Changing Values of Wild Berries in Estonian Households: Recollections from an Ethnographic Archive

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This article examines the historical importance of wild berries in the archival sources of the Estonian National Museum. The studied materials suggest that wild berries as food were insignificant for Estonian ethnologists-researchers as well as for correspondents due to disciplinary conventions and the ways of recollecting about food traditions. However, considering the Estonian remembrances in the context of international studies the consumption and gathering of wild berries for private use becomes a practice with diverse meanings. Wild fruits as food may have ambivalent values, which relate to socioeconomic factors, but likewise to continuities and discontinuities in individual and collective memory.

Keywords: food gathering; wild berries; food culture; European ethnology; ethnographic archives; Estonia

Today wild berries (botanically named “fruits”) are considered an important feature of Estonian culinary heritage. The idea that berries have always been important part of the Estonian diet seems to rely on the fact that natural conditions in Estonia (e.g., climate, soil, and different habitats like forests and mires) are suitable for the growth of a variety of wild fruits. There are more than 20 species of edible fruits that grow in different types of forests and bogs throughout Estonia. The most common wild berries are European bilberry (Vaccinium myrtillus), lingonberry (Vaccinium vitis-idaea), wild raspberry (Rubus idaeus), wild strawberry (Fragaria vesca), bog bilberry (Vaccinium uliginosum), cloudberry (Rubus chamaemorus), and common cranberry (Oxycoccus palustris). Estonian folk medicine has praised wild berries, among other edible plants, as remedies for various diseases (Kalle and Sõukand 2012).
Unlike the popular idea that wild berries have always been an important food for Estonians, a closer look at the history of wild berry consumption over the course of the late nineteenth and twentieth century reveals a more complicated picture where major historical events and the growing importance of transnational agricultural markets continued to transform local dietary cultures (cf. Lysaght 2000, 15). At the same time, people have different memories of the role of wild berry picking and consumption as part of the private food economy and everyday life practices. Our aim in this article is to examine how different generations of Estonians, throughout the last century and to the present, have recollected about the role of wild berries in domestic food consumption. Have they always considered wild berries a valuable food? How have people’s memories about wild berries changed over time, and what has influenced these changes? These are the questions we want to address in order to reconsider today’s popular belief that wild berries have always been an important food for Estonians.

Reflections on the Sources

To examine the ways in which wild berry consumption was remembered and how memories intersected with the historical changes, we primarily focus on ethnological questionnaires and their responses collected by the Estonian National Museum (ENM). The data stored in the archive of the ENM represent different political conditions defining three distinct periods in the development of ethnological research in Estonia, including the establishment of ethnology as a discipline in the Republic of Estonia (1918–1940), the development of ethnographic research during the Soviet occupation (1944–1991), and the reorientation toward the western European tradition of ethnographic research in the re-established Republic of Estonia (1991–present). Earliest recollections date back to the late nineteenth century, whereas the latest reach to 1990s. Such a time span enables us to see continuities as well as changes in wild berry memories of different generations of Estonians.

As social historian Antoinette Burton suggests, the archive is a site of knowledge production and a mechanism for shaping the narratives of history (Burton 2006, 2). Drawing on the arguments developed by Burton (2006), our approach can be characterized as a retrospective interpretation of archival files. It is inspired by the scholarship concerned with the ways in which knowledge is shaped by the cultural environments, such as the work of cultural theorists (Assmann 2011; Manoff 2004), human geographers (Moore 2010; Ogborn 2010), and historians (King 2012; Dobson and Ziemann 2009; Steedman 2001). To examine correspondents’ responses, we relied on the thematic analysis of archival responses (Riessmann 2008, 53–76). This included classification of the responses related to the issues of gathering and consumption of wild fruits in private households and correspondents’ attitudes related to these practices. Additionally, we contextualized these themes with the data from other sources.

We selected four different surveys because (a) they specifically asked about the uses of wild berries in the households; (b) these questionnaires and
correspondents’ replies covered different periods in Estonian history; and (c) except for the study of responses collected in 2002 (Piiri 2006), other records have not been analyzed. More detailed information about the questionnaires, correspondents, and periods recollected can be found in Table 1.

