

Evelin Ilves

There can't be anyone left in the country who hasn't heard the cry go up that Estonian meat and vegetables are too expensive to use in school dinners. So when we heard that the cook at Lauka School on the island of Hiiumaa had fomented an 'organic revolution', we joined Evelin Ilves to see it for ourselves.

"The best cook in the world!" is the praise that a boy from Grade 2 showers on cook Aimi Aromatov as he sticks his head around the door to her office. Having politely made his presence known, he responds to the cook's raised eyebrows with: "You are, because I know you are!"

The walls of Aimi's modest office are covered in colourful pictures and drawings. There are photos of the legendary Teachers' Table, to which the principal invites the most outstanding graduates every spring to sup with the staff. The man himself, artist Märt Rannast, admits that he's unsure whether it's the honour of sitting by the principal or the glory of the spread laid out before them that makes the students approach the table with such excitement.

The tower of appetisers pictured taking pride of place in the middle of the table is truly a sight to behold. The cook smiles to herself as our eyes are drawn to it, and explains its anatomy. The superstructure is an ordinary traffic cone – which, after all, is very easy to clean. The cladding is locally baked bread, which is then covered in aluminium foil. With the foundations set, the cone can then be studded with every kind of appetiser imaginable. There's enough room for around a hundred of them, despite the fact that the table seats far fewer.

The cook clearly shares the principal's artistic eye: even with fruit she concocts creations so glorious that it must be a shame to eat away their beauty. And all of this, it transpires, costs not all that much at all.

Students treated like wedding guests

Aimi happily spends time in the kitchen outside of school hours, too. She caters weddings and wakes and charms visitors to the island with a wide range of sweet and savoury treats. In one of her pictures, a wedding banquet is guarded by a legion of 200 pear hedgehogs; while in another, the impressive centrepiece is a white, fluffy, snowdrift-like... herring cake. "No it's not sour cream!" comes the reply to the obvious question. "It's made from cream cheese, horseradish and whipped cream, and the 'sponge' layers are made from toasted and grated black bread." Just thinking about it has our mouths watering.

And it's not as though the kids at Lauka School are catered to with any less flair than the wedding guests. Having studied cheese-making and spent years working as a technologist at Hiiumaa's meat production plant, Aimi knows everything there is to know about good taste and what you can do with ingredients when you put them together. She certainly knows what works and what doesn't: during her time at the meat plant she came up with dozens of sausage recipes, and her marbled sausage is remembered to this day by many who dined at the Georg Ots buffet in the 1990s. She also brought Estonia its only medal at the 1992 AgroBalti trade fair for her spicy beef sausage with juniper berries. It's a great pity it's no longer sold.

DIY mincemeat and seasoning

Thorough knowledge of and an exacting approach to the quality of ingredients are something Aimi brings to the kitchen at Lauka School, too. She uses no processed or pre-prepared ingredients or packaged seasoning. She doesn't include chicken on her menus, since she often considers it to be very poor. Good chicken, on the other hand, is too expensive.

She eagerly awaits the completion of the island's own product development centre (otherwise known as an abattoir) since it will allow her to procure local meat. She always makes her own mince at Lauka from proper meat. She gets her fish from the surrounding waters, and all of the berries, herbs, fruit and vegetables she uses are grown on Hiiumaa.

Aimi was inspired to enter into agreements with locals on an educational trip to France. There she was hugely impressed by family-run companies that covered the entire production chain

using their own resources, from dairy cattle farming to cheese production or from beef cattle farming to sausage-making.

"Why shouldn't that work for us?" she thought. Estonians think they're hard-working, but her experiences in France left Aimi with the impression that the farmers there work many times harder. How else could you get it all done with just 4 or 5 people? And yet she soon came to realise that she was unperturbed by the extra work negotiating with each farmer would involve, as opposed to sending a single e-mail to the local wholesalers.

She called everyone who was interested together in January, told them what she wanted and lo and behold! they worked out amongst themselves who'd supply the school with what and how much of it they'd supply and voila. The agreements they have, needless to say, are verbal. And the cost didn't go up just because Aimi stopped ordering from the wholesalers: school dinners still cost around 80 cents per student, so parents aren't having to chip in.

