

FOOD

A Nordic Influence on Estonian Cuisine

By PAUL AMES

Estonia's seaside capital of Tallinn, with its domes, spires and Hanseatic watchtowers, has borne a "next Prague" tag since the country escaped from Soviet rule in 1991. The bustling Unesco-listed Old Town, girdled by fortified walls dating back to the 13th century, has put it firmly on the map for city-trippers and Baltic cruise passengers.

Until recently, however, Tallinn was far from famous for its food. Visitors seeking out Estonian cooking usually had to settle for chunks of pork and piles of potatoes, served by folks dressed in medieval garb.

Now, a generation of chefs, inspired by the Nordic culinary revolution across the Baltics, is fast developing a radical new approach to

'Lobsters or oysters here will never be as good as in Paris, but our wild boar...or our pike perch are the best.'

Estonian cuisine, based on the wealth of natural ingredients available in the country's forests, lakes and long Baltic coastline.

"We young chefs talk a lot about the Nordic cuisine, but we need to look for what is uniquely Estonian, what makes us different," explains Rene Uusmees, whose elegant MEKK restaurant sits on the edge of the old city. "We need to find it, maybe we even need to create it, because it's part of our country and our culture."

Mr. Uusmees opened MEKK three years ago—it stands for Moodne Eesti Köögi Kunst, or Modern Estonian Cuisine. He makes sophisticated food that is light and fresh, with a focus on local fish. Standouts include lightly salted freshwater whitefish served raw with cubes of fried goose liver, cauliflower cream and a tomato-chive sauce; or pike perch with apple vinegar, caramelized beetroot and duck-fat fried potatoes.

Mr. Uusmees isn't alone in viewing the resurrection of a distinctive Estonian cuisine as part of a wider process of revival for the national culture. "I love this country. Why should we spend energy bringing Japanese sushi culture here, or Mediterranean cooking? It would never taste as good here," he says. "Lobsters or oysters here will never be as good as in Paris, but our wild boar or our chanterelle mushrooms or our pike perch are the best."

When their Soviet-imposed isolation ended, Estonians rushed to embrace the exotic. French, Italian, Indian, Greek restaurants sprouted around Tallinn. Local food like spiced sprats, sauerkraut and pickled cucumbers became decidedly unfashionable, until the emergence of New Nordic Cuisine in the mid-2000s.

"Suddenly the chefs here started to understand that living in a cold country could be a bonus because we have all these types of fish, and meat and vegetables that the warmer countries don't have," says food writer Vesta Reest. "Chefs like Roman Zastserinski at Õ used to make international fusion food, with tuna sashimi, lobster, this very fancy stuff with 25 ingredients. Then they saw what was happening in Scandinavia and decided that was what they wanted to do here."

In a nation with a notoriously impenetrable language, the new-wave restaurants' monosyllabic approach is

welcome. Õ, which means "island" in old Scandinavian, offers relaxed fine dining in a converted vodka factory. Mr. Zastserinski's signature dishes include an appetizer of eel poached in apple wine from the central town of Põltsamaa; and rabbit in a cream sauce made with false morels.

Sommelier Kristjan Peäske and chef Janno Lepik have taken the commitment to local food a step further. Their restaurant, Leib (Estonian for bread), sources all its meat, fish and vegetables from within Estonia, mostly from small and organic producers. Mr. Lepik cut his teeth in London, working at Richard Branson's exclusive Babylon and Gary Rhodes's W1, but the idea behind Leib was to go back to his roots, with a simple, seasonal take on Estonian traditions. "Our aim was to show that locality can be beautiful and to give a touch of soul," Mr. Peäske says before taking an order for lamb with a black currant glaze and kohlrabi and carrot mash.

Martin Breuer is a Dutchman who's played a key role in the development of new Estonian cuisine. Pädaste Manor, the luxury boutique hotel and spa that Mr. Breuer opened 16 years ago on the island of Muhu, has built a reputation as one of the finest hostelrys around the Baltic. Its restaurant, Alexander, has been voted the country's best for the past two years.

Local chef Peeter Pihel developed his concept of Nordic islands' cuisine there, and he and Mr. Breuer brought it to the capital with the opening of Neh last year in an old harbor pilot's house near the port. "We define our terroir as something ever smaller, to use produce that grows naturally on our island and other islands," Mr. Pihel explains.

He also gathers ingredients from other Baltic islands like Sweden's Gotland, Denmark's Bornholm and the Finnish Åland archipelago. "Before World War II, there were close ties among all those islands," he says. "They share a similar biosphere, cultural space, food traditions."

Mr. Pihel's team is constantly searching for new flavors among the seaweeds, lichens and berries growing on Muhu. Pickled dandelion buds are used in salads, fresh Christmas tree needles for syrups and sorbets, hay and ash smoke adds aroma to a blood-cream soup.

New Estonian restaurants occupy some of Tallinn's most desirable real estate. In a 16th-century guild house overlooking the landmark Town Hall square, Kaerajaan serves the likes of roast Baltic herring coated with cumin and black bread, and elk fillet with a pear-smoked cheese gratin and horseradish biscuit. Gloria began life in 1937 as a cabaret called Dancing Paris and survived the Nazi and Soviet occupations with its lush, velvety décor intact. Egoist is located in the 16th-century home of an aristocratic French merchant.

Both Gloria and Egoist are part of the culinary empire of Dimitri Demjanov. Although Mr. Demjanov's refined cooking style is closer to French classical cuisine, his championing of domestic produce and work to promote the younger generation have earned him recognition as the grand old man of Estonian cuisine.

The renewal of Estonian gastronomy contributes to a broader cultural renaissance since the end of Soviet rule, Mr. Demjanov explains. "Estonia's culinary intelligentsia was destroyed in that time and it's not easy to rediscover that," he says. "Food is a reflection of a country's education, political situation and culture."



Clockwise from top: duck fillet, marinated with cinnamon and orange, served with apple and red wine cowberry sauce at Kaerajaan; Roman Zastserinski at Õ; exterior seating at Leib restaurant; Pädaste Manor; Baltic herring at MEKK.

Lauri Laan (Kaerajaan, Leib, MEKK)