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FOOD RECIPES AS CULTURAL HERITAGE AND HISTORICAL SOURCE

ABSTRACT

In recent decades, interest in foodways, in women's lives, and in everyday matters, has increased. Women's handwritten recipes books – a combination of culinary recipes, medical remedies and household tips – are especially valuable for cultural understanding. In these domestic manuals one can learn, among other things, about food consumption, trade routes, class aspects and social markers, agriculture, and everyday skills.

In this article I call attention to the importance of making archival material, in this case handwritten recipe books, available for as wide an audience as possible, by referring to an ongoing project involving digital publishing.¹ The project in question is called *Historiska recept* ('Historical recipes') and is funded by the Society of Swedish Literature in Finland, an association with large archive collections and which is also engaged in research programmes and publishing. The aim of the project is to provide researchers and an interested public with the tools necessary for the study of as many early recipe books from Finland as can be found.² The project also seeks to step out of theory and to introduce a practical purpose to the material, by offering cooking classes based on the historical recipes for those interested in food and history.

1 Reference to this study: Yrsa Lindqvist: Food Recipes as Cultural Heritage and Historical Source. In Anikó Báti and Patricia Lysaght (eds.): *Living Eating Habits, Revitalized Foodways and the Concepts of Tradition and Food Heritage*. Budapest: ELTE RCH Institute of Ethnology – Museum of Ethnography, 2025. pp. 253–263.

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2 Jonasson, Maren and Norrback, Märtha: 'Finnish Manuscript Recipe Books, ca.1730–1850: Cross-Regional Influences, Copied Recipes, and Authorship Issues', in Kernan, Sarah Peters and Müllneritsch, Helga eds.; *Culinary Texts in Context, 1500–1800. Manuscript Recipe Books in Early Modern Europe* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2024).

RECIPES FROM THE PAST

In this context, historical recipes refer mainly to recipes from the 18th and the early 19th centuries. At that period, Finland was still a part of Sweden, an outlying land in the eastern part of the Swedish state, separated from the rest of Sweden by the Gulf of Bothnia and the Gulf of Finland. Finnish, as a written language, composed of several loan words from Swedish and Latin, and mainly used in religious contexts, was still developing at that time. The upper classes, closest to the nation's official networks, were Swedish speaking, and higher education was likewise provided in the Swedish language. The language of most the written sources from that time – such as the recipe books mentioned in this article, is, therefore, Swedish.

Printed cookbooks are popular collecting items worldwide, while manuscript recipe books have been largely overlooked and are a misunderstood genre. In her book, *Preserving on Paper*, Kristine Kowalchuk points out how such manuscripts can enlighten a range of studies such as those in literature, history and culture, as well as book history, women's and culinary studies, and the history of medicine.³ We hope that knowledge of the digital platform *Historiska recept.fi* will become widespread and that the material it contains will thereby become available for researchers in a broad sense, in different disciplines and studies, as mentioned by Kowalchuk.

During the first two years of the project (2020–2022), six manuscripts were digitalised, transcribed and published.⁴ The manuscripts were found in archives, museums, and in private collections, and were written between 1720–1730 and 1850. They originate from the manors of the nobility and the local elite.⁵

The Finnish elite and nobility at that time lived comfortably but not in opulence. The manors were, in comparison with those on the Continent, rather unassuming, and

3 Kowalchuk, Kristine ed.: *Preserving on Paper. Seventeenth-Century Englishwomen's Receipt Books* (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 4–6.

4 The project continues for 3 more years. By the end of 2025, therefore, the digital platform will host approximately 15 additional manuscripts, some of them dated as recent as the 20th century.

5 The manuscripts are from: Stensböle manor located outside of Porvoo and owned by the noble Rotkirch family; the Wijkman-von Ackern family from Turku; Louhisaari Castle, located north of Turku and owned by the Mannerheim family; Nauvo, located southwest of Turku and owned by the noble family of Schultén; Hautaa manor located northeast of Tampere and owned by the noble Mellin family; and from Herttoniemi manor located outside of Helsinki and owned by the noble Cronstedt family.

agriculture was the main source of income, often alongside an official income from the state.⁶ While their daily diet did not differ significantly from that of the rest of the population, nevertheless, their social status entailed, or presupposed, a generous representation of goods, including foods, that showed the prosperity of the household. The ethnologist Anna-Maria Åström, specialising in the study of the manors of eastern Finland, mentions that the festive seasons were concentrated around Christmas and midsummer. In high-status circles, it was important to highlight the family's status via its material world.⁷

The female head of the household was responsible for, and would have control over, all work that touched on the household. Being self-sustaining meant that virtually all of the food for the household would have been produced and refined on the farm, and the raw materials would then be preserved and stored for the family's entire winter's needs. For almost half of the year, the only opportunities for increasing the household's food supply were by means of fishing, hunting and butchering. Therefore, a lot of the manuscript recipes are about how to preserve food products using different methods, and also about how to use the preserved items in the cooking.

