Journal of Baltic Studies

ISSN: 0162-9778 (Print) 1751-7877 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rbal20

Exploring Modern Foodways: History, Nature, and Culture in the Baltic States

Diana Mincytė & Ulrike Plath

To cite this article: Diana Mincytė & Ulrike Plath (2015) Exploring Modern Foodways: History, Nature, and Culture in the Baltic States, Journal of Baltic Studies, 46:3, 275-281, DOI: 10.1080/01629778.2015.1073926

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01629778.2015.1073926

Journal of Baltic Studies
Vol. 46, No. 3, September 2015, pp. 275–281

INTRODUCTION

EXPLORING MODERN FOODWAYS: HISTORY, NATURE, AND CULTURE IN THE BALTIC STATES

Diana Mincytė and Ulrike Plath

In her article about food practices in Italy, Alison Leitch (2003) argues that the burgeoning interest in gastronomy has become a medium through which the public expresses deeply seated concerns with the shifting political, economic, and industrial order in Europe. If Leitch is correct about the importance of food culture, then what do culinary practices in the Baltic States tell us about life, culture, identities, and historical memory in the region? How can a closer look at kitchens, tastes, and changing shopping habits in three Baltic nations illuminate experiences and practices of living, eating, and working in this part of the world today and historically?

The purpose of this special issue is to explore the above questions by looking at the changing foodways in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania in the twentieth and at the beginning of the twenty-first centuries. Selected from a large pool of proposals, the articles featured in this issue examine the ways in which ethnic, national, and class boundaries were both maintained and transgressed through diets, how agro-food systems were transformed through imperial encounters and national regimes, and how identities were reinvented through food procurement at different historical junctures. At the same time, the authors have been careful not to reduce food to a mere lens through which to study social history, politics, and culture (Gille 2009). For them, food in-and-of itself is an embodied practice and lived experience, constituting a material link between the human body and the environment. Following this approach, this special issue speaks directly to the growing interdisciplinary body of scholarship that places food in larger environmental and historical cycles, taking seriously Donald Worster's maxim that environmental history goes through one's belly (Mink 2009).

This collection of articles builds on and contributes to the long scholarly tradition of studying food and everyday life in the region. Much like in the rest of the European academy, such studies have tended to follow four distinct disciplinary tracks, including

Correspondence to: Diana Mincytė, Department of Social Science, New York City College of Technology, City University of New York, 300 Jay Street, N611, Brooklyn, NY 11201, USA. Email: dmincyte@citytech.cuny.edu

ISSN 0162-9778 (print)/ISSN 1751-7877 (online)
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01629778.2015.1073926

ethnological tradition, historical research, literary studies, and a combination of social science approaches, including anthropology, geography, political science, and sociology.

Ethnologists and folklorists were first in their efforts to systematically collect, document, and analyze local food practices since the early twentieth century. In the spirit of national movements, they were primarily concerned with preserving what they considered as the relics of early national traditions of the peasants, turning a blind eye on modernization of food culture in and around multicultural towns. Despite these limitations, it is thanks to these ethnological expeditions that we are left with a plethora of artifacts, drawings, photographs, voice recordings, and copious notes providing a glimpse into the everyday life of rural households (Dundulienė 1963; Moora 2007; Troska and Viires 2008). Today, scholars continue working with these archives in efforts to draw new connections and explore topics such as changing berry-picking conventions in modern Estonia (Bardone and Pungas-Kohv, this issue).

Unlike ethnologists and folklorists, historians have been more concerned with how food cultures of all classes relate to cultural, economic, technological, and climatic changes, and particular historical events (Plath 2012). They have examined such topics as, for example, food assistance during the bouts of famine in the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries (Liiv 1938; Seppel 2008), alcohol production and consumption practices in the context of industrialization in the region (Astrauskas 2008), and the importance of food substitutes in the culinary networks tying the Baltics and the rest of the world (Plath 2008). In this context, maritime endeavors have been of particular significance because they opened the gates to faster cultural exchanges, as shown by the historians of Medieval Livonia (Põltsam-Jürjo 2012, 2013; Mänd 2012; Sillasoo 2013) and those studying the twentieth century (Tüür and Stern, this issue).

