

# THE TASTE OF “ESTONIANNESSE”: COOKBOOKS AS PART OF NATION-BUILDING IN ESTONIA

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**Abstract:** This paper takes a diachronic look at the culinary trends in the present-day Estonia. It sheds light on the process of nation-building enacted through recipes that refer to the social ideals, convictions, and stereotypes widely held at the time of the first Republic of Estonia (1919–1939). The idealised notions of the past create a distinct atmosphere of nostalgia that can be observed in two sources discussed in this study: *Maria Laidoner’s Cuisine* (2008; compiled on the basis of notes taken down from published cookbooks and hand-written recipes from the 1930s), and *Gifts of Taste* (Ilves 2011). Behind both of these books stand women who have had an important status in society: Maria Laidoner fulfilled the role of the first lady of the state in the 1930s, and Evelin Ilves was the first lady between 2006 and 2015. The two cookbooks point at a feeling of nostalgia that the nation harbours towards the authentic, Estonian cooking first advocated in the 1930s, which combines the rustic and noble into a modern and trendy whole.

**Keywords:** cookbooks, Estonia, food, identity

## INTRODUCTION

Idealised notions of the past create a distinct atmosphere of nostalgia which is evident in different walks of life, among them culinary traditions. In this study I aim to show the role of nostalgia in present-day nation-building processes, relying mainly on two sources: *Maria Laidoner’s Cuisine* (2008; compiled on the basis of notes taken down from published cookbooks and hand-written recipes from the 1930s), and *Gifts of Taste* (Ilves 2011). The common denominator of these two books is the important status of their authors. Maria Laidoner fulfilled the role of the first lady of the state in the 1930s and Evelin Ilves was the first lady between 2006 and 2015. The books represent the period of the first Republic of Estonia and the present time (twenty-first century) respectively. In

addition to this, I take a broader look at recently published Estonian cookbooks to describe the tendency of promoting authenticity that manifests in praising local Estonian food and ingredients. The analysis further examines how the “Estonianness” of foodways is constructed in present-day Estonia. I attempt to show how these cookbooks redefine the essence of the Estonian cuisine, linking the local culinary art to the Estonian nature and environment, promoting ecological thinking in cooking, idealising the cooking traditions of the Estonian middle class / elite of the 1930s, and stressing the importance of the Estonian traditions.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

Eating belongs among the most basic and universal needs that has to be fulfilled in order to stay alive. However, the way we think about food comes with numerous cultural implications that become evident in how we eat or talk about food, prepare it, feel about it, etc. Cookbooks, although a relatively recent invention in the face of the whole history of mankind, can be seen as a guide to the culture of food consumption. Cookbooks talk to us on multiple levels. First of all, they provide information about how to prepare food on a very personal level – after all, they are practical publications meant to be used in the kitchen. But secondly, and equally importantly, they are informative about what can be eaten and how, and thus they also reflect a larger picture (see, e.g., Brownlie & Hewer & Horne 2005: 7, who discuss cookbooks as cultural artefacts that contain “inscribed cultural tales”). Their cultural significance is evident in the way they illuminate the domestic – or, even more broadly, social – history.

I agree with Claude Fischler (1988: 275), who argues that “food is central to our sense of identity”. We are what we eat. Entire nations and groups identify themselves partly through what they see as their traditional food with all the rituals that accompany it. The sociology of consumption (of goods, including food) may be taken as a general framework that describes how external objects cross the border from outside of the human body to inside, both literally and symbolically, and this process of internalisation forms a part of our identity, supporting the continuous (re)construction of the self. The primary location for the process is “the kitchen that is the most symbolic interaction space between the house and the nature” (Żarski 2013: 150).

The politics of food, as Marianne Lien and Brigitte Nerlich (2004) argue, has plenty to do with the creation of the nation-state. Arjun Appadurai (1988) has stated that cookbooks in countries with newly acquired nationhood and regionalised cuisines act as a middle-class instrument for composing a national

culture. As Estonia was largely missing an Estonian-born and -speaking cultural elite until the twentieth century, this is a suitable starting point also in the context of this study. The dominant group establishes the culinary common ground: they define “us” through combining the elements (ingredients, ways of preparing and serving, etc.) that they feel are authentic to that particular culture, and disregard others that seem not so authentic. Contemporary Estonian national identity relies greatly on the legacy from the first Republic of Estonia, and – as we can witness in the present study – so does contemporary Estonian culinary art. Present-day foodways in Estonia display a nostalgia towards the authenticity and creativity of the recipes from the first Republic of Estonia. I attempt to show how the two cookbooks that are analysed in this paper redefine the essence of Estonian present-day cuisine. I first look at the historical background to locate the publication of the cookbooks in time and space, analysing that against the backdrop of a politically manipulated identity discourse. This discourse functions as a mouthpiece for ideas like integration, nostalgia of the “good old days”, a longing for nobility that Estonians as a nation never had, and, last but not least – the revival of national ideals after a long and difficult period under totalitarian regime.

