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The Gusto of Salad

Introduction

Parents and pedagogues have often voiced the question how to increase children's interest in food. This applies primarily to foodstuffs that are not very appealing to children at first sight.¹ One way to solve this problem is by involving children in the preparation of food they will later be curious to taste.

This, however, is nothing new! Children have encountered interactive approaches to various subjects (other than food) as early as in the kindergarten. It is up to adults to use the children's curiosity and apply their nursery-school experiences at home as well. In doing so, they can use children's cookbooks containing suggestions on how to cook together with children, as well as those containing simple recipes to be used by children when cooking without adult assistance.

The selection of such literature in our bookstores is not wide; however, it has noticeably increased compared to previous years, probably also due to the growing demand.

By organizing food workshops at the Ethnographic Museum of Istria, I wanted to show that even the youngest preschoolers, just like senior grade pupils, can assist in the preparation of food and have fun at it.

The traditional food workshop "The Gusto of Salad" (*Gušti od salate*) was held from the 5th to the 9th of May, 2003, at the Ethnographic Museum. I was encouraged to organize it by the museum pedagogue Mirjana Margetić, a member of the Museum Pedagogy Section at the Croatian Museum Society, who took part in the museum education action under the title "U slast" ("Enjoy your meal!").

¹ This applies primarily to vegetables so much disliked by most children.

Since the facilities of the Ethnographic Museum of Istria are not adequately equipped for the heat treatment of food, i.e. for the organization of food preparation courses or workshops, I decided to organize a salad making workshop.

How it once was

Before the workshops took place, I conducted field investigations to find out which salads were most frequently prepared, at what occasions they were eaten and whether they were eaten as a separate dish. I talked about these issues with women from the surroundings of Rovinjko Selo, Pazin and Motovun.

The breakfast usually consisted of polenta and milk, the second breakfast (*marenda*) of scrambled eggs (*fritaja*), while the lunch consisted of minestrone (*maneštra*). Dinner was also rather humble: people drank milk or ate salads with eggs. Such modest meals were typical of Istrian countryside households of the mid-twentieth century. Meat was eaten rarely and only on special occasions, such as Easter (*Vazam*), Christmas and New Year.

Dry-cured ham (*prosciutto*) and sausages were served only to farm hands helping out with haymaking or fieldwork, to household members employed at factories who provided the greatest income and to guests from the town, or otherwise given as presents to doctors and teachers.

Salads, which were served as independent dishes for dinner, were seasoned or “whitened” (*zabijeliti*) with greaves fat (molten bacon; *cvarki*, *črčki*, *cvirki*), salt (mostly sea salt) and home-made wine vinegar. Only few families were able to add, besides boiled eggs, also a sausage or dried loin of pork (*ombolo*, *žlomprt*) to their salad.

Lettuce leaves in the salad would soften because they were poured over with hot fat. Non-molten pieces of bacon in the salad were especially tasty.

In Sošići and the surroundings of Rovinjko Selo, sea salt would be purchased or exchanged measure for measure (*miru za miru*) by *Bezaki*, the inhabitants of the region between Kanfanar and Žminj, who travelled with wagons (*vozovi*) for trade. Eggs were exchanged for sea salt and wheat (*šenica*) was traded for onions.

Olive oil was rarely used because the landlady saved it for special occasions, such as feasts (*fešte*). In the region of Gračišće, selected black olives were put in hemp bags (weighing around one kilo) and tied to a board. Suspended from the board, the olives in the bags were cooked extensively and then hand-pressed to obtain oil. One kilogram of olives would yield one decilitre of oil. Since the region around the village Feštini lacked olives and olive oil, its inhabitants traded dry-cured ham or bacon for olive oil with the inhabitants of Vodnjan. In the mid-twentieth century, one kilogram of dry-cured ham was required for a litre and a half of olive oil and one and a half kilo of bacon for one litre of oil.

The vinegar used as salad dressing was home-made from red wine and diluted with water if necessary. Besides being used as salad dressing, home-made wine vinegar was mixed with water and taken by peasants to the field (*kampanja*). It was a very good thirst-quencher after the work was done.

