundreds of new flavours and dozens of formerly unknown food products. People felt like children from a remote village who suddenly found themselves in a sweet shop where they could not only look at, but in fact taste everything. By today, the novelty has become norm. The choice of food and spices for an Estonian's daily meals is perfectly adequate, although leaves somewhat to be desired where special requirements are concerned. Money saved is increasingly used for travelling, and foreign dishes are later tried out at home. In bigger towns various restaurants offer food from other countries, and many now manage to satisfy even the most demanding visitors.



May your bread last!

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.

Spices

Estonian food is generally regarded as modestly spiced. However, in the Middle Ages people grew parsley, onions, garlic, dill, clary, horseradish, white poppy, etc. The most coveted spice was salt, mainly imported from France, Portugal and Germany. Thanks to Hanseatic trading, Tallinn was also introduced to Oriental spices and dried fruits: ginger, pepper, clove, saffron, cinnamon, cardamom, aniseed, olives, etc – the list is long. In addition to enhancing the taste of the dish to which they were added, the spices were supposed to offer protection from plague and other illnesses.

Food-related predictions and taboos

Food must not be dribbled on the table or your future spouse could take to drink. For the same reason, the slice of cake placed on the plate was not supposed to fall over. The latter could also indicate spinsterhood for the woman.

Wiping the table with your hand meant a row, whereas wiping it with paper or a woollen cloth predicted hunger and destitution.

Who eats bread with potatoes will be sent to Siberia.

While kneading, the fingers had to be held tightly in a fist, especially if it was a young girl – or she might be led into sin.

If you dropped a piece of bread, you had to kiss it.

Layered bread and apple dessert with cottage cheese

makes 25 servings

0.5 kg dry sourdough rye breadcrumbs
0.5 kg light brown sugar
ground cinnamon
3 kg apples, cored, peeled and sliced
100 g butter
2 kg cottage cheese
vanilla sugar
2 litres double cream
0.5 kg fresh blackcurrants
0.2 kg chopped hazelnuts
some blackcurrant sprigs

Fry the breadcrumbs with butter, 200 g sugar and cinnamon. Whip the cream and fold gently into the cottage cheese, then add vanilla. Place the apples in a saucepan with a little water. Cook gently until tender, add the currants and a little sugar, remove saucepan right away from stove. Cool quickly in cold water. Use the remaining sugar for making caramel; mix this with the chopped walnuts. Save part of the praline for garnish, mixing the rest with the fried breadcrumbs. Arrange the bread mix in individual serving bowls and layer with the cheese and apple mixes. Sprinkle with the praline.

Baked apples

8 small apples
0.5 cup of raisins
1 tbs sugar (or 2 tsb brown sugar)
1 tsb cinnamon

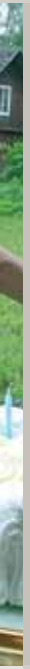
Preheat oven to 200º C. Core washed apples, leave the bottom of apples intact to create a hollow. Mix raisins, sugar and cinnamon in a bowl. Place apples upright and close together in a buttered baking dish. Fill each cavity with raisin mixture. Bake at 200º C until tender, for 25-40 minutes depending on the type of apples. Serve with vanilla ice cream or custard.

The most acceptable dishes for Estonian taste, used with the traditional choice of food, have been consistently and systematically introduced by the food writers of women's magazines, TV chefs and a range of cookery books. The cuisine of Italy, Greece and other Mediterranean countries, greatly favoured in the West during the last decades, have been especially popular. Tex-mex cuisine has found a surprisingly extensive following as well.

How and to what extent has sitting at the world's table influenced the daily fare of ordinary Estonians?

First – who is an ordinary Estonian? This category probably embraces about 85–90% of working Estonians. An average Estonian receives an average or lower than average salary and makes ends meet. However, he cannot often afford time-saving, but fairly expensive ready-made meals, to say nothing of going out for dinner; at the workplace he eats something brought from home, fetches a salad from a nearby shop or finds the closest Oriental fast food outlet.

The home cooking of an average Estonian still mainly entails the age-old combination of potato and sauce, although stews, roasts and soups are quite popular as well. People are increasingly fond of chicken and red fish. The Estonian-style potato salad with mayonnaise and sour cream dressing, served as a substantial dinner or as part of a cold table, has lost none of its appeal. Also popular are lighter vegetable salads with vinaigrette dressing. A wide range of dairy products is consumed, such as curd, local unpastorised yoghurts and various curd desserts. This is the area where nothing can shake the consumer's faith in the superior quality of local products. Cooking oil has replaced margarine, and people boldly consume Italian tomato sauces and preserves, Asian-style exciting spices and dressings, rice, pasta and couscous.



Estonians have never produced hard cheese as it is known in France, Switzerland or Holland. In the Middle Ages, however, cheese was made by the coastal Swedes inhabiting the westerns shores of Estonia, who also paid their taxes with cheese. In the areas of south-eastern Estonia bordering Russia, people have been making relatively hard, albeit rather quickly produced, cottage cheese with caraway seeds called 'sõir'. The first cured hard cheese was primarily introduced in Estonia by German lords of the manor and wealthy urban citizens.

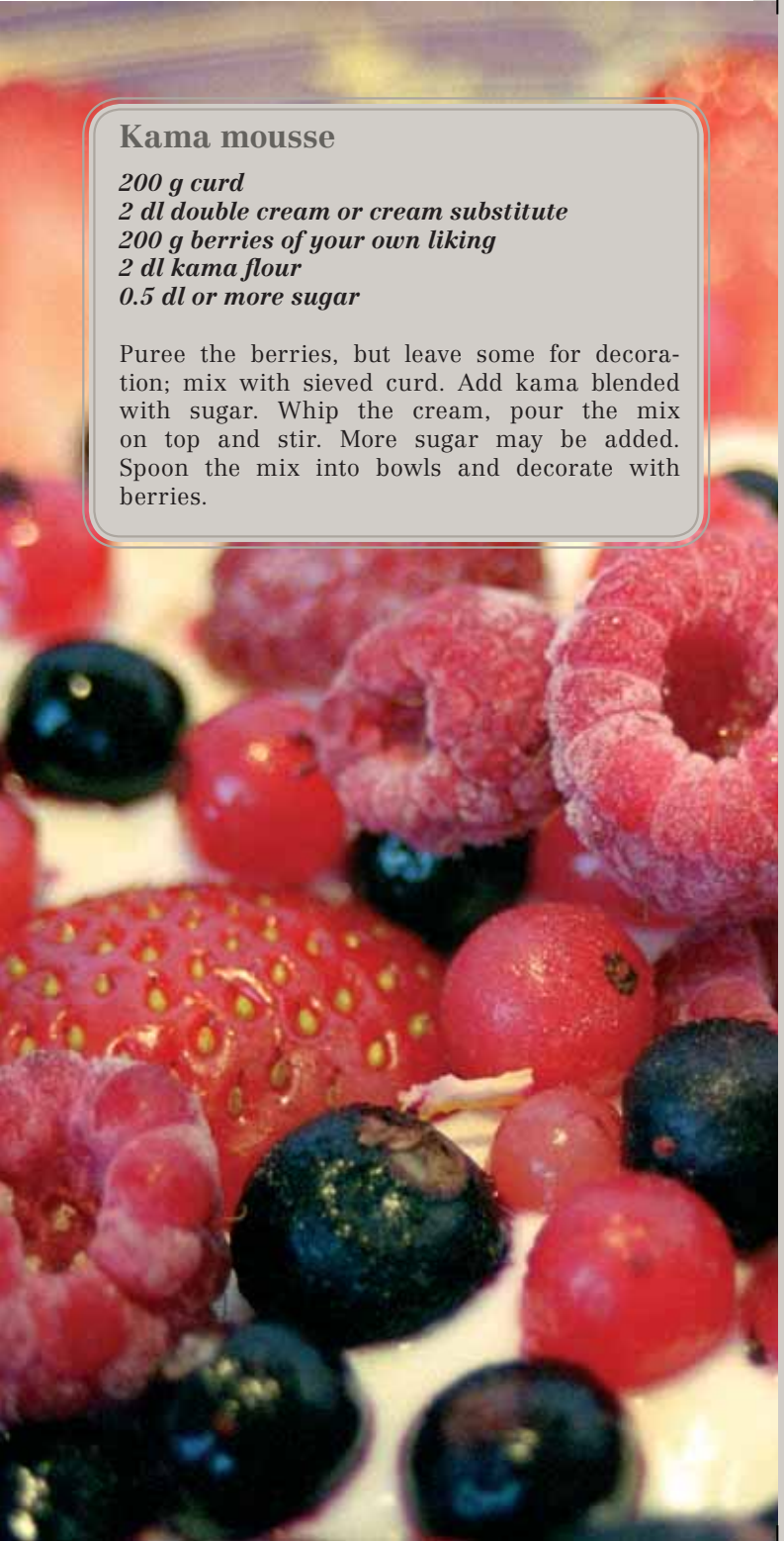
Soured milk drinks, curd or quark in its most primitive form have always enjoyed great popularity among the Estonians. The latter evidently initially came from the German cuisine; it arrived in St Petersburg together with Empress Catherine, and from there travelled to Estonia and to Finland during the 18th century.

The previously meagre Christmas meal became more plentiful at the end of the 1930s, and has not changed much since then. Financial constraints or weight-watching do not really matter as a proper Christmas table must groan under generous portions of brawn, roast pork or goose, roast potatoes, sauerkraut and black pudding, apples, tangerines, chocolate, nuts, and gingerbread. Even if a family with children buys everything necessary from the shops, gingerbread is made at home out of the pure joy of the whole process.

The New Year therefore usually starts with a serious culinary hangover and deep regrets, sometimes followed by a few weeks of rigorous weight watching. During the subsequent eleven months, all that will be conveniently forgotten and everything is repeated again over the next Christmas period. After all, Christmas is the only time when 'bon appetit' is more appropriate than 'may your bread last'!