More recently, a new generation of literary scholars have started to publish textual and narrative analyses of fiction, memoirs, and other literary texts on food culture, combining ethnological, historical, and semiotic approaches under the umbrella of cultural studies. Such analyses include studies of the printed cookbooks (Dumpe 1998; Viires 1985), studies of food terminology (Mincytė 2011; Paškevica 2012), interpretative and discursive analyses of literary works of art (Plath 2013; Ross 2012), and the textual examination of the popular press (Tüür and Stern, this issue). Among literary scholars, there is also a growing interest in studying the role of food in biographies, memoirs, and life stories (Kurvet-Käosaar, this issue).

The fourth line of inquiry combines a swath of studies that have drawn on ethnographic field methods to examine Baltic food practices in the backdrop of ongoing globalization, liberalization, and austerity politics. Often relying on Marxian critiques of capitalism, this scholarship is anchored in the debates about food production, consumption, and distribution cycles (McMichael 2009; DuPuis and Goodman 2005) and has engaged in the burgeoning discussions about post-socialism. Examples include inquiries into the formation of consumer society in eastern Europe (Caldwell 2011; Vonderau 2010; Knudsen Harboe, this issue; Trenouth and Tisenkopfs, this issue), experiences of injustice, power and disempowerment (Dunn 2005; Gille 2011; Klumbytė 2009; Aistara, this issue), national identity construction and reproduction (Lankauskas 2002; Võsu and Kannike 2011), and the social and material embeddedness of food practices in the historical and spatial junctions (Blumberg, this issue; Aistara 2014).

Despite the shared interest in food-related topics, however, there are surprisingly little exchanges spanning the four research traditions surveyed above. This might be due to the institutionalization of disciplinary boundaries that make it difficult to develop sustained intellectual conversations, but also because there have been few venues for the scholars from the disparate fields to build productive collaborative relations. In this sense, this special issue is one of the first attempts to showcase the range and depth of Baltic food studies and create a space for interdisciplinary exchanges.

The diverse disciplinary backgrounds of contributors to this special issue address these goals. Ester Bardone draws on the ethnological approaches, while Leena Kurvet-Käosaar contributes a literary perspective. Karl Stern is an economic historian who collaborates with ecosemiotician Kadri Tüür. Two other authors – Renata Blumberg and Piret Pungas-Kohv – are geographers. Ida Harboe Knudsen is trained in anthropology, while Guntra Aistara, also an anthropologist, brings a strong grounding in environmental studies. Sociologists Tālis Tisenkopfs and Lani Trenouth are already familiar names in the sociology of food and agriculture in Europe. In each case, the authors have worked to transcend the bounds of their disciplinary backgrounds by engaging the works from other fields in rethinking the role of food in their Baltic history, culture, and daily life.

Contributions and Shared Themes

The special issue opens with two articles that link contemporary food production and consumption experiences in the Baltic States with the history and memory of socialism. Focusing on small-scale, non-industrial food economies, both papers show that the socialist past casts a long shadow over how people in the Baltics construct meanings of food justice, locavorism, and ethical eating today. The first article by Guntra Aistara questions the assumptions behind what constitutes "good, clean, and fair" food in alternative food economies embodied in such initiatives as the Slow Food movement and Fair Trade networks. Aistara argues that because these values have been coded in transnational certifications, they have come to contradict and even undermine the moral orientation, rural livelihood, and economic realities in post-socialist Latvia. Similarly, focusing on three markets in Vilnius, Renata Blumberg's analysis contests common assumptions that farmers' markets operate as sites for reconnecting and reimbedding food in local communities. Relying on ethnographic fieldwork, Blumberg sees farmers' markets as part of a larger retail sector shaped by the peculiarities of the post-socialist experience.