The origins of ENM date back to the 1870–1880s, when Estonian intellectuals started collecting elder people’s memories about traditional ways of life and folklore (for more on the origins and development of Estonian ethnology, see Kuutma and Jaago 2005; Annist and Kaaristo 2013). The German and Scandinavian examples of rescuing, collecting, and reconstructing traditional preindustrial peasant culture inspired the main principles for the establishment of the ENM in 1909. The main focus of ethnological research at that time was studying traditional material culture using the historic-geographic method.3

Ethnologist Ferdinand Linnus (1895–1942), following the example of Finnish and Swedish colleagues, decided to start the systematic collection of data with the help of local residents (e.g., teachers of village schools, farmers, craftsmen, etc.). He established a nationwide network of regular correspondents in 1931. The reasons for inviting people to contribute to the museum archive collections were mostly pragmatic: this was necessitated by the lack of researchers as well as the lack of funding for organizing extensive fieldwork trips all over the country. This way,

### Table 1: Summary of sources from the Estonian National Museum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year of compilation</th>
<th>1937</th>
<th>1947</th>
<th>1983</th>
<th>2002</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Data about the questionnaires</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>No. 10</td>
<td>No. 43</td>
<td>No. 168</td>
<td>No. 214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme</td>
<td>Foods, drinks, flavorings</td>
<td>On picking mushrooms, berries, nuts, and other plant food</td>
<td>Gathering nature’s gifts</td>
<td>Food culture in the Soviet period</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of questions</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data about correspondents and the responses**

| Correspondents’ year of birth (the majority) | 1880s–1890s | 1890s–1900s | 1910s–1920s | 1920s–1930s |
| Volumes of responses in the archive (= KV) | NV No. 33, 50–52, 55 | KV No. 77 | KV No. 583 | KV No. 1027–1033 |
| Total number of replies | 341* | 36*** | 77 | 92 |
| Time period recollected in responses*** | 1860s–1930s | 1880s–1940s | 1900s–1980s | 1920s–2000s |

**Notes:**

* This is the total number of replies that included numerous responses from local teachers and schoolchildren who had collected information from their family members. The responses from the latter are not considered in our analysis.

** The correspondents’ network had diminished considerably because some members had died in battle, some due to the repressions, others had fled.

*** Recollections also came from older inhabitants interviewed by correspondents.
correspondents-collaborators became co-creators of the collective memory of the nation.

The task of the correspondents was to prepare extensive written responses to the questionnaires and to interview elder inhabitants of the region (Tael 2006, 8). While current ethnological questionnaires encourage people to “freely write about their memories, experiences and values” and respondents are expected to express their opinions and attitudes, the instructions issued to the correspondents asked them to “objectively” represent a certain region and its culture, and, in so doing, help to collect the memory of the folk (Olsson 2011, 40–42; Värv 1990). Research aims and questions asked by ethnologists at different periods have determined what has been recollected and the methodology used (Kõresaar 1995; Jõesalu 2003). Throughout the twentieth century, questionnaires and correspondence was one of the most frequently used means for collecting data in Estonia as well as in Scandinavia, even if some changes occurred due to the changing political conditions disciplinary developments (cf. Hagström and Marander-Eklund 2005). Because of Estonian ethnology’s focus on the local folk culture and due to the Estonian origin of correspondents, the recollections gave little information about other ethnic groups (e.g., Baltic Germans or Russians).

The first questionnaire we choose under study was compiled in 1937 (KL No. 10). It addressed a diverse range of topics on peasant food culture from which only one question was related to the consumption of wild and garden berries. The responses also featured some earlier memories on how wild and cultivated berries were consumed as food. The structure and main topics of the 1947 (KL No. 43) and 1983 (KL No. 168) questionnaires were similar: the central content drew attention to the practices and customs of gathering berries, and only tangentially touched upon consumption. The last, 2002 questionnaire (KL No. 214), provided a broader overview of the food culture of the Soviet period. Many questions focused explicitly on different ways of getting foodstuffs in the Soviet shortage economy and producing, preserving, and consuming food products at home.

In the following sections, we examine two major themes that emerged from the sources – memories about collecting wild berries and consuming them as food in private households. In the concluding reflections, we put Estonians’ remembrances into a broader perspective bringing in comparisons from other European countries that share similar historical and/or environmental conditions.

