

# STRAWBERRY FIELDS FOREVER?

## Foraging for the Changing Meaning of Wild Berries in Estonian Food Culture

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This article examines the ambivalent status coinciding with the symbolically rich meanings of wild berries as food, relying on data drawn from Estonian ethnographical archives, contemporary food blogs and nutritional and culinary literature. Wild berry memories from pre-modern times up to the present encode personal as well as collective values related to wild food, foraging and food culture, but also feelings related to belonging. The analysis explores the contemporary nostalgia for and high culinary status of wild berries. Diverse values attributed to good food are contained in these berry discourses: tradition blended with gourmet cooking and a healthy anti-consumerist lifestyle combined with the desire for exclusive tastes.<sup>1</sup>

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A recently published “Estonian Gourmet Cookbook” described wild berries as an important part of traditional peasant food culture as well as of modern diet:

In summer Estonia becomes a gastronomic paradise, with row upon row of berries growing in gardens and forests alike. (---) Estonia’s food traditions also incorporate a large amount of forest fare: berries and mushrooms; meat from wild animals and birds; (---) Cloudberries, cranberries, lingonberries and bilberries are all types of forest berries that are used in both the finest of cordon bleu cuisine and natural medicine. (Kirikal 2006: 9)<sup>2</sup>

The quote summarises several values attributed to good quality food and demonstrates how wild food

may acquire new meanings in the contemporary culinary scene in which food from nature as well as sophisticated taste combinations are valued by chefs and foodies alike. At the same time it praises the value of the traditions and tastes of the region that make our contemporary urbanised food culture more authentic and local (cf. Amilien 2003; Trubek 2008).

To put the Estonian case into a broader perspective of food studies – exploring wild foodways guides us to examine people’s attitudes towards and values related to naturally grown food, and nature in general, and the relationship between uncultivated and domestic foods (cf. Albala 2006). Wild food holds a varied status in the contemporary global culinary scene, ranging from poverty to luxury (cf. van Esterik 2006: 93–94).

In general food has an important role as a marker of social status. Examining the changing status of a particular food, such as wild berries, can reveal multiple values related to food production and consumption, and what has traditionally been considered nutritious, tasty or appropriate to eat (cf. Wiessner 1998). Wild food has become a marker of “real food” in our urbanised society where the majority of what we eat is mass-produced. Nature, in itself playing an important part in identity-making processes of Northern Europe, has become increasingly more intrinsic in the culinary self-image and wild food is one of the best vehicles to symbolise this connection (cf. Bergflødt, Amilien & Skuland 2012).

On the international gastronomic scene wild food is in vogue today, being among the most authentic foods in the context of mass production and consumption. Chefs from European fine dining restaurants have rediscovered traditional wild food plants and now explore the novel culinary potential of wild plants (Łuczaj et al. 2012). Qualities like local, seasonal, natural, organic, pure, simple and healthy have acquired a high value in fine dining circles as well as among knowledgeable food consumers. Wild berries have all these qualities and also chefs can use them in innovative ways, inventing new traditions and creating playful nostalgic associations (see Larsen 2010). Commodification of the nostalgic value of wild berries as well as attributing them with the status of top-class ingredients in haute cuisine are both recent trends that characterise not only Estonian food culture but are part of a larger culinary development, especially in the Nordic countries.

### **Food, Memory and Nostalgia**

Food and memory are closely related cultural domains that are at the same time a substantial part of individual belonging and existence. Food likewise works as a “conductive channel for enacting and understanding social changes, as the sensual qualities of food evoke visceral responses that transform external, anonymous social processes into intimate, immediate, and personal experiences” (Caldwell 2009: 3). Recollections about particular foodstuffs may help to understand their cultural as well as indi-

vidual significance. In order to understand the symbolic values given to wild berries in the present it is necessary to look back in time and see how they were thought of in the past.

Recollection is an act in which the past is evoked from the current perspective, therefore what has been forgotten or deemed not valuable enough to memorise also comes into view. Furthermore, looking at how picking and consuming wild berries has been recollected during different times enables us to look into the continuities as well as the changes in Estonians’ “memory culture” (Erll 2011). Recollecting past food habits may often evoke nostalgic memories for the tastes from the past. Culinary nostalgia is strongly related to the feeling of belonging (Mannur 2007). There are multiple symbolic meanings and emotional connections that wild berry memories bring to the table – stories not only about food but also about childhood, home, family, and identity. Exploring various forms of food-related nostalgia – what we are longing for – tells us what we value about our food today and how food consumption enables us to be linked with culture as well as to the nature we live in.

This paper examines Estonians’ memories about wild berries starting from a pre-modern peasant society, throughout the modernisation process in the Estonian Republic and the Soviet years, to the post-Soviet Estonia and contemporary market economy. I aim to analyse the major changes in the consumption of and attitudes towards wild berries, considering both social values and food values of the examined periods.

### **Sources: Archive Memories, Food Blog Narratives and Culinary Literature**

David Sutton reminds us that the process of recollection emerges from an interaction between the past and the present, and just as important as the content of remembering are the *forms* of memories and how they are culturally shaped (Sutton 2001: 9–10). My focus on personal food narratives from different times enables an examination of the changing symbolic status of wild berries in everyday food culture as well as the more general changes in food-

related values within the society. I have selected two types of sources: The first source is correspondents' texts from an ethnographical archive and the second is recent narratives in food weblogs, which provide memories about the gathering and consumption of wild berries, thus shedding light upon the dynamics between individual reminiscences and collective memory cultures.

