ICELANDIC CONNECTION

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CORPORATE SECRETARY Lorna Tergesen
DESIGN & TYPOGRAPHY Catherine McConnell

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SUBSCRIPTIONS, ADVERTISING & EDITORIAL CORRESPONDENCE

Icelandic Connection, Box 1156, Gimli, Manitoba R0C 1B0 CANADA
CONTACT Lorna Tergesen (204) 642–9650 for inquiries about the magazine

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ON THE COVER

PHOTOS: REYNIR SAEMUNDSSON, ROBERT BIRGIRSSON AND GAIL EINARSON-MCCLEERY

The Viking Bakery in Toronto Ontario

Editorial

Food
A Restrospective

by Johanna Wilson

It is impossible to divorce the subject of food from the environment in which I was raised. Extended families were the norm; grandparents were a full part of the household. My mother like most women was a full time housewife and my father was the wage earner. Women had more time in the 1920s and 1930s to devote to planning and preparing the family meals. When I was a child there was a great emphasis on mealtime. My sister and I set the table. Serviettes and cutlery on an ironed tablecloth were standard. My mother expected everybody to be present when called for the meal. No books were allowed to be read at the table and afterwards my sister and I would do the clean up without being asked. In those days we had a large round table that had six leaves and my parents frequently had overnight guests coming in from the country.

Supermarkets didn't exist. Suburbia didn't exist. Schools were closer to home as the towns and cities were less spread out. All the children and most husbands came home for a hot lunch. There were very few canned goods used in the meal and all food was made from scratch. (Comment: If you look at the ingredients list in present-day foods available, you'll find there are lots of preservatives and additional flavorings that would not be there if it was done from scratch. The more we use natural foods and the less we use processed foods the better off we'll be health-wise.)

Foods were prepared in season. When the peaches, plums or pears came in from Ontario or BC, they were preserved in mason jars for the long winter. When the beets were dug up in the fall they were pickled in vinegar. Cucumbers were made into various forms of pickles: dill pickles, mustard pickles, bread and butter pickles. Berry picking in the bush was part of our summer activity. The crabapples and various berries were made into delicious jams and jellies. Tomatoes could be stewed and stored in jars for later use making soups, casseroles and sauces. When the apples arrived in the fall (hallowe'een apples) they were stewed for applesauce.

There was a rhythm to the week. Sunday was the big meal of the week, for example roast chicken or roast beef. If it was a roast chicken, then Monday there would be chicken soup made from the carcass and chicken pot pie made from the leftovers. If it was a roast beef, lamb or beef stew then the left overs were ground-up and made into shepherd's pie. On other days we used a cheaper cut of meat like ground beef or

round steak. It was necessary to pound the round steak with a mallet to soften it up. By tradition Friday was a fish meal and in our home a pickerel or a baked stuffed white fish was a real treat.

The idea of convenience foods and packaged foods didn't exist, but as more and more women went to work in wartime, prepared foods changed people's eating habits and reduced the time spent in the kitchen. That trend continued after the war and even increased as the majority of women entered the work force while nursery schools and daycares opened.

Icelandic foods were time consuming to prepare. *Rullupylsa* (rolled lamb flanks) took seven or eight days to pickle.

Lifrarpylsa was made from ground livers, oat meal, scalded milk, suet and seasoning. The mixture was placed in bag of unbleached cotton 5" x 9" which was then boiled in salted water for 2.5 hours.

The food processor of the day was the meat grinder. It was an excellent machine for taking leftover roast beef and grinding it into hash.

It would not be an Icelandic home without some Icelandic food. I have included a number of recipes that have proven themselves over the decades with many generations.

Icelandic Brown Bread.

I did not always make brown bread because my mother made it. I can still see her kneeding the bread; shaping it into loaves; letting it rise and putting the loaves into the oven. As it was baking a wonderful aroma filled the house and when she took it out as beautifully warm delicious *Icelandic Brown Bread*, fit to be tasted with some lovely preserve that she had made like crabapple jelly.

2 cups lukewarm water
2 Tbsp sugar
2 Tbsp dry yeast

Mix and let rise in a covered bowl for 20 minutes. Add one cup white flour. Cover and leave another 20 minutes. Add:

1 ½ cups lukewarm water
½ up soft margarine
1 Tbsp salt
¾ cup molasses
½ cup brown sugar
6 cups whole wheat flour
2 cups white flour

Knead well. Grease and place in a bowl. Let rise until doubled in bulk (approx. 2 hours). Shape into 6 loaves; place in well greased pans. Allow to rise until double in size. Bake at 350 degrees F for 50 to 60 minutes. Cool on a rack.

The second is *Pönnukökur* or rolled pancakes.

When I have served them at meetings and social gatherings, they have been well received.

2 eggs
1 Tbsp sugar
¼ tsp salt
1 tsp vanilla
¼ cup yogurt
1 ½ cups sifted all purpose flour
1 tsp baking powder
2-3 cups sweet milk

Beat eggs, add sugar, salt and vanilla. Combine and sift the flour and baking powder. Add the yogurt and the sifted dry ingredients to egg mixture and mix it until smooth. Gradually stir in sweet milk.

Use a hot griddle lightly greased with butter. Pour about 1/5 of a cup of batter on the pan, lifting and tilting the pan to distribute the batter evenly. Loosen edges of the pönnukaka with lifter, then loosen entire pönnukaka and

flip over to brown the other side. Layer the cooked pönnukökur on a platter and when finished cooking the batch, sprinkle each with brown sugar mixed with some cinnamon. Roll and when ready to serve cut each one in half and arrange on a plate. They may also be served with whipped cream and peach jam. When serving this way, spread the whipped cream and a little jam on the pönnukaka, fold in half and fold again. Serve individually on a plate as dessert.

The third is the *Vínarterta*.

I'm proud to say that some of my vinatertas have been used as wedding or birthday cakes.

Cookie layers:
1 cup butter
1 ½ cups white sugar
2 large eggs
1 tsp cardamom
3 Tbsp cream
4 cups flour
1tsp baking powder
pinch of salt

Cream butter and sugar. Add eggs cardamom and cream. Mix together sifted flour, baking powder, and salt, then add to butter and sugar mixture, blending well. Divide dough into six portions. Roll out the portions of the dough on a cookie sheet. Cut out an eight inch square using a cake pan as a guide. This recipe will make 6 or 7 layers, depending on how thin they are rolled out. Bake at 350 F. for 10 minutes to a delicate light brown. Layers should be cooled before filling with cooled prune mixture.

Filling:
1 lb pitted prunes
½ cup sugar
½ cup prune liquid
1 tsp vanilla
1 tsp cinnamon
½ tsp grated nutmeg
¼ tsp ground cloves
¼ tsp allspice

In water to cover, cook prunes until tender. Cool, then process prunes in food processor. In saucepan, combine prunes, ½ cup of the liquid from cooking prunes, sugar, vanilla, and spices. Heat to blend in the flavours. Cool before spreading on the cookie layers. Age the cake, in a covered container, for three to four days in the fridge. Butter icing is optional.

