

Evelin Ilves

Along with Evelin Ilves we set off on a very long journey to Põlva County to see how a small Estonian school serves its children organic lunches inspired by Seto culture. The cooks at this school are young Seto women whose venture Kolme Sõsara Hõrgutised is, in fact, the reason for writing this story in the first place.

The efforts of the British TV-chef Jamie Oliver to teach British school children take a liking to fresh and healthy food were humorous and frightening at the same time. Particularly weird were the scenes of parents smuggling crisps and hamburgers through the fence bars to their starving children. Seriously speaking – the children of the small Johannese school and nursery school in Rosma village in Põlva County were also anxious last autumn when the school decided to start using local organic food. Would they be able to eat proper food when those Seto sisters arrived with their healthy food – this was the question on children's minds.

The three Vissel sisters

"Ten years ago Triin (33) could cook nothing but potato and barley porridge (mulgi puder)," jokes Kerti (31), the middle one of the three Vissel sisters, a University of Tartu graduate in sociology and the only one who has been passionate about cooking for as long as she can remember.

When Triin moved from Tartu to Setomaa, out of pure love for romance as she says, Kerti held on a little longer in Tallinn, working at Hansapank, but not much longer. The minute she had the possibility to get a job as a development adviser in the Võru County government, she waited no more and fled the capital.

And when the youngest of the sisters – Kadri (26) – returned to Võrumaa after completing her textile studies at Viljandi Culture Academy, the time was ripe for the three of them to do

something new and something different.

"It was in 2007 during Seto Kingdom Days when we spontaneously decided to take part, put up our tent and sell our homemade cakes and pies there," says Kerti describing how the sisters' Great Affair began. "It was all so exciting: after spending a week cooking from morning till evening, we packed our tents, dishes, tablecloths and children – and off we went!"

Their pastries made of spelt, barley and rye flour – so unusual at the time – were so popular that orders slowly started coming in. A year later the three sisters already hosted the heads of state in their tent. Then the first big catering job came in. "Imagine, 400 people, the opening event of the Andras Association of Estonian Adult Educators... Well, we did not tell the county governor that we had never done such a thing before. And that we do not actually have dishes for all those people," Kerti laughs and describes how she spent the following month preparing for the event and how the recycling centres in Tartu all of a sudden sold no more dishes.

"Well, even today we use dishes from different sets," smiles Kadri and places the cups and saucers with colourful flowers we all remember from the 1970s and 1980s on the kitchen table.

A lot of thinking and combining

"Catering is a piece of cake compared to feeding school children," says Triin who spends most of her time fussing behind the stove at Johannese school, to my great surprise, and continues: "If you do not take the line of least resistance and, in fact, do want to prepare a tasty and healthy lunch, you need to think really hard and combine."

This school also used to serve fish-burgers, sausages and pasta. "School menus might look the same, but the actual food served could be completely different. For example in the Nutridata programme (a web-based programme of the National Institute for Health Development) bouillon cubes, sugar and vinegar are listed as the ingredients of borsch. We never use things like that – these are not healthy for children," Triin says, at a loss.

Many of the children were surprised by our self-made bread and it seemed that for some of them it was hard work to munch a slice of whole-grain bread.

Children say what they think, plain and clear – sometimes it makes you sad, but most the time their honesty makes you happy. If they do not like a thing, they say so. "But if you see a child – as thin as paper – who indeed does not eat nor has ever tried much else but potatoes and plain macaroni – eat his/her first bite of your food or your fish sauce and go on eating it – this is the happiest day of your life!" The sisters radiate with happiness.

Organic is possible

I peer into the kitchen set up in the back room of the more than 100-year old log house that used to be the home of our well-known educator Johannes Käis and I see a cosy fire flickering in the wood stove. By the wall opposite the wood stove you can see its modern counterpart blinking its blue eyes. This is the stove all professional chefs dream about – a convection stove that steams, boils, grills and bakes. The school only has this stove thanks to the donations raised by Estonia's the best chefs at the Chef's Cup football match, the money we received for the things children made themselves and funding from the Leader programme.

How do you do all that, I ask for the millionth time after hearing again and again that it is not possible to provide healthy school food for the scant money allocated by the state. Not to mention, using locally grown foodstuffs. Kerti patiently explains again in her e-mail: "Yes, our children do eat real fish and meat, organic vegetables and eggs bought from local farmers. They eat milk products bought from Nopri farm, brown rice and wholegrain pasta (we never use white sugar, white flour or bouillon cubes or prepared products). Yes, we do make our own wholegrain rye bread with leaven. Once a month we make white spelt bread. The children are served cake once a week and in the nursery school, the porridge flakes are ground fresh every morning ..."

Unbelievable! "Organising everything, finding partners – this is all a one-off effort. Thereafter things get easier," Kerti adds.

Triinu's daughter Päikeriin, who has suddenly entered the kitchen, announces matter-of-factly that the rye and spelt grown at their plot they made themselves with a harrow should be dry enough now so that they could soon go to the mill and let it be ground. And then... and then... mom promised to teach them all how to make it into bread. The children here will not grow up with the misconception that food comes from a factory.

Children here have time for growing

We sit at the kitchen table for a long time. Talking about Waldorf pedagogy, which is called organic pedagogy here, as this is how the former minister of education, Tõnis Lukas, referred to it when visiting the school. Talking about how the children no longer have time for growing in today's frenzied world. That this is exactly what this small school with 47 students and 28 nursery school children wants to give them in its cosy school house. Time to grow, see all things beautiful and the passing of the seasons. Help them find their place in nature and in the world. Time to grow up and become a person whose objective in life is not to reach the highest steps on their career ladder, but rather to be happy. And healthy and joyful also on the eve of their lives.

I can see now why children come to this school and this nursery school from 50 kilometres away – altogether from 11 municipalities. In some cases the reason for people to leave bigger towns and move to the countryside has been, in fact, this school and nursery school in Rosma.

But let me ask you, Vissel sisters, how do you make a living here and what ties you, well-educated and radiant people full of powerful energy to this century-old schoolhouse? "Kolme Sõsara Hõrgutised is our joint venture. Kadri weaves, Kerti bakes and we have our sheep and our farm and..." says Triin and adds that she could not do it without the support of her husband who builds eco-houses. "But what do we live for? To make the world a better place! If we make an effort every day, cook the best meals, set the table nicely and feel grateful for having all that and if we teach the children to do the same day in and day out...they will remember it their whole lives. We will change their world."

Johannese school in Rosma

Johannese school is a school based on the principles of Waldorf pedagogy founded in 1989 through a citizen's initiative. The school is run collectively and the school board receives no payment for their work. The fees in this non-profit school and nursery school are 34 and 26 euros per month, respectively. The study costs are mostly financed from the state and municipal budget.

With its 20 employees MTÜ Rosma Haridusselts is one of the biggest employers in Põlva municipality. Despite this the town of Põlva announced at the beginning of 2012 that it intends to decrease the school poll tax paid for the children of Põlva going to the nursery school in Rosma by 50%. This is a good example of how children are treated unequally on the local level. Inspiring citizen's initiatives that statesmen value so highly in their speeches, might be jeopardised in real life due to the shortsightedness of local government policies.