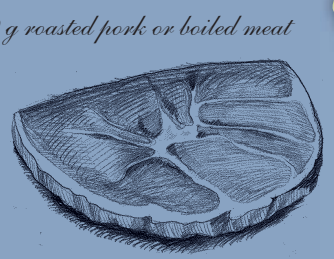
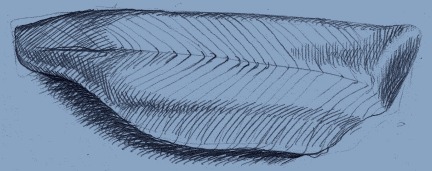
ESTONIAN CUISINE

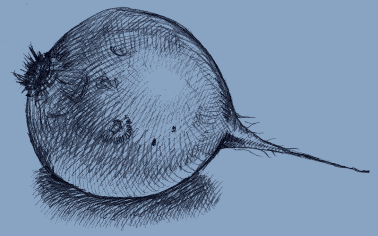




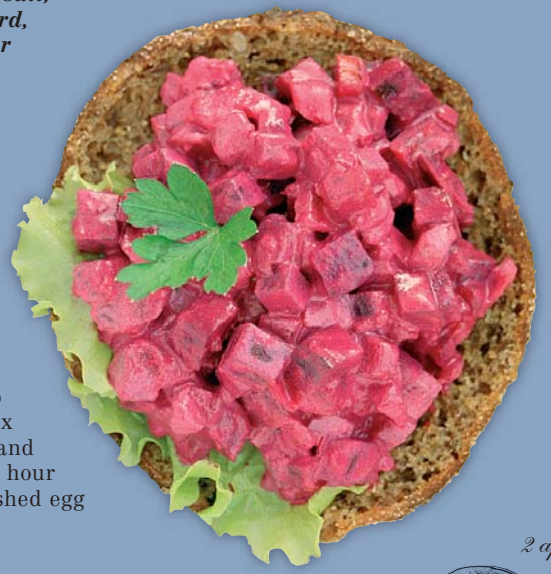
From the heyday of the Republic of Estonia in the 1930s until the late 1950s, no decent party in the country was held without beetroot salad. This fashionable dish was gradually replaced by potato salad that is much easier to prepare. Besides, the latter contains no herring, a fish not to everyone's 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

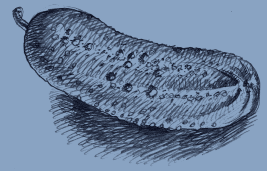
700 g boiled beetroot



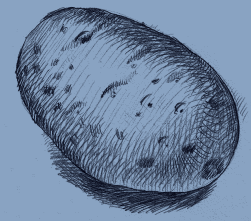
Dressing:
5 dl thick soured cream,
salt,
0.5 teaspoonfuls mustard,
a pinch of sugar



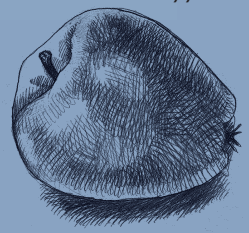
1–2 pickled cucumbers



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 crushed egg whites and yolks.