Season of plenty

Early autumn is a veritable time of plenty. There are so many tomatoes that the cook has abandoned tins and pastes. They're versatile, too – as well-suited to casseroles as they are to soups and sauces. And thanks to locally grown peppers, Aimi has been able to make the children their favourite dish: stuffed sweet peppers. So much so that they'll probably have lost their appetite for them by the time winter comes round!

The students are equally enamoured of the more traditional canteen fare Aimi serves up, like her mashed potatoes and mincemeat sauce – and here too the cook has her own way of doing things. "We've got a peeling machine, but I never use it, because it strips the potatoes of their flavour," she explains. "It's only the ones that haven't been thrown around that are really good. Besides, you should remove the eyes by hand anyway."

As such, all of the vegetables used to feed the hundred students and staff at the school are peeled manually. They're chopped up by hand, too. To this end the cook has bought a number of slicers and dicers which turn the vegetables into little sculptures – and which frequently turn

her vegetable soup into works of art.

The world's best bread pudding

The borscht that's being offered to the students for lunch today is so good that even our driver – who hasn't eaten beetroot for the better part of 25 years – downs an entire bowl. "How can beetroot soup taste that good?" he asks in bewilderment.

Aimi reveals the soup's secrets: "Beetroot, carrots and cabbage from Kõrgessaare, potatoes from Suuremõisa, good-quality beef and lots of herbs." No need for a recipe here, she says.

The only thing you have to be careful with, Aimi concedes, is the boiling – so that the vegetables retain a bit of crunch while the broth stays nice and clear.

On the days she serves soup, the cook often makes a cake to go with it – and the students at the school are full of praise for her confections. They're generally rather simple: to a sponge base of eggs, sugar and flour Aimi adds a thick layer of apples and covers it in cherry jam, or other fruit. Or sprinkles the apples with cinnamon and cardamom.

She then rattles off the secret to the world's best bread pudding to us as if it's nothing special at all: you soak the bread in milk, set one layer, cover it in a thick coating of cherry jam, then add more bread, pour over eggs which have been whisked with sugar, vanilla and milk, sprinkle desiccated coconut over the top and pop it in the oven. And if you can use farm-fresh eggs, so much the better. The next thing Aimi plans to get for the school's kitchen is in fact a light box for her eggs – that way she'll be able to get eggs from the farmers and they themselves won't have to fork out for such an expensive item alone.

Setting an example to the British and the French

Lunch is over and Aimi sees us to the door. She's barely waved us off, however, before she's back in the kitchen: she's about to play host to a group of school dinner advocates from the UK and France who have come to Hiiumaa to see what she makes and learn from her experience.

As we leave, we wonder why we assume it's well-known chefs who should be sharing their knowledge and ideas with dinner ladies. Why not the other way round? As if to confirm that it should be, we run into world-renowned composer and Hiiumaa local Erki-Sven Tüür on the ferry back to the mainland, who tells us: "I always get Aimi to cater parties I'm having at my place. She does traditional stuff, in the best sense, and does it so well that you'd swear it was cordon bleu. It's so good that it crosses all cultural boundaries."

Lauka School

Lauka School was founded in 1900 by a count by the name of Ungern-Sternberg. 75 children are currently enrolled at the school – far fewer than in the heyday of the 1970s, when it had upwards of 220. At the time there were 13 schools in Reigi parish; now there's just one, and only seven in total across the entire island.

The elementary school occupies four buildings that can only be described as 'Swedish red' in colour. The complex is in the middle of a 7-hectare park close to the sea. To get their dinners the children need to pop across the road to the former collective farm canteen, which was bought back by the municipal government and spruced up for the school. The locals also use it for get-togethers and parties. The principal dreams of speed bumps to slow down the forestry vehicles that speed along the road between the school and its canteen, but the Estonian Road Administration won't sanction them. Will it take an accident before they do?

Oh, and if you were wondering, the name of the place – Lauka, from the Estonian word laugas, meaning 'bog' – has nothing to do with inky pools on Hiiumaa. In the local dialect it in fact means 'bay'. The school is by a bay: hence the name!