

# Ravenous | Fried Baltic Herring, at Home

By MONIQUE TRUONG

My kitchen in Helsinki is a repository for toy-size appliances: a half fridge that freezes all the vegetables that I've placed inside except for the palm-size, gold-flesh rutabagas that are as durable as they are delicious; two small burners that offer heat along with the unappetizing smell of an electrical fire; and a microwave that's useless for cooking, so I've converted it into a storage cabinet.

For the past two months, by necessity, I've subsisted on a steady diet of restaurant fare,

which has been an excellent tutorial on the possibilities of Baltic herring, salmon and reindeer. More recently, with the coming of spring, fresh rhubarb and garden peas have made a welcome appearance. These meals, though, have sadly depleted my bank account (the cost of living in Helsinki makes New York City seem like Tijuana) and left me longing sorely and perversely for a home-cooked dinner.

I knew whose table I wanted to join. Paula Hohti is an elegant yet approachable art historian who specializes in the "material culture" (i.e., clothing and fashion) of the lower and middle classes during the Renaissance. She is Finnish-born, British-educated, and currently a fellow at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, the same research institute that has brought me so far north. I was first introduced to Paula because of her other area of expertise: she was a competitor in this year's installment of the popular television series *MasterChef Suomi*, which features accomplished home cooks from across Finland vying for the title that gives the show its name. ("Suomi" is what the Finns call their country.) Paula and I had talked about her culinary influences before — mainly her years of research and travel in Tuscany and the "pure flavors" that she found so irresistible there — and, of course, how the classic Finnish dishes I had sampled in restaurants are actually prepared at home, especially in her home. Talking about cooking, though, is akin to the proverbial "talking about dancing." In other words, I wanted to see Paula dance.

Paula had just moved into a new apartment in the vibrant Kallio district of Helsinki, a 20-minute walk (or a quick metro ride) northeast of the city center across the Pitkasilta or Long Bridge. The bridge used to be the unequivocal dividing line between the upper class and the working class of the city, and now it's also the dividing line between the staid and the hipster class. Kallio is dotted with late-night bars as well as cafes that cater to vegetarians and vegans. Paula was still unpacking, but like all good cooks her kitchen was already in order. With its wood floor painted a brilliant white, the kitchen was filled with sunlight the early evening that I came over, and it would continue to glow this



way until the sun set, around 10:30 p.m. during these generous spring days. Against one wall was a simple wood trestle table covered, still-life-like, with the ingredients for that night's meal. A waxed paper packet full of silvery Baltic herrings, small and slender; a basket full of tiny, first-crop new potatoes, with parchment-colored skin so thin you could rub it off with your fingers; and a profusion of dill, chives, parsley and basil growing in little pots.

As Paula carefully gutted the herrings and removed their backbones, she told me stories about her grandmother, the writer, translator and art historian Sinikka Kallio, who had taught her how to cook as a child. As the school of fish then soaked in their luxurious bath of cream, egg yolk and a dollop of Dijon mustard, Paula recalled how these formative lessons took place in the family's summer cottage in Heinola during the extravagantly elongated days of July and August. Paula's blue-gray eyes sparked as she described her transformation from a child with a fussy appetite to one who delighted in the "forest-gathered food" that her grandmother taught her to appreciate as a cook and as an eater. Dipping the glistening bodies of the herrings, one by one, into a dish of rye flour and then placing them in the butter-slicked frying pan, Paula remembered how she often cooked her grandmother's favorite dishes for her toward the end of her life and how this formidable woman's highest compliment was: "This isn't as it should be."

The meal that Paula cooked for me that evening — tender herrings whose tiny remaining bones had softened and practically melted after undergoing more of a buttery, slow "crisping" than a frying; a lemony new potato salad dressed with olive oil and fresh herbs — was a meal that I could never have eaten in the best restaurants of Helsinki. Those meals never come with a story, or a grandmother, or a granddaughter who's learned so well the loving art of cooking.

## **Fried Baltic Herring with Lemon-Herb Potato Salad**

Serves 4

### **Herring**

16 Baltic herrings (small sardines may be substituted, but their flavors will, of course, be stronger)  
½ cup of rye flour  
½ teaspoon of salt  
White pepper to taste  
4 tablespoons of butter  
½ cup of heavy cream  
1 egg yolk  
1 teaspoon of Dijon mustard  
1 bunch of fresh dill.

### **Potato Salad**

1½ pounds of new potatoes (preferably the first crop of the spring but certainly the smallest ones that you can find)  
2 organic lemons, zest and juice  
1 cup of extra virgin olive oil  
5 to 6 teaspoons of sugar  
1 teaspoon of salt  
1 cup of fresh herbs, chopped (dill, basil, oregano, thyme, parsley)  
2 garlic cloves, chopped fine  
1 small bunch of red radish, thinly sliced.

1. Clean the herrings, removing their heads, guts, and backbones, keeping the tails and the rest of the body intact. (The very small side bones will remain, but the slow frying time will soften them.)

2. In a medium bowl, stir together the cream, egg yolk and mustard. Place the herrings in the cream mixture, and put the bowl in the fridge for 1 to 2 hours. (Take the herrings out of the fridge about half

an hour before proceeding to Step 6.)

3. While the herrings are in their cream marinade, prepare the potato salad: Wash the potatoes under cold water. Boil them in salted water for about 10 minutes, or until they are tender.
4. While the potatoes are cooking, make the lemon-herb dressing: In a small bowl, whisk together the lemon juice, lemon zest and olive oil. Add the sugar and salt, using first half of the amount, then adding the rest little by little according to taste. Add the finely chopped garlic and chopped fresh herbs to the dressing.
5. Place the potatoes, drained well but still warm, in a serving bowl and pour the dressing over them. Mix well. Let the salad stand at room temperature for about 15 to 30 minutes to allow the flavors to come together. Before serving, add the radish slices to the salad. (If you want the radish slices to be extra crispy, soak them in a bowl of cold water for about 10 minutes and drain well before using.)
6. On a large plate, mix the rye flour, salt and white pepper. One by one, reshape the herrings and dip them into the seasoned flour to achieve an even coating. Set them aside in a single layer on another plate or tray.
7. In a frying pan over low heat, heat the butter. Slowly fry the fish for about 7 to 10 minutes per side, until they have turned a golden brown color. (It is important to fry the herrings slowly, in order to soften the small remaining bones. Don't burn them by using high heat!)
8. Serve the fried herrings, garnished with fresh dill, alongside the potato salad, as a starter or as a main course.