Culinary Traditions

Wandering the aisles of a supermarket in Reykjavík, the capital of Iceland, you could be almost anywhere in the western world. Products associated with familiar trends and fads are everywhere to be seen, from Italian virgin olive oil, to Tex-Mex salsa, to sushi kits. Even the occasional microwave dinner can be found, though thankfully these do not (yet) form an integral part of the Icelander’s diet.

Unlike most European countries, Iceland does not have a distinct national cuisine. In fact, a general interest in cooking and food as pleasure and not simply nutrition emerged only in the latter half of the twentieth century. A windswept island in the Atlantic Ocean, just south of the Arctic Circle, Iceland has a harsh climate. The island has been inhabited since the ninth century, but it was not until modern technology brought rapid travel and central heating that it became truly habitable (although during the dark, cold winter some might argue with this). During the Middle Ages, and up to the nineteenth century, life in Iceland was mainly about survival. The populace was poor, and although the Danish colonial masters were, in retrospect, rather benign, the living conditions did not inspire much culinary experimentation. Fruits and vegetables cannot be cultivated, with the exception of a few basic varieties like potatoes. And although picking berries (especially blueberries) is a popular autumn pastime, the general public is not aware of wild delicacies like thyme and chanterelles and cèpes.

What Iceland has always had, and what still constitutes its livelihood, is one of the most fertile fishing grounds in the world. Tempered by the warm Gulf Stream, the ocean surrounding Iceland brims with everything from cod and haddock to majestic whales. And even if Iceland’s heaths are not suitable for olive groves or vineyards, they provide perfect grazing for the herds of sheep that still wander freely all summer long before being brought to slaughter.

Until refrigeration became widespread, Icelanders improvised to prevent their food from decaying. One popular method was to marinate the meat and fat of sheep and whales in lactic acid. Although this process does not preserve freshness or make the meat more appealing, at least it keeps the food from spoiling. Thrifty households used every part of the lamb, and today it is still quite common to happen upon svið, the heads of sheep sawn in half and charred under a high flame. But other once-popular delicacies have disappeared, such as the sheep’s brains that were eaten plain or mixed with flour into cakes and boiled.

As the population became more prosperous and contact with other countries increased, culinary habits changed. Until the middle of the twentieth century, Icelanders generally tried to replicate the eating habits of the Danes who ruled Iceland until 1918 (the final secession from Denmark took place only in 1944). Imitating the Danes was a mark of cultivation for the emerging Icelandic bourgeoisie, which set them apart from their peasant brethren. Thus pork roasts, sweet pickled red cabbage, meat balls, and smørrebrød (open-face sandwiches) became all the rage in Iceland, with later additions such as smoked salmon and cured salmon (grafflax) gaining popularity in the 1970s and ’80s. Icelandic bakeries featured Danish pastry.

Lately, the trend has been toward Italian breads and French pastry, and the Danish influence has diminished. But its presence is still felt in the traditional Sunday roast, which until the 1970s was found in every home. This meal consists of a rack or leg of lamb served with caramelized potatoes, red cabbage, and brown sauce (which along with white sauce or bechamel was all the Icelandic housewife knew until exotic foreign sauces like Hollandaise arrived in the 1960s). Icelanders consume vast quantities of marinated herring in winter, and restaurants regularly offer variations of the Scandinavian smørgåsbord (in Icelandic, hlæðabóð, literally “a table laden with food”). In December it is nearly impossible to go to a restaurant if you are not interested in a Christmas buffet based on the Danish julefrokost.

This groaning board reflects not only Danish influence, but also centuries of poverty and scarcity, which still inform the Icelandic approach to food. An Icelandic feast is primarily about the quantity of food. The generation that remembers the Second World War and its aftermath also places great weight on sugar, which it still considers a sign of affluence and luxury (hence the sugar-coated potatoes and sweet pickled red cabbage).
After having been ruled since 1262, first by Norway and then by Denmark, Icelanders sought to regain their own identity following World War II. Nationalistic pride rode high, and people looked to the nation’s heroic Viking past for inspiration. The Vikings had worshipped their gods with great bravado, consuming vast amounts of alcoholic beverages and robust foods in feasting known as blóta. A clever Reykjavík restaurateur got the brilliant idea to revive this old culinary tradition, and when his restaurant started advertising bórablót (bórr being the old name for the month of February), it was an instant success. The meal included sour food or súrmatur (the aforementioned sheep and whale fat in lactic acid), shark, and other pungent foods that had to be downed with several snaps.