### Picking Wild Berries in Estonia: Berries as Supplementary Food

In order to understand how wild berries were remembered, people’s memories should be contextualized with Estonia’s socioeconomical background. Even though the Province of Estonia was part of Imperial Russia for most of its modern history (until 1918), it continued to be dominated by Baltic Germans who owned manorial estates and held high positions in the local administration. It is these elites who controlled the majority (80%) of the woodlands in Estonia’s territory until the fall of the Russian Empire and the establishment of independent Estonia (Meikar and Etverk 2000, 8).
In their responses to the studies conducted between 1947 and 1983, correspondents remembered that in the nineteenth century the issue of ownership and forest maintenance had a significant impact on wild berry collecting. A farm wife (b. 1897) recollects: “picking berries and mushrooms in manors and state forests was prohibited, especially from young forests, because pickers trampled on the young trees” (KV 43, p. 22).

For Estonian peasants, berry picking was associated with the restricted access to forests. The majority of the correspondents mentioned the need for permission to collect berries and the symbolic payment (consisting of a part of the harvest, or also a small tax) to the manor. The most frightening stories were recalled about rangers (often of Estonian origin) who mistreated the pickers. 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 1998, 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 use of wild berries.

In the late nineteenth to early twentieth century, consuming berries and valuing their taste and nutritious qualities were mostly associated with the higher social classes, such as the Baltic German gentry, wealthy citizens, and the emerging Estonian social elite, whereas gathering berries was related to the lower classes, mostly poor landless people (e.g., cottagers, freedmen) who picked them mostly to sell.

Recollections about berry picking from this era are saturated with memories about market exchanges. For instance, a farm laborer (b. 1916) remembers: “[W]e sold them to manor gents on the spot, even the baroness and the doctor’s wife at Kose bought some. City gents and ladies paid good money, 10 kopecks for a can [of wild strawberries]... If you were a careful picker, you could make up to 20–30 rubles in this way” (KV 77, p. 59).

At the same time as peasants sold berries to the local elites, their own diets were dominated by food produced on farms. The main pragmatic reason for limited berry consumption by Estonian peasants was the fact that the ripening of the berries coincided with more important summer and autumn tasks on the farm. A farm worker describes that bilberries, cloudberrries mature in mid-summer during haymaking season, lingonberries during oat collection period, bilberries at the same time as processing rye; and cranberries during potato harvests (KV 77, p. 76). Although Estonians also picked berries for household use, this was done on Sundays or after the important farm tasks were completed. Therefore, among the social groups, children and old people (primarily women) were often mentioned as the main berry-pickers because they were not fully employed in farmwork. In some responses, city folk were reported to travel to the countryside to pick berries for their own consumption as they had more time and less opportunity for food production.

After the newly established government of the Republic of Estonia passed the Land Act in 1919, land ownership was reorganized and landless people, among which
Estonian-speaking peasants constituted a majority, became proprietors. As a result of agricultural reforms, around 80% of the forests remained state owned and managed (Meikar and Etverk 2000, 13). According to Estonia’s laws, berry picking from state forests that were older than 15 years was free, and gathering restrictions applied only to young stands (Kusmin and Kusmin 2011, 19). In the 1930s, Estonia was predominantly an agricultural society and the forested land comprised only about 20% of the territory (Etverk and Sein 1995, 405).

During this time, berries constituted a considerable source of additional income for the poorer rural and urban inhabitants in the 1920s–1930s. In addition to local markets, berries were also sold abroad: in the 1930s, Estonia exported wild berries such as cranberries and lingonberries to 20 countries; at the period, berry picking was a considerable source of income for approximately 3000–5000 people in Estonia (Paal 2011, 68). Because most of the commercial berry pickers were women, the common word used for such pickers in the press of that time was “berry-women”.

Furthermore, berry picking was significantly impacted by the introduction of new horticulture in the course of the twentieth century. Responses to the 1937 questionnaire revealed that in the nineteenth century berries were mostly eaten by “people of rank”. In the first decades of the twentieth century, growing fruit trees and berry cultures became more widespread. Having acquired the plants and knowledge about domesticated berries, the land-owning Estonian farmers began to cultivate them in their estates (Banner 2005, 307–311). Thus, during the years of independence, the need to collect berries in the wild became less necessary.

