Translated identity: Recipes as part of nation-building in Estonia

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In this paper, I will take a diachronical look at the culinary trends in Estonia in order to shed light on the process of nation-building in the 1930s and the present time. I rely mainly on two sources: Maria Laidoner's Cuisine (2008; compiled on the basis of notes taken down from published cookbooks and hand-written recipes from the 1930s) and Gifts of Taste (2011). The common denominator that brings these two books together is that behind them stand women who have had an important status in the society, first ladies of the state, respectively Maria Laidoner and Evelin Ilves. The books represent respectively the period of the first Republic of Estonia (1919–1939) and present time (21st century). The fact that the books are published in the 2000s, but refer back to the first Republic of Estonia carries a feeling of nostalgia towards the authentic, combining the rustic and noble into a fine and trendy whole.

In addition to this, I will take a broader look at recently published Estonian cookbooks to describe the visible trend of promoting the authentic, local and thoroughly Estonian food and ingredients. The analysis will point at how the “Estonianness” of foodways is constructed in present-day Estonia. I attempt to show how these cookbooks redefine the essence of the Estonian cuisine, creating references to the local culinary tradition and the Estonian nature, the Estonian middle class of the 1930s, and stressing the importance of the Estonian land and its traditions.

Food belongs among the most basic and universal needs. The need has to be fulfilled in order to stay alive, and at the same time it comes with numerous cultural implications in how we eat or talk about food, prepare it, etc. Cookbooks, although a relatively recent invention, can be seen as a guide the culture of food consumption. Cookbooks talk to us on multiple levels. First of all, they provide information about how to prepare food on a very personal level—after all, they are practical publications meant for using in the kitchen. But secondly, and equally importantly, they are

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1 The research was supported by IUT 22-5
informative about what can be eaten and how, and thus they reflect a larger picture
(see e.g. Brownlie, Hewer & Horne 2005: 7, who discuss cookbooks as cultural
artefacts which contain “inscribed cultural tales”). Their cultural significance is
evident in the way they illuminate the domestic—or, even more broadly, social—
history.
I agree with Fischler (1988: 275) who argues that “food is central to our sense of
identity”. We are what we eat. Entire nations and groups identify themselves partly
through what they see as their traditional food with all the rituals that accompany it.
The sociology of consumption that may be taken as a general framework that includes
the sociology of food describes how external objects cross the border from outside
of the human body to inside both literally and symbolically, and this process of
internalization forms a part of our identity, supporting the continuous (re)construction
of the self. The primary location for the process is “the kitchen that is the most
symbolic interaction space between the house and the nature” (Zarski 2013: 150).

The politics of food, as Marianne Lien and Brigitte Nerlich (2004) argue, has a lot to
do with the creation of the nation-state. Arjun Appadurai (1988) has stated that
cookbooks in countries with newly acquired nationhood and regionalized cuisines act
as a middle-class instrument for composing a national culture. The dominant group
establishes the culinary common ground: they define “us” through combining the
elements (ingredients, ways of preparing and serving etc) that they feel are authentic
to that particular culture, and disregard others that seem not so authentic.
Contemporary Estonian national identity relies greatly on the legacy from the first
Republic of Estonia from the first half of the 20th century, and so does—as we will
witness in the present study—contemporary Estonian culinary art. Present-day
foodways in Estonia display a definite nostalgia towards the authenticity and
creativity of the recipes from the first Republic of Estonia. I attempt to show how the
two cookbooks that are analysed in this paper redefine the essence of Estonian
present-day cuisine. I will look first at the historical background to locate the
publication of the cookbooks in time and space, analysing that to the backdrop of a
politically manipulated identity discourse. This discourse functions as a mouthpiece
for ideas like integration, nostalgia of the “good old days”, a longing for nobility that
Estonians as a nation never had, and last but not least – the revival of national ideals
after a long and difficult period under totalitarian regime.

