



Illustration 4. Students of gardening and housekeeping courses at Liplapi Farm in the 1920s. Source: EPM FP 330:30.

# VEGETARIAN FOOD AS MODERN FOOD

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**ATTEMPTS TO EDUCATE  
THE NATION OF ESTONIA  
FROM THE 1900s TO THE 1930s**

## **abstract**

This article considers the spread of ideas on vegetarianism in Estonia from the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century until 1940. The study builds on analyzing archival sources, media texts and educational work conducted by nutrition experts, schools and organizations. Propaganda about the consumption of vegetarian food was associated with the general moderniza-

tion of domestic culture and the discourse on healthy food as the basis for the nation's vitality. The article highlights the leading role of women's movement in home economics, including attempts to implement food culture informed by nutritional science, especially teaching the people to eat more fruits and vegetables. The spread of vegetarian ideas

in Estonia also illustrates how the previously dominating German cultural influences were gradually replaced by an orientation towards the Nordic countries, and demonstrates how these ideas were adapted to an Estonian context.

**KEY WORDS:** Vegetarianism, modernization, home economics, nutritional science.

In this article we analyze the arrival and spread of ideas and practices of vegetarianism and the attempts to modernize the diet of Estonians from the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century up to 1940. The period of Estonia's transition from a province of the Russian empire (1710–1918) to independent statehood (1918–1940) was especially significant when considering the changes in food culture that took place in the context of rapid modernization and the emergence of a modern nation state.<sup>1</sup> Estonia represents an interesting case for examining the intertwining of different ideologies and cultural influences because of the country's geographical location at the crossroads between Germany, Russia and the Nordic countries.

Starting from the 1870s, Estonian intellectuals who led the national movement increasingly began to look towards the rest of Europe, especially the Nordic countries, for examples of progressive culture and civilizing everyday life – the ideals that vegetarian visionaries also expressed in their writings and public speeches.<sup>2</sup> Novel nutritional ideas were adapted to the local climate, economy and food habits. Since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the importance of vegetarian food – not just vegetarianism – was emphasized in the public discourse on food and the nation's diet, based on nutritional science and scientific household management. The consumption of vegetarian food was associated with the general modernization of domestic culture and a healthy diet as the basis for the nation's vitality. The focus on health, physical fitness, natural lifestyle, scientific rationalism, but also ethical consumer awareness, reflected the values of modernity.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, vegetables were envisioned as the food of the future for both health and economic reasons. Plant-based nutrients were less expensive and more accessible to all strata of society. Thus, the ultimate goal of advocates of a plant-based diet was not to convert people to vegetarianism but rather to convince them to change their everyday eating habits by consuming more vegetables and fruits.

**WE EXPLORE** the development of ideologies and initiatives related to educating the nation about healthy eating, the benefits of vegetarian food and how advocating for vegetarian food became a project about modernizing the nation of Estonia. Our main sources are articles published in newspapers and magazines, advice literature and cookbooks, but we have also relied on archival documents (files of home economics schools, the Chamber of Home Economics and the Tartu Association for Vegetarians), as well as published surveys about health conditions. In order to understand the context of our study, it

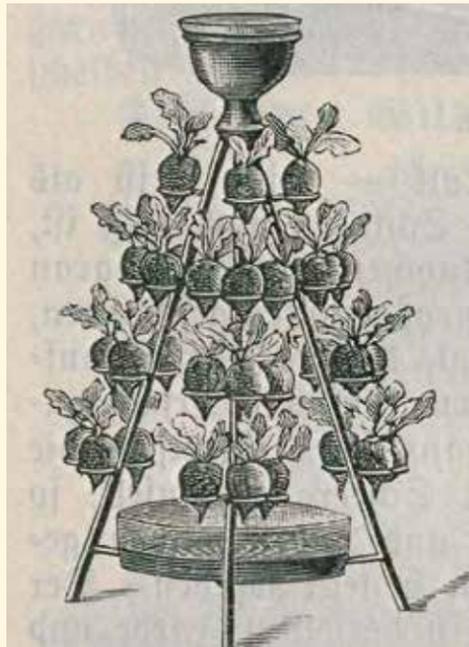


Illustration 1. A frame for serving radishes. Source: Marra Korh *Praktisches Kochbuch* (Riga, 1911).

must be stressed that the promotion of plant-based food until the late 1930s was aimed at a mainly agrarian society in which the emerging rural or urban middle class still retained peasant foodways.<sup>4</sup> How did the educated elite perceive the food habits of the masses and what were the arguments used to convince people to eat more vegetarian food? Unlike the Russian empire until 1917 – and in Western Europe – in which male nutritional scientists and physicists played a prominent role in leading the people towards a modern diet, after World War I in Estonia, female home economics teachers took the leading role in both the nutritional and the culinary education of the nation.<sup>5</sup> Women home economics teachers who instructed other Estonian women to become reformers of the nation's diet by changing their own eating habits are the main focus of this study. Who were these women?