The historical ethnographic sources are composed of responses to the thematic questionnaires in the Correspondents' Archive of the Estonian National Museum, an institution that since 1909 has been collecting and (re-)constructing national cultural memory of Estonia. A nationwide network of regular correspondents was established in 1931 based on questionnaire models from Scandinavia modified for local conditions (cf. Skott 2008; Hagström & Marander-Eklund 2005). The correspondents were to reply as precisely as possible to the thematic questionnaires, including interviewing elder inhabitants of the region (Tael 2006: 8). The correspondents' recollections are not just individual memories but also constitute a collective memory initiated by the institutional interest and research questions shaping what and how it has been recollected (see Kõresaar 1995; Jõesalu 2003). I selected the correspondents' responses to five ethnographical questionnaires that included questions about the gathering or consuming of berries from 1937 until 2004.<sup>3</sup> The recollections cover different periods in Estonian history as well as in the history of ethnology – the earliest recollections date back to the last decades of the nineteenth century with a focus on the traditional peasant food economy, and the most recent ones stem from the 2000s providing information about current foraging and food habits. Archive sources give evidence of the changes in Estonian food culture and allow us to examine the different values and meanings people have attributed to wild berries in the domestic food economy at different periods, as well as to study continuities and transformations in Estonia's memory culture (cf. Jõesalu & Kõresaar 2013).

In order to include more recent reflections on the use of wild berries by the younger generation,

I turned to food weblogs that tell personalised stories through and about food (see Rousseau 2012: 9). Food blogs are a food-writing genre that has blossomed in Estonia, and worldwide, during the last decade and refers to the democratisation of culinary discourse as well as the increasing "gourmandisation" of food experiences in everyday life (Johnston & Baumann 2010). As Lucy M. Long has observed, food blogs function as individual memory tools that help to create meaningful narratives of our daily experiences, and they enable their owners as well as users to look back at what one was doing and feeling in the personal past (see McGaughey 2010: 97). In addition to sharing personal values, blog narratives reflect the cultural values that the blogger holds. The blogs I chose are publicly shared narratives, illustrated with photographs, that are written by home cooks and foodies without commercial intent and mainly concerning their domestic culinary experiences. Characteristic to the berry-related narratives in food blogs was the concurrent theme of nostalgia that enabled me to elaborate on this topic and to draw parallels with the correspondents' recollections, which will be presented in the second part of the article.

Socio-cultural origins of personally expressed nutritional and culinary values related to wild berries are revealed if we examine them in the broader context of food production and consumption. In order to examine the dynamics between the personally perceived and publicly recognised status of wild berries in the Estonian diet, I included some examples of food literature published in the correspondents' recollections or in food blog narratives. Such literature is composed of cookbooks, handbooks and magazines that provide information about why they are good to eat, and how to cook wild berries. These texts, as documents of nutritional and culinary history, are part of a publicly accessible cultural memory that reflects the dietary as well as socio-cultural ideals of the time (Albala 2012: 229; Biltekoff 2012: 173).

The analysis of the sources is structured diachronically, relating changes in food culture with social changes in the society, providing compari-

sons between changing food values and the status of wild berries, as well as between memory cultures of different times (cf. Leeds-Hurwitz 1993: 89–101). More specifically I used a thematic analysis in order to interpret narrative data arising from the sources (Riessman 2008). I concentrated on themes that emerged from the conceptual framework (memory, remembrances, nostalgia) as well as from the sources themselves (collecting and consuming wild berries for private needs; social status of food consumers; nutritional and culinary knowledge; households' food production; home cooking; preserving [wild] fruits; family traditions; people's relationship to nature).

### **Early Wild Berry Recollections: From Snacks to Desserts on the Peasant's Table**

Considering the early ethnographical questionnaires and correspondents' responses from 1937 and 1947, two types of recollections relating to wild berries emerge – those about the role of wild berries in the peasant food economy and others about the customs of gathering. My aim is to connect foraging and consuming remembrances in order to understand the complexity of symbolic values and meanings related to wild fruits in the remembrances of the late nineteenth century until the 1930s.

Nowadays we may not think of forest berries as private property and berry picking as an activity related to social status. Correspondents' and their informants' early recollections date back to the last decades of the nineteenth century, when the Governorate of Estonia (1721–1917) was part of the Russian Empire, and the Baltic German nobility had social and economic autonomy. The land belonged to the Baltic German gentry and manors were the central economic units which controlled berry picking for several economic reasons.<sup>4</sup> Therefore many correspondents reminisced about the restricted access to berries and the need for a symbolic payment for the right to forage. The rangers (of Estonian origin) were perceived as the worst enemies of the peasant pickers. Physical assaults of pickers were mentioned as demonstrations of the ranger's power. Thus, picking berries was related to symbolic power relations as

wild berries were considered an economic resource, though Estonian peasants' negative experiences depended on a particular land owner's and forest manager's attitude. Nevertheless, there were also numerous neutral memories about picking berries in the forests without inhibitions because of the clement attitude of particular manors.

Social status determined people's attitudes both towards picking and consuming berries. Although the gentry and bourgeoisie as well as wealthy farmers appreciated the taste of wild berries, picking was not an appropriate activity for them (cf. Hietala 2005; Ailonen 1977). While the culinary status of wild fruits was high among the upper classes, plucking fruit had a low prestige and it was considered a job for poorer families (e.g. cottagers, freedmen) for whom selling berries provided some additional income. It was only in later memories from the 1920s and 1930s that Estonian city folk appeared as a new group of berry pickers, practicing this activity whether for additional income or for mere pleasure.