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The dominant group in the first Republic of Estonia was the upper middle class that consisted of citizens of Estonian nationality. It was the first time in history when Estonians themselves were the ruling class in their state. For most part of the nation’s history Estonians have lived under the rule of other more powerful (neighbouring) nations who one after another conquered the strategically placed piece of land. The tsar Peter the Great saw Estonia as a window to Europe during the expansion of the Russian Empire in the 18th century; invaders from the West found it a great gateway to the East. The ruling class was essentially the minorities, e.g. Baltic German and Russian noblemen living in Estonia, whereas Estonians were the peasantry.

The 20th century saw a radical change in this order. By the beginning of the 20th century most of the foreign nobility had emigrated to Russia or Germany—to the country of their origin—, and this gave the locals a chance to start developing their own “upper class” culture. As Estonians became wealthier, they became interested in visiting entertainment venues like theatres, cabarets and restaurants. These establishments became more and more likely to be frequented by Estonians and thus the (Estonian) chefs working there gained a chance to introduce Estonian dishes in their menus. Also housewives became interested in “cooking Estonian”. This lead to a wave of publications: culinary books, journals, and handbooks for young housewives were being published. The publications taught mostly urban women how to cook according to local traditions.

In the present day, we can see a rising interest in home cooking as well. There are innumerous cookbooks, blogs, magazine and newspaper cooking columns etc being published, translated and re-printed daily as cooking—especially slow cooking—has come in vogue. Among these, there are few that are designed to make a deeper impression than just provide information about how to prepare a quick and healthy meal for one’s family. I suggest that the latter are especially likely to be closely tied to the self-identification of a nation because they take time to tell a story about the recipes that they contain and in some cases do it also in other languages besides Estonian in order to project the quest for Estonian cooking towards the outsiders, the foreign audiences, strengthening the identity through their recognition and appreciation.
This is the case with *Maria Laidoner's Cuisine* (2008). The book features recipes in three languages - Estonian, Russian and English. *Maria Laidoner's Cuisine* is definitely not just a book about recipes. It is a cookbook with a message. In this paper, we will look first at the historical background to locate the book in time and space, and then tie the picture together by interpreting its message in the context of a discourse that functions as a mouthpiece for ideals like integration, nostalgia of the “good old days”, a longing for nobility that Estonians as a nation never had, and last but not least - the revival of national ideals after a long and difficult period under totalitarian regime.

By comparison, I will also refer to another cookbook, *Gifts of Taste* (2011), a bilingual publication (Estonian and English), written by Evelin Ilves, the wife of the sitting president of Estonia. The numerous pictures in this book and its special section dedicated to authentic Estonian food offer a perfect (diachronic) comparison for *Maria Laidoner's Cuisine*. On the whole, the two books give an interesting picture of how the first ladies of a state, at different though crucial times in terms of national identity, give their share in constructing the Estonian identity through recipes.

Thirdly, I will look even more broadly at recently published cookbooks to establish a trend towards stressing the authentic, local and thoroughly Estonian food.

**Case 1: Maria Laidoner's Cuisine**

Maria Laidoner, born as Maria Kruszewska on December 7, 1888, was a daughter of a Polish nobleman. She married an Estonian general and came to live in Estonia. Her husband, general Johan Laidoner (1884–1953), undoubtedly belongs to the national pantheon of Estonia. He was a highly honoured politician and one of the country’s most famous military officers. From the introduction to the cookbook we may read: “At the age of 35 he became the Commander-in-Chief of the Estonian Armed Forces, and under his determined leadership Estonia won the War of Independence (1918–1920)” (Maria Laidoner’s Cuisine 2008, p 12). This was a heroic victory, all the more so because it was unbelievable: the small Estonian army winning battles on two fronts simultaneously, against Russia and Germany, after years of devastating war-faring. Johan Laidoner was not only respected as a competent commander-in-chief who had
lead Estonia towards their own nation state; he was also a diplomat and statesman. Although he never became the president, he and his wife carried a similar role among the political and intellectual elite of the period. As the President of Estonia, Konstantinn Päts, did not have a wife, the Laidoners often organised and presided over important official dinners and Maria Laidoner acted as the first lady of the state. She was well-educated, having finished Tallinn Conservatoire (now the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre), and was socially very active. From General Laidoner’s correspondence with his wife Maria, some of which is reprinted in the cookbook to give the flavour of the times, we learn about the social life of the elite of that time, and about the responsibilities and obligations they had. These included festive lunches and dinners, gatherings, balls and tea parties. It was Maria who organised the menus and supervised the cooking, serving and laying tables. Up until the beginning of the Soviet occupation of Estonia in 1940, she carried this responsibility and her social events were renowned for her culinary masterpieces (ibid: 12). She died at the age of 90 in Jämejala, near Viljandi, in 1978.

