

We'd been planning a visit to a canteen in a Russian-language school with Evelin Ilves for quite some time. We'd plumped for Tallinn Secondary School of Humanities, assuming we'd get to try their borscht and selyanka – which wasn't on the menu. Indeed, the menu was a whole lot more interesting than that...

We kept our ears to the ground, were given recommendations and looked at the websites of schools in Tallinn and Ida-Viru County in the hope of finding one with a canteen whose menu featured at least one or two traditional Russian dishes. But to our surprise there were none to be found. So instead we opted for the school closest to us: the aforementioned Secondary School of Humanities, in the Kassisaba district in Tallinn, not far from the home of our photographer, Hele-Mai Alamaa.

The school had hit the headlines a few months previously when the results of the state exams were published. Like the proverbial phoenix rising from the ashes, it had skyrocketed to the upper reaches of the school 'league table', now sitting proudly in 3rd place. So off we toddled to this school of wonders with a tingle of nervous anticipation, wondering what we'd find.

As I struggled to put my rather feeble Russian into any sensible order in my head, I also wondered how we'd get our point across. That concern soon vanished, however, when we drove up to the school gate to be greeted by a cheery voice from the intercom in fluent Estonian asking us to wait just a jiffy. I'd been to the school before, and as we waited I muttered to myself trying to recall what had brought me here. Then it struck me: it had been for a Turkish cultural festival and poetry recital competition at which I'd spoken to lots of the students taking part, and their teachers, without even realising that it was a Russian-language school. Since they were all talking to me in perfect Estonian.

My interest in the school grew with every step that took us from the gate to the main entrance. The hue and cry in the media about schools in Tallinn and Ida-Viru County being unprepared to make the transition to Estonian-language teaching despite the years of lead-in time has been relentless. So how had this school managed?

"What's there to manage?" says director Luule Kösler with a smile as she shows us into her office. "Our kids simply want to learn. That's the secret, inasmuch as you could call it a secret!"

As we sit and chat, the bell rings for morning recess. 15 minutes later it rings again, marking the start of the next lessons. In the intervening quarter of an hour there's been barely a sound. "How's it so quiet during break time?" I ask the director, who tells me that the school runs its own 'hall monitor' system and that it does its best to instil core values in its students. These clearly include keeping the noise down and not stampeding through the corridors. I'm amazed again later when the students file calmly into the canteen, chatting quietly amongst themselves.

No crisps and no soft drink

The canteen itself is a sight to behold. Its long, white tables – one for each class, like an extended family – and rows of blue chairs for a pattern of blue and white stripes that remind me of Tallinn's flag. The hall monitor wears a yellow cowboy-style bandana round their neck or tied around their wrist so that everyone knows whose glare they'll be subjected to that day if they forget to clear away their tray.

"Will you be having lunch with us?" one of the more senior boys asks us. "Of course!" I tell him, and ask him what he recommends. "Everything's good," he says, smiling disarmingly, before adding that secondary students should get free school dinners as well as those in lower forms. They're kids too, he says, and it's not like they earn a living of their own, so why make the distinction? And it's hard to disagree with him.

As I wander along past the kitchen staff my eye is caught by the explosion of colour that is the salad bar, from which every student seems to be taking a decent portion. They then get to choose between boiled potatoes or buckwheat, to which they can add a ladleful of goulash. Vegetarians or those watching their figures can replace that with pickled pumpkin, grated carrot with cranberries and cabbage and apple salad. No one goes away hungry.

Before sitting down to eat, we're drawn to the buffet. It's a melange of sandwiches, vegetables and home-grown apples, as well as pastries made fresh at the school and – crowning it all – the kitchen's very own take on mille-feuille. "We have a wonderful confectioner," says the director. "You simply must try the cake." She adds that crisps, sweets and soft drinks never sully the buffet, and haven't done for some time.

The exception to the horror stories?

As we help ourselves to salad and goulash, a kindly-looking lady in a chef's hat comes up to us and introduces herself as the school's food technologist. Or more precisely, a technologist from AS Tuleleek. My eyebrows shoot up in arcs of perfect surprise: this is the first school I've come across serving food prepared by the highly praised and very successful caterers. The stories we've heard have almost universally been the kind to turn your stomach – of meat kept in freezers for years on end and pasta boiled to within a sodden, shapeless inch of its life.