## **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

The dominant group in the first Republic of Estonia was the upper middle class, which consisted of citizens of Estonian nationality. It was the first time in history that Estonians themselves were the ruling class in their state. For the most part of the nation’s history Estonians had lived under the rule of other more powerful (neighbouring) nations who, one after another, conquered this strategically placed country and practically used it as their colony. Tsar Peter the Great saw Estonia as a window to Europe in his attempt to expand the Russian Empire in the eighteenth century; invaders from the West considered it a great gateway to the East. Up until the twentieth century the ruling class was essentially the minority elites, for example, Baltic German and Russian noblemen living in Estonia, whereas Estonians constituted the peasantry.

The twentieth century saw a radical change in this order. By the beginning of the twentieth century most of the foreign nobility had emigrated to Russia or Germany – to the countries of their origin – which gave the locals a chance to start developing their own “upper class” culture. As Estonians became wealthier, they got interested in visiting entertainment venues like theatres, cabarets, and restaurants. The latter became more and more likely to be frequented by Estonians and thus the (Estonian) chefs working there took

a chance to introduce Estonian dishes in their menus accordingly, following the new culinary demands. Also housewives became interested in “cooking Estonian”. This led to a wave of publications: culinary books, journals, and handbooks for young housewives were being published in the 1920s and 30s. The publications taught mostly urban women how to cook according to local traditions, but also introduced dishes from other culinary regions (e.g. crème brûlée, hollandaise sauce, etc.).

Estonians, as already mentioned, were primarily rural people, both emotionally and economically closely connected to their own piece of land. This independent, small-scale farming bore crucial social, economic, and cultural implications for the identity (Unwin 1999: 157). This was turned completely around by the Soviet occupation (1944–1991), which introduced the system of collective farms with no privately owned land. The second Republic of Estonia started off with privatisation, during which much of the land was given back to the original owners. At the same time, an eagerness to join the global economic circuit ended in a rapid urban-based capitalist modernisation. This tension between the rural and the urban, between picking mushrooms and inventing Skype, is still strong in the society, shaping the identity and in some ways also affecting foodways.

In the present day, we can see a rising interest in home cooking as well. It was an inevitability during the Soviet occupation, when women had to be innovative all the time in order to cook something from nothing, although it is sometimes remembered with pride or even nostalgia (see Bardone (2013), who shows that managing to feed the whole family with the few ingredients available in the shops can perhaps be seen as a small act of subversion in itself). There are numerous cookbooks, blogs, magazine and newspaper cooking columns, etc., being published, translated, and re-printed daily as cooking has come into vogue. Among these, there are a few that are designed to make a deeper impression than just provide information about how to prepare a quick and healthy meal for one’s family. I suggest that the latter are especially likely to be closely tied to the self-identification of a nation because they take time to tell a story about the recipes that they contain and in some cases do it also in other languages besides Estonian in order to project the quest for Estonian cooking towards the outsiders, the foreign audiences, strengthening the identity through their recognition and appreciation.

This is the case with *Maria Laidoner’s Cuisine* (2008). The book features recipes in three languages – Estonian, Russian, and English. *Maria Laidoner’s Cuisine* is definitely not just a book of recipes – it is a trilingual cookbook with a message. In this article, I first look at the historical background to locate the book in time and space, and then interpret its message in the context of

a discourse that functions as a mouthpiece for ideals like integration, nostalgia for the “good old days”, a longing for nobility that Estonians as a nation never had, and, last but not least – the revival of national ideals after a long and difficult period under totalitarian regime.

