

PART VI:  
FOOD HERITAGE IN TIMES OF  
CRISIS



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# RESTRICTIONS AS CULINARY HERITAGE: A STUDY OF RESTAURANT POLITICS IN SWEDEN

## ABSTRACT

A detailed restriction system for restaurants in Sweden was developed from 1850 to 1922. The original restriction framework was dismantled in 1955, but many of the restrictions remained in place. The paper, based on official documents and news articles, argues that the restrictions can be seen as a living culinary cultural heritage, which has implications for both the restaurant industry and the general public.

## INTRODUCTION

Eating out in Sweden has been a peculiar experience for international visitors, especially if alcoholic beverages have been included in the meal.<sup>1</sup> The unusual number of restrictions in relation to alcohol causes confusion and frustration. This article aims to provide an historical background to the restrictions and to discuss how the restrictions can be seen as a culinary cultural heritage through the lenses of gastronationalism and different meanings of culture.

The article starts with a recapitulation of the setting up of restrictions, their rationale and applications in different periods, and the national characteristics of the restrictions. The article then moves on to describe restrictions in recent years and ends with an attempt to theorise restrictions as a culinary cultural heritage.

The empirical material for the article consists of official documents, pamphlets from both official and private actors in the restaurant sector, and news articles. The

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1 Reference to this study: Håkan Jönsson: Restrictions as Culinary Heritage: A Study of Restaurant Politics in Sweden. 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. 417–429.  
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material has been collected as part of a longer research project on restaurant culture in Sweden. Earlier publications by this author include monographs on eating out in Sweden,<sup>2</sup> the gastronomic revolution,<sup>3</sup> and an article about Swedish gastronationalism.<sup>4</sup> However, this is my first article focusing *strictly on the restrictions of the restaurant scene*.

#### BACKGROUND: THE CREATION OF PUBLIC RESTAURANT COMPANIES

Sweden came late in the industrialisation process, but from the 1850s onwards a rapid industrialisation process started. As part of the new era, modern hotels with fine dining restaurants were built in conjunction with the railway stations in many cities.<sup>5</sup> It was part of an international development, in which the modern restaurant that had originated in France in the late 18th century, spread throughout the world.<sup>6</sup> As in other countries, the rising bourgeoisie developed a public space at restaurants, and gastronomy became an important part of the cultural capital of the rising urban middle class.<sup>7</sup>

Parallel to this rise of modern, upper-class restaurants, their popular predecessors, the taverns, began to be seen as a problem. From the Middle Ages, an extensive tavern system had developed in Sweden. Despite some attempts to regulate the taverns, they flourished until the middle of the 19th century. At that time, the Swedish political model was reformed. Municipalities at the local level became the basic political unit, with responsibility for social issues, to which the taverns belonged. In the 1850s, the municipalities started 'Systembolag' – companies controlled by the local municipalities. These companies were the forerunners of the still existing 'Systembolaget', the state monopoly which has exclusive permission to sell alcoholic beverages with an alcohol content higher than 3.5%. While the contemporary 'Systembolaget' only deals with alcohol sales in bottles, the main

2 Jönsson, Håkan and Tellström, Richard: *Från krog till krog. Svenskt uteätande under 700 år* ('From tavern to tavern. Eating out in Sweden over 700 years') (Stockholm: Natur & Kultur, 2018).

3 Jönsson, Håkan: *Den gastronomiska revolutionen* ('The gastronomic revolution') (Stockholm: Carlsson Bokförlag, 2012).

4 Jönsson, Håkan: 'A food nation without culinary heritage? Gastronationalism in Sweden', *Journal of Gastronomy and Tourism* 4/4 (2020), 223–237.

5 Nilsson, Jan-Henrik: *Hotellens och krogarnas framväxt; Ett kulturgeografiskt perspektiv* ('The rise of hotels and restaurants; A cultural geography perspective') (Örebro: Örebro universitet, 2016).

