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Adrià is a fascinating happening in the culinary world, but Myhrvold's perspective lacks depth. Among other cogitations, Alberto Capatti's *Le goût du nouveau: Origines de la modernité alimentaire* (1989) convinces one that any true chef, past, present, or future, is both intellectually and emotionally tied to her/his work and of necessity dialogues with his diner.

—Beatrice Fink, Professor Emerita of French, University of Maryland

Ferment in the Baltic

PHILIP ALAN SANDBERG

Surströmming (literally, “sour herring”) is a fermented, malodorous form of Baltic herring produced along the northeastern coast of Sweden. In contrast to typical fish preservation that relies on salt or vinegar, the low-salt fermentation of *surströmming* does not shut down bacterial activity. Thus, the cans often bulge from the internal gas pressure (and are banned on airlines). Among the world's distasteful foods, *surströmming* surely ranks among the rankest.

Surströmming is eaten by only a small percentage of Swedes, mainly in the northern part of the country. Its limited appeal is doubtless due to its smell, which is difficult to distinguish from the stink of rotten herring (look for YouTube videos on “*surströmming*” to see people reacting to the reek). Still, it is, for some Swedes, a valued part of their national food culture. Though few, those devotees can be fiercely loyal; *surströmming* even has its own museum.

But now, this fish most foul, which some Swedish journalists have called an “important culinary tradition,” is—according to headline hyperbole—being persecuted like a piscine Rodney Dangerfield. The

threat to this gastronomic underdog? A “foreign intervention”—a ban by the European Union on consumption of Baltic fish, including herring and smaller populations of cod and salmon, which all contain dioxin. Finland and Sweden, which have strong economic and cultural interests in Baltic fisheries, have several times since 2002 been given exemptions from the ban, allowing the catch and domestic sale of Baltic fish (some of which end their existence as *surströmming*). However, that dispensation may expire at the end of 2011.

Though many might say “good riddance” to stinky *surströmming*, the threat to it is really a proxy for weightier issues. Journalistic rhetoric aside, the EU ban is not an international vendetta against *surströmming*. Rather, it is based on an EU public health ruling on *all* Baltic fish, based on their high content of dioxin and other toxins.

The ban is certainly an economic threat to Swedish Baltic fishing. The primary catch, Baltic herring (called

strömming), is a significant, relished part of Swedish culinary tradition. Prepared fried, grilled, roasted, or smoked, it is widely consumed in the summertime; only a small amount of it is fermented into *surströmming*. Most herring eaten throughout Sweden—and the rest of Scandinavia and northern Europe—is not Baltic at all, but from a larger North Sea subspecies not affected by the EU ban. That Atlantic herring (called *sill* in Sweden) is also an integral part of Swedish dining. It is often served pickled or in tomato, mustard, onion, sour cream, or wine sauce, along with crisp bread (*knäckebröd*) and small glasses of aquavit. According to tradition, each drink requires a song, and Swedes are prepared with many songs (variously stirring, humorous, lyrical, risqué, or Nordic noir), so a lot of herring is eaten.

The Baltic dioxin contamination is a real threat to public health. It developed over many decades via atmospheric release from paper mills,



Above: *Surströmming's* pungent odor and the propensity of the bulging can to burst mean that it is best opened outdoors.

PHOTOGRAPH BY LOLA AKINMADE ÅKERSTRÖM © 2011

waste incineration, metal smelting, chemical-pesticide manufacture, and other industries. Dioxin levels in the Baltic have fallen in recent years, in part because more circum-Baltic countries are subject to EU controls and limits, which will ease the problem of contaminated fish, though not right away.

Once in the water, dioxin enters the food chain, accumulating in fatty tissues over the lifetime of a fish. The mean dioxin level in Baltic herring will fall as the environment improves and as younger fish begin to dominate the population. However, the process may take a long time: Baltic herring live for twelve to sixteen years, and the natural breakdown of dioxin takes scores to hundreds of years.

Among Swedish government agencies and environmental and health advocacy groups, and in the public arena, discussions of Baltic catch and consumption are contentious. As often seems to be the case, the conflict is between economic interests and tradition on one side and public health on the other. The Swedish National Food Administration (Livsmedelsverket), the Environmental Party (Miljöpartiet), and consumer advocates strongly oppose a continued EU exemption on dioxin-bearing Baltic fish, the consumption of which is most dangerous to children and pregnant women. Despite the wide opposition, the Swedish government has proposed to the EU that the exemption be continued, perhaps permanently. The matter is now under consideration by the EU.

If the exemption is continued, Sweden can expect the EU to require public awareness programs on the threat of dioxin. Swedes I spoke with in Stockholm in the summer of 2011 were aware of the dioxin health risk. They characterized their consumption

of Baltic fish as moderate and did not seem greatly concerned about the dioxin. Whether an EU-mandated informational approach and self-policing will provide sufficient protection remains to be seen.

If the EU exemption ends, *surströmming* and the more widely prized unfermented Baltic herring would disappear from Swedish tables, at least until the Baltic is cleansed. Most Swedes would not miss *surströmming*. Although it has achieved international notoriety, *surströmming* was born out of necessity at a time of low salt availability. Now, with easy access to both salt and other fish from more distant waters, why continue to eat this fermented fish, whose odor is so unappealing? Yet for some, it is a matter of taste—or is it tradition?

Sweet Smells of Success

REAGAN HALE WEAVER

Add the word *olfactory* to legalese. While the word *conflict* hardly evokes feelings of comfort, comforting food smells do help resolve disputes. Many lawyers who practice conflict resolution recognize how food can set a conciliatory mood. As an employment lawyer who also practices as a certified mediator, I strive to facilitate dispute resolution. To encourage successful settlements, I employ a variety of techniques from summary jury trials to mediated settlement conferences to harnessing our senses of smell and taste.

Neurologists have long known that associations with positive emotions can be triggered by scent. The part of the brain that controls emotions is affected by the sense of smell. Feelings of pleasure occur when the brain releases endorphins. Studies have shown that positive associations transfer to people's perceptions of others as well. Aromatherapy uses

scents to reduce stress and anxiety and induce feelings of confidence and calm. The efficacy of particular odors on mood enhancement is largely anecdotal—real estate brokers, for example, encourage sellers to bake, not burn, chocolate chip cookies before an open house.

One of the most enduring morsels served by the Florida-based Dispute Management, Inc. (DMI), which I continue to enjoy from my mediation training, is the suggestion of freshly baked chocolate-chip cookies. Mediator training was a relatively new field in the 1990s when former judge David Strawn began offering courses to help lawyers develop their skills as mediators. His book *Dispute Management: How to End the Litigation Problem* is a classic reference for alternative dispute resolution techniques.

One significant technique he advocated for building harmony is to bring sparring parties together around a table where refreshments are provided. As an eager DMI trainee, I envisioned for my own practice a mediation facility with a kitchen where batches of baking cookies greeted the fledgling mediators, litigants, and their counsel, calming any trepidation about forging paths away from traditional adversarial lawyering. Comforting aromas of chocolate and vanilla would waft through conference rooms, relaxing participants and encouraging their sharing and problem solving.

Today, in my mediation practice, I add grapes to the platter of cookies. While also a nod to more health-conscious clients, grapes are a good meeting food because they can't easily be munched without noticing. While cookies disappear within minutes, grapes are usually plucked deliberately from each stem. The act of selecting and savoring a grape