

Evelin Ilves

One beautiful winter day Pere ja Kodu joins Evelin Ilves on a visit to Vääna manor school to congratulate Jaanika Rist on winning the School Cook of the Year award and to taste her famous soup...

It's a crystal-clear morning as I make my way to Vääna, and in my mind I'm juggling the paradoxes of being a cook: why are head chefs from fancy restaurants – who cook for so few – given such celebrity status while those who feed thousands rarely if ever get the recognition they deserve?

And what would happen if a talented and warm-hearted school cook greeted the students in the canteen wearing a proper chef's hat and apron, wished them 'bon appetit' and later asked them how they liked their meals? I'm met in the teachers' room at Vääna kindergarten and elementary school by just such a culinary master – 2011 School Cook of the Year herself, Jaanika Rist.

Although the kids who attend Vääna manor school have always been given good, healthy food, it hasn't always been served up by Jaanika. During the recession she lost her job and was forced to spend her days sending off CVs and asking after jobs in restaurants. "I didn't try out anywhere fancy, but where I did try out taught me that all too often there's a catch to the promise of serving up freshly prepared meals – that although they might come straight from the oven, just how fresh were the ingredients to start with?" Jaanika says. "They never know how many people are going to come in, which is why they have to buy in advance. It's not uncommon for cooks to give things a sniff before they start using them to check whether they smell a bit funny or feel a bit slimy to the touch..." The group of us sitting around the coffee table in the teachers' room falls into a thoughtful silence.

Where's the lemonade and the hamburgers?

The ingredients that the school kitchen uses are as fresh as fresh can be. Getting hold of them, however, isn't as easy as you might think it would be for a school so close to the capital. "We mightn't be that far from the port, but we're still in the boondocks," quips Jaanika, who also gives bike-riding lessons to the pupils in the evenings after school.

The unconstrained atmosphere in the teachers' room reflects the fact that at this school physical education is considered just as important as maths or English, and the views of the school cook are considered to be just as important as everyone else's. Piret Jürna, who has only sat in the principal's chair at the school since the start of last year, is one of its former PE teachers, and hasn't given up the idea of returning to the gym one day, once she's completely settled in her new position. She leads a sports group in her spare time as well, acting as swimming coach to the school's pupils. As such, she and Jaanika are colleagues outside of school, too.

Katrin Noodapera, who introduces herself as the cook's assistant (despite the fact that the title she's given on the school's website is 'director of finance'), invites us all to the kitchens to see how the 78 cents allocated by the state for every student is turned into tasty, healthy meals. "The municipal government doesn't give us anything extra, but the cook and assistant are school employees and all of the money the state gives us goes on ingredients, just as the law requires," explains the principal.

Of course, the pupils have often asked Jaanika where the lemonade and hamburgers have disappeared to. "You can make your own hamburgers at home when your mum and dad are snowed under with other things," she always tells them. "You don't need to be a qualified chef to boil pasta and wieners," she says. "Food is about good health."

Jaanika holds up her hands: every child has to get five handfuls of fruit and vegetables every day, she explains. She makes it her business to give them at least three.

Should schools have their own vegetable gardens and orchards?

Jaanika struggles to produce an enormous pumpkin from underneath the counter as an example of how parents sometimes help add to the canteen menu – the orange giant being a gift to the school from the family of one of its pupils.

Her eyes sparkle as she recalls the number of cooks from other schools who have visited her kitchen and scoffed at the idea of pumpkin being used to make a delicious semolina mousse (simply by adding a little citric acid or lemon juice) and the kids lapping up the oat and pumpkin porridge.

Anyone can see from the weekly menu that even that most basic of staples – porridge – is far from being just water and flakes here, but that rye porridge is served up with apples, for example, or semolina pudding with chocolate. And needless to say the mash, which all the kids love, is made from freshly peeled potatoes using real butter and milk. Just like grandma makes.

“But how much of what you use is local?” I ask, steering the conversation round to a potentially sensitive subject. “As much as we can!” comes the answer. However, price is still the determining factor, explains Jaanika, who is often given home-made cards, flowers and even hugs by the pupils when they come into the kitchen to thank her.

“There was a time when everything made abroad seemed better,” she admits, “but that just led us to forget how good our own stuff is, and how much healthier it is.” That said, old farm recipes

are proving an exciting new challenge for the cook. She knows that Tabasalu school has a friendly farmer who grows all of the vegetables they need. He also brings in berries, apples and herbs. Jaanika would love for Vääna to work with local farmers. "They used to come and offer us stuff, but were told it wasn't allowed," she reveals. "Now they can, but no one comes anymore." Back in the day almost every school had its own vegetable garden, and that's a tradition Jaanika would happily see restored.