Where did they receive their education and how did it shape their values and understanding of vegetarian food? Estonian women who established home economics education and led the diet reform can be regarded as “culture builders”<sup>6</sup> who were not only addressing workers and peasants, but also the middle class who, like themselves aimed to change their everyday food habits and values. Their goal was similar to what was envisioned in other European countries in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries – housewives were regarded as being responsible for the physiological and economic prosperity of the nation and a vegetarian diet was seen as a tool for achieving this goal.<sup>7</sup>

### Early introduction of vegetarianism: male experts as educators

Since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Estonian (food) culture had developed under the influence of two major cultural spheres. Although Estonia was part of the Russian empire, the cultural influence of the Baltic German elite prevailed until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, due to socio-historical circumstances, like much of the working classes<sup>8</sup> in Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Estonians were “vegetarians by necessity, not by choice” – they appreciated meat but could eat it only on festive occasions.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, famines (the most recent from 1867 to 1869) were still relatively fresh in people's minds at the end of the century.<sup>10</sup> However, Estonian simple folk traditionally regarded meat, particularly fat, as a desirable and nutritious food. During holidays, at weddings, and particularly at Christmas, there had to be plenty of meat, and they wanted to eat as much meat as possible.<sup>11</sup> At the everyday table, grain-based dishes dominated, and fruits and vegetables had a poor reputation (with the exception of



Illustration 2. Edible wild stinging nettle (*Urtica L.*). Source: Wikipedia.

**“STINGING NETTLES (*URTICA DIOICA L.*) AND GROUND ELDER (*AEGOPODIUM PODAGRARIA L.*) COULD BE CHOPPED AND BRAISED WITH SOME MILK OR DRIED ICELANDIC MOSS (*AEGOPODIUM PODAGRARIA L.*) POWDER COULD BE ADDED TO BREAD DOUGH.”**

potatoes since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century which, in turn, reduced the consumption of other vegetables). Similar to neighboring countries, vegetables were often perceived as animal fodder or a fad of gentlefolk.<sup>12</sup> The attitude of Estonians towards vegetables also reflected the distinction between the social classes. In contrast to modest allotments at farmsteads, horticulture was well developed in upper-class households by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In manor houses in particular, a great variety of vegetables were cultivated, using heated beds and greenhouses for more cold-sensitive plants (e.g., asparagus and artichokes).<sup>13</sup> Like the gentry elsewhere in Europe, the Baltic Germans used to serve vegetables in elaborate ways (see Illustration 1) although vegetarian dishes did not feature much in the cookbooks aimed at Baltic German households before the 1910s as the authors of cookbooks tended to praise the abundance of meat dishes on bourgeois and upper-class tables.<sup>14</sup>

SEVERAL BALTIC GERMAN intellectuals, pastors and doctors wrote advice literature in Estonian aimed at country folk. These authors criticized the peasants' poor eating habits and suggested the inclusion of more wild plants in their diet, especially during food shortages and times of famine. For instance, in 1818, pastor and writer Johann Wilhelm Ludwig von Luce (1756–1842) published a booklet *Suggestions and Advice When You are Struggling with Poverty and Famine* (Est. *Nou ja abbi, kui waesus ja nälg käe on*), which was aimed at enriching Estonians' eating habits. He described the culinary use of several common plants in Estonia. For instance, stinging nettles (*Urtica dioica* L.) (Illustration 2) and ground elder (*Aegopodium podagraria* L.) could be chopped and braised with some milk or dried Icelandic moss (*Aegopodium podagraria* L.) powder could be added to bread dough. Luce also preached at local peasants for not consuming enough legumes or vegetables (cabbage, turnip) like Germans, Russians and Latvians did and relying too much on grain-based foods, the quantity of which was often insufficient.<sup>15</sup> Similar concerns about Estonians' limited eating habits were also expressed by some of the leading figures of the Estonian national movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (e.g., doctor and literate Friedrich Reinhold Kreutz-



Illustration 3. Peasants at Saaremaa island at the breakfast table (1913). Photo: Johannes Pääsuke. Source: ERM Fk 1:2/78

**“HELLAT WAS VERY CRITICAL OF ESTONIANS’ NUTRITIONAL HABITS AND BELIEFS. HE CLAIMED THAT THE DIET OF THE PEOPLE WAS UNVARIED, THE CHOICE OF FOOD POOR AND COOKING SKILLS LACKING.”**

reached the countryside. The first Estonian intellectuals felt that their mission was to be educators of the common people, and questions about vitality, morality and the need for personal development became prominent. The advice was often moralizing in nature, underscoring the shortcomings of their lifestyle, hygiene and nutrition caused by their lack of knowledge. Among the health advancement ideas that were based on the natural sciences, the temperance movement had the broadest support. Similar arguments were also used by new teachings about diet – vegetarianism.

