

# Traditionalism or Rationality?

## Aspects of Potato Consumption in Sweden

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Jansson, Sören 1994: Traditionalism or Rationality? Aspects of Potato Consumption in Sweden, – *Ethnologia Europaea* 24: 149-154.

The paper describes the early introduction of the potato in Sweden – and the process whereby it has become an important staple. Although consumption has decreased since the 1930s, the potato still holds its position as one of the traditional foodstuffs, which could be interpreted as a sign of conservatism regarding people's food choice. Via data concerning potato consumption in contemporary households the paper questions this conclusion. By pinpointing considerable changes in food practices – and attitudes towards the cooked dinner – it is suggested that this single item rather expresses the dynamics of food habits and its constantly and successfully capacity for adjusting to surrounding living and working conditions.

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For more than a hundred years the potato has served as a key feature of Swedish food. This is so, not only in quantitative terms, but also in a more complex cultural interpretation; for a long time people have looked upon the potato as a crucial ingredient – something that makes a difference between 'just food' and 'a proper meal'. In this respect – a major staple with commonly recognized symbolic connotations – the potato clearly belongs to the category of 'cultural superfoods' (Jelliffe 1967, Heisler 1981).

'Tradition' is generally considered being of great importance in the individual's food choice, i.e. we eat what we have been taught to like. From this standpoint the potato seems to symbolize the quintessence of traditionalism: a foodstuff with an almost static position in the dietary system, in respect of both food practices and values/ideologies. But this is not the only possible interpretation. On the contrary, this paper shows that a more thorough investigation of the potato saga in Swedish everyday life, reveals a dramatic story. It constitutes an excellent case study that illuminates long term changes in living conditions, and, although a

'traditional' dish, it actually questions the concept of 'traditionalism' as a basic principle of food choice.

### A long story

It is as if the Swedes needed nearly two hundred years to achieve a thoroughgoing acceptance of what was eventually to become their super food. At least, this would be so if we adopt the starting point of 1655, when the first known potato plant met Swedish soil. This specimen could be inspected at the then newly established Uppsala Botanical Garden, but it was greeted with no particular interest. The only effect of any significance was that some noblemen living in the vicinity introduced single plants in their kitchen gardens (Osvold 1965).

The 'real' introduction is considered to have taken place much later. It was in 1727 that the industrialist Jonas Alströmer, inspired by a long stay in England, began cultivating potatoes on an agricultural scale. His enterprising experiment in potato growing and persistence in persuading people of the excellence of the

tuber made him widely known – even by today's Swedish schoolchildren – as 'the pioneer'. This meant that by the 1740s he was well placed to make important contributions to the emerging official propaganda in the matter.

The élite of society was now beginning to grasp the potential of this innovation, both as nutriment and economic asset. Extensive propaganda was initiated – for instance scientific papers, pamphlets, and the almanac of 1749 and 1750 (second to the Bible the most widespread publication) – all emphasizing potatoes as a substitute for grain, mainly with regard to baking bread but also, partly, for distilling alcohol (Alströmer 1747, Lantingshausen 1747, De la Gardie 1748).

Even so, we find no evidence of a breakthrough. Some members of the nobility, as well as of the clergy, seemed anxious to develop the new crop. People in general, though, were more reluctant. In years of successive grain shortages the potato was temporarily accepted more commonly as an emergency food (or, more precisely, emergency bread) but not embraced or appreciated as a food item in its own right.

It is true that the potato became familiar to many ordinary farmers during the second part of the 18th century, but it was only rarely cultivated as a major crop. It remained a kitchen garden vegetable, used as a complement to grain. To this one could add the existence of contemporary evidence showing that both independent farmers and, most clearly, the working staff of the big mansions, objected to potatoes as a meal component (Linné 1751, Heckscher 1949).

### Distillation of alcohol – and the making of a super food

What was a modest development in the 18th century moved into a dramatically new phase in the early 19th century. The period between 1802 and 1820, not quite two decades, saw a 460% increase in the potato crop (Osvald 1965). Why, then, this change of heart? Was it a succession of poor grain harvests? Or was it a substantial revaluation of the potato as a food-stuff?

It was neither nor. The key to understanding is more likely to be found in the official regulations of quite another kind of consumer goods – alcohol. Firstly, after almost a century of prohibiting the domestic production of alcohol, around 1800, home distillation was permitted to farmers and other land owners – against a compulsory charge to the Crown. Secondly, the authorities conducted a resolute campaign for utilizing potatoes instead of grain as the raw material. Between 1812 and 1815 they even banned the distillation of grain – which left only one item to choose (Siegbahn 1971).

It is important to recognize that this dramatic expansion of cultivation was not primarily motivated by the desire to increase consumption. The aim was not to produce food, although in reality farmers did. And soon they found themselves well supplied with a raw product of the utmost utility in the area of food preparation.

When analysing how the potato 'invaded' the existing food culture special attention has to be paid to two things. Firstly, as already clearly indicated, there is the cumulative effect of successive phases over a long period of time. Secondly, we must note its versatility, which well suits it for the smooth integration into existing food habits.