ESTONIAN CUISINE

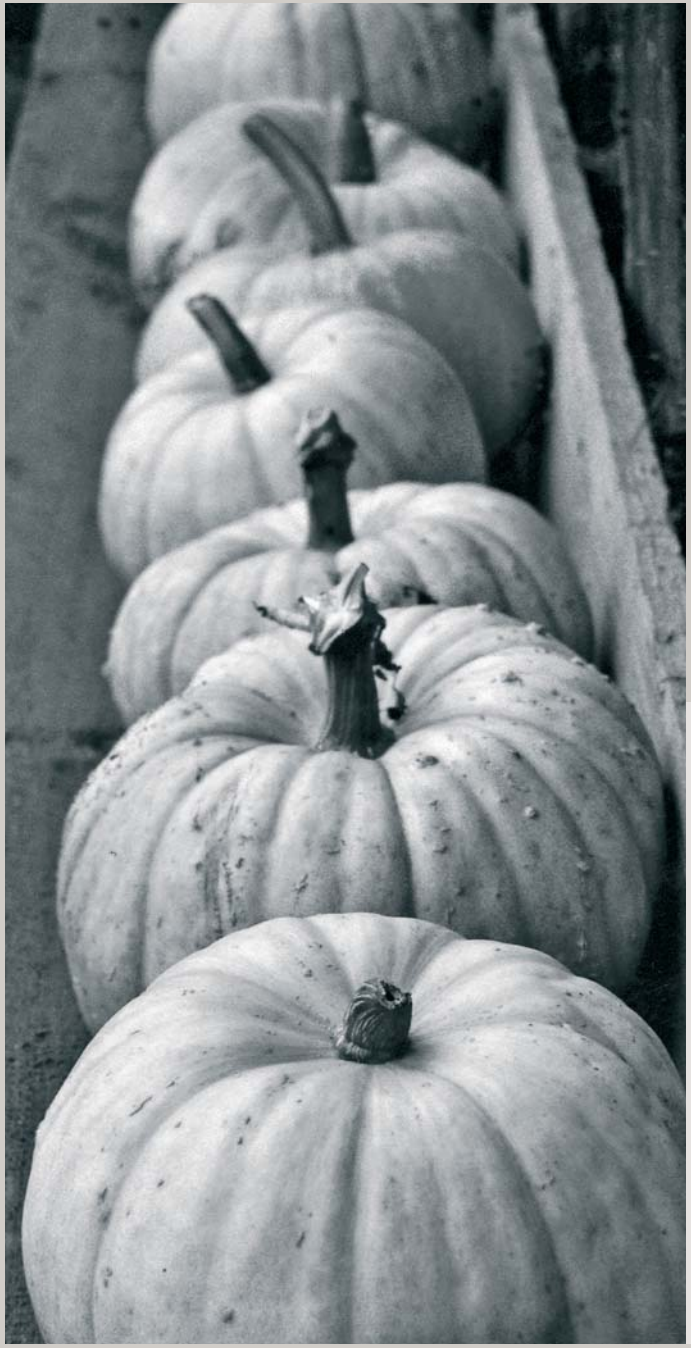
Chicken-dumpling soup

1 whole chicken
water
1 onion – unpeeled
salt
10 grains of pepper
5 potatoes
3 carrots
freshly chopped herbs (parsley, dill, chive)
butter for frying

Dumplings:
100 ml broth
1 egg
0.5 teaspoons salt
100 g 20% sour cream
2 dl flour

Put the chicken into cold water, bring to a boil. Remove froth. Add salt, pepper and unpeeled onion. Allow to simmer for an hour or an hour and a half, until the chicken is soft. Remove the chicken and the onion. Scoop out a ladle of fatty broth for dumplings from the surface. Roast carrot rings in a hot pan. Bring the broth to a boil again, add carrot rings and 5 min later chopped potatoes. Make dumplings: whip an egg into slightly cooled broth, add sour cream, flour and salt. Heat up two spoons in the broth, scoop some dough on one spoon and with the other one push the dough into the broth. The soup is ready when the dumplings rise to the surface. Fry the chicken in butter until brown, place on the table on a platter or slice into the soup when serving. Add plenty of herbs.

The most popular drink in Estonia was light malt ale (*kali*), and birch sap in spring. Beer (*õlu*) was the traditional beverage on festive occasions, having displaced mead (*mõdu*), its ancient rival brewed from honey. Beer brewing, especially on our larger islands, has always been a serious and important undertaking. 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 due to 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.

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.