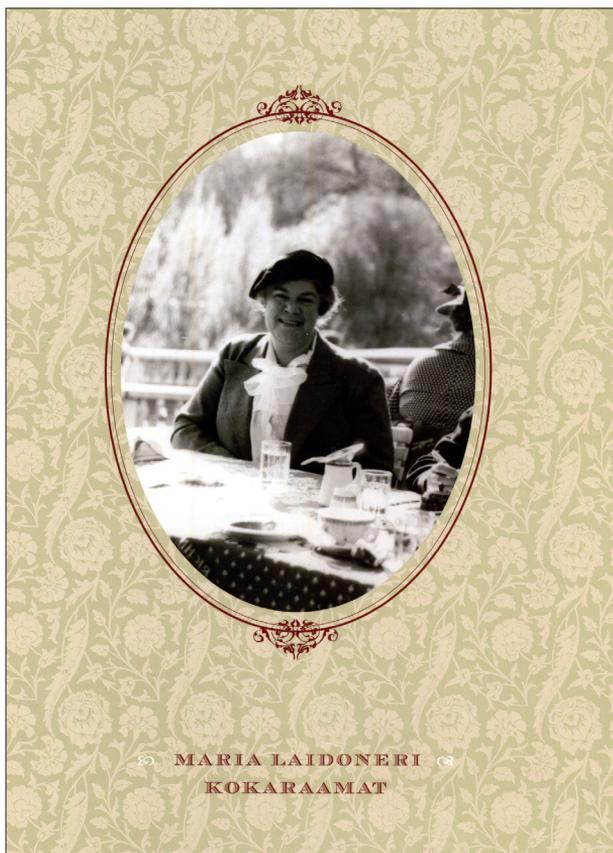
By comparison, I also refer to another cookbook, *Gifts of Taste* (2011), a bilingual (Estonian and English) publication, written by Evelin Ilves, the ex-wife of the previous president of Estonia, written during the time when they were in office. The numerous pictures in this book and its special section dedicated to authentic Estonian food offer a perfect (diachronic) comparison to *Maria Laidoner’s Cuisine*. On the whole, the two books show how the first ladies of a state, at different though crucial times in terms of national identity, gave their share in constructing the Estonian identity through recipes.

Thirdly, I look even more broadly at recently published cookbooks to establish a trend towards stressing the authentic, local, and thoroughly Estonian food.

## ANALYSIS

### *Maria Laidoner’s Cuisine*

Maria Laidoner (née Kruszevska), born on 7 December 1888, was a daughter of a Polish nobleman. She married an Estonian general, Johan Laidoner (1884–1953), and came to live in Estonia. Her husband, being a highly honoured politician and one of the country’s most famous military officers, undoubtedly belongs to the national pantheon of Estonia. From the introduction to the cookbook we can read: “At the age of 35 he became the Commander-in-Chief of the Estonian Armed Forces, and under his determined leadership Estonia won the War of Independence (1918–1920)” (*Maria Laidoner’s Cuisine* 2008: 12). This was a heroic victory, all the more so because it was unbelievable: the small Estonian army winning battles on two fronts simultaneously, against Russia and Germany, after years of devastating warfare. Johan Laidoner was respected not only as a competent commander-in-chief who had led Estonia towards the own nation-state; he was also a diplomat and statesman. Although he never became president, he and his wife performed a similar role among the political and intellectual elite of the period. As Konstantin Päts, the President of Estonia at that time, did not have a wife, the Laidoners often organised and presided over important official dinners, and Maria Laidoner acted as the first lady of the state. She was well-educated, had graduated from the Tallinn Conservatoire (now the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre), and was socially very active. From General Laidoner’s correspondence with his wife Maria, some of which is reprinted in the cookbook to give the flavour of the times, we learn about the



**Figure 1.** Maria Laidoner's *Cuisine*. Book cover (designed by Signe Kaljurand).

social life of the elite of that period, and about the responsibilities and obligations they had. These included festive lunches and dinners, gatherings, balls, and tea parties. It was Maria who organised the menus and supervised the cooking, serving, and laying tables. As she was dedicated to Estonian language and culture, she often took the role of introducing Estonian dishes to foreign guests – her recipes bear a strong connection to local ingredients and ways of preparing food. Up until the beginning of the Soviet occupation of Estonia, she carried this responsibility, and her social events were renowned for her culinary masterpieces (ibid.: 12). She died at the age of 90 in Jämejala, near Viljandi, Estonia, in 1978.

Her correspondence frequently addresses the topic of cooking and all her guests were impressed by her art. One of the main sources she used was a famous cookbook written by Elena Molokhovets, titled *Podarok molodym khoziaikam* (A gift to young housewives) – an extremely popular book at that time (given it was published in more than 20 editions)<sup>1</sup>. Being herself a member of the nobility, Molokhovets was notorious for making clear class distinctions, and her book

carried a strong potential of elevating the nouveau-riche / middle class among the nobility; or, in the case of Estonia, a potential of forming the nobility in the first place. Laidoner made use of ideas coming from other culinary traditions as well, describing, for example, how to make Jerusalem artichoke soup (Maria Laidoner's *Cuisine* 2008: 61) or dessert wine zabaglione (ibid.). Thus, we can say that Maria Laidoner's recipes are informed by various sources: Polish, Russian, and generally European.

### **The story of *Maria Laidoner's Cuisine***

Maria Laidoner's cookbook, published in 2008 by the Estonian War Museum / General Laidoner Museum, was a success on the bookstore shelves. Its copies are constantly lent out from libraries. The publishers of the book aimed to compile a set of recipes in a representable form, to be given as a gift to diplomats and guests of the Republic of Estonia (Maria Laidoner's *Cuisine* 2008: 13). On a more covert level, the book also tries to revive the atmosphere of the first Republic of Estonia, reprinting authentic photographs of the Laidoners' residence by the sea and the luncheons that took place there. The pictures alternate with extracts from Maria's letters.

