

Evelin Ilves

Although introducing new ways of doing things is often far easier in small schools, it is sometimes the biggest ones that stand out. We joined Evelin Ilves on her visit to Tabasalu Co-Ed Secondary School – which sources all of its food from local farms and which uses its own chip card system for payments.

When we heard that the School Canteen of the Year award for 2012 was to go to the kitchen team at Tabasalu Co-Ed Secondary School led by Liidia Maikina, we arranged a visit straight away.

We'd heard about Liidia before. Her twin sister, Ljudmilla Toom, is the head chef at Jüri School, which we paid a visit to last spring. She told us that there was one thing she was truly envious of when it came to her sister: that she had worked deals with local farms to provide the school with all of the vegetables it needed throughout the year. Our interest was piqued.

## **Stewing and skiing**

In an unlikely coincidence, the school at Tabasalu has exactly the same number of students as the school at Jüri: 907. As such, Liidia and her kitchen team of eight are feeding almost 1100 mouths every day, with the more than 100-strong staff also eating in the canteen. They're happy to do so because the food's so good – and has been for more than 20 years. The longest serving member of the kitchen staff, Riina Oselein, has been working in the canteen for 26 years.

In just her third winter as the school's young principal, Carolin Kadaja is full of praise for the dinner ladies. Her mission is to make Tabasalu a school that really does promote good health. It's joined the programme run by the National Institute for Health Development to this end, and it's one that schools don't sign up to merely because of the fancy title – exercise and healthy

eating are considered important in every age group.

In home economics lessons spent in the kitchen, students aren't limited to making sandwiches: they learn how to make soups and casseroles from scratch. And for the second year in a row the whole school has taken up skiing during the third term – PE lessons are timetabled so that students have enough time to get changed and shower, and those that don't have equipment of their own can borrow skis and boots from the school store, which currently has more than 150 pairs. Autumn saw the arrival of extra pairs, when parents organised a charity skiing fair from which all funds raised were donated to the school in order for it to boost its winter sports supplies.

The principal herself went home from the event as the happy owner of a brand new pair of downhill skis. And why not – the same skis would have cost her more than €600 brand new, and she got them for €20!

## **Exercising prerogative**

The athletic principal is an example to all of the students at the school. The morning we visit the school she has already been out skiing for an hour and a half. A passionate hiker, she is soon to jet off to go mountain-climbing in the Himalayas in Nepal. Two years ago she and a group of friends hiked their way through the polar night in Lapland. We listen to all this with admiration and more than a little wonder.

Starting from next autumn, Carolin wants to set up a sports-oriented class at the school. After all, the building next door has everything needed for group training, from swimming all the way through to ball games. The club has good relations with local sports clubs, too, meaning that training can be worked into students' timetables very easily.

What Carolin is most proud of is winning her battle with the local municipal government to allow everyone at the school to use the pool until 5.00 pm each day. Students and staff alike have started to make use of the opportunity. "Including us!" says head chef Liidia. "We go swimming three times a week. It's fantastic!"

## **Multifunctional chip card**

The students heap praise on their school dinners and are eager for us to experience the canteen for ourselves. And there's plenty for them to show us – for a year now Tabasalu has been using a chip card system which arches our eyebrows for its ingenuity and simplicity.

Carolyn explains that students have to have a student card and teachers have to have professional ID; doors have to open, and bus rides have to be paid for. This led to the idea of creating a single, multifunctional chip card to cover all of the bases. The card is all-in-one: a student card for the kids and a teacher's card for the staff, a key to unlock the doors that need unlocking at the school (including the store where they keep the skiing equipment) and a ticket on city buses. In the canteen, one swipe of the card brings up the student or teacher's name, photo and class, and information about what and how often they've eaten is recorded.

The canteen offers porridge in the morning to get the day started right, as well as a more robust meal to see students and staff through the day. There are also school dinners, and a special of the day costing just €1.60. As such, kids can eat up to four times a day – and there are quite a few who do.

Parents too are happy with the chip card system, since the bill they receive at the end of each month sets out very clearly what, when and how much their kids ate or drank. They also pay after the fact, rather than ahead of time, and solely for what's been eaten. Hele-Mai, the photographer joining us on the visit and a parent herself, can't believe her ears. She has to try to work out how often her child is likely to need a substantial meal during the following month and pay for it all in advance. Needless to say this never tends to pan out. I've had the same experience. So there's plenty of reason to marvel at the way they organise things at Tabasalu.

## **Just the boost you need**

The principal eats at the canteen herself every day and is unfailing in the thanks she extends to the chef. As a salad lover, she urges Liidia to share her secret salad recipes with Pere ja Kodu. She's thought to have many of them, all very different from one another, and all with their own special nuance – be they seeds or herbs or berries or nuts...

Coming in for their own share of praise are the potatoes, carrots, beetroots, cabbages, pumpkins and other vegetables that are brought in from Vääna farm. They're said to be so tasty that very little effort is required to turn them into a fantastic meal. True, peeling the potatoes in the canteen is a major operation – 160 kilos is needed in one go to feed the entire school, and they can't be doing with the pre-peeled, chemical-soaked variety. All of the herbs they need for the year are picked in autumn, chopped up and popped in the deep freeze. This makes for a worry-free winter and lets cook Merle Indermitte, who has experience as a restaurant chef, concentrate on her seasoning skills.

When we reach the kitchen, the team are working on the following day's afters – the very same dish that won them the title of Best School Canteen Dessert two years ago: baked apples in honey sauce. A thousand shiny red apples wait for fast-working fingers to stuff them with raisins, cinnamon and marzipan. Just thinking about the whipped cream and honey sauce that will adorn them sees us yearning for Christmas to come round again.

So yes, as massive as this Soviet-era school is, it brims with a sense of homeliness and warmth that gives us a boost for the entire day. When we say our goodbyes to Carolin and Liidia, we exchange a look that says: life is good in Estonia. If you want something and you strive to achieve it, anything's possible.

## **Oven-baked apples with honey sauce**

Serves four

4 medium-sized slightly sour apples  
50 g of marzipan  
Juice of half a lemon  
2 tbsp of sugar

Pinch of cinnamon  
Raisins

Honey sauce

100 ml of honey  
100 g of sugar  
150 ml of cream (35%)  
1 tbsp of butter

To decorate

Cranberries  
Mint

Wash the apples and remove the cores. Stuff them with the raisins, sugar and cinnamon. Roughly grate the marzipan, mix it with the lemon juice and pour over the raisins. Bake at 200°C for 15-20 minutes. To prepare the sauce, blend the honey, sugar and cream. Boil on a low heat for 25-30 minutes. Whisk the butter into the sauce and allow to stand. Serve the apples slightly cooled with the cold sauce. Decorate with cranberries and mint leaves.

### **The 'difficult child' of Estonian schools – lunch break**

Many schools around Estonia still seem unable to ensure that their students can actually have their lunch at lunchtime, as opposed to 10 o'clock in the morning, or more than 10 minutes to shovel it all in. At Tabasalu the lunch break is 30 minutes, for reasons of both health and etiquette.

Once the clocks strike 11.00 the timetable and break times become a movable feast, allowing

the entire school to have their lunch in groups of nine classes at a time – and giving them a good half-hour to do so. Every 10 minutes a new group of students come in, while others return to their classes. Once the lunch break is over, the timetable returns to normal and everything is synchronised again, with the bell ringing for everyone at the same time.