As I said Sunday was a very important food day for the family. We had the best meal that we would have for the week. There was always a great entrée and a special dessert like pumpkin pie, butterscotch pie, apple pie or Brown Betty.

We don't have those big family Sunday meals as often nowadays, but we get together on special occasions like Christmas, Easter and major birthdays and have a grand meal just like the old times. The family gets close together, the cousins are able to catch up with all the comings and goings and I am able to see how the young people are developing as they move through the phases of life. The food we serve becomes a focal point but only a small focal point. What is really important is not what we eat, but that we get together and share time with each other and if the food can help, in that regard, then the meal is a great success.

A Little Food History

by Nanna Rögnvaldardóttir

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Some Icelandic food history

I. The Food and Cooking of the Middle Ages
II. Traditional and Modern Icelandic Cooking

The first part deals with the food history of Iceland from the Settlement until the end of the Middle Ages and a bit further – in some instances up until the late 18th – early 19th century. It is based on a segment of my book *Icelandic Food and Cookery*, published by Hippocrene Books, New York, NY, in 2002. This version was expanded into a paper I gave at a food symposium in Colorado Springs in 2002 and has been revised somewhat.

The second part is mostly taken from *Icelandic Food and Cookery* but slightly expanded. That book has been out of print for some years but a new and revised edition has just been published here in Iceland and the food history section has been thoroughly updated.

(Reprinted with permission. Part two will run in the next issue)

I. The Food and Cooking of the Middle Ages

Some years ago, I was searching online for books on the Central Asian countries, Tadzhikistan, Kirghistan, Kazakhstan – and I came across a book title that intrigued me. I can't recall the author but the title was *Somewhere East of Life*. I have no idea what the book is about but somehow I felt I didn't need to read it – the title said it all. East of life, east of hope, east of civilization … it was all there. It wasn't until much later that it occurred to me that until maybe a hundred years ago, most people would have considered a variation on this title quite fitting to Iceland, which was always somewhere north of life.

So the cooking I'm about to describe can't be said to be mainstream medieval European cooking. It is the cooking of people that chose to live at the outskirts of the habitable world, where resources were few and limited, and had to adapt their diet, their cooking methods and their daily life to that fact.

What Did the Settlers Eat?

Most of what can be said about the diet of the people who came to Iceland in the Settlement period (AD 874-930) is guesswork. There are no written documents dating from that period, no cookbooks, no traveller's descriptions, no trade accounts. What we have is the evidence of the Sagas, written centuries later and not really all that concerned with culinary matters, and some scant archaeological evidence.

Icelanders, and I suppose everybody else as well, have always assumed that the great majority of the people who settled Iceland came directly from Norway and other Scandinavian countries and carried with them almost pure Norse customs and culture. The Sagas certainly support this, even though they mention Celtic slaves and even a few settlers who came from the Hebrides and Scotland. Very few Celtic words have found their way into the Icelandic language; few given names or placenames are of Celtic origin; and there is not much in Icelandic culture or customs to suggest a Celtic heritage.

A few years ago new genetic research by Icelandic scientists revealed some startling results: Even though the majority of the males who settled Iceland did indeed come from Scandinavia, the genetic evidence shows that well over half the women actually came from the British Isles, probably from Ireland, Scotland and the Hebrides. The scientists can of course not tell us why this is so. Did many of the wandering Vikings in fact settle for a time in the British Isles and marry local women? Or did settlers on their way to the remote island in the west – having failed to persuade the women back home to throw caution to the wind and emigrate with them – simply raid Celtic villages and farms on their way to the new home and take the women as slaves?

It is almost certain that both things happened to some extent. What did not happen, however, is the Celtic influence on Icelandic cooking that one might expect, as cooking was definitely a woman's job in Viking culture. The clearest evidence of Celtic influence on Icelandic cooking is probably the use of dulse, which seems to have begun during the Settlement period in some regions at least. Dulse was much eaten in Ireland but almost unknown as a food in Norway.

That does not mean the first generations of Icelanders ate exactly the same food as their ancestors had done in Norway. The settlers will have needed to make some changes to their diet as soon

as they came to Iceland. They found a virgin country, with rivers full of salmon and trout, with seals and birds unused to man, so at first the animals may not have been as wary as they became later. Eggs of wild fowl could also be gathered, so at first there was plenty of food just for the taking, in addition to the animals the settlers brought with them and the crops they grew.

This period soon ended and the farmers had to learn to live with their new land. One of them was Skallagrímr of Borg, father of Egill: "As Skallagrim's livestock grew in number the animals started making for the mountains in the summer. He found a big difference in the livestock, which was much better and fatter when grazing up on the moorland, and above all in the sheep that wintered in the mountain valleys instead of being driven down. As a result, Skallagrim had a farm built near the mountains and ran it as a sheep farm."

The settlers soon discovered the importance of good pastures for their livestock, as well as fields for hay-making. The winters in Iceland are long, longer than many of the settlers would have been used to, and quite a lot of hay was usually needed to feed the breeding stock through the winter.

Dried dulce

So What Was Available to Them?

No recipes survive from the Viking era, if any such were indeed ever written, and few clear descriptions of food preparation and cooking. But we do know something of the utensils that were used and the ingredients that were available. It is more or less known what animals, wild and tame, there were in Scandinavia and the British Isles during Viking times, and to a degree we also know what wild and cultivated plants there were to choose from. In most of these countries, grains could be grown fairly easily and formed a great part of the winter food supply.

The old sources usually mention just "korn" (grain), without specifying the type, but the grain types the settlers would have known were barley, rye, wheat, and in some cases maybe oats and buckwheat as well. Now of course these were not the high-yielding grains of today, but more primitive types with less kernel and more straw. So the yield, which probably wasn't very high in the countries the settlers came from, would have been even more meagre in the harsh Icelandic climate. Nevertheless, grain had probably been a mainstay of the diet of these people, especially those who came from Southern Norway, Denmark and the British Isles.

Many of the settlers will have been used to several types of fruit in their homelands: Plums, cherries, small apples, pears, several types of wild berries, walnuts, hazelnuts, beechnuts, acorns, and others. This they had to learn to live without in their new home. No fruit-bearings trees grew there; no edible nuts, almonds or acorns were to be found; there were only a few types of wild berries.

An old grindstone

In Scandinavia, quite a few things were grown besides barley and rye in Viking times. Kale and turnips were probably the most common vegetables but herbs such as dill and coriander, and probably cress, were grown too and used for herbal remedies, for drinks and for seasoning food. Some peas and beans were grown, along with various onions, parsnips and carrots.

