**Treasures of Nature in Lapland Cuisine**

It is said that the first impression is important. After a short stay in Rovaniemi, I leave, barely getting to know Lapland, but that first impression is very strong. Its element is the cuisine, which I try to sample as much as possible. The dishes turn out to be uncomplicated yet bold - like the landscapes of nature, from which their ingredients originate. Although the raw surroundings might seem unfriendly and barren at first glance, they offer plenty of treasures that can find their way into the pot. This is perhaps the first time that I enjoy every dish I try.

Lapland is famous for its berry fruits. In addition to strawberries, blueberries, or cranberries, one also gathers here yellow cloudberries and red lingonberries. The short but sunny summer makes the forests full of sweet, healthy, and nutritious fruits in September, which the locals eagerly collect. They indulge in them raw, and then they make preserves. Harvests of various fruits are processed into juices, jams, and marmalades, as well as liqueurs. Jams are used both sweetly, as an addition to desserts, and savory, for main dishes. From berries, porridges are also made, for example, a children's delicacy called vispipuuro or lappapuuro. It's semolina porridge in milk with mashed lingonberries. When I try it for breakfast for the first time, I'm not surprised that Finnish kids love it. Another forest treasure is mushrooms. However, it turns out that they landed on Lapland's plates relatively recently because mushrooms were previously considered food for reindeer. Today, however, you can eat delicious, hearty, and - especially warming in the cold winter - mushroom soups. For example, I am delighted with the porcini soup served in a traditional Lappish vessel called a kuksa, carved from a single piece of birch wood. Heaven in the mouth!

As for meat, the area is incredibly rich in animals. Therefore, Laplanders' staple food is reindeer, but other game often also makes its way to the table: grouse, ptarmigan, mallard, deer, and even bear. Heading to Rovaniemi, I know I want to try reindeer meat. The most popular dish is poronkäristys, which is sliced and fried reindeer meat served on mashed potatoes with pickled cucumbers and lingonberry jam. It's a straightforward dish, but it tastes delicious! Reindeer meat has a quite strong flavor, which I can't compare to anything else, but it definitely suits my taste. I also try similarly prepared meat, but served on thin rye bread with yogurt, garlic, radish, cucumber, lingonberry, and arugula. In addition, reindeer is often used to make traditional, hearty soups and various sausages. Dried meat can also be bought. Lapland's forests are crossed by numerous rivers with crystal-clear water, rich in various fish. They are caught all year round, not only in summer but also in winter, when ice fishing is popular. The tables are dominated by fish such as salmon, trout, pike-perch, ide, or roach, and on the coast, also cod. The crown jewel of Lapland's soup is lohikeitto, a soup made from salmon fillets with leeks, potatoes, butter, and milk, seasoned with dill. Although I don't like dill, I fall in love with this dish from the first spoonful! And my love for salmon reaches its zenith when I taste fresh salmon fillet lightly seasoned with salt and grilled over fire. The meat comes out juicy, tender, and wonderfully tasty - and yet it's such a simple meal! Nevertheless, I also enjoy rainbow trout baked in the oven, which I try the next day. I could eat local fish every day.

Local bread surprises me. It turns out that rye, oats, and barley are mainly grown in the area, so wheat bread is practically unavailable here. Rye flour dominates, from which, among other things, a dark, relatively dry, and heavy traditional bread called limppu or buns called reissumies or ruispala is prepared. Another extremely popular baked good is rieska, a flat barley bread. It is often served with butter and milk. Speaking of bread, one should not forget about the traditional Finnish dessert popular in the northern part of the country, translated into Polish as cheese bread or bread cheese. In Finnish, it is called leipäjuusto or juustoleipä, and perhaps the best description of this snack is the English name - squeaky cheese. It's fresh, white cheese made from cow's, reindeer's, or goat's milk, which is then grilled, baked, or flambéed. The cheese squeaks between the teeth when bitten. It is traditionally served with cloudberry jam. Being in Rovaniemi in winter, I must also try the popular drink of the season, glögi. It can be briefly described as mulled wine (it tastes similar), but in reality, that would be untrue because it is prepared here... without wine. Traditional glögi is hot fruit juice (blueberry, cranberry, blackcurrant, or raspberry) served with spices such as cinnamon, cloves, cardamom, or orange peel. Raisins and almond flakes are added, and I try the version with chili. And alcohol? It's not necessary; the basic version is served without it. If someone wants something stronger, they can ask for an addition of barley vodka Koskenkorva, or alternatively wine, rum, or other vodka. A pleasantly warming drink!

On the eve of returning home, I go to the store to take some of these fantastic Lapland flavors with me. In my basket, among other things, end up reindeer sausage, smoked salmon, and lingonberry jam. As usual, eaten at home, it's not the same, but nevertheless, the treats gain recognition from the family, who come over for a tasting. And I can't wait to have the opportunity to taste original Lapland cuisine again. If you're going to Rovaniemi, also check out the post where important and practical information is collected, including where to eat well to try Lapland cuisine.