Jaan Spuhl-Rotalia (1859–1916), a self-educated schoolteacher, journalist, horticulturalist and the author of several handbooks was probably the first Estonian to discuss the principles of vegetarianism in greater depth. (There had been some introductory articles in Estonian dailies in the 1890s.) His arguments primarily reflected the ideas of *Lebensreform*, a reform movement in German-speaking Europe that praised the natural lifestyle, of which nutrition (especially vegetarian food) formed a significant part.<sup>17</sup> Spuhl-Rotalia was particularly inspired by German natural lifestyle pioneer Eduard Baltzer (1814–1887), whose vegetarian recipes he published in a number of issues of the magazine *The Housekeeper* (Est. *Majapidaja*) in 1905. Among the recipes, root vegetable and grain soups were predominant, and cooking various “grass soups” from naturally growing edible plants was also

wald; folklorist Mattias Johann Eisen). They offered general advice on nutrition to Estonian country folk and criticized their eating habits, which were primarily based on bread and cereals. Since the 1860s, the advice of intellectuals reached more Estonians due to the spread of newspapers and educational literature. Unlike other provinces of the Russian empire, the peasantry in Estonia (and other Baltic provinces) was very literate (by the 1890s, around 96% of them could read and write).<sup>16</sup>

BY THE BEGINNING of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, all main ideas of Western social thought had reached Estonians, and by the 1910s, scholarly literature was already being published in Estonian, although most of the publications were popular general knowledge books. Via magazines and popular education, more urban attitudes and a greater awareness of the body, health and food

recommended. Although the magazine's main emphasis was on farming and gardening issues, it also included advice on food. The tone of the advice was moralizing – eating had to be governed by strict rules: you could only drink half an hour after a meal; there should be three hours between supper and bedtime. Vegetables, fruits and dairy products were preferable, while meat was to be consumed in moderate amounts. He repeatedly explained the harmfulness of coffee, even calling it a poison that caused nervousness and thin blood and recommended “coffee drinks” made from malt or peas instead.<sup>18</sup> In 1905 British vegetarian and women's rights campaigner Anna Kingsford's (1846–1888) *The Perfect Way in Diet* (originally published in 1881) was published in a translation by Jaan Spuhl-Rotalia. The book actively promoted vegetarianism, stressing both health and economic arguments. However, in his postscript, Spuhl-Rotalia himself expressed only moderate support of vegetarianism: “As vehement enthusiasts and excessive practitioners can be found in any society, they are not lacking among vegetarians, but a golden mean and sensible moderation are best even in this.”<sup>19</sup> He concedes that eating only raw vegetables is not conceivable in the Nordic countries. He mentioned bread and fruit as the most valuable foods, emphasized a balanced diet and the correct combination of vegetarian and dairy foods. Spuhl-Rotalia concluded that cooking vegetarian dishes was simpler and less costly; in addition, vegetarian eating was clean and humane.

SEVERAL ADVOCATES of vegetarianism in Western Europe and America in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were male doctors, who combined health and ethical arguments and focused on “the purifying effect, both spiritual and physical, of a vegetarian diet.”<sup>20</sup> During the Interbellum era, Danish physician Mikkel Hindhede (1862–1945), one of the best-known advocates of vegetarianism in Europe at the time, was also the greatest authority for Estonian vegetarians, and his ideas were often reflected in newspapers. In 1911 his *The Exemplary Cookery Book* (Est. *Eeskujuline kokaraamat*)<sup>21</sup> was published in Estonian. In Hindhede's opinion, the global population would be threatened by hunger due to a looming food crisis, which is why he recommended voluntarily choosing the vegetarian path. His program of a meatless diet was based on both physiological and economical arguments that questioned the earlier nutritionists' dogma of meat being the ultimate source of protein.<sup>22</sup> He promoted simple and moderate nutrition and stressed that in making food choices, the most important factor was its wholesomeness, its inexpensiveness and its taste. Hindhede's approach with its scientific systematicity was novel in Estonia: he proposed complete menus for different meals in each season, as well as tables on the protein, fat and mineral content of foodstuffs. He formulated instructions that he suggested each housewife copy in capital letters and hang on the wall above the dining table. The diversity of food served in the boarding houses he had founded was highlighted and the dishes' “nutritious value” was said to “compete with refined tastes”.<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, in Estonia, the doctor and prominent public figure Peeter Hellat (1857–1912) raised the topic of healthy eating for a broad audience in a professional manner. He was a supporter

of temperance and vegetarianism who studied and worked at St. Petersburg before World War I. In the guidebook *A Study of Health* (Est. *Tervise õpetus*) (1913), Hellat was very critical of Estonians' nutritional habits and beliefs. He claimed that the diet of the people was unvaried, the choice of food poor and cooking skills lacking (see Illustration 3). Hellat suggested that different kinds of dishes should be eaten throughout the year, particularly emphasizing the rich nutrient content of vegetables. He believed that people should be educated that both meat dishes and vegetables – which improve the taste of a meal and its digestibility – were nutritious. Although he was a vegetarian himself, he did not emphasize it, like other European doctors who were practicing vegetarians – medical experts of the age often criticized vegetarians for being unscientific and sectarian.<sup>24</sup> His book took a moderate stance: “What can be called *approximately reasonable* is a position that ascribes equal status to both vegetarian and meat dishes. Among our people it is still impossible to talk about the excessive consumption of meat.”<sup>25</sup> Hellat's views also reflected a broader understanding of vegetarianism elsewhere – being vegetarian did not always mean total abstinence from meat or animal products, and dairy products in particular were considered part of a healthy vegetarian diet.<sup>26</sup>