Her correspondence frequently addresses the topic of cooking as all her guests were impressed by her art. One of the main sources she used was a famous cookbook written by Jelena Malokhovets, Podarok molodym khozyaykam (‘A Gift to young housewives’) – an extremely popular book at that time. Molohovets was notorious for making clear class distinctions, herself a member of the nobility, and her book carried a strong potential of elevating the nouveau-riche/middle class among the nobility; or, in the case of Estonia, a potential of forming the nobility in the first place. In the process of forming nation-states (Appadurai 1988), the culinary common ground is established by the dominant group: they define “us” through combining the elements (ingredients, ways of preparing and serving etc) that they feel are authentic to that particular culture. The dominant group in the first Republic of Estonia was for the first time local Estonian (or fully assimilated) upper middle class.

The story of Maria Laidoner’s Cookbook

Maria Laidoner’s cookbook, published in 2008 by the Estonian War Museum / General Laidoner Museum, was an instant success on the bookstore shelves. Its
copies are constantly lent out from libraries. The publishers of the book set out to compile a set of recipes in a representable form, to be given as a gift to diplomats and guests of the Estonian Republic. The book tries to revive the atmosphere of the first Republic of Estonia, reprinting authentic photos of the Laidoner residence by the sea and the luncheons that took place there. The pictures alternate with extracts from Maria’s letters.

The culinary culture cultivated by the then new Estonian nobility of the first Republic is recreated by a combination of images—both old and new photos—and text. Furthermore, the book seeks to re-install the ideals, tastes and habits valued then into today’s world, and to integrate the Estonians of different ethnic background (and educate the foreigners) through the consumption of food. Maria Laidoner was, after all, a perfectly integrated foreigner who came to Estonia, learned to speak the language and follow the customs—and cook the local food. The aims of the cookbook are summarised in the preface: it is a publication of historical material, an example of cooperation between different nations, and a classical cookbook all in one, a story of integration. A reference of how the idea of the book was born dwells on the same idea: the photo album together with Molokhovets’s 1899 cookbook was brought to the museum by a Russian-speaking young woman who had found them in the course of construction work in her house, which makes the gesture “the best evidence of the fact that integration has been successful in the second period of independence here in Estonia” (ibid: 13).

The content of the book – and the meanings within

The pictures and letters reprinted in Maria Laidoner’s Cookbook tell volumes about the meaning of food and the sentiments of national identity that it carries. Added to the texts in three languages, laid out as handwriting to enhance the feeling of authenticity, Maria Laidoner’s letters illustrate the story. She wrote the letters in her late life in Estonia. By then (in the 1970s) she lived alone, her husband having been taken to Siberia (where he died in prison), and their son having committed suicide. She describes how visits from her (mostly Estonian) friends brought happiness in her days and something good on her table:
Some ladies came to see me on the first day of the holidays. I made pasha—it turned out nicely and it made me proud. I also made my favourites—“salty” pies—and they turned out well, too. One of my friends brought homemade white bread, another brought a homemade cake and another bought a cake. I coloured, very primitively, some eggs (ibid: 31).

While doing this, she has chosen to use Estonian and add but a few foreign words in between (e.g.: “first I will make some nice pies and plov and the things I promised to make to my friends—пельмени”, p 22). Thus, she is presented to the readers as the embodiment of a well-integrated immigrant, who, although Polish, mastered the difficult Estonian language and found a way into the hearts of the locals. Maria’s letters as well as the recipes ordered as four-course menus and the advice section in the end of the book refers back to the “good old days”, an almost mythological past where receptions were grand, ladies and gentlemen were well behaved and food was plenty. A telling passage in the advice section reads:

*Tea is served on a long dinner table covered with a clean tablecloth. A small table with a samovar is put at one end of the table. A tray of fruit, such as apples, pears, oranges, mandarins and grapes is placed in the middle of the table. On both sides of the fruit tray piles of dessert plates are placed crosswise with the table, and dessert knives made of silver or bone are placed next to the plates. (…) Small plates with thin slices of veal, ham, beef, hazel grouse, turkey or chicken, tongue, rabbit, Russian cheese or cottage cheese, grated green cheese et al are placed symmetrically around the bread tray in the form of a crescent (ibid: 153).*

This description forms a striking contrast with the time that Maria Laidoner actually wrote the letters, ie in the last decade of her life during deep totalitarian stagnation when the everyday reality consisted mostly of food shortage and worshipping working-class heroes who had nothing in common with the bourgeoisie lifestyle she had known in her youth. There were almost none of the by then exotic dishes she mentions available in shops. The permanent promises about blooming communism that was about to arrive and provide equally for everyone had not come true. People
were encouraged to work for the aim, and women tractorists and milkmaids took the forefront on newspaper pages. At the same time, drunks were killing time behind the local shops and life generally got worse for everyone regardless of the effort of keeping up appearances that the ideals of socialism will soon be fulfilled.

Taken to the present times, the perception of this contrast is even sharpened—the idealization of the first Republic of Estonia often goes hand in hand with imagining the atrocities of the later decades (1940s to 1980s). In this juxtaposition, the bourgeoisie society from 1920 to 1940 emerges as the golden times. It emerges as a winner in all its aspects, and food plays an important role in this sum. The nostalgia that food has the power to create has been noticed before: Sutton (2001) sees food as an incubator of memory, complete with its power to stimulate nostalgia. Both food and memory have a strong relationship with identity. Very often we remember the food from our childhood as the ideal one and the experiences originating from our mothers’ our grandmothers’ kitchens shape the preferences in later life. Home and food, especially when combined, evokes feelings of comfort and security. Our tastes are to a great degree determined by cultural patterns emerging from the culinary traditions (Zarski 2013) and the early experience thereof. To put it briefly, “if “we are what we eat”, then “we are what we ate” as well” (Sutton 2001: 6).

The recipes combine the exotic and the homely into fine dishes. Some contain ingredients that today are difficult to find and that give the reader of a taste of grandeur of the past times:

**Pheasant with roast beetroot:** Clean the pheasants. Wash the vegetables. Cut the beetroot into two or four pieces and halve the onions and carrots. Put the ingredients in a cooking or cast-iron pot. Pour in water and red wine and add the caraway seeds and rosemary. Add salt. Place the pheasants on top of everything and cover them with a thin layer of lard to make the dry pheasant meat more juicy. Chop the butter and put the pieces on the vegetables. Season with ground juniper berries and black pepper (ibid: 121).

**Cold mushroom sauce:** Mix the egg yolks in a bowl with mustard, salt, sugar and pepper. Whisk for two minutes, slowly adding the oil. Then continue the whisk carefully until the sauce becomes thicker. Add the thickened cream and
chopped pickled chanterelle mushrooms. Add capers, dill or pickled cucumbers to taste. (ibid: 117).

*Maria Laidoner’s Cookbook* is exactly an exercise in nostalgia for “the childhood of our nation”. Moreover, Maria Laidoner personifies something more than just the good times and prosperity of the first Republic of Estonia. Through a frequent reference to Molokhovets’s book and culinary traditions known among the nobility of Eastern Europe, she helped to build the local Estonian upper middle class through novel and noble tastes: that of crème caramel, Hollandaise sauce, roasted quails, caviar, but also local fish, chanterelles, etc. By mixing the internationally renowned dishes with simple Estonian food, she then created a new culinary tradition of the emerging Estonian nobility. Last but not least—the cookbook itself, published in 2008, symbolizes the revival of national ideals after a long and difficult period under the totalitarian regime.

