



Surströmming

"It definitely does not taste like chicken. It doesn't look like, taste like, or smell like anything you've ever tried before, and I probably won't be suggesting a surströmming encore in the future" wrote Lola Akinmade (above) in her Geotraveller's Niche blog (<http://lolaakinmade.com/2008/08/19/the-surstromming-experience>) about her experience.

Here is another take by Susan McCallum (nee Alm) in Powell River BC:

A Canadian's Experience with the Infamous Swedish Delicacy Surströmming

My husband Chuck and I were fortunate to travel to Sweden in 2002. I have many cousins in the country spread out from Lyksele in the north to Stockholm in the South. My paternal grandparents were born in Sweden and moved to Canada in the 1920s. My grandmother was the only one in her family to leave Sweden. My father learned the Swedish language from listening to his parents and he later taught himself to read and write in Swedish. He instilled in me a pride of my Swedish heritage and I was happy to visit this beautiful country once again.

Upon arriving in Stockholm, we stayed with my second cousin Per in his little two

room flat for three days. He showed us the highlights of the city and we also explored on our own. While staying with Per, we dined on reindeer meat which had been brought down the previous week from the North by Per's parents Sven and Ulla.

Per escorted us to the train for our trip North and left us with a dire warning. He said, "Whatever you do, if my mother offers you surströmming, just say no!"

We carried on our way. The long train ride gave me lots of time to reflect on any reference to surströmming by my Dad. I think he may have mentioned it, but it was so long ago. Unfortunately he had passed away, so I wouldn't be able to ask him when we returned home.

We were met in Umeå by Katarina, another second cousin and her husband Jonte. We were kept so busy by them, touring the area and visiting other family members, that surströmming had been forgotten.

Sven, Per's father, came to pick us up at Peter and Ingela's. Peter is Katarina's brother and they had been sharing their home in Granö with us for a few day.

Sven chatted and made us feel very welcome on the drive from Granö to Lyksele. Sven and Ulla live in a lovely old farm house. It has been in Sven's family for many generations. We were intrigued how the exterior of the house was unchanged, but the interior was updated with all the modern conveniences.

There was more family to meet in Lyksele and Ruskträsk of all ages. Not only two more of Sven and Ulla's children and their children, but also other mutual cousins of mine and Ulla's. After several days, the last thing I was expecting was for Ulla to say that we were having a dinner with Christina who lived just over from Sven and Ulla and we would be able to sample some surströmming.

Surströmming is fermented Baltic herring. The fish is caught in May and June. It is immersed in brine for a day, cleaned and then left out in barrels in the sun to start the fermentation process. I told Ulla that I couldn't go home without trying the "rotten fish".

In the late afternoon, Ulla brought out a tin of something that was bulging on both top and bottom. Chuck and I looked at it

and our instincts told us that something was going on in that tin. Another warning was that she took it out on the patio to open.

While the can was resting out on a patio table, Ulla busily steamed some potatoes and set the table for dinner.

She also explained that she loves surströmming and she takes every opportunity to eat it. Sven does not like it, so whenever they have company who would eat it, she opens a can. She also told me that when she was pregnant with Michael, her first-born, she craved it. She and a couple of other friends who were also pregnant would get together and feast on the putrid fish.

At the dinner table, Chuck and I followed Ulla's lead and spread potatoes on some thin, hard bread and helped ourselves to a couple of chunks of the surströmming.

Chuck started to eat it; meanwhile, I was still busy trying to pick out what looked like the fish's innards and bones.

Ulla said to Chuck, "How do you like it?"

He replied, "It's an acquired taste,"

Ulla said, "You don't like it!!"

Chuck said, "No, I didn't say that." This common Canadian expression was difficult for Chuck to explain.

Meanwhile, Ulla had already jumped up and rushed to the basement where her freezer was. She came back minutes later carrying a small package of frozen fish. It looked like trout but had a very red flesh and she handed it to Chuck. We found out it was Redding and with some microwaving, it became edible. Chuck enjoyed this fish very much and left the surströmming to Ulla, Christina and me. I am not sure what Sven ate that night for dinner, but copious amounts of vodka with beer chasers and singing "schnapps" songs mellowed the whole environment.

Later that evening, when we got to our room, I pushed open the window and hung our clothes out to air. The pungent odour had floated upstairs to the room we were in, directly above the kitchen.

We had many new experiences on that trip to Sweden. We met some relatives I had not met before and we were treated like royalty by everyone. But one of the most memorable experiences of the trip was our introduction to the odious delights of surströmming.

Would I eat it again? Probably, but only in Sweden and with my Swedish family around.

Susan McCallum