IN THE LATE 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Russian empire, a variety of vegetarian movements emerged based on diverse ideologies, some of which were inspired by vegetarian ideas in European countries, some evolving a uniquely Russian character. Although vegetarianism developed later in Imperial Russia compared to Western Europe, a considerable number of vegetarian societies, canteens, cafes and journals existed before the 1917 revolution.<sup>27</sup> St. Petersburg as an intellectual center of the Empire was also a probable source of influence from where ideas of Russian and Western European vegetarianism might have spread to Estonia.<sup>28</sup> In Russia, the spread of vegetarianism based on spiritual ideas was also facilitated by religion – the Orthodox church had long fasting periods. However, the vast majority of Estonians were protestants and did not fast; only a few vegetarians in Estonia were inspired by sectarian religious ideas that were rather similar to the German natural living movement.<sup>29</sup> The ideas of the influential figure in the Russian spiritual vegetarian movement, Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910), were known to Estonian intellectuals (1908 Tolstoy's *The First Step: On Vegetarianism* (the Russian original from 1892) was translated into Estonian) but did not give rise to a similar movement. Although vegetarianism based on medical science arguments was another prominent movement in the major cities of the Russian empire, it had no impact in Estonia. Unlike in the major cities of the Russian empire in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century vegetarian societies, periodicals or canteens were not established in Estonia.<sup>30</sup> Organized vegetarianism did not develop in Estonia despite a strong temperance movement and an awareness of modern medical science and nutrition. The development of vegetarian ideas in Estonia rather reflects the nationalization of modernism very similar to that in Scandinavia.<sup>31</sup>

Thus, by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was mainly men – Baltic German or Estonian intellectuals and foreign or local medical ex-

perts – who were leading the way towards a healthier and more diverse diet for Estonian country folk. Estonian authors translated articles and books by foreign vegetarians and physicians but in their own writing they advocated for a more balanced diet, emphasizing the nutritional value of vegetables but not excluding animal products.

### The rise of local female experts in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Estonia

In Western modernizing societies since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, attitudes towards home economics changed, and it was no longer regarded as an art of service but as a science that required professional training.<sup>32</sup> This new field was based on the latest scientific and technological achievements. The idea of housekeeping as a full-time profession was promoted by a new set of experts who, unlike the doctors and gardeners of the previous generation, were predominantly women. The new home economics culture was introduced by middle-class women and became a means of spreading the values of this social group into the lower strata. The modern educated, rational and efficient housewife who contributed to the nation's welfare became an ideal at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>33</sup> The aim of home economics was not just a private concern of the family because women were supposed to change the way of life and the mindset of the entire nation.<sup>34</sup> Reforming the people's traditional attitudes towards food and their nutritional habits was a critical aspect of the modern housewife's battle. Laura Shapiro described the belief in the transformative power of science in cooking as “culinary idealism.” Domestic scientists were inspired by the nutritional properties of food, by its ability to promote physical, social and moral growth.<sup>35</sup> The promotion of vegetarian food became part of a modern home economics education and also part of the modern nutritional and culinary discourse.

**IN THE YEARS** preceding World War I, vegetarianism had already become significantly more visible in Estonia. Similar to the Nordic countries, women played a leading role in promoting vegetarian ideas.<sup>36</sup> In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Finland (at that time the Grand Duchy of Finland as an autonomous part of the Russian empire) became the closest sphere of influence for Estonian women. The role of women in society at the time was more progressive in Finland<sup>37</sup> and in the other Nordic countries compared to Western Europe. Women's education in home economics and horticulture was seen as an opportunity to modernize home culture and food culture and thereby society at large, but also a chance for female emancipation. Progressive Estonian women regarded Finland as a good place to acquire a professional home economics education and, after returning home, they became pioneering instructors for their fellow countrywomen.

Like the Nordic countries, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Estonia was mainly an agrarian society, unlike the leading industrialized

countries (Germany, Great Britain, USA) in which mass-produced food started creating health issues in the population and vegetarianism was used to combat these issues.<sup>38</sup> In the 1910s the first vegetarian handbooks and cookbooks were published in Estonian, aimed at a wider audience, not just the elite. Favorable grounds for adopting the new knowledge on healthy eating was undoubtedly laid by the active participation of Estonian women in temperance societies in which they represented one third of the total membership at the turn of the century.<sup>39</sup> Also, the peculiarity of the modernization of Estonian home culture should be understood in light of the fact that women's reading skills and practice were more advanced than those of men at the time.<sup>40</sup>

The rapid pace of the modernization of everyday life at the turn of the century is vividly illustrated by the change of opinions about the importance of education on food and home economics in just a couple of decades. At first, it was advocated by a few intellectuals. In Natalie Johanson-Pärna's girls' handicraft

school (1880–1885) whose curriculum was based on her studies in Denmark in 1878 and Finland in 1879, cooking was included alongside other manual activities.<sup>41</sup> Some newspaper articles of the decade described Finnish housekeeping schools as good examples.<sup>42</sup>

Gardening, nutrition and food education went hand in hand as the people had to be taught to grow fruit and vegetables as well as be introduced to new recipes to make their diet more varied. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the wisdom of the era of national awaken-

ing had developed into a widespread demand for gardening and cooking courses in both rural and urban areas. In Tallinn, the first cooking courses to last three months were organized in 1906.<sup>43</sup> The advertisement for the course emphasized that the ways of cooking taught by manor cooks were insufficient for real life and the Finnish art of creating better and less expensive dishes should be considered as an example. The course manager was invited over from Finland. In the 1910s, educated Estonians started expressing their opinions in local newspapers about the urgent need to teach the population about nutrition. They argued that the food consumption of ordinary people was incredibly poor. “There is no emphasis on vegetarian dishes; they cannot even cook such dishes.”<sup>44</sup> The media was also critical of the food offered at eateries in cities and compared them with Helsinki, where the menu in eateries was much more diverse, and vegetarian dishes were always available, including dishes containing various kinds of fruits and berries. The Scandinavian countries were used as an example as these countries consumed plenty of food based on oats, while in Estonia “the prevailing idea was that oats were only suitable for horses.”<sup>45</sup>