Case 2: Evelin Ilves and her *Gifts of taste*

Evelin Ilves, the wife of the sitting President of Estonia (Toomas-Hendrik Ilves has been the president from 2006 onwards), is a visible public figure. Her interest in locally designed Estonian fashion has brought her and her outfits to the attention of the press both in Estonia and abroad. So have her statements about sports (she is the president of Estonian Rollerskating Federation), gardening, handicrafts, health (fighting against alcoholism), and—perhaps above all—food. Together with her husband, she manages the Ärma homestead in Southern Estonia. Before becoming the wife of the sitting president, she was known to the wider public as the project leader of the controversial state-commissioned branding project for making Estonia more attractive for the foreign visitors, thus being involved with questions of national identity, the propagation of Estonianness, and designing the image of the state. The aim of the project was to advertise Estonia as a desirable tourism and business destination (*Welcome to Estonia! 2002*[^2]). Thus, a cookbook that introduces foreign recipes to Estonians and Estonian culinary secrets to foreigners follows quite logically

from her interests. Her contribution to the discourse about contemporary Estonian food is remarkable (Annuk 2013: 139) and she often speaks up on this topic.

The story of *The Gifts of Taste*

Evelin Ilves’s book *Gifts of taste* was published in 2011. Similarly to *Maria Laidoner’s Cookbook*, it takes the reader on a trip into discovering the world of tasty yet simple food. The book is comprised of two parts: the first six chapters deal with recipes given to the president’s wife on diplomatic travels from around the world, and the last chapter is dedicated solely to local Estonian recipes. All of them begin with story of how the dish reached the president’s family, written down in a colourful and warm style. The stories are brought to life by the pictures that illustrate them. The First Lady said after the book launch in Abja bookshop on the official web page of the President of Estonia: “There’s no simpler, quicker or more enjoyable way of expressing your country’s values or capturing the intricacies of its climate and moods and what they have to offer than through local food”

Indeed, the warm, positive moods and impressions that come with cooking form the center of this book—photos accompanying the stories of the dishes are a vivid declaration of this. The artist who designed the book states that “Evelin’s simple, heartfelt recipes are matched perfectly by Marksteen’s [Marksteen Adamson’s] photos, which really give them a ‘just out of the oven’ feel” (ibid). The publishers have stressed the values that the design represents, stating that the simple style lets the pure tastes raise to the pedestal.

Content and meanings

Evelin Ilves starts every “gift” recipe in the first six chapters with a story of how she came to know the dish. The Estonian chapter in the end of the book is slightly different. In its introduction, the author points at the short and yet-in-the-making history of Estonian cuisine: “as a new player, we are just starting our invasion of the

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3 Abja is small village close to Ärma farm. Holding the book launch in this remote place can perhaps be seen as a tribute to the countryside and its authentically Estonian cuisine. The official launch was held at the Helsinki book festival, signaling the orientation towards foreign audience.

world. And that’s great—it means each of us has a say in what the special Estonian taste is” (Ilves 2008: 199). There is an openness to novel tastes in Estonian cooking that she recognizes as a positive thing, but this is right side by side with the features of a laconic, practical—deeply Nordic—cuisine. She adds that for her, the authentic Estonian taste is: “pike perch, chanterelles, cheese curd and wild strawberries” (ibid). There is still a strong stress on the accompanying story of how the recipe reached her, but here the sentiment is expressed with a considerable dose of patriotism and a feeling of local identity—like in this extract describing arrival to Ärma homestead:

The road that leads to our farm ends there. If you stand in the middle of the yard, surrounded by forest, it seems that all roads lead here and lead out to the world from here. There are no hinterlands. The place where you have your home is the centre of the world, the most important place in the world. I like the feeling you get when walking barefoot—as if your roots were burrowing into the ground and drawing new energy (Ilves 2008: 239)

A recipe that is at the core of the second, Estonian part of the cookbook, is the recipe for black bread—the typical Estonian rye bread, very dark and made with special bread leaven, not yeast. She treats the leaven like a living being, which, together with the good intentions of the baker, gives the authentic taste to the result: “Bread has personality. This means that one must treat it very sensitively. Already in ancient times people knew that if you think bad thoughts while making bread, the bread won’t turn out right” (ibid: 245). In fact, her description of baking bread is more than a recipe; to put it poetically, it is an ode to bread. Evelin Ilves takes some time to describe the old art of making bread, passed on from grandmothers to granddaughters. Through her emotional text and the similarly singular photos, it is almost possible to feel the smell of freshly baked dark black rye bread:

If, when you take the bread out of the oven, it turns out that the bottoms are a bit doughy and light in colour, simply put them back in the oven without the pans for 15 minutes. If you wish, you can brush the freshly baked bread with fresh farmer’s butter. I recommend that you let the bread cool for at least an

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5 This line of her interest has now a follow-up in the form of a new book, Leib. Ilo ja vägi (‘Bread. Joy and Power’), 2014
Another star of the Estonian section is fish. Different types of fish dishes have been on the Estonian traditional menu for centuries, mainly because of the long coastline by the Baltic Sea. Pike perch, already mentioned as one of the typical dishes in Estonian cuisine as defined by Evelin Ilves, is closely followed by all other kinds and sizes of salt and sweet water fish: eel, herring, carp, sprat, etc. She writes in an introduction to one of the many recipes of fish dishes:

Only 44 people live in Kiideva year-round, but in the summer all 64 farms are filled with activity. Coastal people are very good with fish. Thus, we tasted the world’s best marinated Baltic herring in the village elder’s home. (...) Put the 100 gutted fish in the marinade [1 liter cold, uncooked water, 6 tbsp coarse sea salt, 6 tbsp sugar, 6 tbsp vinegar]. Let marinate for 24 hours, then debone—now the spine can be removed easily! Roll each fish up and place in a can or jar alternating layers of fish with finely chopped onion, garlic, fresh dill, and a dash of oil. Repeat layer by layer. On the next day, you’ll have a wonderful, delicately salty mouthful. Enjoy with boiled new potatoes, or homemade rye bread. A glass of buttermilk is also a wonderful addition (ibid: 209).

Thirdly, among the most typically Estonian dishes are, quite similarly to Maria Laidoner’s cookbook, mushrooms from the forest. The king of Estonian mushrooms is the chanterelle, abundant in Estonia in late summer and early autumn, most often in pine forests, where their yellow caps can be seen from far. It is a seasonal delicacy that most people use as a valuable addition to their menus, and everyone has a well-kept secret place in the forest where they go to pick them and which was already known by their grandparents and their parents. Evelin Ilves writes:

If I am asked what is the most typical Estonian dish in the late summer, I would definitely say chanterelle sauce with new potatoes. This taste cannot be duplicated or replaced. Chanterelles have a Nordic stubbornness that makes it impossible to grow on farms. Wildly delicious! (ibid: 253)
President Toomas Hendrik Ilves states in his foreword to the first lady’s cookbook that our tastes are determined by our surroundings and upbringing, but a “national taste” is by no means a unified or immutable phenomenon (ibid: 12). Tastes change through generations, and what is stressed at one time or another is as much a matter of practical reasoning as it is an emotional choice. In these two cookbooks that we have describes so far, the emotional choice of creating simple, homely and yet noble food rises to the forefront.

Other recent cookbooks stressing the Estonian culinary identity

Home cook Maru’s book Maru’s Tasty World was published in 2008, and although this is only in Estonian with no translated recipes, it offers an insightful comparison to the first two books in its attempt to define the national and typically Estonian in the kitchen. A few examples of her text reveal the poetic language she uses in describing food that suits to the passing of seasons in Estonia. She approaches her cooking through the four seasons, defining the local tastes through metaphors and images:

My hunter-and-gatherer’s blood starts rushing as soon as there is enough rain, and the smell of wet moss reaches even the town. Picking mushrooms is something much more than just hunting down the fungi. It means a wonderful walk through the woods, fresh air, the need to finally look myself in the eye and listen to what is going on in my head and in heart. Maybe even to get to know myself... (p 96) [here and below: translations by L.L.]

