

**THE FOOD INDUSTRY
IS FINLAND'S THIRD
BIGGEST EMPLOYER.
FINLAND EXPORTS
CHEESE, BUTTER,
ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES,
PORK AND CHOCOLATE.**

distinct seasons, but that since everything is available all year round, it is becoming difficult for restaurateurs to hold on to the seasons. Perhaps the only things left in Finland that Finns still wait for with bated breath are burbot, fished through the sea ice in February, and new potatoes and strawberries in summer.

At home, the master chef eats a variety of foods. "Typical Finnish staple foods: macaroni bake, soup made with local raw sausage, Finnish black pudding with lingonberry jam, pizza, hamburgers. After work, I often have some rye bread with cheese and red wine," Maulavirta says.

Breakfast is almost over at the hotel. The waiters are clearing the bread baskets. The restaurant's own baker has fallen ill, so Maulavirta has been here since the early hours of the morning, baking breakfast croissants. This man must have a passion for food. Why is that?

"It's an everyday need, I suppose. I never set out consciously to develop it. But I'm happy as long as the chain works smoothly on my bike," the chef smiles and begins to outline his plan to bicycle from Hanko, the southernmost point of Finland, to the Arctic Ocean next summer, a trip from the 60° north to far, far north of the Arctic Circle. -





This little piggy went to market



60° north decided to take a closer look at the origins of the foods used by Finnish celebrity chef Markus Maulavirta. So the writer and photographer drove to litti in southeastern Finland to meet pig farmer Ismo Eerola at Heikkola farm.

WRITTEN BY RIITTA MUSTONEN PHOTOS BY SEPPO SAMULI

Let's start with the essentials: how can you tell if a pig is healthy and happy? "Well, it's important that the pig has a curl in its tail and looks happy generally. You have to understand the pig to know how it feels," grins pig farmer Ismo Eerola as his pigs mill around him. The pigs at Heikkola farm are so full of life that the photographer has his work cut out trying to catch even one curly tail on film. However, there's not a chewed tail in sight, and that should prove that the pigs on this farm really are happy.

Chewed tails are a sign of stress in pigs. Even at Heikkola, the pigs are not entirely stress-free: there is always considerable tension involved when the pigs are transferred from where they were reared as piglets to an entirely new herd. "Pigs live in herds naturally. They have their own ways of deciding who's nice and who's not," explains Ismo Eerola.

Personal space At the same moment, some unlucky pig has managed to tunnel through into the next pen, where it is immediately punished for its efforts. The lot of such a renegade pig is a

hard one, because even if it goes back to the safety of its own herd, it will be something of an outcast since some of the new smells will have rubbed off on it. Some timely help from the farmer and an individual pen of its own are the solution in such cases.

At Heikkola, there are some five hundred pigs in three different units. They enjoy a fine life, running around in spacious pens, rooting around in the ground and eating well. Each animal has an average of 1.8 square metres of personal space, compared with the official requirement of one square metre less.



Ismo Eerola knows what to watch in a pig. If the tail comes up in a nice curl, it's a happy pig. A chewed tail means pretty much the same as chewed fingernails in a human being.

LONG-TERM EFFORTS ON SALMONELLA-FREE ANIMAL FEEDS AND PREVENTING GROWTH PROMOTING ANTIBIOTICS HAVE BEEN A GREAT SUCCESS IN FINLAND.

The floor of the pig pens is mostly covered with a wood-based litter. By the feeding troughs there is concrete flooring to give the pig's feet some training with different kinds of ground. The farm uses some 1,500 cubic metres of litter a year. Once a week, the farmer turns the flooring material over with an appliance that he attaches to his tractor. The material comes from a nearby sawmill and is changed completely at least three times a year.

The litter makes a nice flooring for the pigs, and in addition it is environment-friendly. A pig farm

with this kind of flooring does not suffer at all from the same piercing smell that pig farms with floor gratings produce, because the pig droppings are absorbed by the sawdust and composted on the spot. The temperature of the flooring material can rise as high as 50 degrees Celsius as the composting process progresses, and this produces considerable energy savings during the cold Finnish winters. Any liquid waste evaporates, so there is no need to deal with sludge.

The pigs at Heikkola are fed on local food. The oats and barley used for

the pigs' juicy feed cocktail come from the local village and protein concentrate is added to the equivalent of about 15 per cent of the total dry volume. The pigs grow somewhat slower than average, because they get so much exercise. They are generally sent for slaughter before they are six months old.