After Estonia became part of the Soviet Union in 1944, all the land was nationalized and the forests became the property of the Soviet state. The newly established collective and state farms relied were notoriously poorly equipped and staffed by unmotivated workers, and overall production decreased in comparison with the prewar period (Klesment 2009, 251). Due to such organization of production, food shortages were a common part of everyday life in Soviet Estonia in the 1960s and 1970s (Raun 2001, 198–203). In the shortage economy, both rural and urban inhabitants had to look for additional food sources by cultivating food on subsidiary farms and kitchen gardens, especially from the 1940s to the early 1960s, when collective farms did not pay sufficient monetary wages (Klesment 2009, 257). However, the private household plots were too small, only 0.5–0.6 ha (Piiri 2006, 57–58), to supply food for the entire household.

It is in this context that economic values of wild berry picking became particularly important. Not only did individual pickers entered forests, collective berry picking was also organized by the state and workplaces. During the season, public transportation made it possible to access to the berry habitats easy and teams of pickers from a particular workplace went to the forests together. In her recollection, a teacher (b. 1925) describes: “Cranberry picking became particularly fashionable in those years [1960s–1980s]. Especially when a specific date had been set, there were vehicles: buses, trucks and cars… The marshes were full of machines… It was a ‘cranberry fest’—like a large market” (KV 583, p. 246).

This way picking berries became an activity that enforced a feeling of community and created collective identities under socialism (Piiri 2006, 64). The picking season
was regulated by the state to protect berry habitats, but the results of such restrictions were rarely followed, and setting the dates was later replaced with new forms of supervision and forest management.

Additionally, because the Soviet Union could acquire foreign currency from the sale of berries, berry collection and stocking standards were established in the 1960s–1970s to meet international market expectations. While there are no data about how much of the wild berries were collected for sale and for private use, the responses from the ethnological studies suggest the number of berry pickers swelled during the 1970s–1980s to the point that the undergrowth of many mires were trampled (e.g., in some cranberry bogs up to 95% of the biological harvest was picked) (Paal 2011, 70). Some correspondents criticized the unsustainable management of natural resources in the Soviet Union that had resulted in irreversible changes to berry habitats. For example, a retired gardener (b. 1919) condemns that:

There were bilberries, lingonberries and cranberries. It was that way about a decade after the war. But then everything began to change in nature… Forest cutting left large areas bare and the bilberries perished… Marshes and bogs that once grew cranberries quite plentifully, are now dried out because of the melioration and cranberries have disappeared completely. (KV 583, p. 106)

This recollection refers to the negative image of the Soviet management of natural environments, especially wetlands, which were treated as economic resources to be exploited on a large scale. In reaction to the intensive economic pressure, the environmental protection movement became active in the early 1980s, and as a result, protection areas were designated in Estonian wetlands that were considered important for hydrology and for the profusion of berries (Aber, Pavri, and Aber 2012, 257).

In 1983, correspondents were likewise asked about the importance of wild food in the diets of their families. The majority of correspondents declared that the wild food was of medium importance in their family diet but could potentially be more significant. As a librarian (b. 1921) writes: “I especially like mushrooms and wild berries, [and] 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. Who does not have a private garden uses more gifts of nature” (KV 583, p. 373). The gatherers had to find additional time for foraging alongside paid labor and taking care of private subsidiary holdings. Therefore, garden berries and fruits from one’s own garden plot were more important for the daily diets due to easy accessibility, even if the taste of the forest bounty was highly appreciated.

The 1983 questionnaire KL No. 168 (compiled by Pärdi 1983) echoes earlier responses that emphasize wild berries as a desirable food, but it also points to the growing interest in berry picking as a leisure activity: “[T]oday gathering gifts of nature is a necessity only for a few. Nevertheless, most of the people cannot imagine their life today without wild berries, mushrooms or nuts” (KL No. 168). There were new values that wild berries were assumed to have within a modern and increasingly more urbanized society such as “gathering as a pleasant alternative” and “an opportunity to be
in nature” (KL No. 168). In her response, a collective farm worker (b. 1921) explicitly referred to the change in values of berry picking: “[T]oday picking gifts of nature is no longer vital; it is more like a former habit to enrich the table. It is useful and pleasant for everyone to linger in nature, especially for the city folk” (KV 538, 317). This suggests that in the late socialist era a novel recreational value was associated with gathering berries, especially by urbanites who formed the majority of the correspondents by the 1980s.