For rural Estonians wild berries had a lower status as food in comparison with the farm produce that was prioritised as symbolically more valuable. Farm folks remembered they had a limited time for foraging because the ripening of the wild bounty coincided with the more important summer and autumn farm tasks. A farmhand (m., born in 1921) pointed out that blueberries and cloudberries were ready to be picked at haymaking time, lingonberries ripened with the oats, bilberries with rye and cranberries with potatoes.<sup>5</sup> Children or old people (primarily women) were cited as the main berry pickers because they were not fully engaged in farm works (cf. Svanberg 2012; Lindqvist 2009; Łuczaj 2008). Recollections gave farm food a more significant status and wild berries were considered a seasonal supplement or a folk remedy (cf. Łuczaj et al. 2012; Kalle & Sõukand 2012). Public awareness of the nutritional value of berries, propagated in the literature of the time, was still modest, yet in folk medicine berries had an important status as cures for various health problems. In addition, for men working on the farm, berries were not considered a substantial food and therefore wild fruits were perceived primarily as snacks for children and women.



Ill. 1: Berry pickers in the forest. (Photo: Gustav Vilbaste, 1929. Estonian National Museum photographic archive, Fk 1394/185)

The unique taste of wild berries – much praised nowadays – was not remembered to have a value on its own, although the reason for the lack of gustatory memories was also due to the focus of the questionnaires and the way correspondents were expected to describe a collective memory rather than their personal remembrances. The latter were found in some ethnographical fieldwork diaries where the experiences of elderly informants were described. For instance a farm wife (b. 1865) tells a researcher about a vivid memory from her childhood:

Cleaned strawberries were put into a bowl and the landlady poured good fresh milk on top. Everybody took from the berry bowl with a spoon, and ate. The strawberries smelled delicious, and when a bit of sugar or honey was mixed into the milk, it was a true delicacy.<sup>6</sup>

Hence, it was not that farm folks did not have an appetite for wild fruits – the duty to work and the

harsh living conditions made berries a rarity on the peasant's table. Interestingly the use of honey as a substitute for sugar in preserving was not recalled, although beekeeping was increasing in farms from the turn of the twentieth century and some people still harvested wild honey (cf. Klementilä & Jaakola 2011: 68).

The social status of food consumers influenced how wild and cultivated fruits were eaten. Wealthier social classes were remembered to have more means and knowledge about cooking wild and especially garden berries, which were still rare in peasant households at the turn of the nineteenth and the twentieth century (cf. Notaker 2003). The limited access to sugar, due to its high price, restricted the berry species that were collected for the household until the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, Estonian peasants, similarly to their fellows in Nordic countries, preferred blueberries, lingonberries and cranberries that contained organic acids as natural preservatives and could be preserved with-

out sugar (cf. Łuczaj et al. 2012; Svanberg 2012). The peasants' poor living conditions determined their eating and cooking habits in many ways and the situation only started to improve from the 1860s along with the modernisation process – establishment of commercial-financial relationships in agriculture, the emergence of small proprietorships as a class, and a gradual emancipation of the peasantry (Tarkiainen 2008). Since the 1880s separate year-round cooking spaces were increasingly created within farm houses (see L'Heureux 2010: 480).

Yet, harsh living conditions were probably only one reason for limited berry consumption – there was also the lack of culinary and nutritional knowledge. In the introduction to his book “Domestic Berries” (*Kodumaa marjad* 1898), addressed to the Estonian rural readers, the first Estonian-born pomologist Jaan Spuhl-Rotalia writes: “Estonian farms do not know how to value and consume several wild growing berries as supplementary food in spite of hard economic conditions” (Spuhl-Rotalia 1898: 3). The author provides detailed information about different methods of cooking and preserving wild and domestic fruits considering the means and technologies available at the time.

At the end of the nineteenth century the need for people's more varied food literacy is clearly spelled out. Rural folk came to be educated about food through Estonian newspapers, magazines and handbooks that started giving agricultural and horticultural advice, and from the 1880s cookery and household economy literature was produced, aimed at the Estonian peasantry (Viires [1985]2001).<sup>8</sup>

The use of more varied fruit dishes started at the turn of the century along with the early stages of modernisation (cf. Kannike 2013). Courses in household economics, agriculture and horticulture were organised by several agricultural societies and private initiatives. The 1919 Land Act increased the number of landowners who started establishing fruit gardens. As in Scandinavia, an important role in improving the culinary and dietary literacy of Estonian farm wives was fulfilled by countryside women's societies, the cooking courses and domestic economy schools that spread into villages with their

assistance (Troska & Viires 2008: 277). In the first decades of the twentieth century, growing fruit cultures became more widespread after the economic situation on farms improved, Estonian farmers acquired more knowledge and means, and once there was more time after the all-important field labours and animal husbandry (Banner 2005: 307–311). The need to forage berries in the wild became less necessary. A farmer (m., b. 1877) recollected the transformation of fruits' status in the peasants' diet referring to the 1920s and 1930s as a period when more varied berry dishes became common:

Wild strawberries and bilberries were eaten while ripened, with fresh milk. Other berries, such as raspberries, stone brambles,<sup>9</sup> garden berries such as gooseberries and black and red currants were eaten as they were. After they had ripened, no desserts or wine were made [of these berries] (...). Formerly sugar was expensive. (...) Berries were just for sweets, and so were apples too. Rowanberries were brought home for winter and if they had been touched by the cold they tasted sweet. Cranberries were likewise eaten as they were in winter, later they and other berries were used for making all kinds of desserts like kissell [a fruit soup thickened with potato starch], compote, jam, marmalade, wine and others.<sup>10</sup>

Multiple cookbooks and tutorials were published in the second and third decade of the twentieth century that emphasised the importance of nutritional information, a healthy and seasonally varied diet, and also the good taste. The fruits, including wild berries, were highlighted as healthy foods that included several minerals and vitamins (see Ottenson 1937). Though, fruit desserts still remained a festive food not regarded as part of the everyday diet.

