

In a widening world best food is local!

Martin Breuer shares his thoughts on local culinary identity as presented at the conference ‘Inspired by Ingredients’ hosted by the Nordic Council of Ministers on October 21, 2010 in Tallinn

Good morning!

Eating is now done while driving, watching TV and working—as we all know, it’s now perfectly fashionable to eat while doing pretty much anything—and food’s available for nibbling and sipping to provide just that opportunity everywhere mouths are idle.

Idle mouths

We have absolutely no clue what we fill them with while we continue multitasking.

15% of all meals in the US are now consumed while on the move. Consumed in transit as it were.

The majority of meals consumed in the United States and increasingly so elsewhere, consist of fast food. Statistics give the scarcity of time as reason for the consumption of ready-made foods. The same statistics show that the average global citizen spends 22.1 hour per week in front of the TV. That is 3.15 hours per day! Each day!

The big picture

The movie Food Inc. a 2008 American documentary film directed by Emmy Award-winning filmmaker Robert Kenner provides a good insight of how our food has become part of a global industrial food system. (www.foodincmovie.com)

Maslow upside down

Maslow’s hierarchy of needs theory teaches us that food; water, shelter and warmth are the most important needs of humans that need to be fulfilled first. Isn’t it remarkable that what is so important for mankind’s survival is at the same time being totally neglected by most of us? If we look at quality of our consumption it seems clear that the pyramid has flipped upside down.

A typical European citizen now spends 40% less on food and non-alcoholic beverages than 50 years ago! **Food has become cheap and unimportant**

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Industrialization or how we got so detached from food

Farming has -unknowingly for many- undergone a revolution in the last 50 years. Forget the romantic notion of the healthy farm advertised in supermarkets. Most of our food comes from conglomerates that have pushed small-scale farmers and also fishermen (and bakeries and cheese makers) out of the market in a race to decrease production costs and eliminate competition.

Worse, food production has become a total industrially engineered process with little respect for nature and bio diversity.

Most animals do not eat themselves anymore but are being fed a diet consisting of corn or other carbohydrates mixed with vitamins and pesticides, selected for one purpose speedy growth and low mortality. Faster, Fatter, Bigger and Cheaper.

Without much exaggeration we can say that much of the pork and beef are nothing else then clever re-arrangements of corn. We even are teaching fish to eat corn!

How many children growing up in a city do still know anything about how food is produced and animals (other then their pets) live? We have allowed ourselves to become disconnected to something as intimate as the food we eat.

Industrialized food systems:

CAFO's

We now have Cafo's, that's short for Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations. This feeding system does not allow animals to graze freely anymore to pick the herbs that the animal considers best for itself.

Industrial power concentrations and oligopolies

Oligopolistic suppliers that control the whole chain from seeds all the way to the supermarket have come up to dominate the market.

Entrance barriers for the small

In particular small entrepreneurs have a tough time to keep alive in the industrialized food system. A good example can be found in legislation so called for -health purpose- Fortunately we are now able to sell home brew Mihu beer again but up to recently this was forbidden. And serving fresh farm eggs as we do -those with the wonderful deep yellow yolk- is still only semi-legal.

Collapse of rural economies

These industrialized food systems cause rural economies to collapse and with that livelihood and culture on the countryside

Loss of varieties

Not only has variety been reduced, whole animal species are under threat of disappearance if we think of industrialized fishing for example.

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Mediocre taste and quality

Most industrially produced food comes hand in hand with mediocre taste and quality

Arguments pro industrialization

Of course there are also arguments that speak for industrialization, the most important ones are **cost advantage** and **'Feed the world'** to defy Malthus' *Principle of Population*.

Whether these arguments are sufficiently convincing, each of us will have to answer ourselves. But we definitely should not ignore the facts and do have a duty to explore and discuss the consequences of the industrialized food system. When thoroughly inspected, the consequences might indeed show how unsustainable and undesired the current industrial food system has become.

Global distribution

Closely connected to Industrialized food production is global sourcing and distribution. Isn't it silly that we ship Evian water across the ocean.