Wild Berry Consumption in Estonian Households: From the Raw to the Preserved

At the end of nineteenth century, wild berries provided a small seasonal supplement in summer and autumn, when meat stocks were running out, or because of other causes of duress, and primarily for poorer families (see also Luts 2008, 131–132; Kalle and Sõukand 2012, 278–279). Once agriculture was the main source of living in the late nineteenth century, the Estonian peasants’ diet was rather unvaried, and its main components were rye bread, potatoes, fish, pork, milk, and different cereals (Moora 2007, 35). Since the 1880s, nutritional advice had been given in the press as well as in cookbooks, and from 1910 domestic economy and gardening courses became organized by different societies that aimed to improve Estonians’ knowledge of food production and consumption. During the 1920s–1930s, multiple cooking courses and domestic economy schools stressed the importance of a varied diet and spread the know-how to Estonian farmwives (Troska and Viires 2008, 277). Such developments had an impact on how fruits, including wild berries, came to be used in the everyday food culture of Estonian farms.

The 1937 questionnaire (KL No. 10) asked correspondents: “[D]id wild or garden berries have any importance in the food economy during olden times?” Most respondents stated that in “olden times” berries were eaten raw and were consumed as a seasonal sweet. Thus, early recollections, dating back to the last decades of the nineteenth century, brought up a classical question for food researchers: the distinction made by Claude Lévi-Strauss ([1965] 1966) between the raw and the cooked. In light of this distinction, how did the experience and status of berry consumption change during the twentieth century? What were the reasons for this change? These are the questions we would like to address next.

As in earlier studies, the majority of correspondents involved in the 1937 survey were men who rarely cooked. Nevertheless, there were some quite detailed responses about what kind of berries were eaten in farms and how. For instance, a farmer (b. 1877) describes:

Wild strawberries and bilberries were eaten while ripened, with fresh milk. Other berries, such as raspberries [and] stone brambles, as well as 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. Rowanberries⁶ 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 [fruit drink thickened with potato starch], compote, jam, marmalade, wine and others. (KV 33, p. 108)

This description gives quite a good overview of the ways that wild as well as garden berries were consumed in Estonian rural households, although it is not specified when the practice of preservation and cooking berry dishes became more common. From the other sources, it became clear that the major changes in using more varied fruit dishes took place at the turn of the century although these remained festive food until the early 1930s, when peasants’ living standards and farmwives’ knowledge improved considerably.

The limited consumption of berries had practical socioeconomic reasons, among them the high cost of sugar mentioned by the correspondent. The lack of sugar limited what berries could be consumed, and how.7 From the perspective of modern science, we can say that the biochemical properties such as the high concentration of organic acids worked as natural preservatives that enabled the preservation of raw cranberries and lingonberries over winter, without added sugar. Until the twentieth century, the means and technologies for cooking and preserving were rather rudimentary (e.g., the lack of containers). For instance, special stoves for cooking connected to the chimney and separate year-round kitchens became extensively built in Estonian farmhouses only from the 1880s when peasants’ living conditions started to improve (L’Heureux 2010, 480; Pärdi 2012, 53). It was only at the turn of the century when additional tools for cooking and preserving came into use (Moora 2007, 55–56).

In the early decades of the twentieth century, the accessibility of sugar depended on social status, and making preserves was limited to those who could afford sugar. According to the correspondents’ memories, the availability of sugar was limited both by the food crisis during World War I and then later by its high price. For these reasons, berry preserves were valued in correspondents’ responses as a special food eaten on special occasions, offered for guests or consumed as medicine (e.g., raspberry jam given to children against the common cold). The Estonian farmers began to pick berries more extensively for domestic use when living standards improved and the accompanying possibility of buying sugar boosted home preserving. According to the data collected by a correspondent (b. 1916): after the First World War, some families turned 5–6 poods8 of sugar into jam every summer, other richer folk made a lot more (KV 77, p. 45).

In terms of methods of preserving, the correspondents indicated that at the end of the nineteenth and in the early decades of the twentieth century, the preserves were not kept in the small glass jars widely used today, but in clay pots or tubs made from alder or spruce stored in cellars or potato cells. Glass jars became more widely used in farmsteads during the 1920s–1930s, but the means for sealing them were still rudimentary (e.g., parchment or cellophane).

One more important factor promoting the culture of preservation and the knowledge about preservation was briefly mentioned in correspondents’ recollections. In her response, a former farmer exemplifies: “[E]arlier (about 75 years ago – [in 1870s])
picking berries for one’s own use was unknown. But at least 40 years ago [approximately since 1907] they already knew how to preserve and use various wild berries” (KV 77, pp. 129–130).