6 Spang, Rebecca: *The Invention of the Restaurant* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

7 Trubek, Amy: *Haute cuisine: How the French invented the culinary profession* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Philadelphia Press, 2000).

business of the early versions of the 'Systembolaget' was to sell and serve alcohol by the glass, in simple taverns, or 'folk restaurants'.<sup>8</sup>

The municipalities were in charge of the licensing of taverns, which gave them the power to reduce the previously-flourishing market of small, private taverns. As an example, the city of Gothenburg took over all the privately-run taverns in 1865, dismantling most of them and integrating the remaining into the public 'Systembolaget'. Stockholm closed 106 of the 193 taverns in 1877. Rural regions were even more affected by the new policies. It has been estimated that 90% of the taverns in rural areas and 50% in urban areas were dismantled during the late 1800s.<sup>9</sup>

The simple taverns for the growing urban working class had become a symbol for societal problems among social reformers in Sweden, who demanded that the public sector should interfere in this aspect of society. In the first paragraph of the statutes of the first 'Systembolaget', it was stated that it was not just the alcohol itself that had negative effects:

The morality and prosperity of the working class in our society have their worst enemy in the taverns. It is not only the alcohol in itself, which produces moral corruption, wretchedness and poverty, but the temptations, bad examples and disorders that could be found at the taverns.<sup>10</sup>

## THE DEMOCRATIC BREAKTHROUGH AND RESTAURANT POLITICS

Restaurant politics was an integral part of alcohol politics, an area where liberals and socialists, and the new and the increasingly-dominant political parties, united. Both parties had strong factions of teetotalists and joined forces to regulate the production and consumption of alcohol. Until World War I, restrictions were applied exclusively to the taverns that catered for the working classes. But after the democratic breakthrough with equal voting rights for all men in 1917 and for women in 1921, the situation changed. The first election in which all citizens of legal age could vote was a referendum on the prohibition of alcoholic beverages, that took place in 1922. The result was a narrow majority against total prohibition. As a compromise,

<sup>8</sup> Boberg, Stig: *Folket, supen och staten; Systembolagskrogar och folkrestauranger 1855–1955* ('The people, the drink, and the state; Public taverns and folk restaurants 1855–1955') (Stockholm: Sveriges allmänna restaurangaktiebolag, 1981).

<sup>9</sup> Frånberg, Per: 'Sprit & staten' ('Alcohol and the state'), *Tidskriften Populär Historia* 1 (1997), 4–17.

<sup>10</sup> *Statutes for Systembolaget*, § 1 (1850).

a national system designed by the liberal politician and medical doctor, Ivan Bratt, was implemented after the referendum.<sup>11</sup> All restaurants, including fine dining establishments, were obliged to follow the new system with detailed restrictions, which were in place at national level between 1922 and 1955, a period still recognised as ‘The restriction years’. To prepare visitors for the Swedish experience of eating out, the most important licencing regulations were summarised in a travel guide in the following way:

#### LICENSING REGULATIONS

With regard to the serving of alcoholic beverages, restaurants are classified into four groups, namely:

1. Temperance Restaurants.
2. Restaurants Licensed to Serve Beer.
3. Restaurants Licensed to Serve Beer and Wine.
4. Fully Licensed Restaurants.

For your information, we give the following summary of Swedish restrictions of the right to serve wine and spirits.

1. No wines or spirits may be served before 12.00 o'clock (noon) on week days or before 1 P.M. on Sundays and holidays.
2. Alcoholic drinks may be served only with meals costing at least Sw. Kr. 2-. Not more than 7,5 cl. before 3 P.M. or 15 cl. after 3 P.M. may be served to male guests at any one sitting. The maximum quantity allowed to female guests at anyone sitting is 7,5 cl. When Swedish Punch is served, the sold quantities may be doubled.
3. Over and above the quantities mentioned under Point 2, so called ‘lättgrogg’ may be served. ‘Lättgrogg’ is mixed before being served and contains 2,5 cl. of spirits mixed with not less than 20 cl. of water or another non-alcoholic drink. Two such drinks may be ordered without meals or four with meals.

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<sup>11</sup> The restriction system was based on the proposal published in: Bratt, Ivan and Petré, Alfred: *Alkoholen och samhället. Betänkande angående de samhällsskadliga inflytanden bruket af rusdrycker medför jämte förslag till systematiska åtgärder för deras bekämpande i Sverige* (Alcohol and society. Report on the harmful social influences of the use of intoxicants, together with proposals for systematic measures to combat them in Sweden’) (Stockholm: Isaac Marcus’ boktr.-aktiebolag, 1912).

4. Strong wines may be served only with meals (see above), the quantity being limited to  $\frac{1}{4}$  bottle per guest and meal. With light meals or pastry etc., minimum value 30 öre, 5 cl. of strong wine may be served per guest and meal.

