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Swedish and Sámi Food Traditions: A Summer of Exploration

I first want to thank the North Carolina members of the SWEA for helping to sponsor my visit to Sweden during the summer 2012. I was able to begin much exploratory work on my doctoral research, and my ability to speak Swedish was immensely improved.

My visit began in Stockholm where I enrolled in a Swedish language course at the Folkuniversitet. For two weeks, our professor coaxed Swedish from our lips for nearly five hours each day. We were introduced to and incorporated vocabulary on crime, space travel, outdoor adventures, to name just a few. My classmates and I came from across the world, including Germany, Austria, Spain, Turkey, Greece, Iraq, and Mauritius. We were all motivated by our future aspirations – to intern as doctors in Swedish hospitals, to pursue PhD studies in Swedish universities, and more. By the end of the course, I was utterly exhausted but satisfied with my progress as I began more and more to carry on daily life in Swedish.

The second purpose of my trip was to begin gathering data on Swedish and Sámi food traditions in northern Sweden. Food, from my perspective, operates both as a symbolic resource of identity as well as a material resource that reminds us and reaffirms who we are through the tastes, the motions of food preparation, and the commensality of eating. Inevitably, in Scandinavia, this discussion revolves around reindeer, moose, fish, berries and mushrooms as well as the daily habits and seasonal celebrations. In Stockholm, I participated in a kraftor or crawfish party. We ate these little crawfish, cooked in a salty dill base, to our hearts delight with shots of liquor on the side. Unfortunately, the “real” kraftor have been overfished, so they are quite expensive to purchase. Most of the crawfish are imported from China. In addition, I learned that Swedish and Sámi people spend as much time possible outdoors during the summer months. I ate grilled kebabs and a red currant meringue pie on a lakeside home’s porch. I enjoyed fika in outdoor cafés in Gamla Stan and Rosendahl’s Trädgård, where I discovered that the princess torta was by far the best cake.

I was also excited to experience how people were promoting local and organic foods. At Rosendahl’s Trädgård, I walked through their large kitchen garden that supplies the fresh fruits and vegetables they use in their foods. At the Saturday Södermalm farmers market. I bought fresh chanterelles, homemade fladderbloms saft, as well as many vegetables including beets, potatoes, cucumbers, and kale.

Following my Swedish course, I traveled north to Umeå. I met with professors in Sámi studies. One professor in particular took me on a walk through the new museum park that featured older Sámi dwellings and food storage structures. The forest floors were blanketed in blueberries. I ate them by the handfuls. I then traveled to Jokkmokk where I did a bit of archive research at the

Atjje Museum which has a very extensive collection of Sámi books. I ate at the restaurant at the museum, which is Slow Food sponsored and features many reindeer dishes.

I finished my travels with a Sámi friend who herds reindeer near Gällivare. We met in 2008 at a Slow Food conference in Italy, where we were representatives of youth interested in changing the food system. On the first day of my visit, we drove around his Sámi village trying to locate some of his reindeer who were beginning to gather together for the winter. As we traversed the rocky landscape, I gathered up lingonberries and blueberries. By the end of the day, I had seen many of his reindeer and a young bull moose. That evening, we dined on a fusion cuisine of reindeer and moose meat in a Thai curry sauce. That meal was an example of the speed with which ideas, tastes, and spices now travel. Reindeer and moose meat are important symbolic aspects of his identity as Sámi, and simultaneously, he is able to incorporate the new and wonderful tastes of other cuisines. If you would like to see more pictures and learn more about my trip, please go to this website: <http://www.screencast.com/t/z90cqyTBR1Dz>.