It can thus be safely assumed that many of the original settlers in Iceland had experience not only in raising livestock, but in growing grains and some types of vegetables as well, and they will have expected to be able to carry on with this in their new home. But this proved difficult and in many cases impossible. The climate was unfavorable and supplies such as seeds were difficult to get. Still, it seems the Icelanders were reluctant to change, to the point of stubbornness. And maybe that is one of the reasons for the strange fact that even though Icelanders live in close proximity to some of the richest fishing grounds in the world, and even though farming in Iceland is a hazardous battle with the elements at the best of times, they stuck to being a pastoral society and it took them a thousand years to face facts and become a nation of fishermen.

The Evidence of the Soil

So what did they experiment with and what was successful? We do have an idea about what was grown at the bishop's seat at Skálholt, established in the 11th century. A study on pollen from a moor at Skálholt was done in 1960 by Þorleifur Einarsson. He collected core soil samples from the moor and identified and counted the pollen found in them.

As it happens, it is actually easier to date such soil samples in Iceland than in most other places, as the frequent volcanic eruptions divide the soil into layers and you only have to look at where the object you want to date is found. If it is found just below a ash layer that can be identified as dating from the Mt. Hekla eruption of 1104, for instance, we would know that this plant had been growing in Skálholt before that time. One very identifiable layer has been called "the Settlement layer", as it fell in an eruption during the settlement period, probably in AD 898. It is found all over Iceland and has proved very useful in dating many archaeological and geological findings. Þorleifur Einarsson's study revealed many interesting things regarding the vegetation at Skálholt, as well as the environmental effects of the Settlement and climatic changes. For instance, barley becomes evident just as soon as the land is settled and at the same time, there is a marked decrease in birch and willow. Several species of grass show a marked increase, as well as some weeds like chickweed.

Wormwood occurs in the Skálholt samples from the 10th century but disappear in the late 18th century and is now not found wild anywhere in Iceland. It was probably grown in the herb garden at the bishop's seat, as a medical herb

Unleavened Icelandic flatbread

and perhaps also to flavor ale. It was also used in the making of ink, as the taste of wormwood prevented mice from gnawing the manuscripts. Yarrow may also have been used to flavor locally brewed ale.

In the low-lying regions of Iceland, barley could be grown after land had been cleared but the growing season was short and hazardous and yield was often very low. Iceland was never self-sufficient as a grain producer, not even before the cold period that began in the 14th century. During the early part of the "Little Ice Age", as that period has been called, home-grown grain disappeared almost completely. Barley disappears from the soil samples from Skálholt around 1400 AD and while barley cultivation may have survived a little longer in some lower-lying regions, it had completely disappeared a century or so later and wasn't tried again until the 20th century.

Barley is virtually the only type of grain known to have been grown in Iceland but some rye and wheat was imported. Imported rye gradually became the most important grain in the Icelandic diet; wheat was used for fine baking by wealthy people, and for baking communion wafers.

A Breadless Land (almost)

Even when grain was grown, it was probably used less for bread than for porridges, considered more economical than bread, and the same applied to imported grains. Porridges are frequently mentioned in the Sagas and it seems that butter or other fat was sometimes added to them. Halli of The Tale of Sneglu-Halli is described as a great lover of porridge, even though he refused to eat it until he burst, as King Harald demanded of him. And some of the barley was used to brew ale, so there was not much left over for breadmaking.

This is not to say that bread was more

or less unknown in medieval Iceland. It is mentioned often enough in the Sagas, usually in connection with some kind of spread or fat, and was probably much more of an everyday food than it became later on. Reykdæla Saga tells of a man called Þorgeir smjörhringur, Thorgeir Butter-ring, who got his byname because his favorite food was bread and butter.

This bread was probably always unleavened. According to John Granlund, there are no indications that any kind of leavening was used in Western Scandinavian baking during the Viking era, and no ovens seem to have been in use. Three types of bread seem to have been made, thin flatbread baked on embers or hot stones, coarse, heavy bread buried in ashes, and fine wheat cakes baked in a frying pan. Pans of this type have however not been found in Iceland so it is not certain they were used there until much later. Unleavened, coarse barley or rye bread cooked in embers or in a pan over an open fire may not sound appetizing but such bread can be quite good when freshly baked and still warm. It does get rock hard as it cools, however.

It isn't until the late Middle Ages that the lack of grain, and especially the absence of bread in the diet, becomes so evident that most travellers who visit Iceland or others who write about it almost invariably mention this as a very peculiar thing – which it was, of course, to them – and wrote all kinds of tall tales about this strange fact. A common tale was that Icelandic farmers would gladly allow anyone who could provide them with a piece of bread to sleep with their daughters in exchange for this rare treat.

The German cartographer Martin Behaim wrote this on his globe of 1492: "In Iceland are found men of eighty years who have never tasted bread. In this country no corn is grown, and instead fish is eaten." The first part of his statement is incorrect, bread was not that rare, but it certainly wasn't everyday food for poorer people. They buttered their dried fish and ate it instead.

During the 16th to 18th century, well-off people would let their servants bake bread but the majority of Icelanders rarely made or ate bread. And the bread that was being made was usually thin, unleavened flatbread, made from rye or barley. Due to lack of firewood, ovens were virtually unknown, except possibly in a few very wealthy households, and there was no professional bakery in the whole of the island until the early 19th century. There was no village baker (naturally enough, as there were no villages), no communal ovens, no grand houses with huge fireplaces or stoves.

Harðfiskur (dried fish) and siginn fiskur (fermented fish)

After grain cultivation disappeared completely, all grain had to be imported and consequently became even more expensive than it had been. Not only

that, but in some years it was scarce or even completely unavailable. Only a handful of trading ships sailed from to Iceland each year and sometimes bad weather, war or other calamities prevented them from risking the long and hazardous journey. For instance, no ship arrived in Iceland from Norway in 1326, resulting in a severe shortage of all imported commodities. The annals especially mention the lack of wine and say that mass couldn't be sung in some churches due to lack of sacramental wine.

Iceland moss (fjallagrös)

Things got a little better at the beginning of the 15th century, when English fishers and merchants began to journey into Icelandic waters. They bought dried fish and homespun cloth from the Icelanders and sold them grain, all kinds of utensils and metalware, wood, candlewax, weapons, and luxuries like honey. This was the so-called English century in Icelandic history. Several wealthy landowners who had possession of good harbours began large-scale fishing operations. Dried fish from Iceland fetched good prices in European markets and money trickled into the coffers of the Icelandic boatowners.

Nevertheless, the majority of Icelanders continued to be poor. They could not grow grain to sustain them, and they could not afford to buy all the grain they needed, nor could they rely on a steady supply. So what did they use instead? Two very important staples were fjallagrös, Iceland moss, which is not a moss but a type of lichen that grows in many Arctic regions, and söl, dulse, a seaweed that can be gathered at low tide around the North Atlantic.

Moss From the Mountains, Dulse From the Sea

Iceland moss is first mentioned in the 13th century law text of Jónsbók but it may have been used since the Settlement, although there may have been less demand during the first centuries, when life was easier. Iceland moss grows in northern Norway and was sometimes used there as food, at least during famines, although never to the extent that they were used in Iceland. Iceland moss doesn't look very edible but it was used in many dishes, sometimes as a grain substitute, sometimes almost as a vegetable.