The culinary convention cultivated by the then new Estonian nobility of the first republic is recreated by a combination of images – both old and new photographs – and texts (recipes and letters). Furthermore, the book seeks to re-install the ideals, tastes, and habits valued then into today's world, and to integrate the Estonians of different ethnic backgrounds (and educate the foreigners) through the consumption of food. Maria Laidoner was, after all, a perfectly integrated foreigner who had come to Estonia, learned to speak the language, and followed the customs as well as cooked local food. The aims of the cookbook are summarised in the preface: it is a publication of historical material, an example of the cooperation between different nations, and a classical cookbook all in one – a story of integration. A reference of how the idea of the book was born dwells on the same idea, as the photographic album together with Molokhovets's cookbook (1899 edition) was brought to the museum by a Russian-speaking young woman who had found them in the course of construction works in her attic, which makes the gesture "the best evidence of the fact that integration has been successful in the second period of independence here in Estonia" (ibid.: 13).

Recipes, mostly taken from Molokhovets's cookbook (dating from the turn of the century) and Maria Laidoner's letters (dating from the 1970s) form an artistic whole. The pictures and letters reprinted in *Maria Laidoner's Cuisine* tell volumes about the meaning of food and the sentiments of national identity



*I am Polish by origin. My grandfather was part of an old Polish noble family, who Dombrowski wrote about in his novel *By Fire and Sword*. After the suppression of the Polish uprising my grandfather was put into prison as an accomplice in the riot. Polish universities were closed down. My father was not admitted to the Russian university, as he was the son of a rebel, and he was not allowed to go to study abroad either. My father used all of the possibilities that were open to him to study and started working in engineering. Because of his work he was not able to be at home much. I was the fifth child in the family. My mother divorced my father and remarried. My stepfather was very fond of me – he was the sunshine in my childhood.*

**Figure 2.** Interior of the Laidoners' mansion. Maria Laidoner's Cuisine, p. 17 (book design by Signe Kaljurand).

that it carries. Added to the texts in three languages, the letters are laid out as handwriting to enhance the feeling of authenticity. She wrote the letters in her late life in Estonia. By then she lived alone, her husband had been taken to Siberia (where he died in prison), and their son had committed suicide. She describes how visits by her (mostly Estonian) friends brought happiness in her days and something good on her table:

*Some ladies came to see me on the first day of the holidays. I made pasha – it turned out nicely and it made me proud. I also made my favourites – “salty” pies – and they turned out well, too. One of my friends brought homemade white bread, another brought a homemade cake and another bought a cake. I coloured, very primitively, some eggs. (ibid.: 31)*

While writing the letters, she chose to use Estonian and added but a few foreign words in between (e.g.: “first I will make some nice pies and plov and the things I promised to make to my friends – *пельмени*”; *ibid.*: 22). Thus, she is presented to today’s readers as the embodiment of a well-integrated immigrant, who, although Polish, mastered the Estonian language and found a way into the hearts of the locals. Maria’s letters as well as the recipes ordered as four-course menus, and the advice section at the end of the book refers to the “good old days”, an almost mythological past where receptions were grand, ladies and gentlemen were well behaved, and food was plentiful. A telling passage in the advice section (which she had copied by hand from Molokhovets’s book) reads as follows:

*Tea is served on a long dinner table covered with a clean tablecloth. A small table with a samovar is put at one end of the table. A tray of fruit, such as apples, pears, oranges, mandarins and grapes is placed in the middle of the table. On both sides of the fruit tray piles of dessert plates are placed crosswise with the table, and dessert knives made of silver or bone are placed next to the plates. [...] Small plates with thin slices of veal, ham, beef, hazel grouse, turkey or chicken, tongue, rabbit, Russian cheese or cottage cheese, grated green cheese et al are placed symmetrically around the bread tray in the form of a crescent. (*ibid.*: 153)*

This description forms a striking contrast with the reality of the times that Maria Laidoner actually wrote the letters. In the last decade of her life she experienced deep totalitarian stagnation when everyday reality consisted mainly of food shortage and worshipping simple working-class heroes who had nothing in common with the bourgeoisie lifestyle she had known in her youth.