"How have you managed to buck the trend?" I ask, the question rolling off my tongue before I even realise it. Tiiu Melesk explains that although they cater 14 different schools, the menu is slightly different in each – depending on what the schools ask for, what the cooks are known for and what the schools as a whole and the company agree to between themselves. Making sure that the students actually enjoy their food is very important to them. Today Tiiu's in the kitchen here at the Secondary School of Humanities to keep an eye on what's being eaten and what's not.

Of course, the food needs to be healthy, too – not just tasty. Tiiu knows what that means: the ingredients they use have to be high-quality, fresh and, wherever possible, locally sourced. She lists them off for us: the beetroot, carrots, potatoes and apples come from Estonian farms, as do the meat and cheese curds. And while their fish isn't always from Estonian waters, it's always good.

The favourite dishes among the students are the grilled fish fillets with vegetables and the schnitzels, although there's rarely if ever anything left of the chicken pasta either. And that's another of Tuleleek's aims – minimising waste. Training and explanatory work form part of this, telling the kids why one thing or another is good for them. And as I listen to what they say I can hardly believe my ears.

Healthy catering is possible

For just €1.15 per student the canteen manages to provide three different salads, two sides to accompany the main dish and even three different types of water. This at the same time as other schools being catered by another major company have canteens where one sorry-looking salad and a vat of macaroni in which three slices of meat and four cubes of carrot are hidden is the best you can hope for.

A quick calculation tells me that the kids here are being offered 80-90 cents' worth of raw ingredients every lunchtime, as the law prescribes. The other company I referred to offers students on average just 44 cents' worth. That's where the massive difference comes from. It's a lousy situation, and not one I can rationalise in my mind whichever way I look at it.

But it's a good thing that I've had my ideas turned on their heads several times on this visit. For a start, the students I talk to tell me that learning Estonian isn't that hard at all. They also say that living in Estonia is great and that they'll definitely come back here once they've got their degrees. ("You can go to university in another country, right?" they ask me. "Of course you can!" I answer, triggering a long and interesting discussion about universities at home and abroad.) Moreover, I've discovered that big catering companies can provide schools with lunches that are just as good, just as varied and just as healthy as any that a dedicated canteen lady might provide. It's no surprise that Tuleleek keeps winning awards in the Healthy School Buffet competition run by the Tallinn Education Board every year. Good health and good quality seem to be their mission, after all.

As I leave, I promise the students that on my next visit I'll bring the president with me. They ask me so many questions about him that half of them go unanswered – time simply runs out. But as visits go, it's been a terrifically inspiring one.

Mille-feuille

Makes 1 large oven tray

Puff pastry:

- 500 g of flour
- 250 g of butter
- 200 ml of cold water
- 1 egg
- ½ teaspoon of salt
- Dash of citric acid

Filling:

- 400 g of vanilla cream powder (sold in stores)
- Cranberry jam

Allow yourself enough time to prepare the pastry, as it requires a number of stages. First, combine the flour, salt, water, egg and citric acid and knead into a firm dough. Cover with a damp cloth and place in the refrigerator for half an hour.

Next, prepare the butter mass you will need between the layers. To do this, add 5 level tablespoons of flour to the softened butter. (Without the flour the butter would slide between the layers of pastry when rolling.) Pat the butter and flour into a square mass 0.5 cm thick.

Remove the pastry from the refrigerator and roll it into a square slightly larger than the butter and flour mass (leaving it slightly thinner at the edges). Place the butter mass on the pastry to form a diamond shape on top of the pastry square, then fold the edges of the pastry together around the butter mass in envelope fashion.

On a worktop sprinkled with flour, roll the pastry and butter mass out into a rectangular sheet 1.5 cm thick. Fold in three, cover again with the damp cloth and place in the refrigerator for another half hour. Once the pastry has cooled, repeat the rolling process 3-4 times.

Once prepared, roll the pastry into a single sheet 0.5 cm thick and cut it in four. Bake each sheet separately at 250°C for 12 minutes. Do not open the oven door during the first 7 minutes of baking. Allow the bases to cool.

Cover the first layer in vanilla cream made from the powder. Cover the second in the cranberry jam, then the third and fourth layers with more cream.

Break off the crispy edges of the pastry and use to decorate the top layer. Refrigerate for a couple of hours before eating.

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