In contrast to tap water, which is distributed through an energy-efficient infrastructure, transporting bottled water long distances involves burning massive quantities of fossil fuels. Nearly a quarter of all bottled water crosses national borders to reach consumers, transported by boat, train, and truck. We are talking about billions and billions of liters each year.

And what is true for our water is not much different for many other products that we get from far. The average meal travels several hundreds of kilometers before it's on your table.

Don't get me wrong. I am not an anti-globalist, I love to travel, I firmly believe in the progress of our industrialized society and I am a fierce advocate of global trade. But at the same time I am well aware of some of the destructive sides that come along.

Questions

As restaurateur I am faced with questions about food that I ask myself, that clients ask and that staffs poses.

We all -all of us as we sit together here today- are trendsetters. Restaurateurs, chefs, food critics, sommeliers and small scale producers are highly influential not only in what Estonians will eat and drink but we influence the attitude and knowledge about food and its sourcing. Through our diners we can set the agenda and can influence the speed and direction of development.

I know that you and I can make a difference.

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Why us?

Supermarket chains have no incentive to set the agenda; large producers are fine with their market dominance and thank their position to the industrial food system. Small producers, restaurateurs and chefs that are serious about food, do have a self-interest to engage in the issue of local food.

A restaurant is as good as its clients

Ideally it is our critical clients that drive the quality of the restaurant culture however, in a highly dynamic culinary environment like ours where often the general public still lacks sufficient knowledge about food, it then becomes our role to be our own critic. The initiative by 'Flavors of Estonia' to invite international food critics to scrutinize our restaurants is another way to help us to infuse quality. Hopefully this initiative will become a tradition.

The more a restaurant's clients know about food the better

And knowledge starts with our own environment, our own region, of course. Restaurateurs can play a role to increase interest in good food; they are ideal change agents! The best question a guest can ask before ordering is: What's good today?

What's good today?

The answer should be *everything* of course. But how serious do we take this as restaurateurs? Guaranteeing that all one reads on the menu is indeed good TODAY

Most restaurants and supermarkets defy the seasons

Technology and distribution enable us to get produce from far often prematurely harvested and artificially ripened and genetically or technically manipulated for long shelf life.

Scarcely any of what they sell ever tastes in season

Even when in local gardens it is!

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No restaurant is better than its raw materials

For a restaurant, purchasing out-of-the-ordinary food is seldom easy, especially where local production is limited, but no restaurant is better than its raw materials.

Restaurants have a responsibility

...and your clients will value you for taking up this task!

No one knows better than the chef how the meal should go together

We live in times of limitless choice and perceive this falsely to be an improvement of quality. A menu with endless dishes to choose from is a joke and we should not be ashamed to kill the myth. In some restaurants diners are given no choice at all and at Pädaste Manor for example we mostly limit ourselves to a table d'hôte menu, that invites clients to follow the choice of our chef.

Restaurants at Kilometrozero,

as the Italians phrase it nicely are nothing new. Actually this was the way a restaurant in France and Italy and in other food loving nations would be, ever since the restaurant had come into being when chefs lost their noble employers during the French revolution and democratized fine dining. And in many regions of those countries it is still prime focus. In other countries and in larger cities, things have changed rapidly when the average citizen started to go on holiday to far-away regions. In Estonia, restaurants lost their regional connection when the Soviet government imposed standardized menus across its empire. Then in the beginning of the nineties for obvious reasons a surge in interest for the exotic and anything not local became to determinate the menus of the restaurants in Estonia

Pendulum

It's clear that the pendulum had moved far out of gravity. Especially in those countries that did not have a well developed and documented culinary tradition engrained in local culture. As a result regions are now successfully rewriting their culinary vocabulary.

City reconnects to the region

As kid I grew up in Amsterdam and was fascinated by markets. 'The Cuyp' was then the place to go for food in Amsterdam. Most impressive were my teenage memories of the Union Square green market. A revolution had started in the mid-seventies in New York: The farmers market. The Amish and other rural communities came over twice a week from New Jersey and New England with their ware. For me the green

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market is one of the early movements where the city was reconnecting again to the region, looking for 'terroir'.

Pädaste Manor's case story

When planning for our hotel and restaurant on Muhu Island back in 1995 it was clear to us that the nature, culture and traditions of our island community would play an important element in what we wanted to create.

