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SHEEP FARMING AND PASTORAL LIFE

TRADITIONAL FOOD TECHNOLOGY

RESEARCH REPORT FOR ESTONIA

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Traditional food technology

Sheep's milk and dairy products

Sheep's milk has been very little used in Estonia. People used to say that sheep's milk tastes of filth and sweat (KV 15: 747). Sheep were mostly milked among the Swedes (EA 18: 422). Very little has been said about milking sheep. Only goat milking has been mentioned – goat's milk was used as medicine and for making porridge. Milking both sheep and goats was generally rather frowned upon (ERM, 2011).

It has been noted that sheep were milked the same way as cows – the milking took place in the morning (EA 18: 422). Goat's milk has been discussed more and it is said to have been used the same way as cow's milk. The correspondents' responses and the ethnographic archive include no examples of discussions about the processing of sheep's milk. It has only been mentioned that goat's milk was used for making porridge and also as medicine, e.g. in Paide (KV 15: 747).

The only place in Estonia where sheep milking and the use of sheep's milk has been recorded at all is Pakri islands, where Estonian Swedes used to live.

Sheep's milk cheese is the most distinctive of the dishes of the Pakri islands. It was made as follows: in the evening, lambs were separated from sheep so that the ewes could be milked in the morning. The milk was strained through junipers straight into a cauldron, where it was heated almost to the point of boiling. A few drops of liquid obtained from a small piece of dried calf's stomach that had been soaked in beer in a wooden tub for a whole day and night were added for curdling. The cauldron was then removed from the heat, salt was added, the cheese mass was compressed by hand and placed into a mould. It was left there for one day and night, turned and sprinkled with salt. The cheese was then removed from the mould and placed in a smoke kitchen, to dry in nettle and alder smoke. The drying process lasted from 2 to 3 days, during which, the cheese was often turned to keep it from flattening. The cheese had to be washed as well, so that it would not get too grimy. Dried cheese was stored in grain, where it could be preserved for years. Cheese was given as a gift to guests and it was in great demand among tourists.

<http://www.erm.ee>

For the first time in our lives, we saw sheep milked there, the way that only the women of

Pakri know how to do it: they straddled the sheep, so that the beast's head was looking out from behind, through the milkmaid's legs.

The milk was milked with two hands into a small milk piggion. Sheep is a useful animal for the islanders in general. Pakri people know how to turn its meat into wonderful cured ham in their old-fashioned kitchen chimneys, and its hide, of course, makes for self-sewn coats, which can be seen worn by old people and children alike in winter.

<http://www.erm.ee/pakrirootslased/Main.htm>

These days, an enthusiastic farmer is raising a couple of dozen Belgian dairy sheep on Saaremaa and making sheep's cheese by hand. Imported sheep's cheese can be bought from a few better-supplied shops in Estonia.

Traditional food processing

Just the meat and fat of sheep have been processed in Estonia. Only bleeding, meat curing, fat melting and salting have been mentioned as traditional food processing.

Sheep butchering

According to folk tradition, lunar phases were significant when it came to slaughtering animals. However, it must be noted that there are differences as to the preferred lunar phases: in Valga it has been mentioned that domestic animals had to be slaughtered during full moon to prevent the meat from shrinking (KV 104: 119). In Põide, on the other hand, new moon was preferred:

For any kind of butchering, wind had to be in the soft quarter (south), the moon had to be new and the day had to be Friday. These conditions had to be met so that meat would become tenderer when boiled and would last longer. Nothing else has been recorded. (KV 14: 107)

It is obvious that in inland areas, in Valga County, for example, the direction of wind was not considered important. In coastal Põide, on the other hand, it played a significant role. In Urvaste it has been noted that it was difficult to follow all these rules at once. Wind direction has been considered the most important. Therefore, to achieve the "right" wind, people often went to the threshing-floor and opened the gate on the side of the wind that was sought after (either north or south) (EA 56: 120).

The animal was usually slaughtered by the farmer himself. Only some did not butcher their own animals. In that case, a neighbour or a farmhand was called in to help. It was also considered important to keep the animal from suffering long during the slaughter and to make sure the blood bled out properly (KV 104: 265).