Its use seems to have increased gradually, as grain cultivation diminished, and it became more and more important. In the vast wilderness of the North and Northeast, the lichens grew in abundance, and groups of people would go into the mountains to gather them, sometimes sleeping in tents for a week or more, and return with dozens of large sacks stuffed full of their pickings. The moss was then spread out to dry, picked over and stored

in barrels or large sacks. They were then soaked before use, chopped and cooked. In many regions porridges and other food made from it were served every day, sometimes at every single meal. They were used in bread, soups, puddings, blood sausages, and many other kinds of food, and made into teas and potions for many ailments.

It is entirely possible that Iceland moss helped keeping the Icelandic nation alive, not just as food but also as a medicine, as recent tests have shown they contain substances that strengthen the immune system and may prevent some diseases. There are even some who want to link the rise of tuberculosis in the population in the late 19th – early 20th century to the disappearance of Iceland moss from the diet.

Another local plant that was often added to bread was dulse, which was gathered at low water in late August, especially in Western and Southwestern Iceland. So there is a clear regional difference here: in the north and east they had Iceland moss, in the south and west there was dulse. As I've already said, the use of dulse can probably be linked to Ireland and it may not be a coincidence that many settlers in the dulse-wealthy region of Breiðafjörður came from the British Isles. Dulse is mentioned in many old sources and it is clear that it is highly valued; churches often owned rights to collect dulse in faraway regions and there was quite a brisk dulse trade in medieval times. Dulse is known to have been gathered and traded in 1118, and Iceland's oldest surviving law texts mention the right to collect dulse and eat it while on another man's land. This means that dulse was also eaten fresh, not only dried as it is today.

The best known dulse story comes from the Saga of Egill Skallagrímsson. He wanted to starve himself to death after losing his son but his daughter used dulse to trick him into giving up this plan. She convinced him that she wanted to join him, then began chewing some dulse – not, she told him, as food, but to hasten her death:

"Then Egill said, "What are you doing, my daughter? Are you chewing something?" "I'm chewing dulse," she replied, "because I think it will make me feel worse. Otherwise I expect I shall live too long.""

Egill apparently didn't consider the dulse to be food so he also got some to chew on, not realising how salty it was. They both became very thirsty and called for some water but were given milk to drink instead (arranged by the daughter before she joined her father, of course). Egill was so angry at the trickery that he bit a shard out of the horn the milk was served in, and abandoned his starvation plan and composed one of his mighty poems instead.

Now this is of course written three or four hundred years after it supposedly occurred so it may not be reliable evidence about Egil's dietary habits but it does tell us that in the 13th century, people seem to have had an idea that dulse might have been unfamiliar as food to a Viking of Norwegian origin, while his daughter, probably brought up partly by Celtic slaves and servants, would have known all about it.

There is one grain type that grows wild in Iceland. This is lyme grass (Leymus arenarius), a hardy grass that is plentiful in many coastal and sandy regions in Iceland. Its seeds were sometimes used as food, especially in Southeastern Iceland; the earliest mentions date from the 12th century. It was, however, very difficult to harvest and the yield was low. Despite this, it continued to be used well into the 20th century. It was used for porridges

and flatbreads but seems not to have been mixed with other grains.

Wild Flavors

We don't really know much about what the people of the Viking era used to flavor their food but several herbs and spices are likely to have been used. Among them are herbs like dill, wild thyme, coriander and juniper berries, as well as wild onions, chives and garlic, and it is likely that spices like cinnamon, cloves and ginger were used to some extent. Some spices will certainly have been imported to Iceland as well as to other countries, at least from the 13th century onwards, and spices like pepper are mentioned in old documents.

There are a few mentions of "laukagarðar" (literally "onion gardens") in medieval Icelandic sources, mostly in connection with monasteries, although the most famous one is Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir's garden in Laxdæla Saga. What is meant here is probably herb or kitchen gardens but it is unclear what was actually grown in these gardens. The onions in question are probably chives but old books do also mention garlic and unian, probably red onion.

It is known that Norwegian monks grew some types of herbs and vegetables in the 12th century, such as turnips, peas and beans, and it is not unreasonable to assume that this was done in Icelandic monasteries as well – there was quite a lot of contact, as Icelandic monks and priests often visited and resided in Norwegian monasteries and vice versa. A "laukagarður" at the bishop seat at Hólar is mentioned in 1457, although it is not clear if it was still in use at that time. The only onion growing wild in Iceland is the very rare wild onion (Allium oleraceum), thought to have spread from a farm in Borgarfjörður in Western Iceland where an English missionary bishop lived for at least 20 years in the 11th century. He or someone connected to him may have brought the onion there and the conditions are favorable, as this is a geothermal area and the ground is warmer in places than usual.

A smoked leg of lamb hanging in a modern kitchen

Various "gardens" are mentioned in the late 13th century law texts of Járnsíða and Jónsbók but these texts are more or less direct translations of Norwegian law texts – this was only a few years after the Icelanders had sworn allegiance to the Norwegian king. These texts mention onion gardens and angelica gardens, but also apple gardens, turnip fields, pea and bean fields "or any fruit that is protected with hedges or watches." There certainly weren't any apple gardens in Iceland, so these texts can't be relied upon as evidence.

Honey from cultivated or wild bees was of course the natural sweetener the settlers were used to but this was not an

Whey-preserved whale blubber

option in Iceland. Honey could of course be imported but it was an expensive luxury and probably something the average Icelander very rarely tasted, if ever. So the food was definitely lacking in sweetness – the only fruit was dried and expensive, and the native berries were rather tart.

Northern Norway and Sweden are known for an abundance of delicious berries – lingonberries, cranberries, cherries, wild strawberries, bilberries, blackberries, and so on. In Iceland only three types of berries grow in any significant amounts – bilberries, which are not too common, bog bilberries, and the lowly crowberries, not really considered edible in many countries where they grow. In Iceland, however, they grow abundantly and were considered a real treat. They were also a valuable source of vitamins and could be preserved in sour skyr throughout the winter. Berries are not often mentioned in old sources but it is known that they were gathered, and also that crowberry wine was made at the bishop's seat at Skálholt, probably because imported sacramental wine was so often in short supply.

Angelica was grown and grew wild in Scandinavia in Viking times. It grows wild in Iceland – one of the very few tall plants that is hardy enough to grow there – and is relatively easy to cultivate, so it was probably also grown in special angelica gardens at many farms, especially as soil erosion began to destroy its habitat. The roots and stalks of the plant were boiled and then buttered eaten as vegetables, often with dried fish or dulse. The leaves were chopped and used for soups and stews.

"Kál" is mentioned several times in medieval sources. This is the same word as "kale" and in modern Icelandic, it more or less covers the cabbage family but it is by no means certain what the old sources mean. "Kál" may be a specific vegetable, or it may be a term loosely applied to vegetables in general. One of the plants known as "kál" in Iceland was skarfakál, scurvy grass, a valuable source of vitamin C in many regions.