**AT THE BEGINNING** of the 20<sup>th</sup> century quite a few young women studied at Finnish schools of home economics. Upon completing their education, some of them found employment as hired housekeeping instructors and started organizing cooking courses for country folk. Marie Sapas (1875–1950), who had been

#### FAKE MEAT

##### Ingredients:\*

approx. 0.7 l water  
approx. 230 g buckwheat groats  
3 beets  
2 onions  
2 tablespoons of butter or fat  
2 eggs  
1 tablespoon of sour cream  
salt, pepper

Cook the beets until they are soft. Cook the buckwheat porridge. Allow the beets and porridge to cool and then pass them through the mincer. Sauté the onions in butter or fat and add to the buckwheat and beet mix. Add lightly whipped eggs and salt and pepper to taste. Pour the mix into a buttered oblong oven dish and bake in the oven. Serve with boiled potatoes, brown sauce and cucumber salad.

\**Contemporary measurements have been used.*

Illustration 5. A recipe of “Fake meat” from Marta Põld's *A Course on Vegetarian Food* (1916).

studying at the Järvenlinna gardening and home economics school in Antrea, Finland<sup>46</sup> from 1908–1910, launched six-month gardening and housekeeping courses at Liplapi Farm right after she had finished her training, developing these courses into the first gardening and housekeeping school in Estonia (1920–1927). A total of around 210 women graduated from the school.<sup>47</sup> Several teachers at the school also came from or were trained in Finland. In spring and summer, the students engaged in gardening and in autumn they prepared preserves (Illustration 4). Special emphasis was placed on using local produce “to eliminate expensive and unhealthy foreign products”. Also, when feeding the students, vegetarian food played a primary role – meat was only used as an addition, and journalists wrote that the students no longer missed meat dishes.<sup>48</sup> In her report to the Ministry of Agriculture, Sapas wrote that the school mainly taught students how to prepare vegetarian dishes while also emphasizing the contents of foodstuffs and their nutritional value.<sup>49</sup> The training had an element of solid practical leaning but was also based on contemporary science. The school had a sample garden, chemical experiments were conducted, foodstuffs studied under the microscope in housekeeping classes, and tables on the contents and price of food were used. Typical of the period, the students' weight and strength were measured to demonstrate the beneficial effects of gardening activities and vegetarian food.

**BASED ON THE** knowledge acquired in Finland, Sapas published the first original Estonian language book on vegetarian food *Vegetarian Dishes and How to Prepare Them* (Est. Taimetoidud ja nende valmistamine) (1911). The book was dedicated to Jenny Elfving (1871–1950), director of the Järvenlinna school, under whose influence the author had become familiar with vegetarianism and learned about its economic and health-related effects.<sup>50</sup> In her book, Sapas presents vegetarianism as a food choice that is naturally suited to humans and will give more strength and stamina compared to meat. Also, fruit should not only be used as a dessert but should make up a part of the daily fare. She describes how vegetarian food represents better value for money as vegetable protein is less expensive than meat

protein. However, Sapas does not consider it either necessary or feasible to give up meat entirely: “Strict vegetarians who abstain from any form of meat are likely to remain isolated instances in our conditions.”<sup>51</sup>

As food was scarce during World War I, the need for and interest in vegetarian dishes grew. They were introduced at exhibitions and offered at canteens and restaurants. In June 1916, a law was introduced that prohibited the sale of meat products and the serving of meat dishes from Tuesdays to Fridays.<sup>52</sup> In September, the Estonian Exhibition in Tartu had a separate buffet offering vegetarian dishes. The daily *Postimees* wrote that it would give tips “to the numerous vegetarians who had previously followed its principles and were adapting to the circumstances. In this current period of vegetarian food, these are especially useful.”<sup>53</sup> Housekeeping instructor Marta Põld (1882–1963), who also graduated from the Järvenlinna school in 1912, conducted courses in vegetarian food at the Central Society for Farm Work for domestic employees, as well as the wives of military personnel (without charging a fee). At the course she demonstrated how to cook dishes made from legumes and grain, as well as various soups. The course participants agreed that by using the Finnish examples, Marta Põld could “even make nettle infusion taste delicious, not to mention more delicate garden plants.”<sup>54</sup> However, some journalists also published ironic comments about an exclusively vegetarian menu, describing it as an oddity, even during wartime. Her cookbook *A Course on Vegetarian Food* (Est. Taimetoidu kursus) (1916)<sup>55</sup> mainly contains recipes using cabbages, potatoes, carrots, spinach, pea, and beans in combination with rice, macaroni and mushrooms. She suggested meat substitutes such as “fake meat” made from buckwheat porridge and beetroot (Illustration 5) or “fake liver casserole” made from pearl barley, rice and raisins, etc. Such imitation meat dishes were supposed to make vegetable dishes more attractive and acceptable for consumers. Also, mock meat products (e.g. such as Protose) that were available in the USA or Britain and that tasted, felt and smelled like meat were not available for Estonian consumers at the time.<sup>56</sup> Remarkably, the recipes in Marta Põld's handbook