Dandelion greens (*žutenka*) or cultivated radicchio, today very highly praised for its medicinal properties, were most commonly used for salads. They were picked in meadows, especially on humid places, like the ones surrounding water ponds. Dandelion greens were mainly cooked to lose the bitterness, and then prepared as salad or combined with eggs to make tasty scrambled eggs (*fritaje*). Whether they were used fresh or boiled for the salad, dandelion greens could be combined with potatoes. In the region of Gračišće near Pazin they were mixed with beans (*fažul*) or boiled eggs. Both dandelion greens and cultivated radicchio are still prepared in this way.

In folk medicine, dandelion greens were used as diuretics to eliminate toxins from the body, while the water they were boiled in is considered a good remedy for high blood pressure (one cup to be taken every morning).

Carrots, which are today often used in the preparation of minestrone, sauces (*šugo*), soups or French salads, were not common in Istria until the 1960s, when they started being cultivated and used for food, especially the yellow carrot or the *merlin* carrot, used also for animal feed. Carrots were baked under a baking lid or cooked, then cut and used as an ingredient in potato salads.

Workshops

Some things are difficult to explain by words, especially skills. During research, ethnologists will have a better understanding if they try to make a recipe, for instance, rather than relying only on informants' accounts. The same goes for museum visitors. If they have a chance to master a skill through a workshop, they will willingly accept it. Such interactive learning leads to a considerably better and longer memorization.

At the Ethnographic Museum of Istria, we have been applying this work method for several years now, organizing workshops related to current exhibitions. Workshops provide opportunities for visitors to get actively involved with the exhibition and learn something about the subject of the exhibition.

There are several reasons why I decided to have salad making workshops². As already said, the main reason was that the Museum lacks appropriate facilities to prepare cooked dishes at workshops. Since the workshops were held in early May, we could

² I wish to thank my Museum colleagues, curators Rober Bilić, Mirajan Margetić and Olga Orlić, as well as preparator Dragan Dimovski, for their assistance in the practical part of the workshops.

use fresh ingredients of the season. Our topic also fit well with the visiting exhibition “Folk Medicine” of the Ethnographic Museum of Zagreb.

With the intention to compare and combine traditional and contemporary salad making methods, we chose dandelion greens and butterhead lettuce salads, which we combined with boiled beans, sea salt, sunflower seed or olive oil and diluted home-made wine vinegar. The tables for our little workshop participants were placed in the inner yard (*korta*) of the citadel (Kaštel) housing the Ethnographic Museum of Istria.

Since our participants were of preschool and primary-school age, we used plastic plates, forks and knives in the preparation of salads. Olive and sunflower seed oil, as well as wine vinegar, were placed in small plastic bottles with perforated caps, so that even the youngest participants could use the dressings.

Before the practical part of the workshops, we talked about edible plants which can be picked in spring and about ways to prepare them. Since most children are taken by their parents or grandparents to pick wild asparagus, black bryony (*bljušt*), dandelions and other self-grown plants every spring, no long discussions were necessary and we went on to the practical part of the workshops.

Fresh lettuce, purchased at the market in Pazin, was washed and placed in bowls. Children took the salad and chopped it as they liked, added salt, oil and vinegar to taste, and finally tasted their salads. They especially enjoyed and liked the part where their teachers and the workshop leader tasted their salads.

For senior primary school graders we organized a group competition, where groups had to make the fastest and best tasting salad out of set ingredients.

The workshops were very well attended, with over a hundred children taking part. They received very good reactions from children, who enjoyed making and tasting salads, but also from preschool and primary school teachers, who emphasized the need for more cooperation of this kind.

Though play and fun children learned what was necessary for the preparation of salads, the difference between sunflower seed and olive oil and other salad dressings. They also learned something about the importance of vegetables in everyday nutrition and the wealth of traditional recipes of the region.

We learned that children can be involved in the preparation of every dish. By becoming active participants in the preparation of food, they will have more fun and show greater interest, especially when finally tasting the results of their work. The essence of preparing food together is to smell, touch, create, taste, play and have fun.

The intention of this project was to encourage the organization of future food workshops and reinforce the already intensive cooperation between the Ethnographic Museum of Istria and the nursery schools and primary schools not only in Pazin, but throughout the region of Istria.

The organization of food workshops at the Ethnographic Museum of Istria is one of the most interesting segments of the musealization of food. Active participation in the workshops provides an opportunity for learning about everyday life in the past and reflecting about ways to apply the acquired knowledge in the present and the future.

Translated by Sanja Novak