How such knowledge was distributed was specified only in a few responses from 1937 and 1947. Two groups were named as mediators of the knowledge related to conserving: the Baltic German gentry and the urban inhabitants, mostly Estonians who worked in a manor or had moved into cities. Correspondents attributed the spread of preserving know-how mainly to personal contacts and did not mention topics discussed in the educational literature of the time (e.g., berries as diversifiers of diet and their nutritional value). Although the knowledge about preserving and cooking berries (e.g., making berry preserves, wines, baking cakes, etc.) in order to diversify the diet and make it more nutritious was communicated to the Estonian public already in the late nineteenth century in gardening manuals (e.g., Spuhl-Rotalia 1898), the practice of making preserves spread much later. It became common among rural Estonians only when living standards on farms improved, sugar became more affordable, and women in farms had more time to deal with conserving (Moora 1981, 568).

In the Soviet shortage economy, self-made preserves were part of people’s everyday life. The 2002 questionnaire (KL 214) addressed the topic of wild berries among numerous questions about preservation and consumption of the fruits, and, therefore, recollections focused on these issues were better represented. Several correspondents saw making preserves in the Soviet era as a continuation of the self-sufficiency economy stemming from the prewar Republic of Estonia. According to the remembrances collected by a female librarian (b. 1945):

In the countryside, as a consequence 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 realized that self-made preserves were cheaper and also tastier. (KV 1031, p. 220)

To assess the proportions of garden and wild berries, the survey “Personal Subsidiary Holdings” conducted in 1978 demonstrated that 45% of all families made jam, 31% pressed juice, and 28% made compotes. In general, approximately 80% of all produce from personal households was turned into preserves (Raig 1981, 39). This suggests that there was a general increase in berry and fruit preserves in people’s diet in these decades. Preserves were used in a variety of ways and became a common part of the food used during festivities, but also in everyday contexts.

However, in spite of the need and interest in making home preserves, the means for that were not always available. Several correspondents remembered the sugar crisis in the 1940s and referred to the ration cards that were used in the 1950s to distribute many foodstuffs. Therefore, wild berry species that required little or no sugar and entailed traditional ways of preserving remained important in these decades. Preserve making started to spread faster in the 1960s when the sugar crisis abated and metal jar lids and jar lid fasteners appeared on the market, guaranteeing an air-tight seal (Piiri 2006, 67).
It should be noted some correspondents saw that preserve making not simply as a necessity in the shortage economy, but as a creative challenge involving competitiveness. For instance, a librarian (b. 1937) wrote that in her family the cloudberry compote was considered the best: “One year I made 76 liters of cloudberry compote. When I told this to others at work, they thought I was a liar” (KV 1031, p. 62). This suggests that making preserves was a culturally and personally important endeavor. In a similar way as berry picking, it was a way of spending time with the family, creating continuity between generations, and a method for self-realization (Piiri 2006, 77–79).

Finally, a specific difference between Soviet and Western preservation habits must be mentioned. If in western Europe deep-freezing was already common since the 1960s (Shephard 2006), this technology was unavailable for most individual households in Soviet Estonia, where refrigerators with deep-freeze chambers were only sold from 1975 onward (Eelmaa 1985, 5). In their responses, correspondents mentioned that it was only in the post-Soviet era, in the mid-1990s, when refrigerators with more spacious deep-freezing chambers and freezers became available in stores. Due to this, making berries into jams was partially replaced by refrigeration that saved time as well as vitamins and nutrients and made the whole process of preserving much easier.

Concluding Reflections: Estonians’ Wild Berry Memories in International Context

In his analysis of the development of ethnological research in Sweden, Fredrik Skott characterizes the collection of folklore archives as a project of producing collective memory and communal identity (Skott 2008, 282). Similarly to Scandinavian tradition, for correspondents in Estonia, participation in ethnological research and contribution to ethnographic archives became a way to write local histories and to contribute to the creation of collective memory. Additionally, the studied sources provided an interesting data for a contemporary researcher to see how and what was recollected about cultural phenomena at different times.

