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Saami Coffee Culture

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I grew up with Saami coffee culture.¹ It was always around me; at home, while visiting relatives, in the mountains, by the reindeer enclosure. It's a natural part of my life. I only condense it down to its essential parts and present it for people unfamiliar with it, through coffee, stories and settings.

Saami coffee culture wasn't as conceptually clear to me when I started my café in Lycksele in 2011. Even though I had support from the Indigee Indigenous Entrepreneurship program, I still found it difficult to start the business at first. But later, while I was in my café, I noticed how different people would sit and drink their coffee. Saami customers stood apart with their slow, ceremonial way of interacting with the coffee and with each other. Since then, I've studied our cultural history and spoken with many people, young and old, to better understand the essence of Saami coffee culture. I've learned that, wherever it occurs, Saami coffee culture is basically the same.

The Saami started drinking coffee in the late nineteenth century, shortly after it had become pervasive in the southern parts of the Scandinavian countries. Although coffee probably came to the Saami from the south,

1 This text has been edited from an interview with Anne Wuolab by Chris Kolbu on the Nordic Coffee Culture Blog, and republished here with their permission. The original text can be found on the Nordic Coffee Culture Blog. The text begins with a short introduction from Chris, and then switches to a first-person narrative from Anne, based on an interview with Chris.

we have developed a different culture around making and drinking coffee. Coffee was initially used as a complement to reindeer broth, but it soon became viewed as a drink in its own right. Serving it with cow's or goat's milk, as well as coffee cheese and dried reindeer meat is still normal to this day.

Saami will normally know when they are being served coffee, and act accordingly. If they are asked to help out, they will. Not being offered a coffee is tantamount to being given the cold shoulder. However, such things rarely occur, as people seldom wish to cause someone else to lose face in front of others. The coffee is prepared according to the preferences of the host.

Now, I arrange coffee experiences that are based in Saami coffee culture. I might arrange anywhere between four and 10 such events throughout the year, though winter and spring are the busiest times for me. During these events, I talk about how the Saami prepare and drink coffee, while people are served coffee prepared in the traditional manner, with coffee cheese and dried reindeer meat. I put on these events outdoors with a fire, and indoors, in cafés or other settings. I've also organised them as coffee breaks at conferences and business meetings. My customers are both Saami and non-Saami.

Coffee ceremonies are quiet affairs. We use the same coffee beans as everyone else, and we do not prepare them in any special way. The coffee is immersion brewed, and served with cheese and dried reindeer meat. We usually have someone serve the coffee to people—they need to prepare or pour it themselves. To better understand what goes on, it is helpful to imagine a Japanese tea ceremony. It is important that the proper amount of time is taken while drinking coffee, to better create a contemplative and intimate mood. To me, Saami coffee culture is the polar opposite of a short, two-sip espresso or a takeaway coffee. People take their time while drinking, and a coffee event might take anywhere between 20 minutes to an hour. Stories are told, which might be mythical, rooted in Saami spirituality, or comedic.

Coffee is served with *gáffevuostá*, reindeer cheese. It isn't necessarily specific to the Saami—it exists in other reindeer-herding cultures as well, and perhaps similar cheese also exists in other cultures, made from goat's or cow's milk. The consistency of the *gáffevuostá* is like halloumi, and is meant to keep its shape even when it is put in the hot coffee—though

it will become softer. Like halloumi, good *gáffevuostá* should squeak between your teeth when you bite it, but otherwise, *gáffevuostá* does not taste like halloumi.

When making coffee, it is important to make a good fire. Saami fires are made by placing firewood in parallel to each other on top of a couple of perpendicular logs, forming a dense, raised rectangle that will have good oxygen flow but burn slowly. The coffee kettle is always placed on the ground by whichever of the longer sides has the strongest fire going. And as for the cups, it is best if the coffee is drunk out of a traditional Saami cup, a *guksie* (Figure 15).



Figure 15. A *guksie*, a traditional Saami cup used for drinking coffee, carved from wood by Erik Schepers.

Source. Photographed by Erik Schepers, Susteren, the Netherlands, February 2010. Used with permission.

I would like to start a nomadic café. It could travel to Saami festivals, weekend events and markets as a kind of ‘pop-up’ shop. The coffee would be presented in Saami style, but there might also be a cultural element to it: an exhibition or a mini concert, for instance. I would make coffee using immersion and hand brewing methods.

References

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