In Viljandi County, for example, it was preferred to slaughter animals on Saturdays. This has been explained by the fact that people had more time for salting and cooking meat on Sundays; the dishes served on Saturday evenings were also fancier. (KV 104: 265)

These days, sheep are still slaughtered at home for the family's own use, either by the owner or by a butcher invited from the village. With bigger flocks and in cases where the meat is intended for selling, the animals must be sent to a meat processing plant. In the 1990s, sheep completely ceased to be accepted at meat processing plants for some time, putting mutton farmers, in particular, in a very difficult position. By now, however, there is a slaughterhouse in every county, as well as a single official organic slaughterhouse that accepts sheep. There are also a select few licensed private slaughterhouses. Nevertheless, most sheep farmers prefer to butcher sheep at home, since slaughterhouses are anonymous, stressful and far from home. Strict food safety regulations do not permit one to sell the meat of home-slaughtered animals, often putting sheep farmers in a difficult spot, because there is demand for meat as well as meat itself, but selling it straight from the farm is forbidden. A survey has been conducted in Estonia to find out if there is a need for a so-called mobile slaughterhouse; it appeared that there was great need for such a thing. On Estonia's second-largest island, Hiiumaa, which lacks its own slaughterhouse altogether, so that the animals must be shipped over sea to the mainland, the local sheep farmers and hunters have joined forces to establish a local slaughterhouse, also applying for money from EU funds.

Bleeding and mixing blood

After the slaughter, animal blood was let out to flow into a vessel. To keep the blood from congealing right away, a blood mixer was put to work. The blood mixer was typically a girl in a farm. If there was no blood mixer, one of the slaughterers was called upon to mix the blood – to keep the blood moving so that it would not get thicker. Water, or snow in winter, was added to the blood. The snow helped the blood to cool. Upon bleeding, the blood was mixed with a wooden spoon or a simple hardwood chip. A whisk has also been used for mixing. Salt, fat and onions were added to the blood and it was used within the same day. If blood was left

unused for longer, plain cold water was added to it. The blood container itself was stored in the coldest place – either a cellar or a pantry where it would not spoil. (KV 104: 191 Tapa)

While it has been noted that the blood mixer was typically a girl, it has not always been that way. The blood mixer used to be male in earlier times. The reason for that change has not been mentioned anywhere (ERM, 2011).

Sheep's blood is little used nowadays, as the tradition of preparing food made of blood at home has been lost.

Fat melting and salting

When a slaughtered animal's fat was melted during full moon, it did not cave in later when cooling down in the tub, but instead, rose up in a heap – “heaped up”. (EA 56: 120)

Fat was stored raw. First of all, the skin was cut of the fat, after which the fat was chopped into small pieces. Upon salting, fat was mixed with salt and scooped into a barrel that was covered on top. In Saaremaa, sheep fat was put into a barrel together with meat, taken out after some time and left to dry in smoke. Dried fat was hung up and pieces were cut from it as necessary. (Moora, 2007)

Fat was chopped into small pieces, put into a pot and melted until the fat stopped producing mounds. Once the fat was golden brown, the pot was removed from the heat and the fat was poured into any kind of vessel: tub, bowl or piggin. Fat has been pounded, too. But I have never seen or heard myself that a special kind of utensil was used for it. The same vessel that it was put into was used for pounding. During pounding, salt was added to the fat and it was kept inside the vessel with brine on top. If it was pounded at all, it was done raw. (KV 33: 1080)

Salted fat was mostly used for making soups, sometimes also for cooking potatoes and yellow turnips. Sheep fat was added to pudding as well. In the early 20th century, some women stored sheep fat in its melted form and used it for frying (ERM, 2011).

If fat was to be melted, however, it was also cut into pieces and placed on the heat in a cauldron to melt. Once it had melted enough, the hot fat was poured into tubs and then used as necessary. No salt was added to the melting fat. (KV 33: 1080)

Meat salting

Meat was salted so that it could be consumed at a later time. The lady of the house was not economical with salt, so as to keep the meat from spoiling. If the meat tasted bad, it was not fit for any food. Saltpetre was also added to meat, to prevent it from losing its fresh appearance and good taste. For salting, salt was boiled until it had dissolved. The brine was tested with a raw egg – it was placed in the brine and if it floated, the liquid could be poured onto the meat. The meat had to be covered with brine in a way that no part of the meat could be visible. Brine was used because it did not burn the meat or make its colour yellowish-greenish. (KV 33: 211)

Fat and meat salting is not used much these days.