These pigs don't do a lot of travelling. They come to Heikkola from another farm in the same municipality and they are eventually taken to the next municipality to the slaughterhouse. The pigs are picked up

from Heikkola on a Tuesday morning and the next day, on Wednesday, the carcasses are back on the farm for butchering; on Thursday, the meat is up for sale at the farm shop, Benjam's market.

Running Benjam's market is the responsibility of the farmer's wife, Eila Eerola. She says with a chuckle that both pigs and people on this farm eat local food in the true sense of the word. "Even our kids ask whether the pork is fresh, whether it was slaughtered this week or last week."

Local food is an important cause that Eila Eerola supports. "If people don't eat food produced in their own area, then where are we?" she exclaims. "We ourselves are so fanatical that we won't eat even rice, and instead use whole cooked barley grown in Finland. It's our jobs that are on the line, after all."

Most of the pork from Heikkola farm is sold at the farm's own produce market, Benjam's, but some of it goes to top restaurants in Helsinki and elsewhere in Finland. The Eerolas have worked with several chefs, particularly Markus Maulavirta, and got them interested in cuts of pork other than the familiar fillet and pork chops.



FINNISH ANIMALS ARE AMONG THE HEALTHIEST IN THE EUROPEAN UNION.

"We are so proud of our pigs!" – the Eerolas can't say it often enough. Eila is a pig-farmer's daughter from Central Finland and had intended to take over her parents' farm when she met Ismo, her future husband. So she

Proud of their pigs

simply moved from one pig farm to another. In the early days, Ismo, Eila and even Ismo's mother all worked on the pig farm together. The fact that the farm has grown over the past ten years to comprise three units, all of which Ismo handles on his own, may have something to do with the efforts of his energetic and capable wife. Eila is now fully occupied with the marketing side of things.

When she visited pig-farms in France, Eila Eerola was surprised to find that all the pigs needed there was a simple shelter. "Here in Finland we build houses for pigs the same as for people. We have to, because of the cold winters. We also have a different growing season; the first harvest is ready for gathering over there just when

Heikkola farm in the village of Kauramaa in Iitti

- a pork-producing pig farm with a constant turnover
- housing about 600 pigs at a time
- 25 hectares of arable land
- 30 hectares of forest
- Ismo Eerola bought the farm from his parents in 1992.
- The Eerolas started selling pork at Benjam's produce market in 1995.
- Ismo and Eila Eerola bought out the whole market in 2001. The produce market is a limited company, the meat shop a general partnership.



we're going out into the fields for the first time in spring, and we only get one harvest. Even so, we should still continue to be able to produce food for local people in our area."

Something that Eila Eerola loved about France were the small baker's shops and cheese shops and the immense pride that people take in their local produce. "Finland has a culture where it is very bad to boast of your own accomplishments. It takes a lot of work to get a Finnish farmer to say with pride that this is MY COW! MY PORK!"

There's certainly a lot to be proud of. Finnish farm animals are among the healthiest in the European Union,

and this is not surprising, since Finland is a sparsely inhabited country with very cold winters that tend to kill all the bugs. Highly dangerous A-list animal diseases have hardly ever been found in Finland and other diseases are also rare among animals. There have only been isolated cases of salmonella, and the last outbreak of swine fever in Finland was in 1917.

"I would say this is also a sign that animals in Finland are properly cared for. We started our produce market with ethical production as our main selling point, but the trend now is gourmet food and the culture surrounding food. And that's also a very good thing for us."



People come some distance to stock up on the local produce at Benjam's produce market.



Valuable delicacies

As soon as Benjam's produce market opens there is a queue at the cash register, and this is just an ordinary Thursday morning in the sleepy village of Iitti. A couple from the neighbouring municipality has a shopping basket of fresh meat, loaves of bread and Finnish savoury pasties. "Everything here is just so good!"

Next in line is Sirpa Havu, a newcomer to Iitti who works Espoo, in Helsinki metropolitan region during the week, but considers Iitti her home. She, too, has an overloaded shopping basket, including five loaves of rye bread. Why so many?

"I send them as presents to friends all over Finland and give them as prizes in competitions that my employer arranges," Havu reveals. She also takes local specialties to her workmates; one person is particularly fond of a local cheese, while another particularly likes the sausages from the produce market. Havu praises all the market's products to the skies. "The meat is fresh and tasty, the bread is freshly baked locally and just look at those potatoes, they're very good too!"

Havu is undaunted by the fact that these products are more expensive than the equivalent in the average supermarket. "Quality costs money. Anyone can tell these products all taste so much better. And you know where they come from, that's also very important."