And even more typically:

The sky has suddenly risen higher and the clouds have become unreachably high. The days spread themselves out pleasantly, alluring us to go outside. The sound of melting snow follows me everywhere. The water drips on everything around me for at least a week - on iron, stone, branches, mud... I would like to weave this into my dishes. But how is it possible to cook something that would taste like the sound of the melting snow? (p 23)
The image of wanting to cook a dish that would taste like the sound of melting snow is a simple yet effective way of seeing Estonian cooking as an extension of the Estonian landscape, climate and nature. It combines the elusiveness of catching the true essence of the national taste, yet conveys the love for nature that provides the ingredients for Estonian cuisine. The philosophy is straightforwardly reflected also in the first ladies’ cookbooks—value local ingredients, take time for cooking and enjoy the dishes with close family and friends.

There are also other recent books that focus only on trying to pinpoint the Estonian cuisine. One of these is *Eesti köök / Estonian Cuisine* (2003/2010), also a bilingual cookbook like Maria Laidoner’s and Evelin Ilves’s books. The overview of the book at the publisher’s website says:

_Estonians have always preferred local food. Tens of generations have grown up with rye bread, potatoes, vegetables, fish and plentiful bounty from the forests. This cookbook illustrated with beautiful photos of dishes and nature gives an idea about present-day Estonian cuisine. The majority of these dishes were well known already during the first Republic of Estonia*. \(^6\)

Again, we see the stress on the local ingredients, and the often-mentioned love for mushroom-picking and gathering berries in the forest, but also the high value of fish and of course the classical item, the rye bread.

A book dedicated to the art of making bread is a recent new cookbook by Evelin Ilves, *LEIB. Ilo ja vägi. BREAD. The Beauty & the Might*. Its content is also bilingual and its aim is to tell the story of bread in the homes of different women in Estonia. It contains 18 recipes for making bread, but also tries to capture the ineffable: the power behind the old art. This time the author has travelled in Estonia in search for recipes and the stories of the women baking the bread in various remote and central parts of Estonia. Evelin Ilves, who herself has been baking bread for over 12 years, said in an interview made after the book was published that in this book she wanted to show

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what the one who bakes needs to know and most importantly what she or he needs to
give to the bread for the taste and energy to materialize fully.\textsuperscript{7}

Conclusion

Cookbooks are by their nature heterogeneous: there are some used by consumers as
reference materials with basic cooking techniques or classic recipes; specialized texts
dealing with cooking for children or vegetarianism whose importance shifts
depending on lifestyle and life stage; the hand written journals passed through
generations uncovering family and social history etc (Tonner 2008). The examples
mentioned and analysed in this article fall in one category – the cookbooks that are
designed to establish culinary identity.

All of the books that have been referred to in the present paper stress the importance
of traditions and authenticity in local cuisine. A particular aspect that functions as a
locus of identity is memory of old times, where closeness to nature was combined
with a certain grandeur of nobility or upper middle class. To some extent the recipes
become an exercise in nostalgia, an attempt to recapture a bygone era, which allows
for Estonians peoples, now primarily living in cities and towns, to flirt with a lifestyle
more representative of the past than of the present.

The culinary identity of Estonians was to a considerable degree translated from the
nations with an established aristocracy as an act of borrowing reputation through
foodways. After a long occupation and the following rebirth of the Estonian state, the
same recipes were brought to life, this time translated into English (and Russian, in
the case of Laidoner’s cookbook) for the international audience. Thus, some
cookbooks are directed outwards, not only for the Estonians themselves—as an act of
constructing a traditional culinary identity. Everything that was initially alien has
been brought to the forefront as the authentic, and on the whole it has worked well in
the frame of constructing the traditional Estonian cuisine. The analysed cookbooks
convey nostalgia, stepping closer to realizing the ideas of authenticity, tradition and
national cuisine.

\textsuperscript{7}Evelin Ilves: Leib pole põgenemispaik (‘Evelin Ilves: Bread is not an escape’)
http://menu.err.ee/v/uudised/inimesed/893a3114-cfbd-494e-ad44-8ee93bb3c5b5
Although the meaning and values of different foodstuff and dishes change together with the changing social status of the consumers, the re-creation / reformulation of their status is what matters. What these analysed cookbooks express is exactly the re-writing of history in a way that brings culinary nostalgia and authenticity into the discourse of national identity, and through that, contributes to the process of nation-building. Estonia as a country with relatively short history of independence seems to be in need of it.

Works cited:


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Analysed cookbooks and other source material:


