

Evelin Ilves

What is the only school canteen on the island of Muhu like, and what kind of food does it serve up to its students? Is it in the same league as local restaurants Pädaste and Namaste? Evelin Ilves went to find out.

Years ago, at a dinner one night at Nautse ostrich farm, I heard someone say that the people on Muhu dreamt of the island becoming the gourmet atoll of the Nordics. Somewhere where there would be more outstanding and unique places to eat per head of population than anywhere else. The locals are known as prodigious cooks: many of them chefs by hobby, although the island attracts its share of leading chefs, too. Pädaste, Namaste, Nautse and Kala-kohvik are names that not only Estonian food-lovers are familiar with. But how is the kitchen run in Muhu's only school, whence all of the island's cooking talent and gourmands have sprung?

Good local ingredients

The 2000 or so people spread about Muhu's 52 villages manage, between them, to operate one school: an elementary school with around a hundred pupils. Kuressaare, the county capital, lies 70 km to the south-west and is little more than an hour's drive away; getting to the national capital, Tallinn, on the other hand, though a mere 150 km to the north-east, takes at least three hours, and sometimes even an entire day.

Whether the relative isolation of Muhu means catering for its school children is a more complicated affair is the first thing we asked Maire Liitmäe, the jovial lady who runs its canteen.

"Not at all!" she replies. "We're used to things not being delivered every day. And we make as much use as possible of things we can get hold of locally: bread and meat products from Saaremaa – and we always check to make sure the meat really is meat! – and potatoes and

vegetables from local farms. Oh, and apples and pumpkin, too."

Maire is proud of the fact that they have fought for and won the right to pickle their own pumpkin at the school, and offers us some to try. "At first you always think you won't be able to get such-and-such and you won't get any of that," she says, "but if you do your damndest, you can get whatever you need!"

The same can be said of the children's eating habits. Every autumn the canteen faces the challenge of getting the little ones to eat – there are always pupils who are new not only to the school, but to the idea of eating anything other than mashed potato or macaroni. One of the cooks at the school, Meeli Targem, has been feeding the local children for almost 45 years, while testing out new approaches on her own five offspring. She knows how to get even the most intractable pupils to try new things. "You just have to get them to try a little – a single mouthful is usually enough to get 90% of kids to eat the rest," she explains. "You can't just present it to them on the plate. You have to talk them into it, and through it."

Small school, small budget

You also have to be reasonable and consider that children may have their reasons for refusing to eat. In that sense it's easier in a small community, where everyone knows everyone. For example, a little boy who was born and raised in Italy doesn't want to come to the canteen to eat because schools in Italy generally don't have their own canteens. They have a two-hour lunch break, yes, but the pupils go home to eat – to the best restaurant in the world, where their nonna is the head chef...

The little boy in question asks me a little later how many school canteens in how many countries I've visited. I tell him I'm quite familiar with the way things work in Italy. He sighs, reassured. The same boy is also introducing a little gallant good humour to the school: always opening the classroom door for his teacher, never pushing and shoving, always the first to say 'hello' and always smiling.

"We run a pretty tight ship here – looking the best you can and behaving properly are held in high regard," explains the school's charming principal and Russian teacher, Andres Anton. He reveals that he not only strives for good results, but that he has two particular dreams for the school: that it should have its own garden, and that it should have its own uniform, featuring the traditional Muhu knitted vest.

Life on the tiny island teaches everyone who lives on it the value of helping others and saving wherever savings can be made. A great example to all of the other pupils is a little girl who, despite being born without a jaw bone and with arms and legs half the normal length, chips in and does her share along with everyone else. This includes swimming lessons with the boys, as the only girl in the class, making full use of her prosthetic limbs. Her parents make no exceptions for her and will allow no one else to make them either: she is just another pupil, like everyone else at the school. She listens to my talk in the hall on good health with great interest, and is the first in the canteen to thank the dinner ladies for her food.

Absolute favourite: Tatar meat stew

The kids on Muhu tend to like simple dishes the most. But when I ask them what their favourites are, they answer almost as one: the comparatively exotic Tatar meat stew known as 'Azuu'.