Mixing cooked potatoes with the dough to make bread is just one common method used through the whole of the 19th century (Campbell 1950). Another is to use them in porridge or pancakes – in such case, a mixture of potato and flour. And, of course, they are an ingredient in a common dish that is a mixture of root vegetables, greens and pieces of meat, variously known as stew, casserole, hot pot etc. (Ek-Nilsson 1974).

In other words, what we witness is not the destruction but an anonymous invasion of an existing dietary pattern. People could go on eating what they were used to, but still utilize, and learning to like, this new practical, economic, nutritious, and easily produced food-stuff. And soon it became self-evidently a part of the common Swedish diet, appearing more and more as a meal component in its own right.

The fact that home distilling was permanently banned in 1854 made no difference. By the second half of the 19th century the potato was well established as food in Sweden, especially for poor people in general and the rural proletariat in particular, so much that in retrospect they are often labelled 'the potato people' (Löfgren 1981). Not only had it become established in terms of the extent of its consumption; it had also become established in terms of what was judged to constitute a proper meal. The plain and humble root was equally valued in this respect not just to the proletariat but also to the well-to-do farmers and town dwellers. Menus originating from these days seem to have just one compulsory item: the potato.

## The rise and fall of potato hegemony

The late 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century can be considered the heyday of the potato. Certainly farmers and industrial workers during the 1930s still relied rather heavily upon it (Jansson 1992). This was especially the case for farmers who often had potatoes three times a day. Nonetheless, between 1930 and 1970 statistics show a steep fall in consumption from 400 to 240 grammes per person a day; in other words, by 40% (SOU 1984).

How can such a dramatic change be explained? The matter is more complex than can be encompassed in a single paper. Only two fundamentally important aspects will be focused on here: the process of industrialization and urbanisation.

These processes accelerated markedly within a very short timespan. Between 1930 and 1960 Sweden was transformed from a rural society, with one third of the work force occupied within the agricultural sector, into a modern industrial state. Furthermore, following the Second World War, this industrial state experienced a tremendous economic success with an unprecedented improvement in material living conditions.

It requires no great effort to envisage the way all this affected some basic principles of food practices and food supply for various social categories. An obvious example is the col-

lapse of the self-sufficiency economy, where many small-holders considered potatoes as crucial for their possibilities of making a living. Now they had become industrial workers they had neither the opportunity nor the economic incentive to keep potato consumption at the same level.

As already mentioned, a major point is that standard of living rose rapidly: not only for those leaving the countryside for an industrial employment, but also for those who were already industrial workers. And money, as everyone knows, can make a difference. The fact that potatoes were considered an important part of the meal does not imply that people were satisfied with only potatoes. Animal foods were far more highly valued: an ideal was to have meat at every meal, not just occasionally (Hirdman 1983, Fjellström 1990).

As soon as their improved standards of living admitted, people started to exchange a proportion of the starchy components of their diet for more highly desired ingredients. As a corollary we find, after 1940, a marked shift in the Swedish diet from cereals and vegetables to dairy products and meat, thereby initiating a process which in the 1960s caused doctors and nutritionists to start talking about food as a major health problem of the welfare state (Jansson 1993a).

## Some current examples

Where, then, is the potato in the Swedish diet of today? The first point to be made in this respect is that facts and figures vary considerably, depending on whom we are referring to. For instance, persons living with their families seem to appreciate potatoes much more than people living on their own do. And those over the age of 45 eat significantly more than the younger age groups do. In occupational terms, farmers are distinguished by a level of consumption almost double that of every one else (SCB 1992).

Nonetheless, it is illuminating to turn more specifically to one of these social categories in order to get a more detailed description of the state of play. Data collected between 1988 and 1993 will serve this purpose (Jansson 1988,



Fig. 1. The quantitative distribution of potato-, pasta- and rice-meals, according to a sample of 40 dietary records of seven days, completed by females.

Potato	(66%)
Pasta	(15%)
Rice	(19%)

1990, 1993b, 1995a). They derive from case studies of contemporary food practices of middle and upper middle class city households consisting of two adults between 30 and 50 years and their children. The methods of investigation included qualitative interviews and dietary records covering seven successive days. The following is based on a reanalysis of the records completed by females living with husband and children, which makes a total sample of 40 cases.

What, then, can be deciphered from these data? To begin with, the general consumption level is, as could be expected, not very high, with an average of 4.5 potato meals a week. On the other hand, studying the relation between potatoes and the two other staples that appear on Swedish dinner tables, pasta and rice, we find that the potato is anything but obsolete (fig. 1). The opposite conclusion has to be drawn: the potato remains 'super food'.

Turning to look in which forms potatoes are consumed, we can easily see two prevalent features – boiled (in the first place) and mashed (in the second) (fig. 2). Together they represent 57% of all potato dishes listed. At the same time, the table shows the vegetable appearing in further 16 additional forms. The point could, and perhaps should, be made, that the concept of 'potato' comprises a great variety of food items – in a way it resembles a chameleon of the food world, appearing in various guises adapted to surrounding circumstances.