Brought to the present times, the perception of this contrast is even sharper – the idealisation of the first Republic of Estonia often goes hand in hand with imagining the hardships that Estonia had to endure in the Soviet period. In this juxtaposition, the bourgeois society of 1920–1940 emerges as “the golden times” for the present-day reader. It appears as a winner in all its aspects, and food plays an important role in this sum. The nostalgia that food has the power to create has been noticed before: Sutton (2001) sees food as an incubator of memory, complete with its power to stimulate nostalgia. Both food and memory have a strong relationship with identity. Very often we remember the food from our childhood as ideal and the experience originating from our mothers’ our grandmothers’ kitchens shapes the preferences in later life. Home and food, especially when combined, evokes feelings of comfort and security. Our tastes are to a great degree determined by cultural patterns emerging from the culinary traditions (Žarski 2013) and the early experience thereof. To put it briefly, ‘if “we are what we eat”, then “we are what we ate” as well’ (Sutton 2001: 6).

The recipes combine the exotic (e.g. Slavic, European) and the homely (locally Estonian) into fine dishes such as boletus soup with deer pasties (Maria Laidoner's *Cuisine* 2008: 82–93). Many of them give the reader a taste of grandeur of the past times:

*Pheasant with roast beetroot: Clean the pheasants. Wash the vegetables. Cut the beetroot into two or four pieces and halve the onions and carrots. Put the ingredients in a cooking or cast-iron pot. Pour in water and red wine and add the caraway seeds and rosemary. Add salt. Place the pheasants on top of everything and cover them with a thin layer of lard to make the dry pheasant meat more juicy. Chop the butter and put the pieces on the vegetables. Season with ground juniper berries and black pepper.* (ibid.: 121)

*Maria Laidoner's Cuisine* is precisely an exercise in nostalgia for “the childhood of our nation”. Moreover, Maria Laidoner personifies something more than just the good times and prosperity of the first Republic of Estonia. Through a frequent reference to Molokhovets's book and culinary traditions known among the nobility of Eastern Europe, she helped to build the local Estonian upper middle class through novel and noble tastes: that of crème caramel, hollandaise sauce, roasted quails, caviar – but also local fish, chanterelles, berries, etc. By mixing the internationally renowned dishes with simple Estonian food, she then created a new culinary tradition that now, after the 1990s, harmonises well with the ideas of Estonian national food: deeply rooted in the local, but open to the outside world. As the director of the Estonian War Museum writes in the preface, the recipes collected into the book are “tasty, exciting, simple and very Estonian” (ibid.: 13). Last but not least – the cookbook itself, published in 2008, symbolises the revival of national ideals after a long and difficult period under the totalitarian regime.

### ***Gifts of Taste***

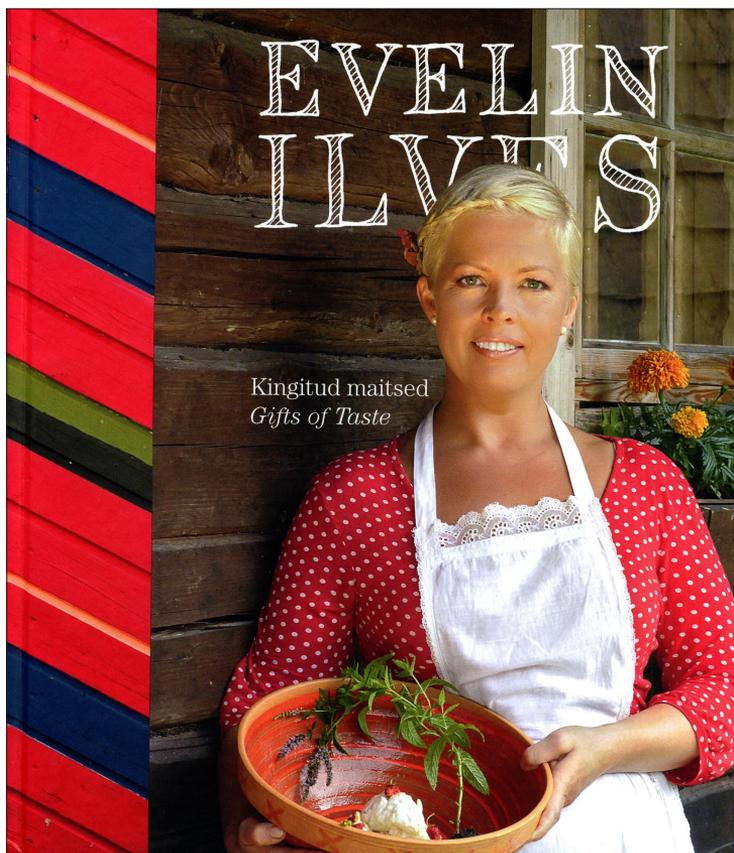
Evelin Ilves, the ex-wife of the former President of Estonia (Toomas Hendrik Ilves), is still a visible public figure. Her interest in locally designed Estonian fashion has brought her and her outfits to the attention of the press both in Estonia and abroad. So have also her statements about sports, gardening, handicrafts, health, and – perhaps above all – food. Together with her husband, she used to manage the Ärna homestead in southern Estonia, where the couple often entertained dignitaries on diplomatic visits from all over the world. Before 2006, she was known to the wider public as the project leader of the controversial state-commissioned branding project aimed at making Estonia more attractive