**EVERYDAY  
VEGETARIAN MENU***(summer and autumn season)*

**BREAKFAST:** white radish snack,  
cheese sandwich, grain coffee or milk

**DINNER:** tomato soup, boiled as-  
paragus or common beans with melted  
butter and fresh salad

**SUPPER:** fresh cucumbers with cream,  
sandwich, berries with milk

**FESTIVE VEGETARIAN  
DINNER MENU FOR GUESTS***(winter and spring season)*

Apple juice with honey

Beetroot dish

Carrot bouillon with onion pie

Rolled pate made of peas with white  
radish salad

Berry cream

Illustration 6. Sample veg-  
etarian menus suggested  
by Elisabet Sild in *A Book  
on Vegetarian Dishes and  
Housekeeping (Taimtoidu-  
ja majapidamisraamat)*,  
1938, 253–254.

were almost identical to those published in Finnish cookery books compiled by the teachers at the Helsinki home economics school, which had been published some years previously.<sup>57</sup> Finally, it should be mentioned that neither Marta Põld's nor Marie Sapas' vegetarian cookbooks were strictly vegetarian but rather lacto-ovo vegetarian in the contemporary sense.

Thus, in the years preceding and during World War I, a significant change took place in the educational activities related to Estonian food culture: a leading role was adopted by women and women's organizations, and the teaching of gardening and nutrition was also directed at homemakers. Consequently, we can see a powerful Finnish influence on the modernization of food culture and gardening in Estonia. The Estonian alumni of Finnish housekeeping schools proved to be capable initiators and leaders of the diet reform. Close contact between Finnish teachers and teacher educators of home economics, as well as several Estonian home economics experts and schools, continued until 1940.

**The modernization of food culture  
from the 1920s to the 1930s**

In the 1920s, a network of home economics schools developed in Estonia that started to prepare both educated housewives and professional teachers, cooks, nurses, etc. By the late 1930s, 44 educational institutions specialized in home economics and approximately 6,000 women had been trained in home economics.<sup>58</sup> During the second half of the decade, specialist advice on food topics started to appear in the media, which specifically emphasized the wholesomeness of vegetarian dishes and suggested particular guidelines and recipes. The most influential journals were *Estonian Woman* (Est. Eesti Naine), which appeared in 1924, published by the Estonian Women's Temperance Union, and *Farm Mistress* (Est. Taluperenaine) launched in 1927 by the Academic Farmers' Society. Starting from 1927, rural women began to join societies of farm mistresses and participate in numerous home economics courses.

Despite the extensive explanatory work, it took some time for modern food habits to spread. The predominantly conservative attitude of Estonians was reflected in the criticism launched by educated specialists. For instance, in 1929, a teacher at the Saku Household Management School, wrote that the situation in the field of nutrition was embarrassing: "Although in some places communal bowls and wooden spoons have been discarded, the manner of serving is still incredibly tasteless and primitive. The worst sin, however, is the unvaried nature of the food." People eat too much meat and too little garden produce, for "the general opinion is that if meat – the expensive food – is missing from the dinner table, it feels as if there

had been nothing to eat at all." Raw vegetables are not eaten. It is the custom to boil them for too long "so that nearly all the nutrients are removed".<sup>59</sup> Fresh salads and green soups created the most ardent resistance due to the common view that these were types of animal food. Furthermore, homemakers regarded the preparation of vegetable dishes as too time-consuming.<sup>60</sup>

The nutritional discourse of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was dominated by a moralizing rhetoric, primarily directed at the eating habits of the poor. The "uncivilized" eating habits of the workers were associated with their lack of knowledge. Yet, unlike in industrialized and urbanized societies in Western Europe and the USA, where advocates of vegetarianism opposed the increasing consumption of processed food, in largely agrarian Estonia, the proponents of vegetarian food mainly criticized people's limited diet based on peasant ideas of what constituted a "proper meal."<sup>61</sup>

From the 1920s to the 1930s, home economics teachers and experts published several innovative cookery books and handbooks on nutrition. Excessively salty, fat-rich and limited diets were criticized, and vegetarian dishes were praised. The authors<sup>62</sup> were unanimous in claiming that the diet up to then had been insufficient, and more vegetables needed to be grown and preserved effectively, primarily in a raw state. There was much talk of making healthy preserves as many of the valuable proper-

ties of berries and vegetables were lost due to. As a good alternative, airtight preserves were introduced, while salting and pickling in vinegar were no longer recommended. General advice on food was complemented by generous collections of recipes, tables of nutrient contents, as well as sample menus. Almost all the authors recommended reducing the amount of meat on the menu, eating more vegetable dishes, and eating fresh salads as appetizers or main courses. It was also believed that vegetables should be used as much as possible as seasonings as they made dishes less expensive, and easier to digest. As a manifestation of such a rational approach, menus containing a complete range of food for the family, covering a week, a month, or a whole season, were published in cookbooks, as well as in the above-mentioned women's journals (see Illustration 6). It is also remarkable that these exemplary menus always recommended seasonal food of local origin.