5. Sparkling and light wines. No restrictions are imposed on the serving of these wines, beyond those given under Point 1.<sup>12</sup>

As stated in the pamphlet, this was just a summary of the licencing regulations. The regulations also included the type of meals served that permitted alcohol to be ordered. Such meals had to consist of cooked, 'proper' food, not just sandwiches, pastries or other light snacks. Strong beer (more than 3.5% alcohol) was prohibited. Not only did the regulations dwell on the quantities of alcohol that could be ordered and the type of food associated with the serving of alcohol, they also strictly regulated the setting in which such activity could take place. It was prohibited to sell drinks over the counter in a bar, as only seated guests were allowed to order drinks. Only limited entertainment could be provided. No dancing or singing by female vocalists was permitted in combination with alcohol servings, as only instrumental music was allowed. Later generations have ridiculed the standard 'Restaurant trio' – three elderly, bored, male musicians on piano, violin and violoncello' playing a standard repertoire of 'restaurant music'.<sup>13</sup>

The restrictions had an educational purpose. The idea was that by getting used to consuming alcohol with meals and in moderate quantities, the bourgeois way of socialising civilly with alcohol would spread to the working class. However, the effect of the restrictions in this context was questionable. Rather than sitting down and eating and drinking in moderation, an effect of the system was that various creative attempts were made to circumvent the restrictions and to ingest larger quantities of alcohol than intended. The compulsion to eat cooked food led to a special genre of so-called restriction dishes, these being dishes that followed the minimum standard for food, but were not really meant to be eaten.<sup>14</sup>

#### ELEVATING THE MINDS AND CULTURE OF THE WORKING CLASS

Public folk restaurants should provide a moral example when compared to the traditional taverns. This required changes both to the supply of alcoholic beverages

12 *Hotels & Restaurants in Skåne 1947* (Malmö and Kristianstad: Länsstyrelserna i Skåne, 1947), 8.

13 Jönsson and Tellström: *Från krog till krog. Svenskt uteätande under 700 år*, 212.

14 Jönsson and Tellström: *Från krog till krog. Svenskt uteätande under 700 år*, 213.



*Fig. 1 (a). Hotel Rydberg, Stockholm, Sweden, 1903. Photographer unknown; from <<https://stockholmskallan.stockholm.se/post/9431>> accessed 9 December 2024. The American Bar at Hotel Rydberg was a novelty in 1903.*



*Fig. 1 (b). Hotel Rydberg, Stockholm, Sweden, 1914. Photographer unknown; from <<https://stockholmskallan.stockholm.se/post/35226>> accessed 9 December 2024. Creative Commons licence (CC-BY). Stockholm imposed the alcohol restrictions earlier than the rest of the nation. After the alcohol restrictions were imposed, the bar was reorganised and couches were put in front of the counter to signal that ordering over the counter was not allowed. Shortly after the photo was taken, the hotel and the bar closed.*

and the premises in which alcohol was served. In addition to the regulation of food and drink, it was important that the consumption took place in suitable premises. In the guidelines for the public restaurants, it was emphasised that the interior and design of the premises was an important part of the sobriety work. The venue should consist of bright and large rooms with a focus on food service. In contrast to the simple furnishings in traditional taverns, which were mostly located in simple, small houses, the new public restaurants had high ceilings and large windows. It was thought that if the space was clean, bright, healthy and spacious, it would have a positive effect on the guests. In a report from Stockholm, a company restaurant manager emphasised the advantages of the new toilet, and claimed that the signs telling guests not to spit on the floor, and the many spittoons provided, ensured that the guests and the premises were in a clean, tidy and healthy state.<sup>15</sup>

The surplus income from the restaurants was partly dedicated to educational purposes. With these resources, local artists were hired to decorate the walls. According to the management of Stockholm's public restaurant company (SARA), the renewed interior design of the folk restaurants had an uplifting effect on the guests and the ambiance:

As a small but quite telling example, it can be mentioned that, after the rearrangement of the exterior design of folk restaurants, it was possible without difficulty to teach the guests the habit of removing their headgear during meals. [...] The former sharp boundary between restaurants of the so-called lower and upper classes has to a great extent been wiped out, and the public drinking-houses have been raised to a more dignified and sophisticated level<sup>16</sup> (Translation by the author).

With art as a tool, those of the working class had become 'decent'. They were seated during meals, took off their caps indoors and thus behaved more in accordance with the conventions of better restaurants. This was also seen as part of democratisation, the erasing of boundaries between the upper and lower classes. Another part of the restaurant policy was to keep down the number of permits to operate restaurants. To be able to establish a restaurant, a 'need for representation' which was not covered

15 Rosenberg, Einar: *Stockholms Allmänna Restaurant Aktiebolag; En tioårshistorik på uppdrag av bolagets styrelse utarbetad av Einar Rosenberg* ('Stockholms Allmänna Restaurant Aktiebolag; A ten-year history commissioned by the company's board of directors prepared by Einar Rosenberg') (Stockholm: SARA, 1925).

