

THE FOOD CULTURE OF ESTONIAN STAROVERY (OLD BELIEVERS): TRADITIONS AND THE PRESENT

Igaunijas vecticībnieku kulinārā kultūra: tradīcijas un mūsdienas

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Abstract. *The Russian Starovery are a time-honoured minority in Estonia, having migrated to the western coast of Lake Peipsi from central Russia at the end of the 17th century. The Russian Starovery subsisted mainly on fishing the lakes of Peipsi, Võrtsjärv, Viljandi, and Ladoga, as well as the Gulf of Riga. Besides, they grew chicory, cucumbers, and onions on their small garden plots and worked as masons in Estonian towns and rural areas. During the Soviet era, the Old Believers sold most of their home-grown vegetables to Russia, mainly Leningrad (Petersburg). After Estonia regained independence, the Union of the Estonian Old Believers' Congregations was also restored in 1995, and in the new economic situation the Old Believers began to look for new ways of earning a living. In addition to road-villages, museums of local history, and chapels, the fish and onion restaurant opened at Kolkja in 1999 has become a central attraction for tourists, allowing them to get acquainted with the Old Believers' daily culture, including food culture.*

The author analyzes self-representation and entrance of the Russian Starovery into re-independent Estonia through food culture, dwelling on theoretical presumption that food-culture and eating is an intergral part of human culture. The basis for generalisations is gathering of heritage related to food culture from the Russian Starovery, as well as printed materials and websites where they introduce themselves through food culture.

It is indeed noteworthy that the Starovery's villages along Lake Peipsi are advertised in media and tourism booklets primarily through their characteristic food culture, although the Old Believers' cuisine – regardless of the religious convictions that have shaped their eating habits – constitutes a mixture of both Estonian (and thereby also Baltic German) and Russian rural and urban food traditions.

Keywords: *starovery (Old Believers) in Estonia, food-culture, food-tourism; cultural heritage.*

Introduction

Eating is an integral part of human culture – an emotionally coloured activity influenced by the eating habits of both family and community, as well as by religious understandings. Although people can and partly do sustain themselves on uncooked food, they generally prepare food and use the consumption of specially prepared and served food and drink as typical markers of various social situations, as demonstrated by the fact that every customary practice nearly everywhere involves eating and/or drinking at some point, and the food and drink are never quite arbitrarily chosen (Leach, 2010: 127 - 128). Ethnologists have studied the social response to innovations in the diet and in preparation of food and arrived at the conclusion that food serves more than just the biological purpose. Interest – or the lack of it – in new foods and tastes can result from social structures (identity, frustration, social aspirations, cultural snobbism or anxiety). Eating can enable people to draw lines, to differentiate themselves from others. Those who eat similar foods are regarded as trustworthy, good, familiar and safe. Those who eat unusual foods rather arouse distrust, suspicion and even disgust (Scholliers, 2001).

Like any other cultural phenomenon, food culture is in constant flux and development. What used to be typical to some area before, need no longer be so today. In a globalising world, changes happen even more rapidly, and it is even more difficult to find time to think what it really is that we eat. In the industrialised societies, most people no longer grow their food themselves, nor do they know anyone who does. We encounter food packed into jars, boxes, sheathed in plastic. We see food as something passive, removed from its producers and natural context. We are already forced to teach our children that what we call food, comes from plants and animals. A person can get perfectly used to the idea of food as something that

simply “appears” in the shop (Meigs, 1997). In the welfare society, food has become cheap and insignificant – Maslow’s pyramid is turned upside down (Breuer, 2010). On the other hand, people are also becoming more aware of food nowadays, and they (again) esteem ecologically clean foods more highly. While in the 16th century Europe, it was new foods and tastes (like spices, coffee, tomatoes, etc) that were the privilege of the rich, nowadays fresh and ecologically clean food is seen as a privilege – something relatively costly and exclusive (Scholliers, 2007).

In the postmodern and multicultural world of today, food culture is part of both regional and national identity and cultural heritage; in other words, it is one of the practical ways of applying a country’s indigenous traditions and work procedures, but also a kind of entertainment, a way of spending free time together and communicating with each other.

Very broadly, the promotion of local traditional food serves three main, albeit closely intertwined purposes in modern society:

1. **Preserving and upholding of local eating traditions, and with or through them, the local way of life and identity, including customs and practices like festivals of church or folk calendar, family rituals.** From the point of view of valuing traditional food and eating traditions, joint preparation of food (the so-called rule of three generations; in case of bigger family feasts also the involvement of the community’s acclaimed cooks) and narration of stories about food and eating customs are important as well.
2. **Tourism.** A region’s history and peculiarity can be opened through food culture. The tastes of the local cuisine offer visitors the pleasure of discovery, including the possibility that some familiar-sounding dish may taste quite differently (like the Setus’ *taarikapsta* which has very little to do with cabbage [*kapsta*] as such), or a dish bearing quite a foreign name may taste very familiar (like the Starovery’s “cooked sugar”, which resembles the toffee “Lehmakomm” well known to us all). Frequently, the guests are also involved in the process of food preparation or given relevant recipes, booklets and other printed material. In this way, the techniques and procedures of food preparation are dispersed beyond the local community. The propagation of local food is also supported by theme days dedicated to specific foods, e.g. fish, milk or bread days. But it has also been observed that food tourism may have brought about a certain blurring of the line separating traditional everyday and festive meals (at folklore festivals or greater popular celebrations, for instance, visitors are offered a “cross section” of the more customary or exotic dishes traditionally associated with the alteration of festive and daily life in the yearly cycle; in restaurants serving national dishes, preference is given to the consumer’s taste – that is, only such dishes are ordered more frequently or can be taken away regardless of the quantity. Another factor playing a role in food tourism is season (the Setus’ *porovikupäiv* (boletus day); the Starovery’s onion and fish fairs, etc.). Thus, the linking of food with tourism may nowadays sometimes offer a remarkable opportunity for the development and diversification of products. Outside interest in the local products increases awareness and interest in the local population and enhances the community’s pride of their local peculiarities and culture (Wood, 2001).
3. **Employment.** Nowadays, those branches of economy that deal with food, colourful experiences, and tourism have an ever greater impact on the economy of rural areas. The local population grow foodstuffs necessary for their cuisine, sell it to the local tourism entrepreneurs, and/or themselves take active part in food-related tourism ventures (hotels, hostels), thus helping to preserve the local way of life. The use of local foodstuffs now gives a relative advantage to restaurants and various catering businesses, and the more they use local products and focus in their menus on local

peculiarities, the greater must be the amount and quality of local raw material that they need. Organic produce offering tourism has become increasingly popular in the world, with the presumption that the food is made of locally grown foodstuffs. Another opportunity for employment and self-realisation is opened up for the local people by arranging training courses and workshops on food culture.

The Traditional Food of Old Believers as Part of Their Cultural Heritage

The Russian Starovery are a time-honoured minority in Estonia, having migrated to the western coast of Lake Peipsi from central Russia at the end of the 17th century. They inhabited the strip of coastal land abandoned by locals, and founded two road-villages densely packed with houses, Mustvee and Kallaste, in the parishes of Torma and Kodavere respectively. The Russian Starovery subsisted mainly on fishing the lakes of Peipsi, Võrtsjärv, Viljandi, and Ladoga, as well as the Gulf of Riga; besides, they grew chicory, cucumbers and onions on their small garden plots and worked as masons in Estonian towns and rural areas. During the Soviet era, the Old Believers sold most of their home-grown vegetables to Russia, mainly Leningrad (Petersburg).

The human geographer Ott Kurs has regarded the 1950s as the best years for the economic and cultural development of the regions lying along Lake Peipsi, dating the beginning of decline with the abolition of local administrative units (rural regions) (Kurs, 2006). The point is that during the independent Estonian Republic (1918 - 1940), the Old Believers had not actually owned their land but only rented it from the state. Therefore the forced collectivisation of the Soviet period could not inflict very much harm on the region's economy.

Thanks to their religion, the Starovery remarkably were able to retain a strong social control over their economy, social life and life-style in Soviet times, and when the Estonians began to adapt to the Soviet system in the 1960s, the Old Believers on the coasts of Peipsi did not. In consequence, quite a few problems related to the Russians' drinking habits were blamed on the Old Believers and their long religious festivals which allegedly “caused delays in busy harvesting times” were bemoaned in the press. Neither were the Old Believers spared when cemeteries were ravaged under Soviet power – most of the small icons set in the crosses were destroyed.

Nowadays the food culture of the Estonian Starovery reflects their characteristic way of life and is also simultaneously a part of their religious identity. It is the strict observance of the rules of religious life that has supported and fostered the preservation of traditional eating habits among the Starovery.

Religious prohibitions concerning the choice of food are related to fasting – Wednesdays and Fridays are fasting days all the year round, when meat and milk products are avoided. *À propos* – modern medicine holds that meat-free days are quite beneficial and the ecclesiastical fasting habits appear to take into account the physiology of our digestive organs dating back to the faraway times when it often proved impossible for humans to find food every day.

In addition to the weekly days of fasting, the Old Believers' religious cycle of the year includes four more extensive fasts: the Great Fast lasting for seven weeks; the Christmas Fast of six weeks (from November 28 up to Christmas Eve, which after the old calendar falls on January 6); the Peter's Fast of six weeks (from Whitsunday to St. Peter's Day); and the two-week Dormition Fast (August 14 - 28). The strictest of them is the Great Fast when even fish is shunned. On fast days, the Old Believers' menu includes mushroom and vegetable soups with macaroni or groats added; cereal mushes made with water, half-liquid berry jellies or flummery, fruit soups (compotes), baked apples. Fish, prepared in all possible methods – cooked, fried, dried – is generally allowed throughout the fasts. Up to the middle of the 20th

century, the Old Believers fasted with the whole family, and the strict rules of eating and behaviour related to fasting were acquired already in childhood. The Old Believers' cuisine is characterised by special dishes prepared for various ecclesiastical and family festivals e.g. *pasha*, special kinds of bread.

The Old Believers' social life centres around the samovar, both in the family circle and when receiving guests. Special tableware (*mirskaya posuda*), washed and kept separately, was designated for guests. Tea is had at least thrice a day: “A little tea in the morning, tea at lunch, and in the evening – great tea-drinking”, the Old Believers say, and in almost every family there is a runner hung on the wall, with the words embroidered on it: “Drink tea and ward off sadness!” Tea is taken hot, with sugar, and several cups on end, and only after that food is brought to the table – fish dishes, buns and rolls, and biscuits (Kuvaitseva, 2010).

Although one of the Old Believers' main sources of sustenance has been fishing in Lake Peipsi and even further, alongside with fish, the other mainstay of their diet has been grain, which, though not grown locally, was either exchanged for fish or bought from Estonians at the market. In Soviet times, grain could also be a payment for work done at the collective farm.

An important place in the Old Believers' menu was and is occupied by potatoes and vegetables: Swedish turnips (*ka'lika*; cf. Estonian *kaalikas*); carrots (*borkanj*; cf. Est. *porgand*)¹, cucumbers, onions, and tomatoes. The Old Believers grew these vegetables themselves, in small plots of land left for private use by the Soviet system, and during the Soviet era the produce was largely sold into Russia – mainly into Pihkva and Leningrad (Petersburg). This recent past is also reflected in the locals' reminiscences: “весь Питер кормился причудскими овощами. Один знающий человек сказал нам: в советские времена жили тут сплошные миллионеры. Смешно, конечно: миллионер, с весны до осени копающийся в земле и навозе.” (Русская Эстония, 2003). [The vegetables grown by the Old Believers fed all of St. Petersburg. Some knowledgeable person told us that in Soviet times, these parts were inhabited by onion millionaires. This is ridiculous, of course: a millionaire grubbing in dirt and manure from spring through autumn!]

The Old Believers' diet was also enriched with mushrooms and forest berries. Unlike Estonians, the Old Believers picked cranberries not only in the autumn but also in spring. The food was flavoured with various oils of different taste, like hemp, nut and custard oils and, in later times, also sunflower oil, as well as various spices (Kuvaitseva, 2010).

The food was cooked in a Russian oven which was used for cooking, baking, and frying. Special skills were required for preparing food in such an oven, therefore girls were allowed to gradually begin to participate in cooking only at the age of 13 - 15.

At the table, people were seated according to an established hierarchical order. Since men spent much of their time away from home as migrant workers – doing either fishing or building jobs – the mistress of the house acted as the head of the family at the table: she cut bread and meat for everyone with her own hand. The whole family gathered around a common table only on great festival occasions or, in winter, on Sundays. A religious attitude towards food was inculcated in children from an early age – soon after weaning, toddlers began to eat the same food as the grownups did, and were strictly disciplined to behave themselves at the table – no laughing or leg-swinging was allowed during the meals. When a piece of bread was accidentally dropped, the culprit had to pick it up and kiss it in apology.