A Thousand Years of Low-Carb Food

There were no large game animals to hunt in Iceland but the settlers brought livestock with them – sheep, cattle, pigs, horses and goats, as well as chicken and geese, and maybe ducks as well. They probably tried at first to let the animals run wild and forage food in the woods but will soon have discovered how severe the Icelandic winters can be. Hay and other feed had to be provided, although sheep

and goats could fend for themselves far better than the cows, especially as a high proportion of the adult sheep were castrated rams (wethers); hardy animals, raised mostly for their wool and well equipped for the Icelandic winter climate. But cows produce much more meat and beef was probably far more common during the first centuries of Iceland's history than later on, when the cattle was almost exclusively used for dairy production. The pigs probably mostly ran wild and gradually disappeared as the island became deforested. However, it is not unlikely that meat was a more important factor in the diet in Iceland than it had been in the countries the settlers originated in. I sometimes joke that it is no wonder low-carb diets are popular here, as the whole nation was on a low-carb diet for a thousand years.

Fresh meat was usually only on the menu for a few weeks in the autumn, although well-off people sometimes slaughtered a lamb or gelded ram for Christmas and other special occasions. Almost all meat and offal was smoked or preserved in whey. In a cold, harsh climate, people need a lot of calories to survive, so fatty meat and pure fat were highly prized. There is evidence to suggest that the sausages made in Iceland were very fatty.

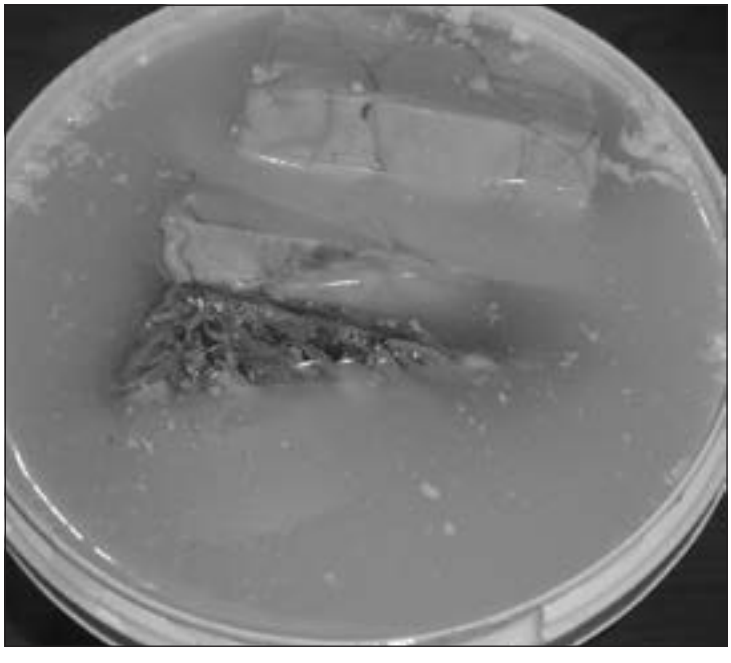
Geese and hens are mentioned in old sources but were probably not very common, as they would have been expensive to feed. In some regions of Iceland, seabirds and their eggs formed a large part of the diet, especially during spring and early summer, when little else was to be had. The birds occupied soaring, almost inaccessible cliffs – a single cliff can be home to millions of guillemots, razorbills, auks and puffins – but once you got near them, they were relatively easy to catch; an experienced catcher could bag hundreds of birds in one day. Medieval sources show that ownership of or access to a birdcliff was highly valued even then. Wild geese, ducks and swans were also hunted.

Whale meat and blubber was eaten whenever available and a large whale that stranded on the shore could provide meat for the whole surrounding region for a long time. Seals were hunted for their meat and hides. Both seal and whale meat may have been consumed even more than before after the Icelanders adopted Christianity in the year 1000, as the meat often seems to have qualified as fish, so it could be eaten on fasting days. And in 1481, Pope Sixtus IV wrote a letter to bishop Magnús Eyjólfsson of Skálholt, where he says that Icelanders can without penalty eat "the

marine fish known as seal" during fast days.

Salmon, trout and char was fished in the rivers and lakes and the rich fishing grounds close to the shore were utilized from the earliest times. The fishing boats were small, open rowing boats, never larger ships. Dried fish played an extremely important part in the diet. At least from the 14th century onwards, and probably even earlier, it was on the menu daily and replaced bread in some ways. The fish was gutted and hung to dry on racks. It was left to dry completely; the cold, windy climate of Iceland is ideal for this. When the fish was to be served, it was beaten thoroughly with a mallet to soften it, and eaten with butter or other fat, such as fish oil. It was not usually cooked, which was an added bonus in the fuel-starved island. Even the fish heads were dried and every edible scrap was consumed.

The dried fish kept well and was easy to store. It was also lightweight – a dried cod or haddock will lose at least 80% of its weight in the drying process. This, however, also means that a lot of butter or other fat was needed to make the unsoaked, uncooked fish palatable, and people would spread their flat fish pieces liberally with butter.



Food preserved and fermented in whey

The Need to Preserve

Iceland is a country completely surrounded by saltwater and it is probably surprising to many that one of the things that had a great impact on Icelandic food culture was the lack of salt. When salt is harvested from the sea, it is usually done by evaporation, either naturally, by using the heat of the sun to dry up shallow pools, or by boiling the water until only salt crystals remain. The first option is clearly not very viable in Iceland, as the climate is neither hot, sunny, nor dry. Boiling the salt was possible at first, and consequently the settlers will have been able to use salt roughly as they had been used to do. But after a few centuries, maybe after a few decades, lack of firewood had already become a problem. Boiling seawater for salt harvesting is a fuel-intensive process and the demand for wood for other uses was great. So people tried to economize. In winter, barrels could be filled with seawater and left until a thick layer of ice had formed. This was then removed and the process was repeated a few times, until the salt in the remaining water was so highly concentrated that it didn't freeze. Then it was boiled but the process took much shorter time than usual and less fuel was needed.

Another frequent method was to gather seaweeds and dry them. They were then burned

and the salty ashes used to preserve food. This was called "black salt" and was used when nothing else was available, but of course the food was contaminated with ash and and not very palatable.

Despite these methods, the lack of salt became a problem early on. Salt could of course be imported but it was very expensive – in the mid-15th century the price was one dried cod for a pound of salt. Most people couldn't really afford that. So other methods had to be found for preserving. And the need to preserve meat, for instance, was greater in Iceland than in many other countries. Almost all slaughtering was done in the autumn or early winter, as hay and other feed for the animals had to be conserved as much as possible and it wasn't economical to feed an animal until it was needed for the table. Perhaps during the first couple of centuries some of the hardier animals could be left to forage for themselves in the dwindling woods but this often proved hazardous, as Flóki Vilgerðarson, who tried to settle in the Western Fjords in the late 9th century, became painfully aware of. According to the Book of Settlement, he neglected to provide fodder, lost all his livestock during a harsh winter, and went back to Norway, giving the country he had tried to settle its present uninviting name as a goodbye present.