The vegetables that grow in Estonia, not to mention the eggs and meat you get here, just taste better, says Jaanika. The quality of the mince coming out of big plants is gradually falling away (something you can measure by the number of clumps, she explains: the more that form in the pan, the greater the amount of bone meal and the less meat there is in the mince) and not even curds are what they once were, instead largely comprising vegetable fats high in trans fatty acids and all sorts of other additives. But in this kitchen there is no compromising on health: such items are simply left off the menu. Even curds, which the pupils at the school are now eating far less frequently.

Fish pancakes with swede and carrot

"But still, what do you do to make the kids like fish and veggies?" I ask, raising an issue that gets every parent talking. "They don't care what's in something – they care what it looks like."

When it comes to flavour, children like purity and simplicity, Jaanika explains. They much prefer cabbage and carrot to be served separately as salads rather than mixed together. With soup, they like it to be as colourful as possible – which means at least three different types of vegetables and something green on top. Semolina always goes down well, but ordinary flour is not something that commonly features on the list of ingredients at the school. As we tuck into lunch in the canteen we're offered rye bread to go with it, and the pasta we're eating was made by the cook herself. This was a relatively late addition to her repertoire, however: she only began making her own pasta more than a year after joining the school. "It simply didn't cross my mind to make my own before that," she says.

Jaanika's golden semolina – the undisputed favourite on the dessert menu among the pupils – is made using equal parts semolina and pumpkin, which is boiled until soft in a small amount of water before a little sugar and a dash of citric acid is added. Then the semolina is boiled and the two ingredients are whisked together. "It's fantastic!" I hear myself say, all the while thinking it's something I could well offer guests myself.

One of the dishes which helped Vääna win the school canteen title – its mincemeat and cabbage soup – was in fact the result of a happy accident. The meat order for that day had been overlooked, but luckily there was some mince in the fridge – and the soup it became one of the key ingredients in was such a hit with the pupils that it's been on the menu ever since.

As I head back to Tallinn, a sceptical little voice continues to question how the kids can really love herring casserole with carrots and swedes, and how the entire menu can be covered using only fresh ingredients for so little money (especially when nothing comes out of a packet from the deep freeze – not even the fish) and how such homely cooking can work in a school canteen. And yet work it does: beautifully, and inspiringly.

Vääna manor school menu

28 November–2 December 2011

The lady of the manor's Monday menu:

Mincemeat sauce, buckwheat, salad, bread, kefir & fruit

The lord of the manor's Tuesday menu:

Sauerkraut borscht, bread, thickened fruit juice with yoghurt, milk & vegetables

The young lord of the manor's Wednesday menu:

Goulash, potatoes, salad, bread, milk & fruit

The young lady of the manor's Thursday menu:

Chicken and dumpling soup, bread, banana and curd mousse & fresh cabbage

The governess of the manor's Friday menu:

Pan-fried fish, potatoes, cucumber and yoghurt sauce, bread, milk & fruit

What motivates the best school cooks?

Jaanika Rist:

- Kids are very direct: their gratitude is genuine and sincere
- The recognition of colleagues and parents
- The chance to use fresh ingredients – and the dream of the school having its own farm!
- Training, which school cooks could always do with more of
- A cosy canteen and nicely laid tables

Good food comes when you work with the kids

At Vääna manor school the pupils are frequently asked how they enjoyed their food and what they would like more or less of. They've even started making their own suggestions, unprompted. The modest size of the school means that on special occasions everyone can sit down and eat together. Before Christmas, for example, the kids were able to make their own suggestions about what should be on the festive menu – and while 'Xmas pizza' might not have made it, 9-year-old Maria Tõnisberg's caramel apples did, becoming a big hit on the dessert menu.

The prize-winning pupils' favourite:

Herring pancake (serves 4)

You will need:

80 g of carrots
80 g of swede
80 g of sweet pepper
80 g of onion
40 g of leek
200 g of herring
1 egg
40 g of wheat flour
60 ml of milk
Vegetable oil
Salt
Sugar
A little ginger and chilli
Grated cheese for serving

Rinse and/or peel the swede, carrot, onion and sweet pepper before dicing. Slice the leek and grate the ginger. Fry the vegetables in the oil, starting with the swede and carrots before adding the onion, sweet pepper, leek and ginger. Fry the herring separately and then add to the vegetables. Season with salt.

Prepare the pancake batter using the milk, egg and flour. Add some salt and sugar. Pour into the pan and cover with the fish and vegetable mix.

Bake at 200°C for 12-15 minutes. Remove from the oven and sprinkle some grated cheese and dill on top. Serve hot.