for the foreign visitors, thus being involved with questions of national identity, the propagation of Estonianness, and designing the image of the state. The aim of the project was to advertise Estonia as a desirable tourism and business destination.<sup>2</sup> Thus, a cookbook that introduced foreign recipes to Estonians and Estonian culinary secrets to foreigners followed quite logically from her interests. Her contribution to the discourse about contemporary Estonian food is remarkable (Annuk 2013: 139) and she often speaks up on this topic. Presently she continues to be active in the culinary scene and in the summertime runs her own home restaurant in Hiiumaa, one of the islands in western Estonia.

### **The story of *Gifts of Taste***

Evelin Ilves's book titled *Gifts of Taste* was published in 2011. Similar to *Maria Laidoner's Cuisine*, it takes the reader on a trip into discovering the world of tasty yet simple food. The book is comprised of two parts: the first six chapters deal with recipes given to the president's wife on diplomatic travels around the world (though largely concentrating on Europe), and the last chapter is dedicated solely to local Estonian recipes. All of them begin with a story of how the dish reached the president's family, written down in a colourful and warm style. The stories are brought to life by illustrative pictures. After the book launch event in Abja bookshop<sup>3</sup> Evelin Ilves announced on the official webpage of the President of Estonia: "There's no simpler, quicker or more enjoyable way of expressing your country's values or capturing the intricacies of its climate and moods and what they have to offer than through local food."<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the warm, positive moods and impressions that come with cooking form the centre of this book – photographs accompanying the stories of the dishes are a vivid declaration of this. The artist who designed the book states that "Evelin's simple, heartfelt recipes are matched perfectly by Marksteen's [Marksteen Adamson's] photos, which really give them a 'just out of the oven' feel" (ibid.). The publishers have stressed the values that the design represents, stating that the simple style lets the pure tastes rise to the pedestal.

Evelin Ilves starts every "gift" recipe in the first six chapters with a story of how she came to know the dish. The Estonian chapter at the end of the book is slightly different. In its introduction, the author points to the short and yet-in-the-making history of Estonian cuisine: "As a new player, we are just starting our invasion of the world. And that's great – it means each of us has a say in what the special Estonian taste is" (Ilves 2011: 199). There is an openness to novel tastes in Estonian cooking that she recognises as a positive thing, but this is right side by side with the features of a laconic, practical – in many ways, deeply Nordic – cuisine. She adds that for her, the authentic Estonian taste is



**Figure 3.** *Gifts of Taste*. Book cover (designed by Dan Mikkin).

“pike perch, chanterelles, cheese curd and wild strawberries” (ibid.). There is still a strong stress on the accompanying story of how the recipe reached her, but here the sentiment is expressed with a considerable dose of patriotism and a feeling of local identity – like in this extract describing the arrival at Ärna homestead:

*The road that leads to our farm ends there. If you stand in the middle of the yard, surrounded by forest, it seems that all roads lead here and lead out to the world from here. There are no hinterlands. The place where you have your home is the centre of the world, the most important place in the world. I like the feeling you get when walking barefoot – as if your roots were burrowing into the ground and drawing new energy. (Ilves 2011: 239)*

A recipe that is at the core of the second, Estonian part of the cookbook, is the one for black bread – the typical Estonian rye bread, very dark and made with

special bread leaven, not yeast. Ilves describes the leaven like a living being, which, together with the good intentions of the baker, gives an authentic taste to the bread: “Bread has personality. This means that one must treat it very sensitively. Already in ancient times people knew that if you think bad thoughts while making bread, the bread won’t turn out right” (ibid.: 245). In fact, her description of bread-baking is more than a recipe; to put it poetically, it is an ode to bread. Evelin Ilves takes her time to describe the old art of bread-making, passed on from grandmothers to granddaughters. Through her emotional text and the similarly singular photographs, it is almost possible to feel the smell of freshly baked dark black rye bread.<sup>5</sup>

*If, when you take the bread out of the oven, it turns out that the bottoms are a bit doughy and light in colour, simply put them back in the oven without the pans for 15 minutes. If you wish, you can brush the freshly baked bread with fresh farmer’s butter. I recommend that you let the bread cool for at least an hour before cutting. Warm bread is doughy! Of course, it is difficult to resist the fragrance of warm, freshly baked bread, but it’s worth it. (ibid.: 247)*