Due to the principles dominating ethnological research, the recollections from 1937, 1947, and partly also from 1983 reflected impersonal descriptions collected from elder inhabitants. People’s personal stories about how they collected and consumed berries and why they valued them were often left out or kept in the background because of the way questions were formulated (e.g., short answer questions or multiple-choice answers) and research scope (e.g., focus on describing practices rather collecting individual memories). However, even fragmentary recollections enabled to draw connections between different periods. More detailed personal remembrances on food culture and the consumption of wild berries could be found from biographically contextualized responses collected in 2002 that revealed not only collective but more individual meanings and values that berry picking and eating has.

In the following reflections, we compare some of the main results and conclusions based on our sources with international studies in order to put Estonians’
Correspondents’ reports that wild berries constituted an important source of additional income and nutritional value for poorer families are supported by similar data from other countries (cf. Hietala 2003; Bringéus 2000). Ken Albala argues one’s relation to wild food highlights social and cultural issues, among them different social class relationships to nature (Albala 2006, 9–18). Our study likewise showed that social status intersected with both the collection and eating of berries in significant ways. Recollections dating back to the end of nineteenth century, early twentieth century showed that Baltic German gentry and the upper classes in Estonia valued the taste of various kinds of fruits and had sugar as well as knowledge for preservation that were unavailable to peasants (cf. Notaker 2003, 559). The limited access to sugar restricted the berry species that were collected for household use; therefore, Estonian peasants, like their counterparts in European countries, consumed bilberries, lingonberries, and cranberries that contained organic acids and could be preserved without sugar (cf. Łuczaj et al. 2012, 362; Svanberg 2012, 319–320). More importantly, there was a deep social gulf between peasants who picked berries and higher social classes who consumed them.

During the first decades of the twentieth century when Estonia was mainly an agricultural society, farm produce became increasingly more valued than wild food; therefore, correspondents considered wild berries rather marginal in the national diet. Prioritizing farm production was also the reason why berry pickers were typically those who could not be fully engaged in farm work, including landless folk before 1919 and especially women (cf. Svanberg 2012; Lindquist 2009; Łuczaj 2008). In a similar way, time and energy invested in individual food production in Soviet Estonia made many correspondents value agricultural and horticultural produce over the consumption of wild berries that were proportionately less consumed. In the Soviet shortage economy that relied on self-provisioning where most of the food was produced in subsidiary holdings and gardens, foraging for food from nature played an important role (cf. Bellows 2004; Caldwell 2004). In contrast to their Soviet counterparts, Scandinavians considered wild berry picking as part of their summer cottage culture and a leisure activity (Pouta, Sievänen, and Neuvonen 2006; Lindhagen and Hörnsten 2000). For Estonians, berry picking as a recreational practice emerged only in the late Soviet period when the country became increasingly more urbanized and the standards of living improved.

We also found from correspondents’ recollections that during different political regimes wild berries remained an important export product that facilitated commercial harvesting of berries in the region throughout the twentieth century and guaranteed Estonians extra income (cf. similar results in Sweden and Finland in Bringéus 2000, 183–186; Hietala 2003, 186–193). Berries were likewise sold at the local market or exchanged for goods. In Soviet Estonia, the intensified collection of wild berries had several socioeconomic components, including state-organized berry picking campaigns that made it into a site for building collective bonds. The shortcomings in state forest management resulted in prioritizing the quantity of berries picked over the damage caused to the environment. Thus, similarly to neighboring countries Estonians’ berry
picking memories were influenced by the emergence of global berry markets, the increasing industrialization of agricultural production, changes in local horticulture that included the introduction of domesticated fruit and berry plants, the modernization of rural households, and the proliferation of new technologies. However, in Scandinavia, the popularity of harvesting wild products has been related to the so-called Everyman’s Right (the right to forage for wild berries and mushrooms also in private lands) that emphasizes cultural values. For instance, Estonians’ neighbors, the Finns, understood berry picking not just in terms of pragmatic needs, but also as symbolic values, including a sense of belonging to nature (Pouta, Sievänen, and Neuvonen 2006, 288–289; Hietala 2003, 193–194).

Another conclusion drawn from our sources is that correspondents did not consider wild berries as a proper food in comparison with the farm produce and cooked food. This does not amount to saying that the lower social classes did not eat wild berries, or that that their nutritional value and status in comparison with the farm produce was considerably lower. Rather, wild berries were valued as a complementary or healing food alongside other herbal remedies (cf. Hietala 2003; Łuczaj et al. 2012; Svanberg 2012). The status of wild berries as food in correspondents’ recollections 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.

