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Slow food from

by: Lola Akinmade
Greta Huuva perks up as
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Slow-food expert Greta Huuva at restaurant Samernas in Jokkmokk. Foto: Lola Akinmade Åkerström

“First, you soak the dried reindeer meat for 24 hours, and then you boil it, add rice, some potatoes, herbs, cream – to make it a thicker soup,” Huuva explains, adjusting her rimmed glasses. Though she has called the Jokkmokk area home for more than 40 years, 61-year-old Huuva is a Sami elder who grew up in a small village (seven or eight houses) along the Sweden-Finland border in Tornedalen.

The Sami are an indigenous people of roughly 70,000 living in the Arctic and sub-Arctic areas of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and the Russian Kola peninsula (collectively known as the Sápmi region) with approximately 20,000 calling Swedish Lapland home. Once nomadic reindeer herders, the Sami still widely rely on reindeer meat, and tend to use every single part of the animal – meat and fat for cooking, fur and skin for clothing, horns for knives and tools.



Reindeer meat served up in wooden Sami bowl. Photo: Magnus Skoglöf

Multitasking in Sápmi

Fluent in Swedish, Finnish, and her native language, North Sami, Huuva also teaches traditional food culture at the Sami Education Center next door. Founded in 1942, the education center teaches reindeer husbandry, traditional handicrafts (*Duodji*), and cooking. In addition to her work with the restaurant and cooking courses, she has for the last six years been holding seminars in Sweden and abroad, teaching Sami's slow food culture and other sustainable indigenous traditions.

In 2009, Huuva was appointed Sami Food Ambassador by the Swedish Ministry for Rural Affairs, which wanted to globally spotlight regional foods from Sweden as part of a new Nordic Slow Food movement. “It was an honor because I've always loved to work with our culture and I try to lift it up,” she explains with a smile. “So others can get to know about our food.”



A serving of soup worth waiting for. Foto: Lola Akinmade Åkerström

The concept of slow food centers around three main principles – good, clean, and fair – good food enjoyed with the company of others, produced in a clean and eco-friendly way with fairness and respect to those responsible for making it.

A 406-year-old market

And it's only fitting that the theme for the 2011 Jokkmokk market was slow food, coming full circle back to a way of living the Sami have nurtured for centuries. For over 400 years, the Jokkmokk market has been a major meeting point for different Sami groups to trade and exchange goods. The three-day long market remains the largest Sami festival in the world, opening on the first Thursday of every February with outdoor activities, lectures, folk dances, reindeer races, dog sledding, traditional food, and *Duodji* artisans.

"Slow food has always been our daily food and we try to keep this lifestyle today," Huuva says. "It's really just about what you're eating from your surroundings and a respectful consciousness about it."



Greta Huuva prepares a meal in the outdoors. Photo: Magnus Skoglöf

As part of slow food culture, Huuva mentions making sure that reindeer are properly taken care of, moose have been free to roam around the forest, fish have been living in clean water, and the people who cultivate them get what they need and are taken care of.

Winter solutions

There aren't many vegetables in the Arctic and sub-Arctic regions of Sweden besides potatoes and a few roots like angelica and beet, so the Sami work with herbs, mushrooms, and berries, using every edible part of the reindeer as the base for most meals. It's this heavy mix of protein and fat that keeps the Sami body healthy and warm through cold winters. Reindeer fat is as good as olive oil, Huuva points out, and it has the same combination of omega-3 and omega-6, so it's used as an alternative to butter, margarine, and even milk in various dishes.



Sami food to keep you warm, and healthy. Photo: Lola Akinmade Åkerström

“In the winter, I just want a lot of reindeer meat, fish, and fat because of the long cold winters. My husband said he wished we had something green to eat,” Huuva mentions, highlighting the lack of natural vegetables in the region. “Oh, not now, I need the fat for the winter. Maybe in the summer, then I can have a green salad.”

Once Swedish Lapland’s dark harsh winter rolls around, you’ll find Huuva hibernating for 12 hours straight. “November is actually my resting month. When the snow comes, I just want to go like a bear and sleep 12 hours,” she says. “To survive these winters, you need to sleep a lot.”

Knowledge over generations

Huuva uses the angelica herb’s roots and seeds for cooking, its stalk for medicinal purposes, and its mildly sweet young stems for candy. Roughly 300-400 years ago, it wasn’t uncommon to see older Sami folk chewing angelica root to boost the immune system and protect them from diseases and bacteria.

This invaluable traditional knowledge is certainly worth preserving, and why Huuva strives to educate others. Working with her six grandchildren who live nearby is her way of ensuring this food culture is passed on within her immediate family.

“It was the elders who taught the children. My parents were very busy with reindeer herding so my grandma and grandpa, they taught me everything I know about the Sami culture,” she says. And these days her own grandchildren help pick flowers, herbs, and wild berries during the spring and summer, and assist her in the kitchen as well.

“I once had guests visiting from the south of Africa, representing indigenous groups from that region. I made my soup [*Torrköttsoppa*] for them, but I wasn’t sure if they would like it.”

Huuva’s guests had insisted on sampling traditional Sami food. After a while, they burst into the kitchen, exclaiming, “Oh, we love it. It tastes just like home.”

Just like home? Initially perplexed, Huuva soon learned that they made the exact same type of soup but with antelope meat, which had been dried for days in the sun. “Our cultures are a lot

more similar than we think.”

Related links

- [Huuva's Food Ambassador profile](#)
- [Viddernas Hus](#)
- [Angelica herb](#)
- [Jokkmokk Market](#)
- [Slow Food International](#)

This feature is also available in [Russian](#).



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