**Figure 4.** Visualising authenticity. *Gifts of Taste*, p. 240 (photographs by Marksteen Adamson).

Another star of the Estonian section of the book is fish. Different types of fish dishes have been on the Estonian traditional menu for centuries (fish dishes were also present among Maria Laidoner's recipes). Pike perch, already mentioned as one of the typical dishes in Estonian cuisine as defined by Evelin Ilves, is closely followed by all other kinds and sizes of salt- and sweetwater fishes: eel, herring, carp, sprat, etc. In the introduction to one of the many recipes of fish dishes she writes:

*Only 44 people live in Kiideva year-round, but in the summer all 64 farms are filled with activity. Coastal people are very good with fish. Thus, we tasted the world's best marinated Baltic herring in the village elder's home. [...] Put the 100 gutted fish in the marinade [1 liter cold, uncooked water, 6 tbsp coarse sea salt, 6 tbsp sugar, 6 tbsp vinegar]. Let marinate for 24 hours, then debone – now the spine can be removed easily! Roll each fish up and place in a can or jar alternating layers of fish with finely chopped onion, garlic, fresh dill, and a dash of oil. Repeat layer by layer. On the next day, you'll have a wonderful, delicately salty mouthful. Enjoy with boiled new potatoes, or homemade rye bread. A glass of buttermilk is also a wonderful addition. (ibid: 209)*

Thirdly, among the most typically Estonian dishes are, quite similar to Maria Laidoner's cuisine, mushrooms from the forest. The king of Estonian wild mushrooms is the chanterelle, abundant in Estonia in late summer and early autumn, most often in pine forests, where their yellow caps can be seen from afar. It is a seasonal delicacy that most people use as a valuable addition to their menus, and everyone has a place in the forest, well kept in secrecy, where they go to pick them and which was already known by their grandparents and their parents. Evelin Ilves writes:

*If I am asked what is the most typical Estonian dish in the late summer, I would definitely say chanterelle sauce with new potatoes. This taste cannot be duplicated or replaced. Chanterelles have a Nordic stubbornness that makes it impossible to grow on farms. Wildly delicious! (ibid: 253)*

Toomas Hendrik Ilves states in his foreword to the (at the time) first lady's cookbook that our tastes are determined by our surroundings and upbringing, but a "national taste" is by no means a unified or immutable phenomenon (ibid.: 12). Tastes change through generations, and what is stressed at one time or another is as much a matter of practical reasoning as it is an emotional choice. In these two cookbooks that I have described so far, the emotional choice of creating simple, homely, and yet noble food rises to the forefront.

### **Other recent cookbooks stressing the Estonian culinary identity**

Home cook Maru's book *Maru maitsev maailm* (Maru's Tasty World) was published in 2008, and although this is only in Estonian with no translated recipes, it offers an insightful comparison to the first two books in its attempt to define the national and typically Estonian in the kitchen. A few examples of her text reveal the poetic language she uses in describing food that suits the passing of seasons in Estonia. She approaches her cooking through the four seasons, defining the local tastes through metaphors and images:

*My hunter-and-gatherer's blood starts rushing as soon as there is enough rain, and the smell of wet moss is noticeable even in town. Picking mushrooms is something much more than just hunting down the fungi. It means a wonderful walk through the woods, fresh air, the need to finally look myself in the eye and listen to what is going on in my head and heart. Maybe even to get to know myself...<sup>6</sup> (Maru 2008: 96)*

And even more typical:

*The sky has suddenly risen high up and the clouds have become unreachable. The days spread themselves out pleasantly, tempting us outside. The sound of melting snow dripping follows us everywhere. The water drips on everything around me for at least a week – on iron, stone, from branches on the mud... I would like to weave this into my dishes, to feel it in the delicacies. But how is it possible to cook something that would taste like the sound of the melting snow? (ibid.: 14)*

The image of wanting to cook a dish that would taste like the sound of melting snow is a simple yet effective way of seeing Estonian cooking as an extension of the Estonian landscape, climate, and nature. It combines the elusiveness of catching the true essence of the national taste, yet conveys the love for nature that provides the ingredients for Estonian cuisine. The philosophy is straightforwardly reflected also in the first ladies' cookbooks – value local ingredients, take time for cooking, and enjoy the dishes with close family and friends. Again, we see the stress on the local ingredients, and the often-mentioned love for mushroom- and berry-picking in the forest, but also the high value of fish and of course the classical item, the dark rye bread.