Our clients would be well travelled individuals who had seen quite a bit of the world and were somewhat spoiled in the good sense of the word. Obviously these clients would not be interested in a destination so far from the usual path if we could not open the beauty of our community to them. The need for us to be strongly anchored to our Island was to be true for our cuisine and our spa concept as well of course.

Thus we became one of the pioneers of what we then in the 90's called new Estonian Cuisine. In the beginning sometimes still hesitant but increasingly less so, we went against the mainstream and discarded the notions of international cuisine, still very fashionable in Estonia at that time. Reactions of our clients were generally very encouraging with the exception of the odd Estonian client that would once in a while tell us that he could also eat this food at home and for much less money!

I hate it if the chef travels with me!

Over dinner, sometime in 1999 Alec Lobrano who was on assignment to write about our hotel and restaurant for Gourmet Magazine remarked: 'I hate it if the chef travels with me!' What he wanted to say is that he as a seasoned traveller expects to discover local cuisine when travelling and not a fabulous Japanese restaurant in Moscow, a great Italian in Beijing or a Thai at the Amazon river especially not so in a rural destination. His remark gave me the confidence that we were on the right way. We indeed had embarked on an interesting new and unthreaded path. I do not pretend to know it all and our journey was one of trial and error. I will try to take you along now but please keep in mind that the path we decided to go might not be the only one.

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How we at Pädaste Manor engaged with local produce

- Declared local identity to be our touchstone
- Declared seasons to be important
- We built our greenhouse and herb garden
- Started collecting traditional recipes
- Engaged local farmers, prepared to pay a bit extra
- Surrounded ourselves with staff that believes in localness
- Often said no
- Redefined our 'terroir', our 'soil' to be the Nordic Islands
- Continue to sharpen our focus

In search of the Nordic Islands' Cuisine

Not that long ago the Islands in the Baltic Sea were well connected via trade routes and family ties. Traditions and culture were liked. The common nature and climate we share with other Islands even brought about many similarities in food and techniques. In that sense Gotland for us is indeed much closer than Tartu.

Expedition

Early last year Peeter Pihel, Imre Sooäär and I decided to undertake an 'expedition' to research the Nordic Islands' Cuisine. For that purpose we visited the Islands of Zealand, Gotland, Åland, Öland and Bornholm. On each Island we had identified a likeminded restaurant that takes the principle of 'cooking local' to heart. We created an intensive 10-day tour. Besides having discussions with chefs and restaurateurs exchanging ideas and concepts we visited their network of local suppliers.

The expedition has enabled us to establish a pleasant network of likeminded restaurateurs and chefs that feel free to contact and support each other in operational matters. We were fascinated by the passion that we discovered in the various partners that hosted us (Noma, Kadeau, Hotel Borgholm and Paviljongen), to develop a conceptual path.

Ideas about cooking and preservation techniques, common to our region, were exchanged.

We have gained a much better understanding of the extreme importance of sourcing of materials in terms not only of terroir but also in terms of: where were they grown

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or gathered and how were they raised or produced. We have come to understand that this is not only an issue that intrigues and fascinates us but that we indeed share this fascination with others. Our exchanges have also taught us that there are various degrees of ‘terroir-correctness’ possible and defensible.

We met with many local producers some of them now provide us regularly with their local products that we started using in our menu (for example cold pressed rapeseed oil and blue cheese from Bornholm).

Upon our return we realized that what has started out as an expedition, would actually become only the start of a continuous research into the relationship between (local) produce and wild materials gathered from nature on the one hand and dishes on the other hand. A new fascinating world opened itself.

More info about our expedition at: www.nordicislandscuisine.com

Foraging

Maybe the most startling result is the sharpness of focus and sense of direction that we gained from our expedition. Choices in our menu or way of cooking that might have been difficult to answer questions before are now based on a clear and consistent concept. One of the immediate results after our return has been our decision to source the wild surroundings on and around our estate for wonderful ingredients that we do not grow but gather. As a result we have appointed a Director of Wild Produce that assists our team in the discovery of wild materials that we use in our kitchen.