It is difficult to say to what extent the recipes were used in the households and families to which they belonged. Some of the recipes contain ingredients that, given the transport possibilities of the time, could be difficult to obtain in distant Finland. Fresh oysters were available nowhere nearer than the Swedish west coast, nor were lobsters either for that matter. In one of the manuscripts, however, there are recipes in which both fresh and salt-preserved oysters are used. In another of the collections, there is also a recipe for 'pickling oysters in the English way', with French wine, wine vinegar, nutmeg and pepper, after which they were put in jars. The handwritten recipe manuscripts are, nevertheless, more personal documents than, for example, printed cookbooks, and it can be assumed that especially the advice and home remedies that concern health and the curing diseases, that they contain, lean on experience, as do the recipes that concern textile dyeing.⁸

⁶ Husbands on manorial estates also often worked for the state or in the military, for example, and had, therefore, an income additional to that derived from agriculture at the manors.

⁷ Åström, Anna-Maria: 'Kolonialvaror och vardagsting i den europeiska marginalen' ('Colonial Goods and Everyday Things in the Margin of Europe'), *Finskt museum* (2010–2011), (2011), 7, 19.

⁸ Norrback, Märtha: 'Bröd och bot' ('Bread and cure'). <<https://historiskarecept.sls.fi/sv/ebook/norrback-brod-och-bot.epub>> accessed 23 October 2024.

When it comes to ascertaining which foodstuffs the households had access to, it is more advantageous to look at the records that the housewives kept about purchases. In an account book for the year 1764 kept at a manor near Helsinki, it can be seen that among the household's purchases were Baltic herring, herring, salmon, bream, butter, livestock, venison, eggs, fresh fish, 1 cock, wheat flour, meat, turnips, Swedish turnips, cabbage, hops, and 2 cows for slaughtering for household meat. In addition, there were purchases of salt, sugar, tea, coffee, almonds, figs, rose hip, anise, ginger, cinnamon, saffron, nutmeg, cloves, bay leaf, orange peel, olive oil, syrup, sweet wine, vinegar, and muscat wine. All ingredients are found in the recipes from that time.⁹

In the household account books and in preserved receipts, information about the kitchen utensils that were needed in a particular household – such as colanders, baking tins, graters and funnels – can also be found. New customs such as the holding of coffee parties required more refined and more abundant pastries.¹⁰ Recipe books, and cash receipts, as well as farm-accounting data related to housekeeping, provide insights into both the individual's living environment and the women's collective work.

TASTING HISTORY

Personally, I find great pleasure in highlighting the recipes in a practical way – they are, after all, intended for the act of cooking. In a digital platform hosting thousands of historical recipes, it is possible to make various types of comparisons between them, to search for individual ingredients, and to categorise and experiment in a way that would be much more laborious if using the original manuscript. But how can one know what the cooked food tasted like and what it is that these recipes describe. The answer is that we do not know, and the reason for this is, that so many of the recipe components used back then, were different compared to those in use now. Thus, in terms of taste, what has to be borne in mind is the nature of the raw materials used, which were often stored and pickled, the preparation methods, the vessels used, and above all the flavours which seem to have changed quite a bit over the course of two hundred years. An example of this is the recipe for soup of dried pike:

9 SLS 1220, The SLS Archive, The Society of Swedish Literature in Finland.

10 Åström: 'Kolonialvaror och vardagsting i den europeiska marginalen', 16–17.

‘Take raisins, gingerbread, wheat bread, vinegar, sugar, boil it together, beat in the pike, [add] saffron if necessary.’¹¹

Pike was one of the fish species that was dried, although mainly for the preparation of stockfish.¹² But in the recipe above, one might wonder if the step of soaking the pike, or the step to add water in making the soup, have been omitted. If not, the only liquid in use is vinegar, which hardly makes a soup edible. Today, raisins, gingerbread and saffron, have Christmas connotations.

Not all of the recipes featured in the manuscripts are remarkable. Recipes for pastries of various kinds are by far the most-commonly found there and what surprises us most about them today is the number of eggs used – up to 40 eggs could be included in a cake, for example. Bitter almonds were also used in a quantity that is not recommended today, as they contain amygdalin, which can release hydrogen cyanide after ingestion. Lemons were also used abundantly, which is surprising, given the distance from Finland to the lemon trees’ habitat.