**THE DEVELOPMENT** of nutritional science in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was related to the rise of modern nation states – it was the period when the state started intervening in people's eating habits, seeing a strong link between physical health and diet.<sup>63</sup> Healthy citizens who could work efficiently and contribute to the nation's prosperity were regarded as a valuable resource. In the 1920s, knowledge of the beneficial qualities of vitamins was spreading, and the vitamin content of vegetarian dishes became the main argument for promoting them. In the 1930s, calorie counting also started in Estonia. Several authors pointed out that the number of calories obtained from eating meat could successfully be replaced by an equal amount obtained from vegetarian food. *The Housewife's Handbook* (Est. Perenaise käsiraamat) (1934) recommended adding at least one boiled vegetable to the daily menu in addition to potatoes, eating uncooked fruit or vegetables once a day, and freely consuming vegetables and bread during each meal.<sup>64</sup> Although graphs and charts about the nutritional content of food never made their way into daily use in ordinary kitchens, the mindset they projected became increasingly attractive to modern housekeepers.<sup>65</sup>

The explanatory work by the home economics teachers emphasized that food should guarantee the physical and mental development of both the individual and the nation. In the second half of the 1930s, educational activities concerning healthy food became particularly extensive and systematic, and the Chamber of Home Economics (Kodumajanduskoda), founded in 1936, became the leading force in the field. The Chamber's Food Committee was tasked with studying, improving and managing the dietary conditions in homes and in public, including offering various consultation services. In the series of publications by the Chamber, the booklet *Inexpensive and Healthy Food* (Est. Odav ja tervislik toit)<sup>66</sup> was published. It underscored the importance of eating local foods from the perspective of both health and value for money and emphasized the need to carefully consider vitamins and calories when making food choices. First and foremost, growing, preserving and using garden produce was promoted (see Illustration 7). By the end of the 1930s, some



Illustration 7. Seasonal autumn foods at the exhibition of the Chamber of Home Economics (1937). On the right the Secretary in Chief Hilda Ottenson. Source: AM F 23319: 10.

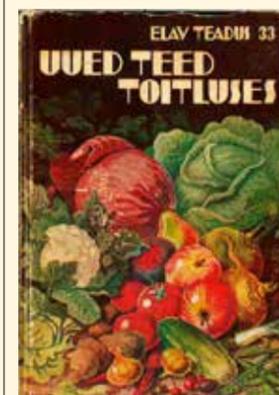


Illustration 8. The handbook *New Ways in Nutrition* (Est. Uued teed toitluses) by home economics instructor Olga Kesk (1934).



Illustration 9. The Association for Vegetarians in Tartu celebrating its 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1939. Source: Internet.

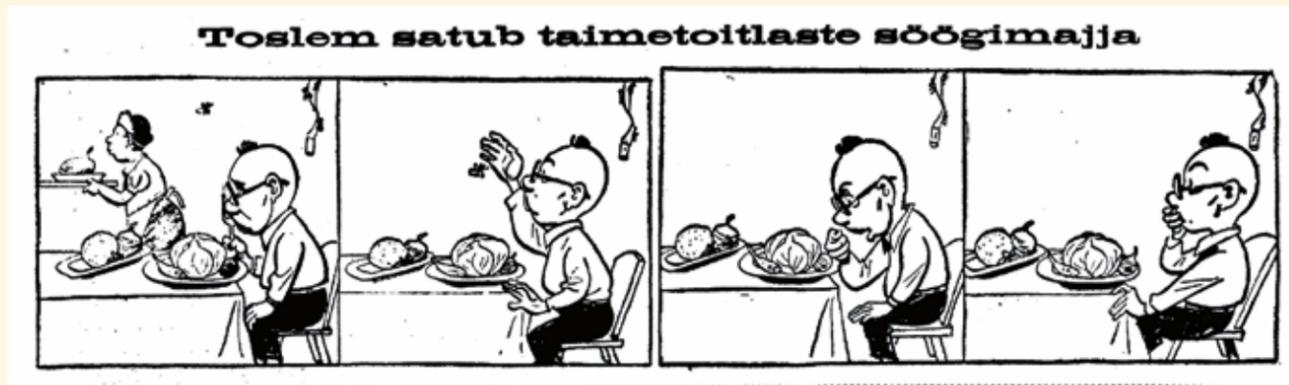


Illustration 10. A comical character Toslem in a vegetarian canteen. Author: Gori. Sädemed, August 1, 1937.

advances in vegetable consumption had been made, mainly due to the awareness-raising activities regarding suitable kinds of food for babies and infants. Numerous lectures and sample cooking classes were organized. For instance, weekly demonstrations of the preparation of inexpensive and healthy dishes were given at schools. Home economics experts underscored that the outlandish and complicated recipes based on bourgeois Russian and French cooking should be abandoned and replaced by a healthier diet. The experts even stated that public eateries should be supervised by home economics teachers, like in the Nordic countries.<sup>67</sup>

