

Evelin Ilves

The cook at Metsküla School, with its roll call of 17 students, is not shy about adding herring to the beetroot soup or courgettes to the pilaf. "My teachers are the radio, the Internet and Jamie Oliver," she tells visiting guest Evelin Ilves.

The school we decide to visit during Estonia's birthday month is one of its smallest – the elementary school in the village of Metsküla. Pille Kaisal, its principal of 20 years (and indeed its director of studies, first grade teacher and English teacher for the same duration), was awarded a Citizens Day decoration in recognition of her services in 2012. We wanted to see what things were like in such a tiny school and what was being cooked up for its students.

"Drive across the field!"

Google Maps has no more luck finding the school than we do. Instead, it directs us to the middle of a bleak and empty field. Perhaps it's confused – after all, there are at least five or six villages called Metsküla in Estonia.

As it turns out, we're looking for the one solitary school in Matsalu National Park. This secret we only learn when we send out an SOS to the principal.

"Drive across the field – the road's so slippery it's virtually undrivable!" she warns us before ringing off and heading out to meet us. As soon as we pull up, the door to the little wooden school house (which can only be described as being 'Swedish red' in colour) is opened to us and we're ushered in as though the school has been standing here for 300 years. To our surprise we discover that this odd little building, which acts as something of a magnet for its alumni, is a child of the newly independent Estonia: born in 1989.

School of dreams

Before we head for the canteen and the kitchen we ask the principal what keeps drawing people back to the place. It's not often that families move away from the big city halfway across the country all because of one isolated little school. Or rather move back once their kids reach school age.

Pille's eyes light up. She's not trying to make a particularly special school, just a very good one – one people want their kids to go to just like they did. Her own children have long since returned to Metsküla, with everything they remember so fondly about their school days still here, and indeed better than ever before.

The school year starts with a five-day culture and nature studies camp in the autumn, which this year was held on the island of Saaremaa. Every winter there's a two-day skiing camp at Jõulumäe. Three times a year the students are taken to Soomaa National Park so they can experience first-hand the wondrous transitions of the seasons. In August they attend an English-language camp with friends from Sweden and Poland in one of their three countries: Poland one year, Sweden the next and Estonia (and more precisely Matsalu) the year after. In spring they do a three-day hike on which they're accompanied by their parents. If the conditions allow, they even go ice-skating on Matsalu Bay. Everyone at the school remembers the time they skated 15 km across the bay and up the Kasari River to Penijõe – an unforgettable experience!

The kids are all into orienteering, and virtually every PE lesson is spent outdoors. There's no gym at the school, but if the weather's really atrocious they can transform the biggest room into a space for simpler ball games.

Kids from Years 1 and 2 regularly do two-kilometre circuits during their lessons, while the older students cover as much as four to six kilometres at a time. It goes without saying that they do pretty well for themselves on local sports days, almost always ending up on the podium, and it's rare for any of the students to get sick. The last time the principal herself went to the doctor was more than a decade ago.

Cook, supplier, driver

Knowing we were on our way, cook Ene Ploom has already laid the tables and the kids have all taken their seats. Carrot and pumpkin salad is soon dished out, followed by potatoes with herring sauce, and grace is said. Before dessert is served the plates are cleared so that Ene's home-made yoghurt – made using blackberries picked from bushes behind the school – is easier for everyone to enjoy.

Ene in fact never studied to become a chef, joining the school originally as its cleaner. One day though she was asked to stand in for the previous cook and lo and behold, everything she served up was heaped with praise.

"My teachers are the radio, the Internet and Jamie Oliver," she says with a smile. She adds that she grows vegetables, berries and herbs for the school free of charge and entirely off her own bat in her 'trial and error' garden at home. And when she's not there, she's often to be found in the forest picking berries and mushrooms for the children's meals. She makes jam, pickles pumpkin and at the end of each term cooks with the students – just like at home.

Although mashed potato and pancakes with minced meat are favourites among the pupils at Metsküla, Ene isn't afraid to try something new. Beetroot soup with herring and pilaf with courgettes are the first dishes that spring to mind.

When Ene heard that the healthiest food is always sourced within a 50 km radius of where you live, she decided to live by this principle. She's the cook, the supplier, the driver, the dishwasher and the head of the canteen, and when she's none of those things she's showing children around the kitchen or doing the paperwork that comes with ordering produce from farmers. She's fazed by nothing. Her only concern is that the children under her care are healthy and happy.

Summer secret

Before we leave Ene reveals the secret of the school's 'other life': for one month every summer the building plays host to the families of beloved children's authors Aino Pervik and Piret Raud. One family lives on one floor and the other on the other, cooking for themselves in the kitchen. The staff at the school bother them as little as they can.

"See that wood stove there?" says Ene. "That's in the book about the elephant (Sanna ja salakütid /Sanna and the Poachers/), and Mare – the cook before me – her sheep and her cottage by the sea are in there, too!" Tobias ja IIB /Tobias and the IIB/ was in fact written from start to finish in the computer room right here at the school.

As we head back, our driver sighs and says: "It's schools like that that produce really decent, interesting people." I know I'd go to it, not to mention sending my kids there. True, it might be an unusual place to grow up and learn things or live and work, but it's as though there's not a care in the world. The school, as the beaming Pille puts it, is one big happy family.

Party for the entire community

On 24 February, when hundreds of thousands of people around the country switch on their TVs to join in the Independence Day celebrations, the community centre in Metsküla will be hosting a party of its own. People will be coming from all over the surrounding area – Keemu, Matsalu, Meelva, Kullaste, Saastna, Liustemäe and of course Metsküla itself. All of them are true Estonian villages, full of life. There'll be around 100 people at the event.

The party will start with dancing and singing before the buffet tables are brought in. The tablecloths will go down and voila – the party can begin! Every family that comes along brings with them something for the buffet. Some bring the same thing each year, knowing how much everyone else enjoys it. Much eating, drinking and merriment ensues. And by the time President Ilves makes his Independence Day address and the concert and reception starts, everyone is back at home in front of their TVs.

Metsküla's grace

Ever since the school opened in Metsküla in 1989 and its teacher, Ann, started teaching her four pupils, they have always said their own version of grace before lunch:

Õnnistust toidule palume, /Bless this food before us,
Jumal, sind kõige eest täname, /Oh lord, we thank you for it all./
Jätku leivale! /May we never know need./

Everyone starts and finishes their meals together. And after that is the most fun part of the day – recess outside, whatever the weather!

Metsküla School's herring sauce

Makes 4-6 portions

- 500 g of herring
- 1 small onion
- 1 clove of garlic
- 5 cm of leek
- 50 g (ca 3 tablespoons) of sour cream
- 20 g (ca 1 tablespoon) of mayonnaise
- 1 hard-boiled egg
- 1-3 teaspoons of flour
- 200 ml of water (preferably from boiling potatoes)
- oil for frying
- lemon pepper, lemon juice, salt, ginger and dill to season

Season the herring with the lemon pepper, baste with a little oil and bake at 180°C for ca 20 minutes until golden. Sauté the chopped onion and garlic in a pan until transparent. Add the diced leek before sieving the flour into the mixture and sauté until browned. Add the sour cream, mayonnaise and water, stirring constantly, and bring to the boil. Add the herring and finally the chopped egg. Season with the lemon juice, ginger and dill, adding salt to taste. Serve with boiled potatoes and mixed salad.

Article in [Pere ja Kodu magazine](#) (PDF).