Thirdly, a few words about when these potatoes are consumed. The current data show a clear tendency towards dinner-time, that is the evening meal of the day. It should be noted, however, that this is partly due to the exclusion of men from this reanalysis. Other data from the same studies show that men more often have potatoes at lunch time. More interesting, though, is that potatoes appear

more frequently at week-ends than on week days. In retrospect it seems as if the 'everyday' character of the staple has declined in favour of a 'week-endish' one.

## A traditional food in modern society?

It is clear: the potato has no fixed position in Swedish diet. Its historical development shows a rather dramatic story touching upon a wide range of economic, social, and cultural changes. Studying potato consumption can, therefore, serve as a useful means of disclosing the everyday aspects of social change within different social settings. But, apart from the fact that food habits change when society changes, can something more be learned about fundamental principles of people's food choice?

It is tempting to interpret the slow pace of acceptance of the potato as clear evidence for the deeply rooted conservatism, that is often

Fig. 2. Potato dishes (and number of dishes) in a sample of 40 dietary record of seven days, completed by females.

Kokt (Boiled)	78
Potatismos (Mashed)	27
Stekt (Fried)	15
Gratäng (Au gratin)	14
Bakad (Baked in the oven)	9
Pommes frites (Chips/French fries)	5
Pressad (Boiled, pressed through a coarse strainer)	5
Hasselbackspotatis (Whole potatoes, partly sliced and roasted in the oven topped with butter and cheese)	5
Raggmunkar (Potato fritters)	4
Stuvad (Pieces of boiled potato, heated in a sauce made of butter, flour and milk)	3
Potatissoppa (Soup)	3
Potatiskroketter (Commercially prepared potato croquettes)	3
Råstekt (Raw potato, fried in a frying pan)	2
Janssons frestelse (Sliced potatoes, cooked in the oven with cream, onions and anchovy)	2
Klyftpotatis (Sliced potatoes, roasted in the oven)	1
Pitepalt (Stuffed potato dumplings)	1
Rösti (Rösti)	1



said to characterize attitudes and values regarding food. However, when adopting the view presented here, that puts the slow introduction into longer historical perspective, quite another aspect of continuity and change emerges. In this light, the potato might instead be regarded as symbolizing the thesis that 'tradition' or 'traditional behaviour' is never given once and for all, but continually placed under consideration and the subject of revaluation. The key strategy for the individual would, in that case, not be conservatism but subjectively conceived rationality.

Of course, conservatism might be highly rational, for instance in a cultural milieu where 'innovations' and 'change' are regarded nothing much to strive for, and where change per se actually represents a risk: why turn to a new crop until you are totally convinced of its benefit?

This kind of subjective rationality is perhaps most evident with regard to the 20th century transition from the self-sufficiency economy. With regard to basic changes of economic resources – in this case less land to cultivate and more money to be spent on worldly goods – and, equally important, existing desires to increase meat consumption, the most rational behaviour from the individual's point of view was to develop new food habits; to cut down on cereals and potatoes and eat more meat.

But the concept of 'subjective rationality' is also relevant in the analysis of today's situation, with marked differences in potato consumption in various household formations and social categories. There are, for example, as documented in other studies, a number of practical reasons for people who live on their own to keep consumption at a low level. For instance, it has been shown that in households with a low turnover of cooked food, potatoes are generally treated as 'fresh' food with relatively short duration in the refrigerator (Jansson 1990). For people living that way it is simply common sense to keep a small stock of pasta or rice in the cupboard – in case one should venture a cooking session.

Finally, a brief comment on the generation gap in potato consumption; older persons eat more than younger ones do. Does this mean

that the dear old staple is subjected to a process of devaluation; that it is less and less appreciated as a meal component? It is possible, but most data actually point in another direction. One thing clearly emerging in the interviews mentioned earlier, is that people today rate potato as a high quality product. It is said to be nutritious, healthy, and good value for money. Another thing to bear in mind is that potatoes are still 'super' compared to other staples.

What logic, then, can be made out of this apparent paradox? A plausible conclusion is that the decrease in consumption should not be interpreted primarily as an effect of changing values of the potato as such but rather as an effect of changing values of what constitutes a 'meal'.

It seems as if the definition of a 'meal' has changed significantly during the last decades. For most of the 20th century it automatically included potatoes (or other staples), but today there is a whole variety of dishes considered suitable for dinner-time, which do not include potato. Mixed salad, soup, toasted sandwiches, omelette, black pudding and take-away pizzas and hamburgers – to mention just a few.

And the rationality of it lies in the fact that young families of today have to adopt new meal practices – and new food ideologies – that are congruent with the new well established Scandinavian gender role system (Jansson 1995b). Nowadays, when both husband and wife are in paid employment outside home there is neither time nor expectations or demands for elaborated dishes every day. It is quite sufficient to have something more easily prepared.

But this doesn't mean that a 'meal' is equal to a 'real/proper/cooked meal'. Obviously, in these younger generations we find a pretty outspoken view indicating that whenever food represents something specifically more than 'eating together' – for instance a symbolic manifestation of the family, or quite simply that the working week has come to an end – then it is seldom enough to have 'just a meal'. It is important to have 'a real/proper/cooked meal', and – as we have seen – it will most likely include potatoes.

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