So what options did the Icelanders have to preserve their meat and fish? Given the name Flóki saddled their country with, freezing might seem a possibility but the famously unreliable Icelandic climate makes that option very unreliable; Iceland may be cold but it isn't really that cold, or at least it can't be counted on.

Neither is the climate dry enough to make air-drying of meat a real option, although fish was usually dried. Much of the meat was smoked but that method usually demanded some salt and wasn't really suitable for the more perishable parts like offal. So the Icelanders developed their own preserving method: They used one of the few things they had more than enough of, which was whey, and preserved much of their food in fermented whey.

The late and lamented Icelandic culinary historian Hallgerður Gísladóttir did a lot of research on whey preservation and she says that she has not come across this method anywhere else; pickling or preserving food in fermented whey for preservation was known in Norway in Viking times but never widely used, as Norwegians had lots of firewood and could process salt from seawater by evaporation. In Iceland, whey preservation became common early on. This is evident from archaeological research. When ancient farmsteads are excavated, remains of several huge barrels are usually found

dug down into the kitchen or larder floor and these barrels will have been filled with soured or fermented whey, "sýra" which in Iceland was usually a byproduct of skyr-making.

Fermented whey is an excellent preservation agent; I have myself, as a child, eaten blood pudding and other food that had been kept in sýra for well over a year, in an unheated (and unrefrigerated) room. The fact is that fermented whey not only preserves the food and its nutrients remarkably well, it can even add to the nutritional value of it, since vitamins from the whey seep into the preserved food. It also tenderizes and softens the meat and gradually softens and dissolves bones. Fish and cattle bones were sometimes kept in the fermented whey until they had softened and then they were boiled and eaten, although they seem to have been rather unpopular.

Food that is kept in fermented whey for some time will gradually acquire a more sour taste. It is sometimes said that all food will eventually taste the same if it is kept in whey for long. Food that was preserved in this manner was usually boiled and cooled before being submerged in the whey. A lid was then placed on top and if the barrel was to be kept undisturbed for some time, some tallow was usually melted and poured over the rim to seal it.

Fermented whey was not just used to preserve food. It was used to flavor soups and porridges, possibly to marinate meat, but the main use was as a beverage. The use of fermented whey as a refreshing drink was not unknown in Norway but in Iceland, it became so prominent that 12th century Norwegians remarked upon it. The main reason for this is of course the lack of beer and ale. Some beer was brewed in Iceland in the Middle ages but after barley cultivation disappeared completely, sýra became the local substitute. It is not alcoholic but it can be very refreshing and tasty for those who have acquired a palate for it. It used to be said that two-year old whey was fully developed. By then, it was so sour that it was usually diluted generously with water, sometimes 1 part sýra to 11 parts water.

A Land of Milk but No Honey

Milk and dairy food was one of the mainstays of the Icelandic diet. Cow's milk was by far the most common in the early period but gradually the cow population shrunk and the sheep population grew, and ewes became more important in the dairy production. The settlers brought goats too and the wealth of place names that can be linked to goats indicates that they were fairly common at first. They are also mentioned several times in old sources like law texts, but their importance seems to have declined fairly rapidly, probably as the land became deforested. They never did disappear completely, though.

There are several indications that quite a lot of milk was drunk fresh in the Middle Ages in Iceland. It was considered ideal food for invalids and old people and when people made pension contracts with convents or monasteries, for instance, they would sometimes stipulate that they should be given a certain amount of milk to drink each day.

The main use of milk, however, was for making dairy products like butter, cheese and skyr. The Icelandic butter, because of the lack of salt, was usually not salted. It was soured. Sour butter is, I believe, an Icelandic speciality that has completely disappeared – and should not be mourned, if descriptions of visitors to Iceland in the late Middle Ages and later are to be believed – but the Icelanders themselves liked it, and even when salt became more affordable, many continued to prefer soured butter to salted. It was also said to keep

Homemade butter. Sweet, not soured.

much better than the salted butter – up to 20 years, some sources say. The Icelandic cows seem to have produced fattier milk than the cows of neighbouring countries, perhaps considerably more so, and quite a lot of butter was being produced. Rent was usually paid or at least calculated in butter and rich landlords, churches and bishop seats accumulated huge butter mountains.

The settlers brought their cheesemaking skills with them to Iceland and cheeses are often mentioned in old Icelandic documents. The Sagas also mention them several times It is clear that cheesemaking was widely practised, probably on every farm, and rent and taxes were often paid in cheese or butter. But as life became harder in the late Middle Ages, cheesemaking gradually diminished and during the 18th century, it disappeared almost completely. The reason for this is probably that skyr was thought to be more economical than cheese, the yield from the milk was higher when skyr was made than when the milk was used for cheesemaking. Lack of salt may also have played a role, since cheese was usually salted to preserve it but skyr needed no salt at all.

Skyr is an Icelandic speciality that has been made since the Settlement so it was probably brought over from Scandinavia. Skyr is known in medieval Norway, but only in Iceland did skyr-making continue and become a very important part of the diet.

Skyr was made with either sheep's or cow's milk, although in modern times it is made from cow's milk only. The milk – usually skimmed – is curdled with bacterial cultures and rennet. The culture comes from a starter kept from the last batch of skyr and the rennet was usually made from calf's stomach, although butterwort *(Pinguicula vulgaris)* could be used in a

pinch. Rennet is actually not mentioned in pre-16th century Icelandic sources but that doesn't mean it wasn't used before that time. However, some of the skyr mentioned in old sources seems to have been a lot thinner than later on and it is mentioned that people sip or drink skyr. This probably means that the skyr was not sieved or drained. Later on, it was usually left on a sieve to drain and often became thick enough to be cut. The thin, unsieved skyr was also used to preserve food, much as whey.

A Cuisine of Wants

As for cooking methods, boiling was by far the most common; there were no ovens for roasting and no medieval frying pans have been found in excavations. Meat was sometimes roasted on a spit but probably mostly when a cauldron or other cooking vessel was not available. But even the cooking pots were in short supply. No metals are found in Iceland – not enough to make cooking utensils, at least – the clay is not suitable for pottery, and so on. Cauldrons and pots had to be imported and were expensive. In AD 1345, the bishop of Skálholt found it necessary to issue a ban on using baptismal fonts and bowls for non-sacramental use, presumably meaning to cook soups and stews. Wealthy men sometimes bought cauldrons and rented them out. *Grágás*, the medieval Icelandic law book, sets out the standard dimensions of an iron cauldron and according to it, the cauldron should have a capacity of 30 litres, or around 7½ gallons. But most Norse and old Icelandic cauldrons that have been found have been rather smaller than this.