16 Rosenberg: *Stockholms Allmänna Restaurant Aktiebolag; En tioårshistorik på uppdrag av bolagets styrelse utarbetad av Einar Rosenberg*, 46.

by current establishments, had to be present in the area. Thus, Swedish urban space acquired a special character, in which the restaurants were spread out, being evenly distributed based on how many people lived and worked in an area.

#### INVERTED GASTRONATIONALISM

The formalised restriction system was dismantled in 1955. However, the number of licences in operation remained limited, and with high prices for alcohol, consumption was kept down. It was still mandatory to provide cooked food in the restaurants, although it was no longer necessary to order it. While the previous system focused on the guests, the new 'liberal' system focused on the regulation of restaurant businesses. Restaurants that had too high a percentage of alcohol sales might have their permit cancelled, which led restaurants to subsidise 'dish of the day' to increase the number of food orders. Restaurateurs had to maintain order in the premises, undergo training in Swedish alcohol policy, and avoid serving drunk guests. The public restaurant companies continued to be an important actor in the restaurant sector. In 1970, they were merged into a nationwide company, which became Europe's second largest restaurant group.

All in all, this meant that Sweden, as a culinary nation, continued to differ from the other countries on the European continent. There was a broad political consensus that the Swedish restaurant scene required special Swedish regulations. Most proposals to deregulate the restaurant sector were rejected, which in turn reflected a national self-image that Sweden would be a forerunner when it came to promoting sobriety, cleanliness and work.

Michaela deSocey coined the term gastronationalism.<sup>17</sup> The term was originally attributed to a growing interest from politicians in a number of nations in Europe to claim a position as a gastronomic nation. In a previous article I have described how Swedish gastronationalism differs from that of other countries, in particular by the absence of heritage claims.<sup>18</sup> While acknowledging the importance of the restriction years in shaping a distinct national profile, I did not at the time realise that the restriction heritage in itself could be seen as a form of inverted gastronationalism – a

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17 DeSocey, Michaela: 'Gastronationalism: Food traditions and authenticity politics in the European Union', *American Sociological Review* 75 (2010), 432–455.

18 Jönsson, Håkan: *Den gastronomiska revolutionen* ('The gastronomic revolution') (Stockholm: Carlsson Bokförlag, 2012).

Ser. B.  
**CLEMENSKÄLLAREN.** N<sup>o</sup>

\_\_\_\_\_ Dat. / 192 kl. \_\_\_\_\_

Innehavaren med sällskap \_\_\_\_\_ män, \_\_\_\_\_ kvinnor har  
 inlagit måltid, som berättigar till \_\_\_\_\_ cl. spirituosa inom  
 restauranten.

(På detta spritbevis får icke uttagas spirituosa för andra personer än här namn  
 angivda, samt skall beviset omedelbart återlämnas till kassan.)

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Fig. 2. Restrictions sheet used by the restaurant staff at Clemensköllaren, Lund. Printed in Lund, Sweden, in 1927, by Berlingska boktryckeriet (From Lund University Library with permission). To ensure restrictions were followed, the serving staff were obliged to document the number of people at the table, their gender, and time of day when the meal was taking place, and to calculate how much alcohol could be served at the table in question.



Fig. 3. Restaurant Shanghai, Stockholm, around 1922. Photographer unknown; from <<https://stockholmskallan.stockholm.se/post/16536>> accessed 9 December 2024. Creative Commons licence (CC-BY). The clean room and the wall paintings created a nice atmosphere. At least some of the guests had removed their headgear during the meal.

nation proud of its attempts to regulate and downplay gastronomy in public spaces. The restaurant was a symbol of either excessive drinking or conspicuous consumption, and both were seen as morally and politically questionable activities during the heyday of the Swedish welfare state.

The gastronationalism of the restriction years did not aim to export food and drink or attract culinary tourists, but to create a country where citizens learned to eat and drink in moderation. Erasing the boundaries between upper and lower classes in the restaurant sector, could be seen as part of a national project to reduce class differences for a new national community in a welfare state.