The accessibility of sugar, an improvement in cooking technologies, the means for preservation, and the wider distribution of knowledge of how to make conserves from the 1920s on were the key factors that increased and varied the domestic consumption of wild as well as garden berries, and changed their food status. Making berry preserves boosted in the 1960s–1980s when the additional means and technology made it possible, and various fruit and berry conserves became a considerable part of everyday food consumption (cf. Łuczaj et al. 2012, 362).

The continuity of the peasant food economy can also be detected in the Soviet preservation practice. Like in other countries belonging to the Soviet bloc, making preserves was perceived as not just a labor-intensive duty, but also as an annual family ritual and a form of creative self-expression (Caldwell 2004, 100–114). In post-socialist period, deep-freezing marked the transition from the preserves-centered berry economy into the new era of wild food consumption in Estonia.

To return to the questions raised at the beginning of the article, meanings and values attached to wild berries changed significantly from 1937 to 2002. Berries did not always evoke pleasant nostalgic memories, like it may happen today, but were related to the ambivalence with which people engaged in foraging and poverty-driven consumption of wild foods. In the recollections of preindustrial age, wild berries were remembered to be collected for pragmatic reasons. In the context of modernization and urbanization, however, the correspondents emphasized the noninstrumental value of the wild bounty. Social distinctions as well as existing food hierarchies have influenced limited consumption of wild berries in different times. Today, foraging is increasingly given a recreational value and is associated more with personally significant memories and meanings rather than with the necessity to sustain oneself (Bardone 2013, 38–41). Besides, picking or eating wild berries may have different importance also in the same person’s life at different periods: metaphorically speaking, the taste of wild fruits in the childhood may not be the same in the old age. But this is a topic for a new study.
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Notes
1. Because wild fruit plants have multiple parallel names in English, we added Latin names in order to facilitate the identification of the species. The Estonian and Latin names are correlated according to the Index of Estonian Plant Names (see Eestikeelsete Taimenimede Andmebaas 2014) and to the international database The Plant List (see The Plant List). Because Latin plant names also have synonyms that knows a plant, it is necessary to clarify that Oxycoccus palustris is a Latin equivalent for the Vaccinium oxycoccos; the former name is more commonly used in Estonia for the common cranberry.

2. The majority of correspondents were of Estonian ethnic origin and only a few had a mixed Russian-Estonian ethnic background in 1983. In the 1930s, more than half of the correspondents were teachers, with farmers, artisans, officials, and others making up the rest. In 1937 and 1947, the majority of correspondents were rural inhabitants. In 1983, correspondents lived both in rural and urban areas, and in 2002 mainly in urban settings, having diverse occupational backgrounds. Prior to World War II, men dominated among the correspondents, whereas after the war mostly women contributed to the archive. In 1939, the correspondents’ network had 413 members and from the 1950s to the 1980s there were around 200 active members comprised mainly of retired people.

3. The historic-geographic method was developed in the 1870s by Finnish folklorists Julius and Kaarle Krohn and was adapted to ethnology in order to compare the regional variations of ethnographic phenomena and their changes in time. The method was especially useful for investigating details, similarities, and differences in material cultures (Goldberg 1984).

4. There have been other methods of collecting data in Estonian ethnology, including ethnographic fieldwork, biographical methods, and others.

5. Similarly, a Finnish questionnaire from 1970, Metsämärjat [Wild berries], includes 10 thematic blocks of questions, of which only one is related to consuming wild berries.
as food (the compiler was Riitta Ailonen; for the analysis of the responses, see Ailonen 1977).

6. The Latin names of the berries mentioned in the quote are *Rubus saxatalis* for stone bramble and *Sorbus aucuparia* for rowanberries. The former grows mainly in the coastal areas and islands, whereas the latter is common in all Estonia.

7. Drying, as a means for preserving berries, was mentioned only by a few correspondents, and this primarily for the purpose of making medicinal tea (cf. Kalle and Sõukand 2012). Adding dried berries to bread dough, or making berry-porridge was not remembered by the correspondents, although in eastern regions of Estonia berries were used this way (Moora 1981, pp. 568–569).

8. “Pood” was a unit of measurement used in Imperial Russia. One pood is approximately 1638 kg.

References

**Ethnological Sources**

Ethnological questionnaires (No. 10, 43, 168, 214) and the responses in the Correspondents Archive (KV No. 33, 50–52, 55, 77, 583, 1027–1033).

**Printed Sources**


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