Fried Baltic herring

0.5 kg cleaned (gutted) fresh Baltic herring or fillets
1 egg
1 tablespoon milk
1 dl rye or wheat flour
0.5 teaspoons salt
cooking oil

If you use filleted herring, it might end up too thin and dry after frying. For a more juicy result, press the two halves, before coating, back into a whole fish, skin-side up. Various stuffings can be used, for example chopped dill and chives. Beat the egg, mix with milk and salt. Dip the herring in egg, then coat in flour and fry in oil until golden brown. Fried Baltic herring tastes equally wonderful hot or cold, as well as marinated:

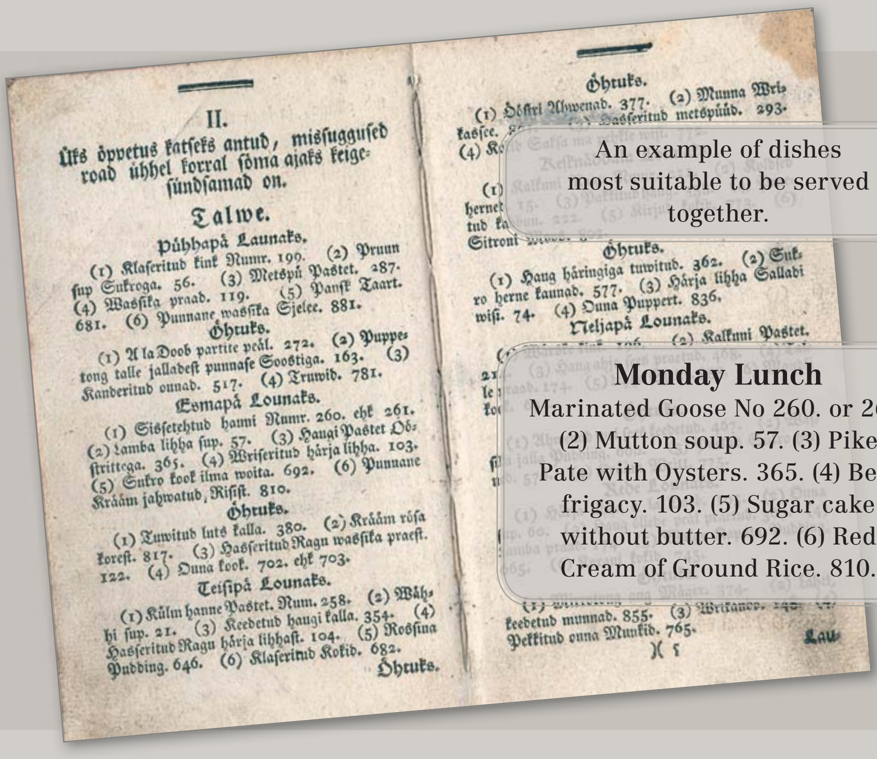
3 dl water
1 tablespoon 30% vinegar
(or 5 tablespoon lemon juice or white wine vinegar)
1 teaspoon sugar
0.5 teaspoon salt
5 grains of pepper
5 grains of allspice
(5 grains of clove)
1 carrot
2 small red onions

Boil carrot and onion rings with salt and sugar in flavoured water until soft, add spices and vinegar. Allow to cool. Pour marinade on the fried herring; it takes 24 hours in a cool place for the spices to acquire their full flavour.

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 katseks antud, missuggused road ühhel korral söma ajaks keige-sündsamad on.

Talwe.

Pühhapä Launaks.

(1) Klaseritud kink Numr. 199. (2) Pruun sup Sukroga. 56. (3) Metspü Pastet. 287. (4) Wassika praad. 119. (5) Pansk Taart. 681. (6) Punnane wassika Sjelee. 881.

Öhtuks.

(1) A la Doob partite peäl. 272. (2) Puppe-tong talle jalladest punnase Soostiga. 163. (3) Kanderitud ounad. 517. (4) Truwid. 781.

Esmapä Lounaks.

(1) Sissetehtud hani Numr. 260. ehk 261. (2) Lamba lihha sup. 57. (3) Haugi Pastet Ös-strittega. 365. (4) Wriseritud härja lihha. 103. (5) Sukro kook ilma woita. 692. (6) Punnane Kräám jahwatud, Risist. 810.