The following two articles take us back to the tumultuous history of the twentieth century to illuminate the continuities and changes in food culture in the region. Rereading ethnological surveys conducted under the purview of the Estonian National Museum, Ester Bardone and Piret Pungas-Kohv examine how the values surrounding wild berry picking and consumption changed in Estonian households over the century. They track major transformations from the restricted berry consumption by the peasants under the rule of Baltic German landlords and the Russian Empire, to berries becoming an export commodity in the first part of the twentieth century, to

collective picking excursions under socialism, to picking as a leisure activity today. The second article by Leena Kurvet-Käosaar tracks life in forced labor camps in Siberia after the Second World War to remind us that famine is about a social disturbance as much as an experience with suffering. Examining the memoirs and dairies penned by Baltic women, Kurvet-Käosaar shows how food (or the lack of) during deportation constituted a particular site for redefining women's identities, the domestic order, and the boundaries of community and the nation.

In contrast to the experiences of extreme hunger, the next two articles in the issue grapple with the emerging consumer culture of the late twentieth and the early twenty-first centuries that is epitomized in the seeming abundance of food in supermarkets, markets, and specialty shops dotting modern urban landscapes. Following a similar life-story approach as Kurvet-Käosaar, Lani Trenouth and Tālis Tisenkopfs take a broad view of the Latvian food topography to study changing habits over two decades of post-socialist transformations. In their analysis, Trenouth and Tisenkopfs develop four consumer profiles – the urban professional, the rural farmer, the urban retired, and the urban worker – to distill the most prevalent features of the Latvian consumer culture and to show how differently these groups have experienced and "tasted" post-socialism. In the following article, Ida Harboe Knudsen examines the growing popularity of the "authentic" Lithuanian cuisine that valorizes "healthy" countryside products, defying western nutritional advise such as low-fat meat and dairy products. Harboe Knudsen argues that such a reinvention of the Lithuanian gastronomic taste signals the ambivalence with which Lithuania's residents relate to the ongoing "Europeanization" of the region.

The last paper in the special issue knits together the thematic threads developed in the earlier papers by linking particular consumer tastes with the quest for economic sovereignty and identity politics in the first part of the twentieth century. Focusing on Atlantic herring expeditions organized and sponsored by the Estonian government in the 1930s, Kadri Tüür and Karl Stern show that the interwar government was deeply engaged in European food trade tariff politics and actively, even if unsuccessfully, sought to establish Estonia as a self-sustaining fishing nation. Through an investigation of popular accounts about these expeditions, Tüür's and Stern's analysis provides insights into the struggles over food sovereignty that are surprisingly similar to those being fought today by the avant-garde of the local food movements such as La Vía Campesina (Edelman 2014).

As these summaries indicate, issues surrounding nationality, subjectivity, and modernity constitute key themes that link articles in the special issue. It is therefore unfortunate that in the process of compiling the articles, we were unable to include outstanding papers that would have spoken more explicitly to the issues of multiculturalism and transnationalism that have defined the Baltic region for centuries. We do hope, however, that conversations forged in our exchanges with all the authors will prove to be productive and lead to new collaborations.

Acknowledgments

We thank the authors who entrusted us with their work and their patience with a lengthy revision process as well as the numerous reviewers who prepared carefully calibrated comments for each author. Without such feedback, the papers would have

not been as insightful and lucid as they have become. We gratefully acknowledge the contribution of Paulius Narbutas and Robert M. Wills who helped us with language editing in efforts to create a more coherent style across the issue.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

We would like to thank the Estonian Science Foundation that provided partial funding for this special issue under the project "History of Baltic Food Culture: Production, Consumption and Culture in the Light of Environmental History" (ETF 9419).

References

Aistara, G. A. This issue. "Good, Clean, Fair… and Illegal: Paradoxes of Food Ethics in Post-Socialist Latvia." *Journal of Baltic Studies* 46 (3): 283–298. doi:10.1080/01629778.2015.1073915.

Aistara, G. A. 2014. "Latvia's Tomato Rebellion: Nested Environmental Justice and Returning Eco-Sociality in the Post-Socialist EU Countryside." *Journal of Baltic Studies* 45 (1): 105–130. doi:10.1080/01629778.2013.836831.

Astrauskas, A. 2008. *Per Barzdą Varvėjo: Svaigiųjų Gėrimų Istorija Lietuvoje*. Vilnius: Baltos Lankos.