Early recollections did not associate gathering wild fruits with a nostalgic feeling; they were rather related to poverty and the pragmatic need to get supplemental food. Yet, wild berries began to have multiple symbolic meanings and values related to the social status of food consumers, as well as to the ambivalent status of wild fruits in the overall food hierarchy. Corre-

spondents' memoirs prioritised farm-produced food and farm labour in comparison with foraging from the wild. Although wild berries were eaten by the rich as well as the poor the former had more means for diverse food consumption, hence more varied berry dishes. While the Estonian peasants' social status remained low, wild fruits for them were mainly snacks or remedies and it was due to the process of modernisation and the improvement of living conditions that rural folk could afford to buy sugar, cook more varied foods and started preserving berries. The distribution of nutritional and culinary knowledge along with the diversification of Estonians' diet raised the status of wild berries from snacks to valued ingredients in desserts.

### **Soviet Time Memories: Continuation of Peasant Food Values and the Boost of Home Preservation**

In the aftermath of World War II when Estonia became part of the Soviet Union, the economic development of the country as well as food culture was quite different from the Nordic neighbours. From 1947 onward, the collectivisation of agriculture destroyed the traditional family farm system, and collective farms (*kolkhozy* and *sovkhozy*) were established (Kasekamp 2010: 145–146). Dramatic political ruptures, that affected the lives of several correspondents, existed alongside private everyday lives in which changes in food culture in comparison to the pre-war period were less significant, except in the overall shortage of the late 1940s and early 1950s. The recollections from the Soviet food practices were collected by the Estonian National Museum in the late Soviet period (1983) and in post-Soviet Estonia (2002, 2004). Correspondents' memories became increasingly more personal and have since the 2000s developed into more experiential biographical narratives (cf. Jõesalu 2005). This change in memory culture is mirrored by a shift in Estonian ethnology from the “memory of the folk” to an interest in personal stories.

Like in other republics of the Soviet Union there was a shortage of various foodstuffs in Soviet Estonia. Until the 1960s life in the countryside remained

quite rudimentary (cf. Caldwell 2009). Basic modern kitchen technologies were available only on a limited scale and households remained important units of food production (cf. Kannike 2013). For personal needs Estonians had to continue to rely on their own skills and labour, since grocery stores were poorly stocked, had a limited and unvaried selection, and the quality of the products was generally low (Piiri 2006: 55). As in other countries of the Eastern bloc a subsidiary economy was practiced in private allotments,<sup>11</sup> foraging for food from nature and constructing informal food networks (cf. Bellows 2004; Caldwell 2004).

Correspondents' reminisced about the continuation of pre-war farm economy values necessary for survival during the Soviet shortage economy (cf. Caldwell 2009). For instance, a librarian (f., b. 1921) recalled foraging in the wild, contrasting it with the importance of self-produced food:

I especially like mushrooms and wild berries; their importance as a family food could be bigger. Gathering them is limited by the lack of time. The importance of home gardens has increased so that picking gifts of nature constantly decreases. Those who don't have a private garden use the gifts of nature more.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, time and energy invested in individual food production made many correspondents give agricultural and horticultural produce a more important status than the wild berries that became proportionally less consumed than garden fruits (cf. Ailonen 1977: 122–126). The latter were more valued by correspondents because of their easy availability, forest products because of their unique taste. Collecting berries for private needs was remembered as a leisurely activity, especially for the increasing urban population. Those Estonians (with a varied social background) who had summer cottages or huts in the countryside saw the gathering of wild berries in the Soviet period primarily as a necessity (cf. Löfgren 1999: 136).<sup>13</sup> Many urban correspondents planned their vacation during the berry-picking time and spent their holiday picking berries and preserving

for winter (cf. Caldwell 2004). However, in memories from the late Soviet period (the 1960s–1980s) foraging by urbanities also came into the frame as a recreational activity. A retired teacher (m., b. 1929) reminisced about it: “To a certain extent it was also a family hobby, whose additional benefit was staying and moving around in the fresh air.”<sup>14</sup> A worker (f., b. 1931) perceived berry picking as a private pleasure: “I like the forest, I feel wonderful there especially while being alone. When I was a child I often used to go to the state forest to herd animals.”<sup>15</sup>

The 2002 questionnaire addressed the topic of wild and garden fruits among numerous questions about the preservation and consumption of preserves, therefore recollections focused on these issues and consumption of wild berries was considered *inter alia*. Alongside other correspondents, a retired library administrator (f., b. 1945) saw the practice of preserving in the Soviet shortage economy as a continuation of the self-sufficient economy stemming from the pre-war Estonian Republic, although the practice was not so widespread in the 1930s:

In the countryside, as a reverberation of farm keeping, it was clear that every farm must make its own preserves. It was unthinkable that for example in the 1950s someone living in the countryside would buy such things from the store. This habit and custom lasted for a long time. Later it was realised that self-made preserves were cheaper and also tastier.<sup>16</sup>

In the 1960s–1980s better available means and technology boosted home preserving in the entire Eastern bloc and various fruit preserves became a considerable part of people’s everyday food (cf. Łuczaj et al. 2012).<sup>17</sup> If the Western nutritional discourse of the 1960s was already concerned about “negative nutrition” related to obesity and other diseases (Biltekoff 2012: 177), then the Soviet public discourse was concerned about the goodness of fruits and berries as part of a rationally calculated diet.