During the cooking classes, many questions arise and lead to discussions about the ingredients being used, which sometimes seem exotic, and sometimes just remarkable. One also reflects, in an historical perspective, on matters such as transport, sustainability, economy, innovations, and on all the knowledge that women must have had in order to keep a household afloat and, when custom dictated, to show the family’s social position via dishes. This was achieved by the inclusion of wine, lemons and almonds in the recipes, and especially by the frequently-mentioned use of spices, then almost unknown among the peasantry. Cinnamon is the most common spice appearing in the recipes, closely followed by pepper and nutmeg. Other spices used were ginger, cardamom, saffron and anise. The inclusion of spices was a measure of status reserved for wealthy households.¹³

Another thing that is different from our time is that the food was served *à la français*, that is, that all of the dishes were served at once, and were not divided into starters, main courses and desserts. The food was usually sweet, sour and spicy, respectively.

11 The von Ackern manuscript. <[https://historiskarecept.sls.fi/sv/collection/2560/text/85082?views=\(type:readingtext\)&q=torr&q=g%C3%A4dda](https://historiskarecept.sls.fi/sv/collection/2560/text/85082?views=(type:readingtext)&q=torr&q=g%C3%A4dda)> accessed 23 October 2024.

12 Talve, Ilmar: *Folkligt kosthåll i Finland* ('Peasantry Food in Finland') (Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1977), 35.

13 Swahn, Jan-Öjvind: *Boken om kryddor: historien om kryddornas ursprung, bruk och egenskaper*, ('Book of Spices: the history of the origin of spices, use and quality') (Solna: Rabén Prisma, 1995).

Preparation over an open fire or in a wood-burning oven also added a dimension of smoke to the food that cannot be achieved in a modern kitchen.

CULTURAL HERITAGE IN ACTION

The popularisation of history via food has been done in the media, in the British infotainment series such as *The Supersizers*, and in Sweden in the corresponding concept called *Historieätarna* ('the History Eaters').¹⁴ In these contexts, the programme-makers get fully immersed in the topic, also imitating different historical eras via clothing and other props. Historical sources are used and researchers in historical lifestyles are called in as experts.

My own experiences of giving cooking classes are that historical recipes give a concrete insight into life in another era. In a Finnish context, the recipe ingredients are testament to the fact that there was great social diversity in Finnish society at the time. This is in contrast to the more usual narrative about the Finnish food culture, which has concentrated on the eating habits of the common people, about crop failure, and about famine and scarcity during the cold winter months, when the ground was frozen and when the people were limited to the food products which they had preserved and stored.

For today's people, the manuscript recipes often provide a new insight into the fact that luxury also existed in historical times. What was deemed luxury then was unattainable for most citizens – the use of spices, lemons, almond flour, and rose water, not to mention lobster and oysters – which can still be considered luxury products in countries like Finland where these items are only available by means of imports.

During the cooking classes, one also reflects on the appearance of the food – usually all of the dishes get a similar brown colour – and its texture. Puddings of various kinds were a popular dish in the 18th century, which also gives rise to discussions about the quality or state of people's teeth 200 years ago, and to what extent one could chew food that was not well prepared.

By bringing archival material of the kind mentioned in this article to a general audience, discussions are born, and insights that many would never otherwise reflect

¹⁴ See <<https://sv.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historie%C3%A4tarna>> accessed 23 October 2024.

on come to the fore. The material also provides insights into the fact that everyday documents can be of great importance for our perception of history, and that even our own recipe collections can be of value to new generations in the future – provided they are saved and archived for posterity as one of the many forms of cultural heritage.





Fig. 2. Root vegetables, such as carrots and turnips were often stuffed and thus became something beyond a carrot or turnip. Even so, they were often stuffed with the same insides that were dug out, and mixed with almonds and cream, for example. In the recipe for stuffed carrots, a funnel is used to extract the inside of the vegetable, but in the cooking classes, other methods, that serve the same purpose, may be resorted to. (Photo by Yrsa Lindqvist, Loimaa, 2023)



Fig. 3. During the actual cooking, the discussions are usually about how to solve various challenges that arise as the recipes are not so precise. Each course ends with a session of eating together and tasting all of the dishes served. The participants then often also reflect on the period that the recipes of the dishes refers to, on what it was like to live at that time, on the women's burden with housework in a time without electricity, household appliances, and several other issues. (Photo by Yrsa Lindqvist, Helsinki, 2023)

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