#### THE LEGACY OF THE PERIOD

During the writing of a monograph on the history of eating out in Sweden<sup>19</sup> I did a search on research literature on Swedish restaurant history. In the newly-built faculty library for the Humanities at Lund University, I found that most of the works had been placed in category 363: 'Societal problems – other'. That says something important about the view on eating out in Sweden. Restaurants have been something of a necessary evil, a social problem that must be regulated. Although eating out has increased dramatically, and the view of gastronomy is now more in line with that of other countries, part of the legacy from the restriction period lives on. An example is the Swedish government's reaction to when the parliament, in 2016, approved an initiative to dismantle the regulation that restaurant staff must intervene if spontaneous dancing occurred in the restaurant, unless the restaurant had applied for, and had been granted, a 'dance permit licence'. The government was reluctant to take any measures, not even when a restaurateur in Malmö gained some fame after being fined when a cover band at an after-work session had played such catchy rhythms that the guests had started moving in time with the music. Only in July 2023 did the new centre-right government decide to abolish the dance permit system.

During the Covid-19 pandemic that broke out in the spring of 2020, the restrictions were designed in a way that was particularly troublesome for the restaurant and culture sector. While Sweden was internationally known for 'loose' restrictions, restaurants were an exception in this context. Serving at bars was again prohibited

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19 Jönsson and Tellström: *Från krog till krog. Svenskt uteätande under 700 år.*

– the guests had to remain seated. No more than four people were permitted at each table and the sale of alcoholic beverages was prohibited after 8.00 p.m. The similarities with the restriction years were striking.

Congestion at shopping centres and in public transport was considered a necessary evil. Crowding in connection with food and drink intake, on the other hand, was unnecessary and immoral, and should therefore be avoided, regardless of the consequences for the food service sector. The legacy from the time when restaurants were seen as a societal problem was thus still very much alive.

### THEORISING 'RESTRICTION CULTURE'

The point that the Swedish restaurant sector is shaped by restrictions is now hopefully convincingly argued, but the reader may question if it is relevant to call it a *restriction culture*. This section will sketch the reasoning behind the terminology.

The word culture is one of the most difficult words to define, since it has numerous meanings. It is not possible here to recapitulate the debates about the term 'culture' in disciplines such as ethnology, anthropology and art history, so I will focus on Raymond Williams's classical account of the genealogy and use of different meanings of the term 'culture'.<sup>20</sup> Williams defines three main uses of the term:

1. The works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity. This refers to the type of works on display in cultural institutions, such as museums, theatres and opera houses.
2. A general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development. This 'Culture', with a capital 'C', is linked to the notion that something can be cultivated, thereby raising it to a higher standard than the natural or unrefined stage.
3. A particular way of life, whether of a people, a period, a group or humanity in general. This is how culture is used in terms such as American culture, Folk culture etc.

When teaching classes in ethnology and food culture, I remind students that the food culture researcher deals with culture in the third 'anthropological' meaning of the word. We should avoid claims about one culture being superior to another. By

<sup>20</sup> Williams, Raymond: *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Croom Helm, 1976).

paying equal attention to the food cultures of marginalised groups and the elite, we aim to illuminate the meaning-creation processes involved, without making moral judgments or restricting cultural activities to the domain of the fine arts.

However, confronted with the empirical material for this article, I believe that this neglect of culture in the first two definitions in the list may lead to a simplified and reductionist approach for the study of restaurant culture. To understand the long-standing history of restrictions in Swedish restaurant politics, we must acknowledge that all three dimensions of culture were enacted in the practices of the policy makers. By using Culture type 1 (paintings and sophisticated music), the restaurant guests were supposed to embark on the journey of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development (Culture type 2). By creating a cultivated restaurant space, the guests, especially those of working-class backgrounds, should become cultivated, i.e. start to drink in moderation while consuming proper cooked foods, and seated with their headgear removed. By imposing restrictions on all types of restaurants, an attempt to create a more general sense of belonging through a supposed Swedishness, a modern type of person-embracing values such as democracy, modesty, equality and hard work, would be accomplished. This idea, although challenged by recent decades of a more liberal attitude towards restaurants as public spaces, has been integrated into the everyday practices of policy making to such an extent, that I believe it is accurate to talk about a *restriction culture* to understand the peculiarities of the Swedish restaurant sector. Restrictions are thus to be seen as a culinary cultural heritage, that still shapes the history of eating out in Sweden.

## CONCLUSION

This article has discussed the importance of restrictions for Swedish restaurant culture. The ambition has been to discuss how regulatory systems can affect the food culture in a particular country. It has also aimed at problematising the use of the concept of culture, and argues that a holistic view of culture that includes meanings that are usually perceived as separate, can broaden our understanding of restaurant culture.

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