The Soviet cookbooks did not explicitly admit to the shortage economy but people were recommended to make home preserves in order to utilise the pro-



Ill. 2: Girls after picking lingonberries in Viljandi County. (Photo: Anonymous, 1921. Estonian National Museum photographic archive, Fk 2250/155)



duce. Home preserving was propagated in handbooks, newspapers, magazines and on television. The Soviet Estonian home cooks' bible "Preserves" (*Hoidised* 1959) provided detailed nutritional as well as preservation information and suggested the best ways to preserve particular fruits. In the 1970s the author recommends the compote as the best way of preserving the nutritional value, colour and taste of fruits (Ottenson 1970: 67). A former librarian (f., b. 1937) remembered that within the home preserving of his family, "There have been [made] more compotes than jams. Basically from the same berries, but we think cloudberry compote is the best. One year I made 76 litres of cloudberry compote. When I told this to others at work, they thought I was a liar."<sup>18</sup> Thus, making preserves was not just a troublesome duty, but an annual family ritual and a form of creative self-expression, which even involved some competitiveness and became the sign of a home cook's status as a good food provider. Home preserving had cultural as well as personal values; like the berry-picking it was a way of spending time with the family, creating continuity between generations, a way of communicating and finally a method for self-realisation (cf. Caldwell 2004; Piiri 2006).

The reasons for extensive home preserving were also rooted in the lack of deep-freezing technology in Soviet Estonian homes – household refrigerators with a separate freezing chamber were available only from the mid-1970s (Eelmaa 1985: 5). Hence, Estonians' ways of preserving berries were quite different from Western Europe where deep-freezing technology was widely available since the 1960s (Klementilä & Jaakola 2011; Shephard 2006). A nutritional discourse began propagating deep-freezing as the best way of preserving nutrients in berries, especially vitamins, from the late 1980s (Reeder 1988). Yet, deep-freezing chambers were small and frosting berries became common only in the 1990s when more spacious frosting chambers or special deep freezers became available on the market. From then, among the younger generation jam-making was replaced by deep-freezing that saved time and sugar, as well as preserved vitamins and nutrients.

To sum up, in multiple recollections of the pres-

ervation culture during the heyday of socialism (the 1960s–1980s) we see a continuation of peasant food traditions and values, where multiple correspondents expressed a "restorative nostalgia" (Boym 2001) towards the pre-war life. Those correspondents who grew up in the Soviet period perceived the subsidiary economy as normality and making preserves as part of the family's summer and autumn activities, something that was remembered with pride, while looking back from a post-Soviet situation. Interestingly, foraging for berries did not evoke nostalgic associations with peasant ways of life – picking berries was remembered among other activities of the self-sustaining food economy. Family traditions and personal values were praised in several berry memories that described gathering as a form of leisure rather than work and a pursuit of personal happiness (cf. Jõesalu 2005; Caldwell 2004). The wild bounty still had a lower status than self-produced food, yet, alongside an increasing number of urban inhabitants, there were more people who had time and an interest in foraging for wild fruits.

### **Recent Remembrances: Personal Nostalgia for Wild Berries in Combination with Home Gourmet Inventions**

The transformational post-Soviet period of the 1990s during which the Estonian Republic entered the market economy, changed the status of home preserving in the food economy and marked a distinction between different generations. Considering correspondents' recollections, Soviet self-sustaining ways of food production and consumption associated with the cultural continuity of a peasant lifestyle were perceived as the normality of everyday life by the elder generation (born in the 1920s–1940s), yet became signs of the negative Soviet-time heritage that the younger generation (born in the 1950s–1960s) wanted to forget (cf. Jõesalu & Kõresaar 2013). In the post-Soviet economy former homogeneous foodways were replaced with diverse patterns of consumption along with the stratification of lifestyles, especially from the early 2000s (Keller 2004).

In the 2000s the consumption of food is often based on lifestyle choices related to social status and

taste, but likewise on ethical choices that value the local, natural, organic and healthy. Today the majority of Estonians live in an urban setting and their connection to nature and foraging has changed considerably. However, the younger generation of food bloggers with memories of berry picking from their childhood may rediscover the pleasure of this activity after establishing their own family and becoming concerned about what to cook for their kids. Being a knowledgeable food consumer means being informed about dietary and nutritional issues.

As indicated above, changing memory cultures are related to different generations' memories – wild berries have different meanings for different age groups as well as at different times in a person's life. The shift in the ways berries are remembered and valued becomes especially interesting when comparing recollections from older correspondents (born in the 1920s–1940s) and food bloggers belonging to the younger generation (born in the 1970s–1980s). The older generation expressed how changes in technology and entry into the capitalist market economy changed attitudes towards the picking and conserving of wild as well as garden berries. Blog narratives from the 2000s, on the other hand, indicate that the early post-Soviet distancing from Soviet habits (such as producing and preserving food oneself) has been abandoned now and replaced with a more critical and reflective attitude towards food consumption. Such attitudes also characterise cookbooks that contain an authors' personally meaningful memories, for example, as the following introductory story to the "Tastes of the Forest":

The forest is wonderful and relaxing in all seasons. (---) Going to the forest is in my "blood" since I was a child. The trips made from grandpa's and grandma's farm are still vivid in my memories. (---) Later, the time spent in the forest and the company has been more important than the harvest itself. (---) Today everything can be bought from the shop. Though, it is not in any way comparable with the fresh berries one has picked from the forest with one's own hands or the emotions experienced. (Enden & Vilen 2009: 3)

The writer praises the pleasure of picking berries oneself and stresses family and emotional values related to the gathering practice in contrast to passive food consumption that relies uncritically on the supermarket selection. In addition, "reflective nostalgia" (Boym 2001) for berry picking and wild berry tastes related to a Soviet childhood is expressed by a food blogger:

With blueberries I have a special relationship. I would say, nostalgic. Blueberries mean blueberry soup with dumplings, the childhood forest, more particularly – this forest [a link to a photo added]. Blueberries also represent childhood gatherings with the family, when you could not get out of the forest before you had filled the basket (which does not mean that the mother did not help the children filling their baskets). And after returning home all this bounty had to be cleaned. Of course, there are some people who still can collect enough blueberries to make 20 jars of blueberry compote and the same amount of jam. Honour them! I am a lazy person and I do not. But at least five, and up to ten boxes of self-picked blueberries is the must have. (Vadi 2010)<sup>19</sup>

Such an attitude towards blueberries speaks of changing meanings related to everyday food practices – among the young generation the necessity of home preserving is replaced by the nostalgic desire to feel the continuity with family traditions, albeit interpreted in the context of the current situation of food consumption and technologies. Thus, if nostalgia is expressed by today's thirtysomethings and fortysomethings towards their Soviet childhood gathering trips, towards the tastes of particular dishes and preserves made by mothers and grandmothers, it is not the nostalgia for the Soviet economy in a political sense but rather a longing for the self-continuity, belonging and happiness perceived at a very personal level (cf. Sedikides et al. 2008; Jõesalu & Nugin 2012).

Indeed, collecting berries by oneself is not just a lifestyle choice – it is once again a practice marking a social distinction in the neoliberal economy. For a

limited number of Estonians, especially those families with a smaller income or unemployed, gathering wild berries is still a source of additional seasonal income.<sup>20</sup> For this social group, the wild bounty may have a less nostalgic and more pragmatic value, because collecting berries for hours is not an easy way to earn money. In contrast, there are Estonians who, in summertime, prefer to be engaged in effortless pleasures and buy berries from the market or directly from pickers.

Preserving wild berries for oneself has become a matter of knowledgeable choice and a reaction to mass-produced food. Self-made preserves, that in the 1990s were considered an unnecessary relic of the Soviet food economy, are now preferred to industrial jams because they contain less sugar and more berries (jams produced in the EU contain ca. 35–45% berries). Furthermore, making preserves has been re-framed by young Estonian foodies as an expression of sophisticated taste and as an enjoyable and creative activity – wild and garden berries are creatively combined with spices and herbs (e.g. chutneys from cranberries or rowanberries, blueberry jam with cinnamon, raspberry jam with peppermint, etc.). Hence, nostalgia for natural and genuine tastes is combined with the modern desire to consume in a novel way.

Professional cooks in fine dining establishments are constantly looking for culinary surprises, combining familiar tastes in unexpected ways. In addition to the nostalgic longing for the traditional values of wild berries, a significant number of novel recipes are introduced to the public including ingredients or ways of preparation that give wild berries more noble flavours. Such values are also introduced to household cooks – for instance, a recent cookbook includes wild strawberry and white chocolate ice-cream, raspberry *vinaigrette*, *brûlée* from summer berries, or rowanberry-apricot chutney (Enden & Vilen 2009). Elite restaurants' chefs, especially in Nordic countries, have raised the wild berry to a new status as a top-quality ingredient. I would characterise this development, noticeable in current food literature and the media, and in the professional restaurant scene that gives traditional food a noble

value, as a process of gentrification.<sup>21</sup> Gentrification is simultaneously a physical, economic, social and cultural phenomenon that can also be applied in the study of food culture in which upgrading gives certain ingredients or dishes that recently had a low status a new status through re-contextualisation, cooking and serving them in more elegant ways. Consuming wild berries in a gentrified context is once again a marker of social and taste distinction – it is not affordable for everyone to experience how *blueberry sorbet* with *spruce granita* tastes at the best restaurant in the world – *noma* in Denmark (see Redzepi 2010: 289).

At the same time, such noble ways of cooking berries may inspire home cooks among whom difference, novelty, and variety are the values related to “real cooking” (Short 2006: 47). The “gourmet turn” induced by elite restaurants' chefs has reached our everyday food – we expect to have home gourmet experiences whenever we feel like it. In addition to rich gourmards, knowledgeable middle-class foodies are an increasing group of food consumers who also love to cook (cf. Johnston & Bauman 2010). What we eat is still a matter of social status, yet it is also a matter of culinary literacy.

Considering food bloggers' attitudes, sophisticated tastes are not necessarily a privilege for the elite consumer. Home gourmet cooking often praised in food weblogs may be seen as a reaction to the global food chains, to the standardised food products available in supermarkets and perhaps also to the overpriced gourmet restaurant food. Food bloggers consider wild berries a genuine foodstuff that has an authentic taste and provides a fine dining experience for the family or friends (a significant number of wild berry dishes in food weblogs are cakes and desserts of various kinds – e.g. wild strawberry pavlova, cheesecake with cranberries, lingonberry-marzipan tartlets). Wild berries are tried out in ways quite different from what bloggers' mothers used to cook. A foodie describes the pleasure of making a blueberry dessert, novel in Estonian home cooking:

It is a pleasure to be in the countryside during summer. Together with my sister we enjoyed go-

ing to pick blueberries in the forest. (---) We saved some berries for home and prepared a simple and delicious semifreddo. Of course, it is a simplified recipe, not the classic semifreddo, but it tastes divine and should be enjoyed on a summer terrace after dinner. (Hanson 2009)<sup>22</sup>

This blogger represents a quite common attitude among contemporary home cooks in Estonia who do not see a conflict in combining the familiar with something luxurious as a way of self-expression and personal interpretation of culture (cf. Kannike 2013). The wild berry gourmet signifies a generational shift in Estonian food culture and speaks of new attitudes towards home cooking, but as multiple personal nostalgic associations in Estonian food blogs indicate, the exclusive value of self-picked berries is strongly related to the value of self-cooked food.