"We do try and come up with new things and try out new flavours every now and then," Maire says. "Pumpkin, for example, is something the kids now really love in porridges and cakes. Azuu didn't exactly knock the socks off anyone when we first tried it, but the older ones developed a taste for it, and now we serve it a couple of times a month. They ask for it!" She adds that in such a small school, with 100 mouths to feed, it's not always easy to draw up and stick to a budget – despite the fact that each of the 78 cents per student in state funding finds its way directly into the food they eat, with the dinner ladies' salaries paid by the municipal government.

The school is the only place in the area where hot lunches are prepared, and as such they are also made available to local builders, tradesmen and officials for a small fee. 40 extra diners makes it easier for the canteen to cope with the budget it has to work with. As do the parties

and wakes that are held in its hall.

The principal, who weaves a thread of black humour through our entire conversation, is happy with the way things are going: they have a 100% success rate among their pupils, excellent teachers and some of the most outstanding results in the country. And although the island's local speciality – sour mash – has fallen somewhat out of favour with the children, their handicraft teacher and author of many embroidery books Anu Kabur is keeping their interest alive in the complex and beguiling art of Muhu needlework.

When it comes time for pictures to be taken, the principal chooses the corner of the foyer where a beautiful embroidered rug hangs – with one square for every graduating class the school has produced. Those squares will keep being added to, since plenty of children are being born on Muhu, and the school is unlikely to close its doors any time soon. With any luck, they will stay open for ever.

Azuu

Serves 4-5

The favourite dish of the pupils at Muhu school

Ingredients:

233 g boneless pork
40 g tomato paste
33 g oil
77 g onion
13 g flour
110 g pickles
550 g potato
2.7 g garlic

150 g water or broth

Cut the meat into strips and lightly fry in a pan before placing in the casserole dish. Add the chopped onion, followed by the flour, and turn up the heat. Add the tomato paste, seasoning ingredients and some of the water. Stew until the meat is semi-soft. Peel and cut the potatoes into sectors. Fry them and add to the meat mixture. Pour over the remaining water or broth and continue to stew. Immediately prior to serving, garnish with the pickles, cut into thin strips. Note: do not stir excessively once the potatoes have been added.

Muhu sour mash

Serves 5-6

A tasty sweet dish that is making a comeback

Ingredients:

1 litre kefir or buttermilk
200-250 g flour (premium wheat flour, if available)
vanilla
sugar
1-2 tbsp butter (if desired)

Add enough flour to the chilled kefir or buttermilk to form a consistency equal to 20% sour cream. Boil on a medium heat, stirring constantly, until you have a thick, glossy mixture. Flavour with the vanilla, sugar and (if desired) butter before taking the mixture off the boil. Eat cold with milk. Raisins can also be added to the dish.

From MUHU Island

Whenever anyone mentions Muhu, it reminds me of a funny story that came out of the apple gardens at Pädaste manor. The juicy red apples from Pädaste were a much sought-after export item to England during the period of the first Estonian republic. Each apple was placed in a crate, individually wrapped in tissue paper. The only stamp on the crate said: "From MUHU Island". 'Muhu' sounded so far-off and so exotic that it upped the price of the apples well beyond that of their competitors! No one connected the name with the Nordic region – it sounded so warm, so sweet, so exciting and so full of yearning!

Muhu Elementary School canteen menu (26-30 March 2012)

Monday: Selyanka, rice pudding with strawberries, bread & milk

Tuesday: Meatloaf, potatoes, sour cream and dill sauce, beetroot salad, bread, milk & drinking yoghurt

Wednesday: Azuu (pork and fried potatoes), cucumber and tomato salad, bread, milk, cocoa & sweet bun

Thursday: Chicken and cabbage borscht, cheese curd cream with thickened cranberry juice, bread & milk

Friday: Oven-baked chicken schnitzel, potatoes, sour cream and herb sauce, carrot and apple salad with juice, bread, milk & fruit