

New Finnish nutrition guidelines call for ethnic food "theme weeks" in daycare ^[1]

The aim of the new guidelines from Finland's National Nutrition Council is to begin teaching youngsters from an early age to eat foods other than the traditional Finnish staples macaroni casserole, meatballs and sausages.

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EXCERPTS

New recommendations from the National Nutrition Council now extend to children in the daycare system. The guidelines call on care givers to daycare children offer more ethnic foods by way of theme weeks.

In addition to promoting good health among children in early years education programmes, the council said that it wants "to promote lifelong food learning". This according to the state body means not only being receptive to new flavours or being interested in cuisine, but also developing sophistication when it comes to food.

Passion for food enhances quality of life

Food sociology researcher Taru Lindblom said that interest in food and nutrition are a good measure of a person's ardour in other areas of life.

She noted that while it is possible to see food as nothing more than fuel, it is actually much more. Non-participation can be linked to inequality, she said, adding that people who are politically passive have been observed to also be indifferent to other areas of life.

She argued that people who don't want to expose themselves to new taste experiences may not want to expose themselves to new perspectives either.

Lindblom said that research shows that children have no prejudices about food. If one child dares to eat a forkful of an odd-looking meal, others will follow suit. However she acknowledged that in some households, swapping minced meat and potatoes for something else may be financially impossible.

It is for that reason that systematic food education in daycare centres, schools, the army and workplace cafeterias is necessary, said Tampere University researcher Markus Vinnari.

"Knowledge of food in Finland should not be divided along class lines and familiarity with food culture should be possible for everyone," Vinnari declared.

"There is a danger that in the future the so-called 'sushi border' would be drawn according to residential areas and not just on a certain part of the map of Finland," Vinnari remarked, referring to the concept of the relative availability of sushi restaurants in certain parts of the country.

Testing unfamiliar foods as a route to empathy

The researchers see food as a way to getting under the skin of another and to defusing confrontational attitudes.

According to Taru Lindblom, research has shown that openness to new cultures reduces hostility to unfamiliar things – including food.

The researchers said that it would be a mistake to view Finnish food as particularly unique. In truth its influences come from four different directions: Russia, Sweden, the north and nowadays especially, from the US food and beverage industry.

"Once we understand that we are also the sum of many influences, we will be better able to question what it really means to be Finnish," Vinnari asserted.

It is a fact that the cuisine of most countries draws something from its neighbours. People who scorn falafels, eat the same bean patties that are prepared in Israel as well as in the Palestinian areas – or in the poor neighbourhoods of Marrakech and in Berlin's trendy Neukölln. Only the spices and raw ingredients may vary depending on location and what's available.

The sociologists say that research has shown that people are suspicious of foreign cuisine because their culture is seen as foreign, and not

because the food itself is perceived as bad.

It may well be that people just don't dare to like it, the researchers concluded.

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