In addition to a nostalgic longing for real and genuine tastes, wild berries are associated with the issue of health that has become one of the key themes in contemporary food discourses. Wild food seems to be healthy food par excellence and likewise satisfies our nostalgia for authentic food (cf. Amilien 2003). The authors of a recently published “Berry Book” (*Marjaraamat*), entirely dedicated to wild and cultivated fruits, highlight the importance of berries’ nutritional value and suggest deep-freezing as the best way of conserving berries, and making jams in small portions from defrosted berries (Virkus & Suitsu 2012). If in recollections from the late nineteenth century wild berries had a medicinal value due to folk wisdom, then today berries high nutritional value is proven by scientific research.<sup>23</sup> The values like healthy, fresh and pure are widely accepted and also reflected in the culinary blogosphere and new ways of cooking berries (e.g. smoothies) have become popular among the younger generation of home cooks, who appreciate berries because they taste good as well as being beneficial to one’s wellbeing, especially in contrast to mass-produced food.

### **Concluding Discussion: The Diversity and Ambivalence of Wild Berry Values in Food Culture**

Why are wild berries good to remember as a topic of food culture research? Wild berries turned out to be foodstuffs with ambivalent value and at the same time rich with symbolic meanings. Recollections studied in this paper tell diverse stories not only about why and how wild fruits were used, but also revealed diverse and sometimes ambivalent attitudes related to the meaning, value and status associated with (wild) food. The way wild fruits have been remembered likewise enabled the understanding of feelings related to food, and belonging at distinct times, guiding us through different memory cultures from various socio-historical periods. Food remembrances throughout times also enable us to follow the changes and new challenges in the field of ethnological research.

It is unavoidable that we make sense of culinary traditions from a contemporary perspective and understanding these traditions is inevitably linked to re-interpreting them. However, if the tradition is used in order to authenticate the present food culture, one may tend to forget that the values attributed to certain foods were not the same, because the overall system of food production and consumption was different, as well as the social dynamics in the society. The analysis of the sources demonstrated that a tradition of consuming wild fruits existed in the past, that they have been eaten by people with different social status, yet, the ways berries have been foraged, cooked and consumed have varied considerably along with the social stratification and during different phases of modernisation. The status of wild berries as food has varied along with the changing social status of the consumers; changing nutritional and culinary knowledge; the improvement of home cooks’ kitchen literacy; and the development of new cooking technologies.

Today, wild berries have a positive value both for culinary as well as dietary reasons – they are considered local, seasonal, natural, ecological and scientifically proven healthy food for everyone. Yet, these values have not been universal throughout time. In

early pre-modern recollections, wild berries were remembered to be collected for pragmatic reasons; modernisation and urbanisation, on the contrary, increased the non-instrumental value of the wild bounty. In urban society alongside the globalisation of foodways, wild fruits are symbolic of a pure and genuine food as well as being ethical and ecological (cf. Lindqvist 2012: 59). Although wild berries are free food from nature it has always taken an effort to forage them, both in terms of physical activity and proprietary relations. Limited consumption of wild berries has been influenced by social distinctions as well as existing food hierarchies in different times.

In a society where only a few families are engaged in food production, gathering berries makes us feel that we are *making* our food instead of passively consuming what has been industrially produced. In addition to modern dietary interests and knowing the origins of the food we eat, the re-actualisation of the berry gathering practice may be influenced by the desire to live simply and sustainably, and to romanticise the peasant and more “authentic” pre-modern rural foodways (Hall 2013). The recent rediscovery of wild food may be seen as part of an ecological, healthier and anti-consumerist lifestyle (cf. Łuczaj et al. 2012: 364–365). Collecting and preserving wild berries oneself also becomes a moral act – a reaction to the industrial food system – and reflect concerns about where our food comes from, and what the impacts of its production on the environment are (cf. Biltekoff 2012: 178). Today, going out to pick your own berries is less related to low social status, especially because gathering has been reframed as a healthy recreational activity and pleasurable fun for urban people who work mostly indoors. Yet social distinctions still exist when we look at the social groups who do the commercial berry picking for a living, or the elite consumers who look for sophisticated taste experiences in top-class gourmet restaurants, where berries are collected by professional foragers. Food from the forest can also be valued in welfare societies even if there is no will to forage for it oneself (cf. Lindhagen & Hörnsten 2000).

Although wild berries were considered a marginal food in comparison with cultivated foods, they were

also rare food because of the seasonal availability in a temperate climate and the limited means or resources for preservation. Besides, not all wild berry species grow everywhere – there may be more potential consumers than berry sites at a place. Although today a wild bounty can be deep frozen for winter, forest berries clearly have an aura of exclusivity. The unique tastes of various wild fruits have given them high culinary status in the context of fine dining as well as in home gourmet cooking. Developments in contemporary Estonian food culture, which have been influenced by European as well as Soviet examples, are in tune with the trends in Nordic food culture, where the taste of food has become increasingly more important in addition to its nutritional and health values, and have long been promoted in public food discourses (see Bergflødt, Amilien & Skuland 2012).