This was, perhaps, not the best hour of Icelandic cuisine, but it attracted people to restaurants, which were scarce and expensive at the time. Foreign travel to Mediterranean resorts during the 1960s was also a revelation, and new generations began to experiment with food as enjoyment. But the scarcity of food (imported vegetables and fruit were still luxury items) and the restrictive pricing of and puritan approach to wine meant that new eating habits developed slowly. In the early 1970s, restaurants were mainly found in the major hotels of Reykjavík, where the cuisine tended to be classic—French with a Danish touch, or vice versa. Even pizzas and hamburgers were relatively exotic until the 1980s. When a typical family ate out, they usually had fried chicken in a basket with a serving of French fries, or deep-fried haddock with a serving of fries, in one of the few diners that had begun catering to their demand.

Home cooking was, similarly, a bastion of conservatism. Even if Icelanders were blessed with some of the freshest and best fish in the world, they generally agreed that the only fish fit for human consumption was haddock (few people realize it is actually a scavenger), and then only when served with boiled potatoes and melted fat. Cosmopolitan cooks opted for melted butter, while rural cooks used melted sheep fat. Legend has it that in earlier centuries, when no haddock was available, whole communities preferred to starve rather than consume cod, flounder, or other species deemed inedible, even though abundant. Cod was fished, but mainly because foreigners clamored for it. Until only a few years ago, cod in Iceland was almost always eaten salted, as bacalao. Many consumers probably thought they were buying salted haddock, as the Icelandic name for it, saltfiskur, means only “salted fish” and gives no clue as to its origin.

Classic home cooking is now called mömmumatur or “Mom’s food,” implying that the younger generation does not know how to prepare the old-style dishes and can savor them only when visiting their parents. These dishes are also found on the menus of staff cafeterias at larger companies and institutions. They include kjótsúpa, meat soup made with lamb, potatoes, and carrots; kjöt í karrí, a stew of lamb and rice with curry; kakósúpa or cocoa soup, usually eaten with tvíbókur, a kind of crouton; and endless varieties of haddock and lamb, usually served with potatoes.

Lamb comes in all forms. In the autumn, it is still common to eat slátur or “slaughter,” which is basically what is left of the lamb after the meat has been butchered: the heart, liver, kidneys, chunks of fat, and blood. Many families still maintain the tradition of buying slátur and stuffing the stomach to make either lifrarpylsa (liver sausage) from minced liver, wheat meal, and fat; or blódmör (blood sausage) from blood, wheat meal, and fat. These sausages are boiled and usually eaten with mashed root vegetables. Just as the Scots have modernized their traditional haggis,
some Icelandic cooks are now preparing these dishes with less fat and more spices. Another version of lamb, traditionally eaten in late winter, is saltkjöt or salt meat, and then there is hangikjöt or “hung meat,” a leg of lamb that has been both salted and smoked. Prepared as a whole leg (usually deboned) or served sliced on bread, it is traditional Christmas fare, and when properly prepared, a delicacy. Also appreciated are wild goose, wild duck, reindeer, and the most traditional Christmas food of all, the rjúpa or ptarmigan, which brings the taste of mountain herbs right onto the plate.

Although Iceland has a rich bird life, Icelanders have mixed feelings about eating them. In the Westman Islands to the south, puffins are considered a delicacy, as are other sea birds, and the eggs of wild birds are traditionally eaten in several regions. The smaller birds that migrate to Iceland during the summer months are considered a delicacy in many countries, particularly France. Yet most Icelanders wouldn’t dream of hunting these birds, whose praises the poets have sung for centuries, and whom they see as the harbingers of summer. This nation of whale hunters gets teary-eyed at the mere thought of these loveable little creatures being brutally hunted for pure culinary pleasure.

Contemporary Cuisine

It wasn’t until the 1980s and ’90s that the Icelandic kitchen as such really began to develop. But once it got going, it progressed with phenomenal speed, thanks to a combination of outside influence (both increased exposure to foreign cultures and an influx of immigrants) and the entrepreneurial spirit of a few brave individuals. Restaurants began popping up like mushrooms in the center of Reykjavík, offering a variety of cuisines—classic French, nouvelle cuisine, Italian, and, gradually, even something that might be labeled contemporary Icelandic cuisine. Unlike most culinary cultures, Icelandic cooking is not defined by preparation methods, spices, or presentation. Rather, it strives to bring out the pure flavors of fresh products, with minimal cooking and seasoning. Borrowing what it needs from other cuisines, the new Icelandic cuisine focuses on the raw material in its purest state. The reaction of Icelanders—chefs and consumers alike—to this new culinary style can be compared to that of children who for years have been starved for toys and suddenly find themselves in an enormous Toys “R” Us. They want to try everything at once. Thus, in a very short period of time, Icelandic food culture went through many phases in a process that most countries experience over decades, if not centuries.

