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Creative Food in Zemgale

I have been a frequent visitor to Latvia over a period of 20 years, but until November 2017 I had never had the opportunity to visit Zemgale. Zemgale, a region in central Latvia to the south of Riga boasts one of the most fertile food growing areas in Northern Europe, something that has ensured the prosperity of the region for successive centuries. And it was the growing number of creative small food businesses of the Zemgale region that I had come to see, thanks to the hospitality of Inese Baumanė and her colleagues at Jelgava Local Municipality.

The high soil fertility and relatively unpolluted agricultural and natural areas are significant advantages of Zemgale, and define the potential for agricultural development and specialisation in food production. Add to that Latvia's Agricultural University located in Jelgava, the largest town in the region, and Jelgava's Local Municipality, which is strongly supportive of regional food co-operatives and you have a recipe for growing creative food businesses. This is exactly what I found on my visit.

The largest part of Zemgale is flat with little undulation, which in agricultural terms means a focus on cattle and arable production. But there is an ostrich farm. In addition 25 per cent of the land is forest which is helping Zemgale to become self sufficient in fuel. The forests are also home to wild boar, which produce very tasty meat.

Some of the farms are very large - up to 3000 hectares and similar in size to some of the kolkhozes or "collective farms" in the former Soviet Union of which Latvia was once a part. Indeed one farm I visited had indeed been a kolkhoz and the oldest member of the three-generation family living there today had worked on the kolkhoz, living in one room with her family, with her job of feeding the cattle. This, is in spite of the fact that her family had owned this farm since the late eighteenth century. Happily, the farm is now back in this family's ownership. Following the collapse of communism in Latvia in 1990, this woman's son was able to back the family farmhouse with six hectares of land. Today, he has been so successful that the farm extends to 300 hectares of prime land, which grows mainly wheat and rapeseed for export and also sugar beet.

Interestingly, however, his wife Lolita may have the most profitable piece of land on the farm. Tiny in comparison to the rest - about one acre, and right next to the farm buildings - this land is used by Lolita to grow thirty varieties of mint, from which she produces an astonishing variety of products. Several types of mint tea of course, but also





mint chocolates, from both white and dark chocolate, made in the shape of mint leaves. Then there are meringues, marshmallows, jars of plums in mint-flavoured syrup and mint-flavoured honey. Also cosmetics, including creams and lip balms. I tasted most of Lolita's edible products and very good they were too. A diversified farm business for sure and wondering which was the "diversified" part produced no easy answer as both the arable farm business and "Peppermint House" , as Lolita names her business, are clearly doing well.

For me, one of the lessons from this farm was the importance of having the right experience. Lolita had studied food technology at Jelgava University where she met her husband who was studying for an agricultural degree. Lolita then went on to work for Jelgava City Council where she learned how to craft well focused grant applications. She also worked as a teacher in a local school, and with her experience as a mother of her own young son and daughter, Lolita knows how to both entertain and educate school parties who come to visit. Not surprisingly, the farm has won several awards from the Ministry of Agriculture.

To see a very different type of food business I was taken to a farm named "Blūdži" owned by Ināra Mākalne. Having been a consultant agronomist in the collective farm system, Ināra has long experience of the land and farming. Following the collapse of the Soviet system Ināra bought her own small 12-hectare farm in 1993. Initially she kept 14 dairy cows, several heifers and a herd of calves. During the recession of 2008-2009, however, the farm business began to struggle and Ināra had to sell much of the land and the livestock. The story might have ended there had it not been for her son Jānis who decided he wanted to make cheese. I was told that he took some milk from a nearby dairy cow and brought it back to "Blūdži" - to experiment, as he had never seen cheese made in his life. Thanks to his persistence and initiative, 200 litres of milk are now processed every day producing more than 25 kg of homemade cheese. The first cheese was caraway-seed cheese, but now there are cheeses incorporating sunflower seeds and different spices, the newest of which is a chilli cheese. There are also smoked and marinated cheeses as well as a special rotten cheese. The marinated cheese won the Riga Food Award in 2014. The cheeses are sold in Belgium and the UK as well as Latvia and at a big cheese festival in neighbouring Lithuania.

Pickled vegetables have long been a specialty of Latvia and indeed much of Eastern Europe. As a visitor to this part of Europe in the early 1990s I found pickled vegetables quite acidic and heavy. However, Ināra has perfected her recipes to use just the right amount of vinegar with a little sugar and salt to create bottled vegetables with a lovely fresh taste. Given the seasonality of things like cucumbers, tomatoes and peppers this is a task well worth doing. She also preserves fruit - raspberries in jelly and also blackcurrants





and strawberries, all of which, alongside tomatoes, cucumbers and potatoes, she grows on the farm.

Truly, this is a family business. Having known hard times Ināra is keen to make sure that her children have a stake in the business and have the skills to produce food for sale. Her very youngest son, aged 14 years, makes bread to sell, getting up early in the morning to prove the dough before going to school. The school curriculum in Latvia these days includes teaching on the need to make money to live. No state owned farms to provide jobs! I guess that Ināra's son could teach his fellow pupils a thing or two about being an entrepreneur.

Coming from Britain I was very interested in the question of branding. At "Blūdži" they have created their own brand "Māikalnu - made with love" which appears on and every cheese and vegetable jar.

My third visit was to a bakery on the edge of Jelgava. Latvia is famous for dark rye bread and an expert can tell you which region any dark bread is from. Over the 20 years I have visited Latvia the variety of bread has grown enormously or perhaps I have just become more aware of it. Much as I enjoy the dark bread, I do enjoy the lighter wheat and rye brads that are now more readily available. This was a lovely bakery where it is possible to taste bread before buying and also, by arrangement, to learn to bake your own bread. I was particularly interested in a bread made from whole grains and seeds - wheat, oats, rye, all unprocessed, soaked in water with sunflower and other seeds then shaped into a loaf and baked. I'm planning to have a go at making something like this myself!

Farm shops are not common in Latvia, nor are vegetable box schemes. But there again, Latvian people are emotionally close to nature and the land and used to growing their own vegetables. When the recession hit in 2008/2009, some people who had previously gone to live in Riga for work lost their jobs and, having access to family plots in the rural areas, they were quick to return to growing their own food.

Getting to market is often a problem for small food producers. All three food businesses I visited sell some product from the farm but thanks to the support of Jelgava Local Municipality and European LEADER funding, a shop selling local foods and crafts has been opened in Jelgava, actually right underneath the council offices. Since the shop is run as a producer co-operative it can attract European funding in a way that a single business cannot due to the issue of "state aid". Latvian producers understand this and are clearly happy to form co-operatives. This is definitely something we could learn from in the UK, including my home country of Wales.





For me, no visit to Latvia is complete without a visit to Riga's Central Market. Located in five pavilions constructed in the 1920s by reusing old German Zeppelin hangars, It is Europe's largest market. The fruit and vegetable stalls are a sight to behold not least for the vibrant colours but also for the fact that everything that can be produced in Latvia is produced in Latvia. In these days where local food is highly prized and often highly priced, fruit and vegetables produced in Latvia are just simply what there is. On this grey November morning, I must have counted 22 different types of apples and half a dozen types of tomatoes all grown in Latvia. Potatoes, carrots, swedes and cabbages in abundance, of course, but the real treat was the cranberries. It was cranberry season in Latvia and several stalls were laden, these glorious maroon coloured berries piled high on white trays reminding me of the Latvian national flag.