What does nostalgia for wild berries tell us about connections between contemporary food values and memory culture? Today the importance of knowing your food is combined with a nostalgic longing for picking berries yourself. Furthermore, collecting wild fruits in particular forests creates the feeling of dwelling in and belonging to a place in contrast to mobile urban and technologically mediated lifestyles. Practices such as gathering your own berries from the forest or making berry preserves in summer are now seen as healthy ways of resistance to mass production, as well as a way to live in an ecological and sustainable foodways paradigm. Self-gathered and self-preserved berries are once again a valuable part of a households’ food economy, although not because of possible food shortages, but because of the need for knowledgeable choices in the era of mass-produced food and impersonal food consumption.

Considering the sources examined for this article I subscribe to Janelle Wilson’s claim that nostalgia is a diverse phenomenon that may have different meanings and serve distinct purposes – nostalgia may function as an expression of a person’s self-continuity and also as a way of group bonding, it may create idealised, collectively shared versions of the past, yet also be a commodity in contemporary

market society (see Wilson 2005). Personal nostalgia for wild food in food bloggers' as well as chefs' and cookbook authors' narratives shed light on today's memory culture and the way we make sense of our food traditions. Natural landscapes and wild food are perceived to be simultaneously part of the past as well as the present. Thus, wild berries may serve as a vehicle for a journey to the culinary past – eating wild berries enables us to experience what previous generations tasted. Yet, it is the positive nostalgic experience characterising the contemporary lifestyle and gustatory choices in which the sweetness of berries is remembered, without the bitter after-taste of our peasant ancestors' poverty and labour-consuming effort of producing food oneself until the late Soviet period.

## Notes

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- 2 There are more than twenty edible wild berries or fruits, to use botanical terminology, growing in Estonia, many of which can also be found in other Northern European countries, e.g. blueberry (*Vaccinium myrtillus*), lingonberry (*Vaccinium vitis-idea*), raspberry (*Rubus idaeus*), wild strawberry (*Fragaria vesca*), bog bilberry (*Vaccinium uliginosum*), cloudberry (*Rubus chaemaemorus*), and cranberry (*Oxycoccus palustris*).
- 3 The questionnaire titles reflect different research interests in which the issue of wild berry picking and consuming was considered: in 1937 *Foods, drinks, flavourings*; in 1947 *On picking mushrooms, berries, nuts and other food plants*; in 1983 *Gathering nature's gifts*; in 2002 *Food culture in the Soviet period*; and in 2004 *Human-environment relations in contemporary Estonia*.
- 4 The manors' restrictions on gathering had two major reasons. The Russian Empire introduced the forest preservation law in 1888 that required more careful maintenance of private forests in its provinces (Teplyakov 1988: 7). Additionally, encouraged by the Russian gentry, Baltic German landlords started seeing wild berries as a resource for additional income (Jürgenson 2005: 56–57). Correspondents also mentioned berry export by traders, who transported them to Riga and St. Petersburg, as a factor for the increase in commercial berry picking.
- 5 Source: KV 77 (1947): 76. In the references to correspondents *f* refers to the female and *m* to the male correspondent; for contextualising the response the year of birth and the activity of the correspondent are provided. All translations of correspondents' responses are by the author.
- 6 Source: EA 117 (1957): 494.
- 7 Interestingly, correspondents did not remember honey being used as a substitute for sugar. Drying, as a means for preserving, was also mentioned only by a few correspondents, and this primarily for the purpose of making medicinal tea.
- 8 Such developments were in tune with the nineteenth-century nationalism in the rest of Europe where cookbooks turned to native folk cookery instead of guiding international elite cuisines (Albala 2012: 235).
- 9 *Rubus saxatilis*.
- 10 Source: KV 33 (1937): 108.
- 11 Yet, the standard size of private household plots was incomparable with the farm households being limited to 0.5–0.6 ha (Piiri 2006: 57–58).
- 12 Source: KV 583 (1983): 373.
- 13 State organised berry utilisation in the Soviet Estonia also supported the commercial gathering of wild berries for extra income (Paal 2011).
- 14 Source: KV 1064 (2004): 13.
- 15 Source: KV 1069 (2004): 98.
- 16 Source: KV 1031 (2002): 220.
- 17 In Estonia in 1978 45% of all families boiled jam, 31% pressed juice, and 28% made compotes; in general, approximately 80% of all produce from personal holdings was turned into preserves (Raig 1981: 39).
- 18 Source: KV 1031 (2002): 62.
- 19 Source: Vadi (2010): Mustika-jõhvikajogurti *panna cotta*. 11.03.2010. Food weblog *Toidutegu*: <http://toidutegu.wordpress.com/2010/03/11/mustika-johvika-jogurti-panna-cotta/>. Accessed March 1, 2013.
- 20 Gertu (b. 1977), a mother of four children, describes that her blueberry gathering trips last from 5 am to 11 am and sometimes she returns to the forest also in the evening. She can pick 24 litres during one trip. She claims that berry utilisation prices have risen after the euro was introduced (e.g. the best price offered in summer 2011 was 2.40 per kilo) (Allas 2012: 38–39). Even though the prices paid by berry utilisers and resellers (e.g. 1.60 euro for blueberries) are almost half the price asked at the marketplaces (e.g. 3–5 euro for blueber-

ries), active pickers may earn around 50 euro per day (Mikovitš 2012).

- 21 Gentrification is a concept used in urban studies mainly for describing how certain low-income neighbourhoods have been upgraded as valued places for living for people from the middle and upper-middle classes (Pacione 2005: 212).
- 22 Hanson (2009): Mustika semifreddo. 17.08.2009. Food weblog *Puhas rõõm*: <http://piretireseptid.blogspot.com/2009/08/mustika-semifreddo.html>. Accessed March 1, 2013.
- 23 As studies from the Nordic countries have demonstrated, the discovery of phenolic components (such as flavonols) found in wild berries has given them an important status as “functional foods” (Yngve 2007: 1207).

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