Some home economics and nutrition experts such as Elisabeth Sild (1888–1980) and Olga Kesk (1898–?) also collaborated with groups of devoted vegetarians. The only officially registered organization was the Association for Vegetarians [Est. Taimetoitlaste Ühing] founded in Tartu in 1924 under the aegis of the Temperance Union<sup>68</sup> (see Illustration 9). It aimed to combat meat consumption and promote a healthy lifestyle and an understanding of a meat-free lifestyle. However, like moderate vegetarians in Europe, they considered it acceptable to consume butter, eggs, milk and cheese.<sup>69</sup> Educational activities were the priority of the association. Based on the nutritional science of the age, the association provided recommendations about the most beneficial foods to eat, especially recommending raw food dishes and berry and fruit juices. In order to make imported fruit more available to consumers, the association submitted a request to the government to free these products from customs duty.<sup>70</sup> The association arranged regular lectures and cooking demonstrations from both foreign and domestic experts. For instance, Elisabeth Sild demonstrated how to cook raw food dishes and published the handbook *A Book on Vegetarian Dishes and House-keeping* (Est. Taimtoidu- ja majapidamisraamat)<sup>71</sup> at the association's request. She also compiled menus for everyday and festive usage (see Illustration 5). Sild criticized processed and manufactured food, snobbish cooking and the excessive use of meat and spices. According to her, the so-called “food of Sun force”<sup>72</sup>, or raw leaves and the fruits of plants, were most valuable, and she recommended starting each meal with raw food. Olga Kesk also wrote that “nutritional competence today is by far not limited to

the skill of “making soup” but represents a whole new branch of science, full of innovations and novel discoveries.”<sup>73</sup> (see Illustration 8).

**IN THE 1930S**, appeals were also made for the transition to full veganism or even a raw food diet. Along with health professionals, Estonian clergyman Alfred Lepp (1900–1984)<sup>74</sup> aimed to reform people's diet, emphasizing the religious aspects of a vegetarian diet in combination with medical arguments (especially those of Maximillian Bircher-Benner (1867–1939)) and temperance.

By the end of the 1930s, educational efforts through the media, schools and courses, as well as general economic growth, resulted in the people having a more varied and balanced diet. However, progress in the consumption of vegetarian food was relatively slow. Regional descriptions of health conditions from the 1930s conducted by medical scientists<sup>75</sup> give a brief idea of people's actual diet: bread and potatoes were staple foods, as were grain porridges and soups. The persistence of such food habits also reflected generational attitudes towards proper food. With the exception of the poor, most of the middle class remained conservative. The menu was seasonal and vegetables (except sauerkraut) were mainly eaten in the autumn. In 1939 the Secretary-in-Chief of the Chamber of Home Economics Hilda Ottenson (1896–1990) (Illustration 7) had to acknowledge that there were regions in which mostly bread and salted pork were still eaten for breakfast, lunch and supper throughout the year, without even potatoes as a side dish. The consumption of fruit and vegetables was low and was almost non-existent in the winter.<sup>76</sup> Nevertheless, there is no reason to believe that Estonia's food culture was lagging behind in global terms. For instance, in the USA, a breakthrough in what constituted healthy eating was only made during the Great Depression of the 1930s.<sup>77</sup> In Finland, the change from simple eating to an awareness of the proper menu also occurred in the second half of the 1930s.

Moreover, the media also sometimes published critical or humorous pieces about vegetarians, who would go to extremes in vitamin hunting, depriving themselves of the necessary ani-

mal nutrients (see Illustration 10). Several dailies wrote that in Estonian conditions, imported fruit was an excessive luxury and also warned their readers that raw food could become a health hazard if the rules of hygiene were ignored (which was often the case in rural areas).<sup>78</sup>

## Concluding thoughts

The introduction of vegetarian ideas in Estonia in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and the systematic spreading of science-based knowledge about the benefits of eating and the skills of cooking vegetarian food in the decades between the two world wars reveal some unique patterns to the modernization of everyday life. At that time, Estonia transformed itself from a province of the Tsarist empire, in which Baltic German culture dominated, into an independent nation state. Western ideas and practices were considered part of new, modern Estonians, who were supposed to rid themselves of both old “unhealthy” peasant food habits as well as admiration for the Baltic German food culture which, in turn, had taken on several French and Russian influences, with its elaborate bourgeois recipes, preference for imported products and excessive eating. In the period studied, the influences of both spiritual and medical branches of Russian vegetarianism in Estonia remained marginal.

**MALE INTELLECTUALS** – doctors, horticulturalists and journalists – were important figures in the early promotion of vegetarian ideas in Estonia. Since the 1910s, female home economics teachers trained in Finnish schools played a particularly significant role in the modernization of food culture. They established similar educational institutions in Estonia and followed similar ideas about healthy nutrition: praising local products, seasonal diet and preferring moderate vegetarianism that did not exclude products of animal origin. Despite the dietary reform efforts of nutrition experts and home economics teachers, the eating habits of the broader population were slow to change and conservative attitudes rooted in peasant culture persisted until the 1930s. Yet, a broad network of home economics schools and cooking courses, numerous manuals, cookbooks and articles in the media, as well as state-supported institutions like the Chamber of Home Economics, contributed to the spread of modern ideas and practices, especially among the younger generation. Furthermore, home economics experts were realistic about the people's living standards in what was still largely an agrarian society and therefore mainly promoted vegetables and fruits, while emphasizing that consuming more healthy plant-based food might also help them to be thrifty. ❌

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