The Old Believers think that their good health and long age, as compared to those of the Estonians, result from the predominance of fish and vegetables in their diet, whereas the Estonians prefer meat dishes and don't very much care for fasting. Yet the Estonian traditional cuisine has left its traces on the Old Believers' food culture. For instance, the latter

¹ It deserves notice that the names of several vegetables have been borrowed into the Starovery's idiom from the Estonian language.

have learned from the Estonians to add cubes of fried bacon into their soups, to prepare white thick sauce (with flour) and milk soup with vegetables, bake biscuits and cakes to accompany the tea, and make semolina cream for dessert (the name of this dish is also adapted from Estonian). On some occasions, the prohibition of using blood for food has been broken and both black pudding and *verikjakk* (blood-mixed dumplings) have been made following the Estonian example. The names of both the dishes are also borrowed from Estonian.

From the 1930s onwards, innovations spread into the Old Believers' kitchen, too. Food began to be prepared on a stove. This innovation enabled to prepare food in smaller quantities, entailing a more precise quantifying of the ingredients in recipes – something unknown to the old Russian cuisine. Many girls took courses in cooking, learning to prepare “townish” dishes and serve cutlets, patés, fish in tomato sauce, salads of pickled pumpkin and beetroot, and vinaigrettes for festive meals, as well as to make preserves. During the Soviet era, more products, such as rye and wheat bread, groats, pasta, and milk and pastry products were bought in the shop. Many traditional recipes fell into oblivion and the traditional Russian oven was replaced by a (gas) stove.

After Estonia regained independence, the Old Believers' commercial ties with Russia were broken and the demand for their locally grown vegetables decreased in Estonia, too, leading to a negative impact both on the employment rates and the local way of life as a whole.

The Starovery, Tourism, and Employment at Present

After Estonia regained independence, the Union of the Estonian Old Believers' Congregations was also restored, in 1995, and in the new economic situation the Old Believers began to look for new ways of earning a living. In addition to road-villages, museums of local history, and chapels, a fish and onion restaurant opened at Kolkja in 1999 has become a central attraction for tourists, allowing them to get acquainted with the Old Believers' daily culture, including food culture.

From then on, the Estonians' interest in the Old Believers' culture and way of life has been rising, too. The Old Believers' characteristic road-villages with farmhouses lined up along both sides of the street, their winter races of *karakatitsas* (self-built vehicles for driving on the ice of Lake Peipsi), their fish and onion fairs, etc., have become tourist magnets both home and abroad.

In recent years, the Old Believers have found that tourism industry allows them to earn a living while still preserving their traditional way of life. A fish and onion restaurant serving traditional Old Believers' food has been opened to tourists at Kolkja. Exclusive caterers emphasizing the local peculiarities have become part of the modern place marketing (see such home pages as: <http://www.hot.ee/kolkjarestoran/>;

<http://www.eestimaitseid.com/est/restoranid/year-2010/id-94/Kolkja-kala-ja-sibul-on-k%C3%B5ik-mida-eluks-vaja->; <http://www.visittartu.com/583?org=13021&l=13039>; etc.);

but information on such interesting eateries is also spread through informal channels, such as blogs: *Right at the beginning of the trip, we set our mind on visiting the fish and onion restaurant at Kolkja on our way back. Since we headed back from Haudamäe through Tartu, where we made a short stopover, and from there we had to take a round - about to Kolkja heading first for Jõhvi, our journey along uninhabited paths (i.e., roads lacking both asphalt cover and sauna ads) proved a real Col(gotha)kja path. But upon arrival, the destination proved worthy of all our sufferings. The atmosphere was genuine, the waiter was kind and the food really delicious. We had pikeperch variously prepared (breaded, stuffed in large pancakes [Russian: blin], with pilaf, and pikeperch à la Czar); Indrek resolutely ordered onion salad and praised it saying he had never before eaten onion so well prepared and sweet; Riin still found space for sweet pancakes and I feasted on the Old Believers' pie, while*

Rika almost single-handedly dealt with a whole bowlful of “cooked sugar” pieces to go with her herbal tea. A very yummiie place, definitely one to be visited again!

(<http://liinalood.blogspot.com/2010/08/setod-sibulad-ja-soiduroom.html>, 25.10. 2011).

The culture and food of the Old Believers is introduced by the network of tourism service providers along the shores of Lake Peipsi, the Onion Route (<http://www.sibulatee.ee/>), which aims at “introducing this mystical and multicultural region, the coastal areas of Lake Peipsi”. Among the services offered to tourists there is a food package of the Peipsi area, where visitors can themselves participate in preparing local dishes (<http://www.sibulatee.ee/peipsimaa-toidud-pakett/>; 25.10. 2011).