Meat jerking and dry-curing

Wind-drying of salted meat was used as a technique for meat preservation. In the old days, dry-curing used to be one of the most important ways of preserving meat in Estonia. People in Saaremaa also dried meat inside – above the stovetop or threshing-floor stove – for a couple of weeks and then left it to stand in a container. Dry-cured meat was always eaten for Christmas. Even in the 20th century, it was common in Saaremaa to have a leg of sheep ham hanging above the stove. The technique of slowly smoking meat above the heater has mostly been used in Western Estonia, in Northern Estonia and on the islands. Slow meat smoking was not practised in Southern Estonia. (Moora, 2007)

Meat smoking

Meat smoking spread all over Estonia in the 20th century. Historically, three different methods for meat smoking have been described.

In Valga County, smoking in the sauna has been mentioned. Meat smoking usually took two days. The meat was spread on perches that had been placed in the sauna. More specifically, meat was smoked as follows:

Meat was placed rind side up at first, to drain the liquid from the meat. Heating the sauna began with green alder that produced a lot of smoke. When the water stopped dripping and the first signs of dripping fat appeared, the fire in the heater was let to cool down. Once the meat had cooled down a bit, it was turned on the other side and a new heating process was started. Bowls were placed under the meat to collect the

dripping fat. The last smoke came from junipers – that gave the meat a nice smell. When tender meat was desired, some more vapour was produced, the door was closed and the meat was steamed for quite a long time. Afterwards, the door was opened and the meat was taken down. (KV 104: 122)

If there was little meat, it could also be smoked in the chimney. (KV 15: 47)

Meat can be smoked in the threshing room above the heater of the stove as well. Such a smoking method has been mentioned in both Valga County and Kadrina. The meat was not far from the heater and was therefore smoked more quickly. A pan was placed under the meat to collect the dripping fat. (KV 33: 1122)

Meat was soaked in brine before smoking.

Meat smoking today

Meat smoking usually involves the use of a smoke chamber, where the meat is processed with natural smoke. The purpose of smoking is to give the meat a pleasant appearance and taste and to make it keep for longer. Hot smoking is done at 60–80 °C and cold smoking at 15–20 °C. Meat is usually smoked in a hot smoke chamber. Meat smoking was also commonplace during the Soviet period, when people typically built their own smoke chambers. The same chamber could be used for smoking both meat and fish. A brick funnel with a firebox underneath it was erected. The walls of the firebox were built with clay bricks, as these can stand the heat the best. A solid grid was placed on the firebox and rocks were laid on top of the grid, similarly to a sauna heater. Grids for meat or fish were placed well above the grid with the stones. In addition to the grids, the chamber also had places for attaching spits or hooks. The back wall of the chamber had a ventilation hole that made it possible to adjust the smoke. The rocks were first heated up; hot stones gave the chamber a uniform temperature and kept the flames from burning the fish or meat. Once the chamber was hot, green alder, maple, apple tree or some other resin-less deciduous wood was added to produce smoke. A couple of half-green alder logs were also good. The chamber has to be kept hot throughout the smoking process and as much smoke as possible should be generated. Once the meat is more or less done, it is a good idea to let it cook above the cinders for an hour or so, but not much heat should be produced at that point. Nowadays, smoke chambers or ovens can be bought from construction supply stores. Outdoor kitchens with a smoking chamber, a wood-burning stove and a barbecue grill are highly popular.

Of the old methods of meat smoking, smoking in sauna is still being used. In Southern Estonia, people use smoke saunas for meat smoking and workshops are held to teach the traditional method of smoking. Smoke sauna is an ancient chimney-less sauna, where stones are placed above the firebox and the smoke comes straight into the sauna room. Each smoker has his or her own technique for meat smoking, but what is most important is that the meat is not drained of fat due to great heat and becomes dry. A good result is obtained only after long practice. In Western Estonia and on the islands, saunas with heaters are common. In such a sauna, meat pieces are hung in front of the heater with hooks and are smoked for a couple of days at low heat. Meat can also be placed on the heater in a pan after heating the sauna and eaten hot the next day.