The tradition of eating pea soup and trotters on Shrove Tuesday and goose on St Martin's Day has mostly survived in rural areas. For an urban citizen of several generations, maintaining old customs now simply entails buying a box of Shrove buns topped with whipped cream at the nearest café.

Easter is celebrated together with the arrival of spring; people paint eggs in bright colours and give them to one another, whereas the more enterprising make pasha.



Kama mousse

200 g curd
2 dl double cream or cream substitute
200 g berries of your own liking
2 dl kama flour
0.5 dl or more sugar

Puree the berries, but leave some for decoration; mix with sieved curd. Add kama blended with sugar. Whip the cream, pour the mix on top and stir. More sugar may be added. Spoon the mix into bowls and decorate with berries.

Eating preferences of wealthier Estonians are not so drastically different as might be considered. Variations emerge elsewhere. The group, mostly in their early middle age, eats lunch at a reasonably priced restaurant in the vicinity of their office. Dinner is often purchased at the supermarket delicatessen counter. Tinned meals? The choice here too has grown enormously in the past years.
Talking about long-term national eating habits, these are mostly followed on folk calendar holidays, the most significant being the pagan 'jõul' (Nordic Jul, Old English Yule), celebrated long before the arrival of Christianity.

There are no fixed times for meals in Estonia today. Breakfast is usually eaten at home before going to work. There are two main breakfast traditions: half the population drinks coffee with milk and eats open sandwiches with ham, hard cheese or fish, the other half prefers porridge or muesli with milk. After midday it is time for a light snack. Lunch is often altogether neglected. A family meets for a joint meal only over the weekend, and sometimes not even then.

The new trend in the eating habits of Estonians is by no means only limited to new food products and spices. The innovations that shook the whole society caused powerful undercurrents that have elevated eating, once serving merely the physiological needs satisfied within the four walls of home, to the focus of keen public interest. Every self-respecting newspaper or journal has a food column, every slightly lengthier interview examines the respondent's relationship to the food that (s)he eats. Cafés, restaurants and specialist food shops are regularly reviewed, compared and assessed, all of which benefits the knowledge Estonians now have about cuisine.

Estonian *gourmet*

Eating out has not (so far) been an essential part in the culture of communicating between people in Estonia. The reason is not so much the level of prices, but rather the lack of tradition. Food has always been for nurturing the body and not the soul: friends meet up in cafés or pubs. Food is not generally a topic of conversation, and praising the meal can be embarrassing, even to the waiter. There is, however, ample cause to praise food in restaurants, as some offer an enjoyable meal at a very high level. An interest in eating is further encouraged by TV cooking programmes and a wide range of cookery books.

Besides following international trends and getting to know new flavours the Estonian restaurant culture seems at first glance to proceed the other way round – professional chefs are busy creating a national *gourmet* cuisine. Both areas of activity moreover involve the same people.

There are chefs who insist that the Estonian restaurant *gourmet* should only use local seasonal raw material, but apply the methods and technology of classical French cuisine in the kitchen. Aficionados of national *gourmet* cuisine support the principle that national cuisine and eating traditions are the most precious treasures of a small nation, and must be appreciated accordingly.

To promote their work and to establish better relations with other countries, the more active chefs founded the Estonian Chefs' Association in 2000.

Competitions such as *Approved Estonian Taste* and *The Best Estonian Product* always attract a large number of participants. In addition to the usual new products, a few years ago the latter introduced the competition of functional, i.e. healthy products and then products that follow national traditions.

Stuffed chicken wings with delicate pumpkin-horseradish cream

4 chicken half-wings
120 g dark chicken meat
40 g carrot-onion mix
30 ml crème fraîche or double cream
40 g smoked bacon
salt and pepper, garlic

Bone the wings but keep the shoulder bones. Stuff cavity with paté-mix, made from the minced meat, the cream and the vegetables, fried with the bacon and seasoned with salt, pepper, garlic and mushroom soy sauce. Bake in the oven at 180°.

Cream

200 g pickled pumpkin
200 g marinated horseradish
4 dl soured cream or crème fraîche
salt

Squeeze the horseradish completely dry, chop the pumpkin cubes with chef's knife. Whip the cream and fold gently with the horseradish; add the pumpkin mince. Season with salt.

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Tallinn sprats
Narva lamprey
Baltic herring rolls
Gulf of Finland
Baltic Sea
Tallinn
Rakvere
Narva
Rapla
Paide
Haapsalu
Jõgeva
Põltsamaa
Lake Peipsi
Onions from the coast of Lake Peipsi
Saaremaa smoked flounder
Vormsi
Hiiumaa
Muhu
Saaremaa
Kuressaare
Pärnu
Viljandi
Mulgimaa
Tartu
Võru
Valga
Kihnu
Bay of Liivi
Vortsjärv
RUSSIA
LATVIA
Fruitwine Põltsamaa Kuldne
Mulgi curd cakes
Dried Peipsi smelt
Blood sausage

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