The Old Believers’ food culture is also introduced and (re)vitalised through the folklore movement. Marina Kuvaitseva, a researcher of the Narva Museum, has written a book discussing the Old Believers’ food culture based on authentic material collected from local people, and organised an exhibition introducing the Old Believers’ food culture (<http://www.kultuur.info/syndmus/eesti-vanausuliste-toidukultuur-521/>; 25. 10. 2011).

The national “Cultural programme of the Peipsi area, 2009 – 2011”, financed by the Ministry of Culture and aiming at preserving a vigorous cultural space in the coastal villages along Lake Peipsi, and those of the Old Believers’ in particular, helps to maintain the local way of life. This programme is intended to help preserve, restore, and develop the mental and material cultural heritage of the areas around Lake Peipsi and to increase the number of people participating in the local culture, particularly by connecting the younger generation with the language and cultural heritage of their ancestors (<http://www.kul.ee/index.php?path=0x214x1492>; 25.10. 2011).

Conclusion

It is indeed noteworthy that the Staroverý’s villages along Lake Peipsi are advertised in media and tourism booklets primarily through their characteristic food culture, although the Old Believers’ cuisine – regardless of the religious convictions that have shaped their eating habits – constitutes a mixture of both Estonian, and thereby also Baltic German, and Russian rural and urban food traditions.

To date, two books introducing the food culture of the Old Believers have been published, one of them offering an insider view as it was: “Застолица: кухня староверов Эстонии. - Eesti vanausuliste köök” (2010) and “Peipsi veerel. Vanausulised paluvad lauda” (2011). The latter gives a survey of the Old Believers’ festive and daily dishes and the traditions associated with calendric and family occasions (baptisms, weddings, funerals). The book is based on information about the Old Believers’ food culture, collected on expeditions organised by the Narva Museum into the villages of Mustvee, Raja, Kükita, Tiheda, Kallaste, and Kolkja in the years 1999 – 2008.

Kopsavilkums. *Krievu vecticībnieki ir godā turēta minoritāte Igaunijā, kuri 17. gs. beigās emigrēja no Centrālās Krievijas uz Peipusa ezera rietumkrastu. Galvenais iztikas avots krievu vecticībniekiem bija zvejošana Peipusa, Vertsjerves, Viljandes un Lādogas ezeros, kā arī Rīgas jūras līcī; turklāt viņi audzēja cigoriņus, gurķus un sīpolus savos piemājas dārziņos un strādāja par mūrniekiem Igaunijas pilsētās un laukos. Padomju laikos vecticībnieki pārsvarā pārdeva savus mājās audzētos dārzeņus Krievijā, galvenokārt Ļeņingradā (Pēterburgā). Pēc Igaunijas neatkarības atgūšanas 1995. gadā tika atjaunota arī Igaunijas vecticībnieku draudžu apvienība, un jaunajā ekonomiskajā situācijā vecticībnieki sāka meklēt citus iztikas pelnīšanas veidus. Bez ceļmalu ciemiem, kultūrvēstures muzejiem un kapelām 1999. gadā Kolkjā tika atvērta zivju un sīpolu restorāns, kurš ir kļuvis par galveno tūristu piesaistes vietu, ļaujot viņiem iepazīt vecticībnieku sadzīves kultūru, tai skaitā arī uztura kultūru.*

Šajā rakstā tiek analizēts krievu vecticībnieku paštēls un iekļaušanās neatkarīgajā Igaunijā, izmantojot uztura kultūru, balstoties uz teorētisku pieņēmumu, ka uztura kultūra un ēšana ir cilvēces kultūras neatņemama sastāvdaļa. Vispārīnājumiem par pamatu kalpo no krievu vecticībniekiem iegūtais ar uztura kultūru saistītais mantojums, iespējamie materiāli un mājaslapas, kur viņi paši iepazīstina ar sevi, pārādot savu uztura kultūru.

Patiešām ir vērts paturēt prātā, ka vecticībnieku ciemati gar Peipusa ezera krastu tiek reklamēti masu mēdijos un tūristu brošūrās, galvenokārt parādot viņu tradicionālo uztura kultūru, kaut gan vecticībnieku kulinārija – par spīti reliģiskajai pārliecībai, ka viņi paši ir radījuši savus ēšanas paradumus – ietver gan igauņu (un tāpat arī Baltijas vācu), gan krievu pilsētas un lauku ēdiena gatavošanas tradīcijas.

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