Öhtuks.

(1) Tuwitud luts kalla. 380. (2) Kräám rösa koreſt. 817. (3) Hasseritud Ragu wassika praest. 122. (4) Ouna kook. 702. ehk 703.

Teisipä Lounaks.

(1) Külm hanne Pastet. Num. 258. (2) Wäh-hi sup. 21. (3) Keedetud haugi kalla. 354. (4) Hasseritud Ragu härja lihhast. 104. (5) Rossina Pudding. 646. (6) Klaseritud Kokid. 682.

Öhtuks.

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, having replaced turnips, and began to compete with pearl barley porridge. It competed so successfully that by the beginning of the 20th century it had become one of the main field crops. 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.

Roast pork

2 kg pork shoulder with rind
salt
pepper

Pre-heat the oven to 250 degrees. Rub salt and pepper into the meat and place it, with the rind down, in a baking dish with high edges, only slightly bigger than the piece of meat. Pour in a few cm of boiling water. Place the dish on the bottom of the oven for 10 minutes. Take it out, turn the rind up. Cut the softened rind and the fatty layer underneath into a few cm deep squares, sprinkle salt into the gaps. Roast in the middle of the oven for about 30 min, if necessary, add more boiling water to the dish. Turn down the heat to 160 degrees, pour the juice in the dish over the meat. Roast for another 1.5 hours. If the rind gets too crispy it should be covered with foil. The meat is done when the inner temperature is at least 72°C. The roast is traditionally served with potatoes, stewed sauerkraut, cowberry jam, pickled pumpkin and gravy.

The roast is much improved if made in a wood-burning kitchen stove, as it produces a different kind of crispness and taste.

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 customs and prophesies

Respect bread;
bread is older than we are.

The bread loaf was placed on the table near the master of the household, as he was the one to hand out bread to the family.

The loaf was never placed with the cut end towards the door, to prevent it from leaving the house.

A new loaf of bread was never started in the evening, because it was thought that evening bread shrank, whereas morning bread grew.

If a girl swept bread crumbs from the table to the floor, she was in danger of becoming a spinster.

If you dropped bread on the floor, you had to kiss it.

Kama

Besides black bread, kama flour is another staple that Estonians living abroad miss. It is made of roasted cereal grains and legumes: wheat, rye, barley, oats, dried peas and beans. The ground flour is mixed into curdled milk. Kama is a summer food, which people used to take along during haymaking; today it is a perfect light snack in hot weather. Chefs produce gourmet dishes and desserts from kama, and they are offered at state receptions.

2 dl curdled milk or kefir
(or unflavoured yogurt)
2-3 tablespoons kama flour
2 teaspoons sugar or honey
(fresh or frozen wild berries)

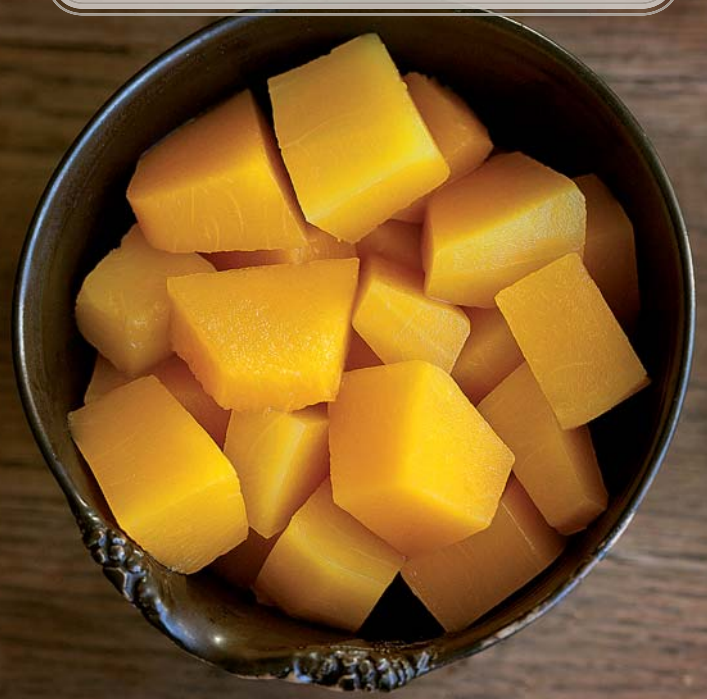
If you have berries, pour sugar or honey on them and crush lightly with a fork. Add curdled milk and kama flour, mix.