Grilling and barbecue (BBQ)

Grilling means the cooking of meat in the heat of embers. Grilling gives meat a nice brown colour. The heat is very high, which is why preserving the juiciness, pleasant aroma and appearance of the meat must be paid attention to. People usually grill meat in fresh air, on top of embers on a grid or spits, but there are also grill ovens that can be used in enclosed spaces. In summer, grilling is the most common method of preparing food outdoors in Estonia; people grill food over a bonfire, with charcoal grills or gas grills. Mutton in ready-made marinade is available in shops, but most people make their own marinade for raw meat. Barbecue meat is prepared from boneless rump, shoulder, chops, ribs or the saddle of mutton. Red wine, lemon, tomato, onion, dark beer, apple or redcurrant juice, but also vinegar, mustard, yoghurt or soy sauce are suitable for the marinade. Meat is marinated in dry or liquid marinade for any length of time between a few hours and a few days, the most common marinating time being 24 hours.

The newest meat cooking method – barbecue – means slow-cooking food in a special oven equipped with a water pan, at a relatively low temperature (~100 °C) in a smoky and moist environment. BBQ meat takes on a slightly smoky flavour and is juicier than grilled meat thanks to slow cooking.

Cooking meat in an underground hole

In order to cook meat underground, a hole ca. 1 metre deep is first dug and lined with large stones. An intense fire is then lit in the hole and let to burn for a couple of hours. Meat is

wrapped in several layers of tin foil and wet newspapers or rhubarb leaves and the packages are fastened with wire. The hole is also suitable for cooking a whole sheep at once. The meat is lowered into the hole, buried under charcoal and covered with a metal sheet. A new fire is made on the metal sheet and it is left to burn for 4 to 5 hours, depending on the size of the meat pieces. The meat comes out tender and with a pleasant smoky flavour.

In the Soviet time

Sheep were mostly killed in autumn, when they were brought into the barn. Just like before, sheep were killed by Michaelmas (29 September) in Soviet times. The sentence “each ram has its own Michaelmas” was usually added.

Meat was one of the most important foodstuffs during the Soviet period. It was used together with several other foodstuffs, e.g. with vegetables, grains or pasta products.

Mutton is generally chopped into nine sections. Additionally, it is classified into three categories, which have been ranked according to quality. Legs and kidneys belong to the first category. Flank, breast (rack), saddle, striped meat belong to the second category. Neck, knee and shank belong to the third category. (*Raamat maitsvast ja tervislikust toidust (Book on Delicious and Healthy Food) 1955: 161*)

Leg, saddle and kidney can be fried both in large and small pieces. It is recommended to use flank stake and brisket in soups or put small pieces of them in ragout or pilaff. The rest of the segments are used either for making soup or minced meat.

People started to use more manufactured products as well as chilled/frozen meat during the Soviet period. Frozen meat is melted slowly as a large piece. During freezing, the juice from muscle fibres penetrates the space between the cells and freezes as ice crystals. By melting meat slowly, the juice flows back into muscle fibres and the qualities of fresh meat are restored. By melting meat quickly, juice and nutrients often flow out of the meat. Thus, it becomes dull and lacks taste (*Raamat maitsvast ja tervislikust toidust 1955: 160*).

The selection of food has also changed compared to Soviet times. Shashlik and pilaff have been adopted from our fellow nations. These dishes mostly spread as recipes in cookery books. For example, recipes for lamb shashlik and chanakhi (Georgian national dish) as well as pilaff were referred to in the cookery book *Raamat maitsvast ja tervislikust toidust*, published in 1955 (ERM, 2011).

Conclusion

Sheep's milk is not and has never been used in Estonia. Mutton is mostly processed at home for the family's own use; very little meat reaches shops through slaughterhouses and meat plants, and when it does, it is raw. Sheep's intestines are used for making grilled sausages, but the sausages themselves are made from pork. Every once in a while, some smoked sausages made of mutton come on sale due to having been custom-ordered from a small meat plant. The emergence of small local meat processing plants is hindered by very strict food processing regulations that small-scale sheep farmers are unable to meet. However, so-called communal kitchens, which are officially recognised and licensed for food processing, are beginning to pop up in parishes. Through the joint efforts of such kitchens and sheep farmers, mutton products should also be able to reach regular people and tourists. There is demand for such products, and sheep farmers are interested in processing and marketing their meat on the spot as well. Also, sheep farming has taken a definite turn toward the production of organic meat.

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