Some Icelanders did have an alternative, fuel-conserving method for cooking. They simply cooked their food in the nearest hot spring. Sometimes the food was placed in a cauldron or other container which was then lowered into the boiling or almost-boiling water, sometimes it was buried into the hot earth close to the spring, and this is how rye bread is made even today. We know the hot springs were used for cooking in medieval times, because a source dating from 1199 tells of two women who were carrying a cauldron home from a spring and had an accident.

Geothermal heat was probably used mostly for baking bread, or steaming it, and this is still being done in Iceland; you can buy *hverabrauð* (hot spring bread, a dark, moist rye bread) in any supermarket in Reykjavík. The dough is placed in a closed container, buried in hot earth and left to steam in its own moisture for up to 24 hours.

For most cooking, however, the commonly used fuel after a few centuries of deforestion was either peat or dried sheep manure, and this continued into the 20th century; sheep manure is even used to this day for smoking meat and salmon. Trees and shrubs had almost completely disappeared in many regions after a few hundred years and firewood certainly was not something to be wasted; some have said it is no coincidence that almost all witchburnings in Iceland took place in the Western Fjords, where there is usually a supply of driftwood.

It is obvious that everyday Icelandic cookery, even from the earliest times, differed in many ways from contemporary Northern European cookery, and I think it is safe to say that this does not reflect changing tastes. There are indications that the settlers tried to continue doing things as they always had, but were – either quickly or gradually – forced to adapt to a harsher environment.

Icelandic cuisine was for almost a thousand years a cuisine of wants – want

of grain, want of fresh produce, want of salt, want of fuel, even want of cooking vessels and utensils. The people of Iceland had to pay a certain price for chosing to live somewhere north of life, but they adapted to their environment and managed to survive for a thousand years on what they had.

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Part Two: Traditional and Modern Icelandic Cooking to continue in next issue

Food for Thought

by Avery Simundsson

Iceland is known for many things- beautiful scenery, Viking sagas, and the volcano that no one can pronounce. But one thing it has not been known for is its exquisite works of culinary expertise. There are certainly Icelandic dishes that have survived the journey from Iceland to make their way into the hearts of Icelanders and non-Icelanders alike – pönnukökur, vínarterta, rúllupylsa, and skyr to name a few. However, there are many others that have appealed more to people's shock factor rather than their taste buds – singed sheep's head, blood sausage, and the ultimate test of bravado, hákarl, better known as fermented shark's meat. While some of these have fallen out of favor when it comes to the average dinner table, they have not been lost. Rather, they have been cleverly marketed to become popular tourist "must haves" while touring the country. Hákarl, in particular, has become a "do you dare" food that is offered as a memorable cultural experience, washed down with a shot of black death, Brennivín.

The history of these foods becoming staples in Iceland is an interesting one. Iceland's climate is not hospitable to many common agricultural crops. In order to survive the nine-month winter, everything produced or harvested during the short, three-month growing season had to be preserved in some way. Wood was scarce and smoked food had to be processed using dung as fuel. Salt, as a preservative agent, was a traded commodity, and rather expensive for a country which survived mainly on subsistence farming for much of its history. Alternative to that, Icelanders found that the whey leftover after making skyr was a suitable alternative. Iceland used to have a bit of cheese culture, but it was generally abandoned in favor of the more convenient skyr. Using whey to preserve meats gave it a distinctively sour flavor and is a method that has seldom been found elsewhere in the world. Whey was used to preserve everything from fish, and sausage to offal and cattle bones. Nothing was wasted. Sheep's heads were singed and boiled (Svið) for the tender meat on the skull, as well as the tongue and eyeballs. Ram's testicles are pressed into blocks and soured in whey (súrsaðir hrútspungar). The blood was saved for blood sausage (Blóðmör).

Historically, food in Iceland was never eaten for pleasure, for company or for indulgence – quite opposite of how things are today when food is generally eaten for enjoyment and noses are turned up at less desirable dishes. However, even though these traditional foods were originally made for survival, I can't say there are many that I haven't eaten as a young Icelandic-Canadian growing up on a farm with an abundance of nutritious and delicious food. Though I have enjoyed fresh vegetables, homegrown beef and chicken, and a wealth of my Mother's incredible homemade pickles,

jellies, relishes, and other preserves, there has often been tongues on our kitchen counter being pressed after boiling, pails of blood in our freezer for sausage, and yes, I even remember my dad with a blow torch, singing the wool of a lamb's head on our front lawn. Are we so hard-pressed that we are required to eat these things to avoid starvation? Certainly not. Are they tasty? Well, that will depend on your taste. I can't say any of them are comparable to a barbecued lamb chop melting hot in my mouth, or the light and delicate taste of pönnukökur spread with whipped cream and strawberry jam. But there is a certain satisfaction in knowing that eating these foods connects me to what they were originally created for – survival.

I find it interesting that even hákarl, the fermented shark's meat, manages to draw so much of an audience that it is regularly available in grocery stores throughout Iceland. Tourists with no connection to the country or its history can still be persuaded, despite its name, description, reputation, and smell, to purchase and put it in their mouths. Maybe it's the same draw that pulls us into anthropologic museums to learn about our fascinating histories, or the desire to hear old sagas, and pass on our own family history, recipes and traditions.

Or maybe it's just smart marketing. Either way, its certainly food for thought.

Making Lifrapylsa in Gimli

by Elva Simundsson

PHOTO: ELVA SIMUNDSSON

Jerry and Gunnvör mixing the ground liver and suet

Lifrapylsa is an Icelandic version of liver paté. It is a combination of ground liver, suet and milk together with fillers such as flour and oatmeal. Sounds delicious, doesn't it? Eaten hot or cold, it has been a staple of Icelandic diets for centuries. However, here in North America it is not available if you don't make it yourself. Several times a year, our kitchen in Gimli is turned into a lifrapylsa-making factory. My spouse, Jerry Jonasson does all the work of grinding the liver and suet and mixing this bloody mess into an edible product. It's all about the liver which he receives from my brother, Bragi Simundsson.

The Simundsson farm has been a family owned and operated farm in the Interlake, near Arborg, Manitoba since 1901. For the last couple of decades the farm has been moving toward a more natural, environmentally healthy and sustainable beef and lamb production.

PHOTO: ELVA SIMUNDSSON

Lifrapylsa mixture in the roasting pan, ready for the oven

Ruminant animals like cattle and sheep were built to eat grass. The production of grass-fed meats is based on the concept that animals should do the job they were built for. The belief is that the meat protein portion of our diet can come from a natural system that turns a perennial forage resource that humans can't eat, into something we can. Our meat products should come from animals that are raised in a humane natural way with no artificial hormones or antibiotics.

The primary focus is to replicate nature. This is done in a sustainable manner, using rotational grazing for pasturing sheep and cattle. This is the way the bison utilized the prairies when they roamed free, with short periods of intense grazing and long periods of rest for the grass to recover. Our grandparents raised animals on a similar diet. There is a definite taste difference and scientific studies have shown a significant health advantage.