Pickled pumpkin

2 kg peeled and chopped pumpkin
1 l water
5 tablespoons 30% vinegar
0.5 kg sugar
8 whole cloves
8 grains of allspice
1 cinnamon stick

Dissolve sugar in boiling water, add spices in a small gauze bag, and let it simmer for 5 min. Remove the spice bag, measure the vinegar and add pumpkin. It may seem that there is not enough liquid, but the pumpkin releases a lot of juice. Boil for a few minutes, occasionally stirring with a skimmer to raise the pieces on the bottom to the surface. Pumpkin is ready when it is a bit soft, slightly crunchy, but not mushy. Ladle the pumpkin pieces into heated jars, pour in marinade and close the jars.

If you do not intend to keep the pumpkin for a very long time, try the milder version, using half the amount of vinegar and sugar.



"Beetroot."
Johannes Heimoja, 2013

In the course of 20-odd years since regaining independence, Estonian cuisine has undergone intoxication and enthusiasm for everything that was missing during half a century of closed borders, as well as a subsequent sobering-up period. Today we are happy to say that Estonian cuisine has rediscovered itself, relying on the experience of previous generations and the solid foundation established by them.

In parallel with accepting international food trends and tastes, professional chefs in our restaurant culture are busy creating national gourmet cuisine.

Estonian food has traditionally been strongly influenced by German and Russian cuisine – quite a number of popular dishes come from them – whereas now Estonia associates itself more with Nordic cooking. We have wholeheartedly welcomed the ideas of the New Nordic Cuisine, i.e. food should be pure, fresh, simple and reflect the changing of the seasons, raw materials should be typical of our climate and landscape, although the traditional can always be enriched by suitable foreign flavours, and the good taste of food should be in accordance with contemporary views of health and well-being.

Delicacy from Peeter Pihel's collection "Autumn leaves", 2012.

Restaurant Alexander on Muhu Island

Despite being quite pricey, organic products are increasingly in demand. Many people in Estonia have summer cottages with orchards and vegetable patches; their strong common sense rejects any usage of chemicals and they thus enjoy a lot of uncertified organic produce.

Modern restaurants pursue ever closer ties with local small and organic producers. Ideally, foods should move "from local producers straight to the table".

Estonian schools and kindergartens have always offered decent hot meals, although in recent years more effort has been made to make them healthier and more diverse. Some schools have initiated pilot projects that enable them to use the products of local small farmers and organic foods.

A major challenge is the participation of Estonian chefs at the competition Bocuse d'Or, known as the Culinary Olympics.

In January 2014 Estonia will, for the first time, take part as a partner country in Berlin's Grüne Woche, the largest food and agricultural fair in the world. This means organising the opening ceremony of the fair and its cultural programme for about 5000 guests. The menu for the meal following the opening will be compiled by the Association of Estonian Chefs.

Cooks also compete in Estonia. Every year, the best cookery book, chef, baker etc. are selected. The 50 best places to eat in the country are nominated, which is naturally quite an accolade for the places selected.

Various contests are organised for food producers as well, where awards are given in the categories "Acclaimed Estonian Taste" and "Best Estonian Food Product".