Director of Wild Produce

Every single day, one of the kitchen team now goes out to our forests, fields and beach to pick wild stuff for our kitchen. Like for example: Ramson, Beach Purslane, Sorrel, Woodruff, Yarrow, Evergreen shoots and Cowslip.

Once a month Mercedes Merimaa, our Director of Wild Produce goes with our whole kitchen- and service-team out into the nature to discover new plants and herbs that we might decide to use.

Relationship with local producer – no easy job

I like to touch for a moment on building a relationship with local suppliers; it involves trust of course but also needs likewise minds and mutual understanding. Especially because a restaurant like ours doesn't buy in large quantities and also because our demand does not always match neatly with the supply of the farmer or producer. As the demand for high quality organic local produce is still small, this ‘thin market’ often lacks sufficient lubricant yet to be sustainable for all sides.

Meanwhile we do have partnerships that are successful and already last since many

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years. We learned that it is necessary to invest a lot of time in the relationship with our local producers, if we want to make it work well. And like in any partnership also this one needs maintenance. It is not a one-time affair! Only through very personal weekly, sometimes daily contacts such relationships with small producers will become successful. There is no role for intermediaries, not only would it drive up cost but more importantly, the necessary interaction between kitchen and farmer would get lost in translation.

Logistics are a specific issue as well. How to get our wonderful blue cheese from Bornholm at reasonable cost and on time?

It also redefines the function of a chef, his task is not any longer just to cook, but it now stretches from sourcing of the raw material and coaching of producers all the way until the dish that he has selected and prepared for you is served at your table. A commitment to total responsibility!

All in all this is a costly relationship of course that in the end has to be valued by your customer. But that is in my opinion the very function of a good restaurant, to make things possible that you cannot achieve at home!

Farmers Market

For home use, a serious Farmers Market is the solution to connect with farmers and small producers and we do lack such an institution at the moment in Tallinn. It would be very exciting to see farmers come on a weekly basis to Tallinn to sell their ware along with all the knowledge, passion and pride that they have put into their food. It is inevitable that also intermediaries will 'man' the stalls, in that case just let's hope that they have a thorough knowledge of and love for the produce that they sell. If this is the case then the public should expect a Farmers Market to be more expensive than a supermarket. but every penny worth the produce offered. Quality does not come cheap, but then who wants to buy a cheap car?

The future

At least for us at Pädaste Manor the path that we have chosen to go will have no foreseeable end. On our journey we find that every time we open a door or take a turn, we are confronted with many new doors to explore again. It is maybe not an easy path but it is one that is great fun to walk and above all: it gives us purpose!

While I have no illusion that we can change the world, I know that we can change our own place for sure.

Simplicity is a complex thing

One final remark: about simplicity. In cooking, as in all the arts, simplicity is the sign of perfection. Less is more.

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Not that simplicity is easy to attain as it often involves tedious preparations. I like to conclude with a quote:

*'Let a potage de santé be a good domestic broth, well-enriched with good and carefully chosen meats, and reduced into bouillon, with no chopped vegetables, mushrooms spices, nor any other ingredients, but let it be simple, since it bears the description 'healthy', and let the cabbage soup taste entirely of cabbage, a leek soup of leeks a turnip soup of turnips, and so on, leaving out elaborate mixtures of chopped meat, diced vegetables, breadcrumbs and other deceptions....
What I say about soup I mean to apply generally as a law for everything that is eaten.'*

Doesn't that sound refreshingly modern? It is a quote from *'Les Delices de la campagne'*, written by Nicolas de Bonnefons in 1654.

Thank you!

Martin Breuer is owner and restaurateur of Pädaste Manor, a five star small luxury resort and spa on Muhu Island in Estonia. Martin Breuer shares his thoughts on local culinary identity as presented at the conference 'Inspired by Ingredients' hosted by the Nordic Council of Ministers on October 21, 2010 in Tallinn

Pädaste Manor has enjoyed being at the forefront of culinary developments in Estonia ever since it first opened its doors in 1996. Lately Alexander Restaurant at Pädaste Manor has been voted best restaurant in Estonia. Its kitchen takes inspiration from what we call the Nordic Islands' Cuisine. For more information visit www.padaste.ee
