

Eat, Share, Love
Inkeri Hakamies

Katja Uusihaka & Matti Eräsaari (eds) 2016. *Ruoan kulttuuri. Antropologisia näkökulmia ruoan tutkimukseen*. [The culture of food. Anthropological perspectives to the study of food.] Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seuran Toimituksia 1419. Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society. 241 pp. ISBN 978-952-222-712-6. ISSN 0335-1768.

Jani Kaaro (ed.) 2017. *Ruoka-Kalevala – eli makumuistoja Suomesta*. [The Food Kalevala – or taste memories from Finland.] Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society. 432 pp. ISBN 978-952-222-826-0. ISSN 2323-7392.

Food is fuel for the body, but it is also much more than that. Food is culture, and it has emotional, symbolic, abstract and sometimes ambiguous meanings. What we eat and how we eat it matters – and not just for our physical well-being, but for our cultural identity. Therefore, food and the complex phenomena that surround it make an excellent topic for cultural research.

In recent years, the Finnish Literature Society has published two very different books on food culture. The book *Ruoka-Kalevala – eli makumuistoja Suomesta* is a product of a joint project between the Finnish Literature Society, the Martha Organization and the S-Group (a Finnish retailing cooperative organisation). It consists of edited written memories that were collected through a questionnaire, fictional stories by eight Finnish authors, short introductory texts by the editor, Jani Kaaro, and an afterword by Johanna Mäkelä, a professor of food culture. The collecting of food memories is still ongoing (www.ruokakalevala.fi). The book is divided into three major themes: “Onnen eväät” (Provisions of happiness), “Menneen maku” (Taste of the past) and “Maan kasvu” (Growth of the land). Each of these are further divided into subchapters mainly defined by different types of food ingredients or dishes: bread, potatoes, coffee, *mämmi*, meat et cetera.

Interestingly, *Ruoka-Kalevala* refers to the original *Kalevala* – the Finnish national epic, compiled by Elias Lönnrot – only in name. Of course, the reference is intended as a metaphor: the book is a collection of food memories from the past, which represent “our roots” and tell stories of the land “from which we have grown” (p. 8). Still, it might have been worth mentioning that the original *Kalevala* also includes depictions of food, and a rather famous scene of the making of beer. This would have given an opportunity for a more academic reflection on the role of food in Finnish cultural heritage.

Inadvertently, the book is centred upon childhood. Most of the stories are nostalgic recounts of food and the caring one received as a child. They deal with strong affects: food was a materialisation of love, and eating the things one ate in one's happy childhood stirs up strong emotions. The leading lady in most of the stories is the grandmother, who had a touch of magic in her hands and could "conjure up" delicious dishes like no-one else (p. 12). Going to *mummola* – the grandmother's house – also meant a break from the everyday life, and the place represented a different time where food was self-grown and self-made.

Ruoka-Kalevala is a happy book and easy reading, intended for the general public. It presents the reader with unproblematic memories of a unified Finnish food culture. The food memories also touch upon experiences of poverty, but mostly between the lines: on slaughter day, all the parts of the carcass were consumed in one way or another, or the author later realises why diluting milk with water was necessary (p. 287). There is also a whole subchapter dedicated to depression, war and food shortage ("Lama, sota ja pula"). Otherwise, the more sensitive issues related to nutrition are bypassed. For example, the growing of tobacco and hop are mentioned in the section dedicated to gardening, but the possible problems related to the consumption of these products are not given any attention. The more difficult and sensitive themes are covered mainly in the fictional short stories: in Virpi Hämeen-Anttila's story, one of the protagonists has suffered from an eating disorder, which still reflects on her relationships with family and food, while Pajtim Statovci's story deals with a family escaping war and living in diaspora, and for the mother of the family, cooking serves as a form of therapy or a way of avoiding reality.

Ruoan kulttuuri, on the other hand, digs in deeper to the symbolic meanings of food and different practices of eating. It is a collection of peer-reviewed articles by nine different authors, affiliated with the universities of Helsinki or Manchester. The topics vary from how food operates as a vehicle for moral talk amongst the market women in Kilimanjaro to how sharing or refusing food reinforces social relationships in the communities of I-Kiribati. The bigger common theme in the articles is *commensality* – sharing food and eating together. The authors share the principle that food is never mere nutrition, but "the foods eaten, and the way they are eaten, are always both expressions of cultural value systems and parts of the material processes that shape our social and cultural lives" (p. 229). Although the book represents anthropological research, it also provides tools and ideas for other branches of cultural studies.

For example, Katja Uusihakala's case study of the "ex-Rhodesian" diaspora's *bring and braai* food event, as well as the articles discussing the consumption of Argentinian *mate* or Mexican *mezcal*, by Johanna Pohjola and Toomas

Gross, deal with the symbolic values of food and drink from different points of view. According to Gross, the consumption of *mezcal* is a defining element for the community in Oaxaca, and the practice of drinking *mezcal* simultaneously defines who is *not* part of the community: women and protestants usually abstain from the drink. Similarly, *mate*, a herbal tea, is a key symbol that signifies being Argentinian, and most of all to Argentinians themselves. Unlike *asado*, the traditional Argentinian meat barbecue, it is not offered to tourists or made use of in the travel industry. The *bring and braai*, practised by “ex-Rhodesians” who emigrated from Zimbabwe to South Africa, is a barbecue event where the community gathers to spend time together and grill meat. It is an event where people eat together and separately simultaneously: each family is expected to bring their own foods. For the practitioners, the *bring and braai* represents Rhodesian hospitality, and it distinguishes the community from the rest of the white population of South Africa. The ways these foods and drinks are prepared, consumed, shared and talked about, can carry significant values to both insiders and outsiders of the practices. Of course, food is not the only signifier of a local or cultural identity – although in the context of this book it plays the most important role.

As the editors Eräsaari and Uusihakala remark in the introduction, in the Finnish context, the foodstuff that carries equally important symbolic values is probably *bread*, which is also used in Finnish folklore as a synonym for food in general (p. 22). *Ruoka-Kalevala* also includes several stories about baking and consuming bread. As a *practice*, the act of eating bread, together or separately, is still perhaps too ordinary for people to acknowledge. In any case, it does not carry similar ceremonial significance to the *bring and braai*, for example.

But what would be the “best” example of Finnish *commensality*? In the agrarian as well as the modern society, the centre of Finnish social life, and the practice that brings people together in their everyday life, was and is definitely drinking coffee – be it in festivities of different kinds, in a workplace break room or on a date in a nice café. As also mentioned in *Ruoka-Kalevala*, the Finns are famous for consuming more coffee than any other nation in the world (p. 148). If one studied the Finnish coffee ceremonies, one would observe that there are unwritten rules as to how the cake should be cut, or how long the guests are expected to be modest and hold back (*kursailia*) in order not to appear greedy.

Ruoka-Kalevala stirs up a lot of emotions in the reader and provides historical and cultural contexts for the phenomena related to Finnish eating. However, an academic reader might be left feeling “hungry” for more analytical research. The ideas and concepts of *Ruoan kulttuuri* will complement the “meal” and also help one to observe Finnish food culture from a more univer-

sal perspective. In the end, both books concern themselves with *love* – food is ultimately about caring for one another and reinforcing personal relationships within a community.

AUTHOR

Inkeri Hakamies, MA, is a doctoral student in European Ethnology at the University of Helsinki. She is specialized in museum history and museum practices.