In a certain way, this almost childlike fascination with everything new is an integral part of the Icelandic mentality. Whether it results from centuries of isolation, or whether globalization has simply allowed it to blossom, is impossible to tell. Most gadgets and fads, be they cellular phones or body tattoos, fusion cooking or kickboxing, seem to have unrestricted access to the Icelandic heart (and wallet). This is partly due to the incredible prosperity that the last decades have brought. From a poor and backward nation, Iceland has been transformed into one of the most affluent societies in the world, and Icelanders have been struggling

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to acquire a fitting lifestyle ever since. Of course, this means that most things that had been essential to the Icelandic lifestyle are now considered passé and old-fashioned. Pasta has replaced potatoes, white meat has edged out red, and bread is not simply rye bread any longer. Younger generations study abroad and bring back new habits and appetites. Aspiring chefs, who until the 1980s went to train in Scandinavia, now venture to France, or even London and New York, for inspiration. Among all of this foreign influence it is sometimes difficult to detect what is Icelandic and what is not. Yet, gradually, the nation is beginning to realize that some of the foods of the past were perhaps not that bad and are worth fighting to preserve.

One of the most positive aspects of the last two decades is the discovery of the culinary wealth that swims in the ocean and grazes the heaths. Fish and sheep have always been there; they kept the nation alive but were never given a second thought. Despite the dearth of spices, vegetables, and fruits, Icelanders have always had freshly caught fish and organic lamb. Now chefs are scrambling among the fishermen at the harbor, trying not only to get hold of the
freshest fish, but also to encourage the fishermen not to throw overboard the unwanted bycatch of obscure species. As for the sheep, the new-born lambs breathe pure mountain air and graze on natural herbs instead of grain, which give the meat a distinctive taste. Icelanders have lately realized that what they had always taken for granted—purity and freshness—is a luxury in most other countries, and slowly they are becoming aware of the need to preserve Iceland in its unspoiled state. Because food exports are a critical part of the Icelandic economy, much of the debate has focused on the food industry, primarily the fishing industry.

Fishing was traditionally a free-for-all business. It was not uncommon for families to have a small boat for weekend fishing—not for leisure, but to put food on the table. But with trawlers getting ever larger, and modern technology, radars, GPS, and sonar ensuring that the catch was no longer a matter of luck or of the captain’s intuition, overfishing became a serious problem. In 1983, new legislation was passed to regulate fishing in the waters around Iceland. Based on scientific advice, a yearly quota is set and divided among the country’s fishing fleet. Although the quota legislation continues to be hotly debated (mainly over the question of whether those taking advantage of natural resources should have to pay for their privilege), it has had a markedly beneficial effect on the fishing stocks. Fishing is booming, and without state subventions. New species are being discovered, while old ones are found in quantities large enough to make the industry sustainable.

Although fishing is thriving, whaling is not. Whale meat was once common on the family table in Iceland, usually as a cheaper substitute for beef. Due to international pressure, Iceland stopped whaling in 1984—temporarily, it was thought. Whale watching is now one of the most popular tourist attractions, yet many Icelanders believe that whaling should be resumed. They point out that the whale herds in Icelandic waters are getting so large that they might endanger other parts of the ecosystem, such as the fishing stocks; after all, big whales eat a lot of small fish. Many Icelanders regard the ban on whaling as a result of the romantic image these animals have in the eyes of big-city conservationists, who don’t have to depend on nature for survival, and whose personal experience of the environment comes mainly from glossy magazines and television. Meanwhile, whale meat has disappeared from restaurant menus (except at one Reykjavík restaurant, which managed to deep-freeze a couple of whales in time); it is only occasionally available in supermarkets when a mink whale gets caught in a fishing net. However, as ever more Icelanders get involved in conservationist causes, the friends of the whales are not derided as they once were, and you might even spot the odd native among the whale watchers.

In essence, two contradictory trends can be seen in the Icelandic food scene today. On the one hand, there is an emphasis on freshness, purity, and even organic agriculture. People are growing more conscious of what they eat. The progressive lifting of import barriers has meant more variety (French cheese, Danish ham), but it has also led to fears about food-transmitted diseases like salmonella, as well as to concern over the widespread use of chemicals or fertilizers outside of Iceland. Yet when the local media followed the debate about genetically-engineered food, most people were not bothered by it—at least not as much as they were bothered by the fear of campylobacter, which ruined the barbecue season for the country’s poultry farmers in 1999. The second trend is toward simplicity: ready-made food needing minimal preparation. In the capital’s many fish shops, “ready to put in the pan dishes” are overwhelmingly preferred to fresh filets.

Nature, once an integral part of every Icelander’s life, is gradually becoming more alien. Most young people are unable to filet a fish or defeather a bird, skills common only a generation ago. Many cannot even perform more mundane tasks, such as slicing an onion. But this is probably the price of progress. And even if these people are unable to cook for themselves, they are still more likely to eat better and more varied food than their parents did. Interest in food has never been higher. Despite its size, Reykjavík offers an exciting variety of restaurants with cutting-edge cooking equal to the best in continental Europe. A young generation of chefs is emerging, who take full advantage of the local products, combining them with the best culinary ideas the world has to offer. Come to think of it, not having a past and a restrictive national cuisine can sometimes be an advantage.

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