Bardone, E., and P. Pungas-Kohv. This issue. "Changing Values of Wild Berries in Estonian Households: Recollections from an Ethnographic Archive." *Journal of Baltic Studies* 46 (3): 319–336. doi:10.1080/01629778.2015.1073916.

Blumberg, R. This issue. "Geographies of Reconnection at the Marketplace." *Journal of Baltic Studies* 46 (3): 299–318. doi:10.1080/01629778.2015.1073917.

Caldwell, M. L. 2011. *Dacha Idylls: Living Organically in Russia's Countryside*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Dumpe, L. 1998. "Aus der Baltischen Kochgeschichte. Die Ersten Lettischen Kochbücher." In *Kultuuri Mõista Püüdes*, edited by T. Anepajo, and A. Jürgenson, 233–245. Tallinn: Teaduste Akadeemia Kirjastus, Ajaloo Instituut.

Dundulienė, P. 1963. *Žemdirbystė Lietuvoje: Nuo Seniausių Laikų iki 1917*. Vilnius: Valstybinė Politinės ir Mokslinės Literatūros Leidykla.

Dunn, E. C. 2005. "Standards and Person-making in East Central Europe." In *Global Assemblages: Technology, Politics, and Ethics as Anthropological Problems*, edited by A. Ong, and S. J. Collier, 173–194. Malden: Blackwell Publishing.

DuPuis, E. M., and D. Goodman. 2005. "Should We Go 'Home' to Eat?: Toward a Reflexive Politics of Localism." *Journal of Rural Studies* 21 (3): 359–371. doi:10.1016/j.jrurstud.2005.05.011.

Edelman, M. 2014. "Food Sovereignty: Forgotten Genealogies and Future Regulatory Challenges." *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 41: 959–978. doi:10.1080/03066150.2013.876998.

Gille, Z. 2009. "From Nature as Proxy to Nature as Actor." *Slavic Review* 68 (1): 1–9.

Gille, Z. 2011. "The Hungarian Foie Gras Boycott: Struggles for Moral Sovereignty in Postsocialist Europe." *Eastern European Politics and Societies* 25: 114–128. doi:10.1177/0888325410374090.

Klumbytė, N. 2009. "The Geopolitics of Taste: The 'Euro' and 'Soviet' Sausage Industries in Lithuania." In *Food & Everyday Life in the Postsocialist World*, edited by M. L. Caldwell, 130–153. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Knudsen Harboe, I. This issue. "The Making of the Consumer? Risk and Consumption in EUropeanized Lithuania." *Journal of Baltic Studies* 46 (3): 377–391. doi:10.1080/01629778.2015.1073925.

Kurvet-Käosaar, L. This issue. "'Is That Hunger Haunting the Stove?' Thematization of Food in the Deportation Narratives of Baltic Women." *Journal of Baltic Studies* 46 (3): 337–353. doi:10.1080/01629778.2015.1073951.

Lankauskas, G. 2002. "On 'Modern' Christians, Consumption, and the Value of National Identity in Post-Soviet Lithuania." *Ethnos* 67 (3): 320–344. doi:10.1080/0014184022000031.

Leitch, A. 2003. "Slow Food and the Politics of Pork Fat: Italian Food and European Identity." *Ethnos* 68 (4): 437–462. doi:10.1080/0014184032000160514.

Liiv, O. 1938. *Suur Näljaaeg Eestis 1695-1697. Lisas: Valimik Dokumente Suurest Näljaajast*. Tartu, Tallinn: Loodus.

Mänd, A. 2012. *Pidustused Keskaegse Liivimaa Linnades 1350-1550*. Tallinn: Eesti Keele Sihtasutus.

McMichael, P. 2009. "A Food Regime Genealogy." *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 36 (1): 139–169. doi:10.1080/03066150902820354.

Mincytė, D. 2011. "Unusual Ingredients: Gastronationalism, Globalization, Technology and Zeppelins in East European Imagination." *Anthropology of East European Review* 29 (2): 1–21.

Mink, N. 2009. "It Begins in the Belly." *Environmental History* 14: 312–322.

Moora, A. 2007. *Eesti Talurahva Vanem Toit*. Tartu: Ilmamaa.