Fascination with everything concerning food has increased enormously. Hundreds of cookery books are published, as well as food magazines. Extensive food portals, such as Nami-Nami and Toidutare, and about a hundred acknowledged active hobby chefs-food bloggers are attracting lively attention. Quite a few of them reside outside Estonia, either temporarily or permanently, and share via blogging and photographs the peculiarities of local cuisine. For years, Estonian food has been introduced in English at www.nami-nami.blogspot.com.

Masters at work: Roman Žaštšerinski and his team.

Semolina mousse

1 l water
1.5 dl semolina
sugar according to taste
2 dl (frozen) berries (cranberries, blueberries, black or red currants)

Bring water to a boil, slowly whip in semolina, add sugar. Simmer on low heat for 10 min. Crush berries, add to the boiling mixture. Let cool and whip into a dense and fluffy mousse, spoon immediately into dessert dishes and allow to cool properly. Serve with cold milk.

If you wish to make the mousse from juice, take:

2 dl strong juice (e.g. cranberry or black currant juice)
8 dl water
1.5 dl semolina
sugar according to taste

Add the juice to the water at the start and bring to a boil.

Make sure you try rhubarb semolina mousse!

5 dl pieces of rhubarb
9 dl water
1.5 dl semolina
1.5 dl sugar

Add rhubarb pieces to water at the start and bring to a boil.

The food industry has started providing "nostalgia products": ice cream, curd snacks and various types of sausages made according to Soviet-era recipes without any preservatives. Trying to comply with consumers' wishes, meat producers have reduced the amount of salt, synthetic colouring agents, preservatives and taste enhancers. After a campaign started by the Estonian First Lady, the confectionary factory Kalev totally abandoned trans fats, and reduced, as much as possible, the levels of sugar and synthetic colouring.

Curd snack: a cult delicacy, dating from the Soviet era, is still produced today.

For about one thousand years, black fermented rye has been an essential feature of Estonian culture and identity, as well as being a food staple. Porridge excepted, all other food was traditionally called "leivakõrvane", i.e. a side dish to bread, and not the other way round. Only one hundred years ago an Estonian farmer acquired more than half of his daily energy consumption and most of the necessary nutrients from bread. There is a saying in Estonia that hard work is afraid of men who have eaten bread.

In rural areas, every family used to bake their own bread. A large batch was produced at one go, as leavened rye bread stayed soft for several weeks. Today's shops offer a huge variety of bread, over one hundred brands, although for a regrettably long time bread made from white flour has dominated. Estonians' craving for white bread originates from the time when peasants could only afford rye bread, whereas the manor lords and burghers ate white bread. However, thanks to the increasing awareness of a healthy lifestyle in the new millennium, people are more appreciative of products made from wholemeal and rye. The army of people who make rye bread at home is growing at a pleasing rate.

In the dairy department in shops, nothing can shake the consumer's faith in the superior quality of local products. Recently, two of the best selling products have been unpasteurised farm milk and organic milk sold via special vending machines. Kefir with probiotic cultures and fruity fermented milk drinks are also much in favour. Yogurts, with a variety of fruits added, contain living bacteria, and their storage life has not been extended by heating. The newest trends include reduced sugar and increased amounts of natural additives, plus the "clean label", which guarantees a minimal amount, or total absence, of artificial substances. Traditional curds and cottage cheese, and various types of curd cheese pastas and creams continue to be strong favourites.

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 southeastern 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.

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.

Baked apples

8 (slightly sour) apples
50 gr sultanas, slightly crushed hazelnuts and/or almonds
1 tablespoon sugar (or 2 tbl brown sugar)
2 teaspoons cinnamon
butter

Pre-heat the oven to 200°C. Remove the cores from the washed apples but leave their bases intact. Mix sultanas, hazelnuts, sugar and cinnamon. Place apples in a buttered baking dish. Fill the holes with the sultana mixture. Depending on the variety, bake 25-40 min, until the apples are soft. Serve with cream or vanilla ice cream.

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