A book dedicated to the art of bread-making is a recent (2014) bilingual new cookbook by Evelin Ilves, *LEIB: Ilo ja vägi / BREAD: The Beauty & the Might*. This time the author travelled in Estonia in search for recipes and stories of the women baking bread both in remote and central parts of Estonia. Its aim is to present the story of bread as felt and told by 18 different women in Estonia. The book contains recipes for making bread, but also tries to capture the ineffable –

the power behind the old art. Evelin Ilves reflects on her relationship with black bread as “an eternal love, an all-powerful prayer”:

*We in Estonia have a special relationship with bread. ... I knew I wanted to capture all this in this book – the story and face of bread, the beauty and strength of women, the unbelievable diversity and power of our nature. All this combines in the Estonia that has sustained us here for millennia. This is the Estonia that captivates us every day and sometimes causes pain. And this is the Estonia that day after day ever more boldly confirms to the world that miracles are possible. That everything is possible when you live with your roots deep in the ground, and are carried by strong wings.* (Ilves 2014: 10)

Evelin Ilves, who herself has been baking bread for over twelve years, said in a radio interview after the book had been published that in this book she wanted to show what the one who bakes needs to give to the bread in order for it to taste good and, even more importantly, for the energy to materialise fully.<sup>7</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Cookbooks are by their nature heterogeneous: there are some used by consumers as reference materials, with basic cooking techniques or classic recipes, or specialised texts dealing with cooking for children or vegetarianism, whose importance shifts depending on lifestyle and life stage, or handwritten journals passed from one generation to another, uncovering family and social history, etc. (Tonner 2008). The examples mentioned and analysed in this article fall in one category – the cookbooks that are designed to establish and shape culinary identity.

All of the books that have been referred to in the present paper stress the importance of traditions and authenticity in local cuisine. A particular aspect that functions as a locus of identity is memory of old times, where closeness to nature was combined with a certain grandeur of nobility or upper middle class. Another aspect that is felt throughout the examples is the connection between generations of women, the caregivers who traditionally cooked for the entire family. To some extent these recipes become an exercise in nostalgia, an attempt to recapture a bygone era, which allows for Estonians, now primarily living in cities and towns, to flirt with a lifestyle more representative of the past than of the present.

The culinary identity of Estonians was, to a considerable degree, translated from the nations with an established aristocracy as an act of borrowing reputation through foodways. After the long period of Soviet occupation and the following rebirth of the Estonian state in 1991, the same recipes were brought

to life, this time translated into English (and Russian, in the case of Laidoner's cookbook) for the international audience. Thus, some cookbooks are directed outwards, not only to Estonians themselves – as an act of constructing a traditional culinary identity to be recognised on a grander scale than just within the country. Everything authentic, even if combined with the exotic and borrowed, has been brought to the forefront.

Although the meaning and values of different foodstuffs and dishes change together with the changing social status of the consumers, the re-creation/reformulation of their status is what matters. What these analysed cookbooks express is exactly the re-writing of history in a way that brings culinary nostalgia and authenticity into the discourse of national identity, and through that contributes to the process of nation-building. They convey nostalgia, stepping closer to realising the ideas of authenticity, tradition, and national cuisine. Estonia as a country with a relatively short history of independence seems to need it.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Read more about the book, especially concerning its popularity at the time of its publication, at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A\\_Gift\\_to\\_Young\\_Housewives](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Gift_to_Young_Housewives), last accessed on 17 January 2018.

<sup>2</sup> One of the first times the logo appeared in Estonia is documented in this news text: *Eesti märk on "Welcome to Estonia!"* (The Brand of Estonia is "Welcome to Estonia!"), Delfi.ee, 26 April 2002 (see <http://www.delfi.ee/news/paevauudised/eesti/eesti-mark-on-welcome-to-estonia?id=3518619>, last accessed on 16 January 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Abja is a small village in the vicinity of Äрма farm. Holding the book launch event in this remote place can perhaps be seen as a tribute to the countryside and its authentically Estonian cuisine. The official launch was held at the Helsinki book festival, signalling the orientation towards foreign audience.

<sup>4</sup> See *First Lady's Cookbook Published Today*, 20 October 2011. Available at <https://vp2006-2016.president.ee/en/president/evelin-ilves/evelin-ilves-media/6657-first-ladys-cookbook-published-today/index.html>, last accessed on 24 January 2018.

<sup>5</sup> This line of her interest received a follow-up in the form of another book by Evelin Ilves, *LEIB: Ilo ja vägi / BREAD: The Beauty & the Might*, published in 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Translations of excerpts from this book are made by the author.

<sup>7</sup> Her preoccupation with women as a symbol of the persistence of the nation (manifest partly in their bread-baking ability) forms the backdrop for this book; the interview follows the very same reasoning (see Evelin Ilves: Leib pole põgenemispaik (Evelin Ilves: Bread is not an escape), available at <http://menu.err.ee/v/uudised/inimesed/893a3114-cfbd-494e-ad44-8ee93bb3c5b5>, last accessed on 18 January 2018).

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