Paškevica, B., ed. 2012. *Tulkojums Ar Grašu. Ēdiena Volodnieciskie Un Starpkultūru Aspekti*. Valmiera: Vidzemes Augstskola.

Plath, U. 2008. "Surrogates in Baltic Nutrition and Culture in the 19th Century." In *The End of Autonomy? Studies in Estonian Culture*, edited by C. Hasselblatt, 52–68. Maastricht: Shaker.

Plath, U. 2012. "Baltic Asparagus: Transnational Perspectives on Gardening and Food Culture (17th-19th Cc.)." In *Tulkojums Ar Garšu. Ēdiena Valodnieciskie un Starpkultūru Aspekti*, edited by B. Paškevica, 40–64. Valmiera: Vidzemes Augstskola.

Plath, U. 2013. "Näljast Ja Näljapsühholoogiast A. H. Tammsaare Romaanis 'Ma Armastasin Sakslast'." In *Armastus Ja Sotsioloogia: A. H. Tammsaare romaan 'Ma Armastasin Sakslast'*, edited by M. Hinrikus, and J. Undusk, 50–71. Tallinn: Underi ja Tuglase Kirjanduskeskus.

Põltsam-Jürjo, I 2012. "'Hääleib', 'Saajaleib', 'Iseleib' – Eesti Leivakultuurist 13.-16. Sajandil." *Tuna. Ajalookultuuri Ajakiri* 4: 14–28.

Põltsam-Jürjo, I. 2013. *Pidusöögist Näljahädani. Söömine-Joomine Keskaja Tallinnas*. Tallinn: Eesti Ekspressi Kirjastus.

Ross, J. 2012. "Naisterahva Mõnitus. Toidu Valmistamine Eesti Nõukogude Olmekirjanduses." *Looming* 1: 83–96.

Seppel, M. 2008. *Näljaabi Liivi- ja Eestimaal 17. Sajandist 19. Sajandi Alguseni*. Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus.

Sillasoo, Ü. 2013. "A Cultural History of Food Consumption in Medieval Livonian Towns." In *Landscapes and Societies in Medieval Europe East of the Elbe Interactions between Environmental Settings and Cultural Transformations*, edited by S. Rossignol, S. Kleingärtner, T. Newfield, and D. Wehner, 316–328. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies.

Trenouth, L., and T. Tisenkopfs, This issue. "The Evolution of Household Foodscapes Over Two Decades of Transition in Latvia." *Journal of Baltic Studies* 46 (3): 355–375. doi:10.1080/01629778.2015.1073927.

Troska, G., and A. Viires. 2008. "Söögid ja Joogid." In *Eesti Rahvakultuur*, edited by A. Viires, and E. Vunder, 264–278. Tallinn: Eesti Entsüklopeediakirjastus.

Tüür, K., and K. Stern. This issue. "Atlantic Herring in Estonia: In the Transversal Waves of International Economy and National Ideology." *Journal of Baltic Studies* 46 (3): 393–408. doi:10.1080/01629778.2015.1073928.

Viires, A. 1985. "Kokaraamatud Kultuuriloo Kajastajatena." *Keel ja Kirjandus* 3: 158–166.

Vonderau, A. 2010. *Leben im Neuen Europa: Konsum, Lebensstile und Körpertechniken im Postsozialismus*. Bielefeld: Transcript.

Võsu, E., and A. Kannike. 2011. "My Home Is My Stage: Restaurant Experiences in Two Estonian Lifestyle Enterprises." *Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics* 5 (2): 19–47.

Diana Mincytė is an assistant professor at the City University of New York, New York City College of Technology. She studies topics at the interface of poverty, food politics, and the environment, particularly in the context of post-socialist Europe and the United States. Her research was published in *Environment and Planning D, Sociologia Ruralis, Agriculture and Human Values, Slavic Review*, and other journals and edited volumes.

Ulrike Plath is Professor of German culture and history in the Baltic region at Tallinn University and senior researcher at the Under and Tuglas Literature Institute of the Estonian Academy of Sciences. She has published in the areas of Baltic cultural history of the Enlightenment and Baltic foods, gardening, and environmental history.