'Research conducted by the University of Manitoba, Alberta and Ontario, Canada, and beyond these borders in the U.S. and in South America, particularly in Argentina and Brazil, strongly suggests that grass-fed (also known as grass-finished or forage-finished) beef contains higher concentrations of Omega-3 Fatty Acids and conjugated linoleic acid (CLA) than conventional beef. In fact, research suggests that it may be as high as three times that of conventional grain-fed beef.

We, as humans, cannot produce essential fatty acids, therefore, they must be obtained from food or supplements. The research strongly suggests that grass-fed beef has a higher ratio of Omega 3 to Omega 6 Fatty Acids because grass contains a higher concentration of essential nutrients than are in feedlots.'[1] The Simundsson farm operation is a member of the Manitoba Grass-Fed Beef Association. They sell provincially inspected grass-fed beef by the whole, half, shared halves, or variety packs. Buyers include grocery outlets and individuals. However, for every carcass sold, buyers

generally don't want the liver in their meat order. This leaves my brother with a freezer full of the finest quality liver that needs an alternative outlet for consumption.

Bragi and Jerry have made an agreement. Bragi gives Jerry liver and suet from the grass-fed, pesticide, antibiotic and hormone-free beef and lamb. In return, Jerry gives him lifrapylsa. There is always so much that Bragi can't consume it all fast enough, so there is left-over to share with friends and family who have put in a standing order for a piece of lifrapylsa from each batch.

The process is messy and time-consuming, but basically quite simple. Jerry found a recipe in a community cookbook that I inherited from my mother. The ground liver and suet is mixed into a large roasting pan with all the other ingredients and baked.

This is the recipe: [2]

Lifrapylsa (Liver casserole)

1 lb (1/2 kg) liver
¼ lb suet
¾ cup whole-wheat (or rye) flour
1 cup oatmeal
1½ cups milk
2 tsp salt

Grind liver fine.
Grind suet (separate from the liver).
Mix liver with milk.
Add other ingredients, mixing well.
Mix suet in last.
Spoon into casserole dish or roasting pan.
Cover dish with foil.
Bake for 2 to 2½ hours at 300° F / 150°C

Jerry has been using this recipe but as he is making this with five pounds of liver per batch, everything gets multiplied in quintuplicate. Another factor is the consistency of liver. Trial and error has taught him that unless the liver is semi-frozen when it goes into the meat grinder it comes out as a mushy, soggy mess. Ground semi-frozen, it is still pretty bloody and messy but the grinder seems to handle it better.

PHOTO: GUNNVÖR DANIELSDÓTTIR

Gunnvör's Livrapylsa boiled in the bags

Traditionally, Icelandic lifrapylsa was made as a sausage (as the name indicates, pylsa = sausage in Icelandic). The ground liver mix was stuffed into animal casings (intestine, stomach, etc.) in the manner of a Scottish haggis and then boiled. Later, some cooks sewed bags out of unbleached cotton or even parchment paper. However, this recipe calls for roasting rather than boiling the product.

Our good friend Gunnvör Danielsdóttir is also a lifrapylsa fan. She buys her lamb from Bragi, but unlike most other customers, she insists that the liver be included in her orders. When Jerry is preparing to make lifrapylsa, he contacts Gunnvör and she gets him to grind her liver at the same time. Her recipe is similar to the one Jerry uses but she uses the different, more traditional 'sausage' cooking method.

Each time friends or family come from Iceland, she has them bring her some special bags (or what look like pouches) which appear to be only available in Iceland, into which she puts the lifrapylsa mixture.

These bags are made from a special protein and binding agent dried and rolled thin to resemble parchment paper. Her pylsa (or sausage) is then boiled. Boiled or baked – fans of lifrapylsa are equally pleased with either product.

1 Web source: http://manitobagrassfedbeef.ca/Health%20Benefits/HealthBenefits.html (accessed 22 June, 2015)

2 Arborg Memorial Hospital Women's Auxiliary: Culinary Gems for Manitoba's Centennial (1970) p. 46.

The Sugar Made Him Do It

by Courtney Rubin

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Siggi Hilmarsson, founder of Siggi's Skyr yogurt, discusses his trial-and-error process of starting up, the American diet, and the importance of sleep.

Tired of overly sweet American foods and homesick for a taste of the thick, tangy, protein-rich yogurt he ate every day in his native Iceland, Deloitte consultant Siggi Hilmarsson tried to cook up a batch in his Tribeca kitchen in December of 2004. He used a 1913 recipe for skyr, as the yogurt is called in Icelandic, that his mother found in the local Reykjavík library.

"The first batches were pretty awful," recalls Hilmarsson, now 34. But the naturally fat free skyr—whose thick, creamy texture comes from using three times as much milk as standard yogurts—was an unlikely success. Its only added sweetener is agave nectar, and it sells at nearly three dollars per six-ounce container (about triple that of an average yogurt).

The company, which now

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE COMPANY

Siggi Hilmarsson cooked up his first batch of skyr in his Tribeca kitchen in 2004. "The first batches were pretty awful," he says.

has nine employees, makes about 100,000 six-ounce cups of skyr a week. It's carried in Whole Foods, Wegmans, and Stop and Shop, and this March goes on sale in 110 Giant Carlisle supermarkets. (Next up: the launch of drinkable yogurt.) The Icelandic Milk and Skyr Corporation, as it's called, doubled its sales last year. And in 2011, Hilmarsson expects to grow sales by 50 percent. He recently spoke to *Inc.'s* contributing editor Courtney Rubin about starting up and the unexpected success that it brought.

What prompted you to start making skyr?

I've always been a pretty healthy eater. I don't eat a lot of sugar. Growing up at home there was never white bread in my house, only this dense European bread. My mom would give me raw vegetables to snack on, and she told me raisins were candy. I believed her for a long time. I first came to New York to go to Columbia Business School. Coming to America it was a huge shock to go food shopping. Everything had sugar in it. In the 80s Americans got paranoid. They took the fat out of everything and replaced it with sugar. I'd see what looked like really delicious bread, really dense, and it had all the grains, and then I'd toast it and taste it and think: This is weird. It had all this sugar in it. At home sugar was only for dessert. It was in chocolate. It wasn't in bread or anything else.

I ate rather poorly the first year I lived here, and it was getting to me. I started becoming anal about food, especially with regards to the sugar content. I just wanted simple, healthy things. And I missed skyr. I used to eat it every day in Iceland. So I was in my apartment at Christmas [2004] and I decided to try to make it.

How did you go from the kitchen to a plant?

The first time I made the yogurt at home it wasn't what I wanted. The second time it was OK. I never got it consistently perfect, and I could never really figure out what was going wrong. It's a simple product that people have been making in Iceland for hundreds of years. After using the cream to make butter, the leftover nonfat milk gets turned into skyr. It's simple but it's not easy. It's chemistry: The yogurt responds to the environment, and you really need to make it in a plant to be able to get consistently good results.

So I took a vacation from Deloitte and went upstate to try to make the yogurt. You need a really specific temperature for the skyr to come together, and you can't really do that in a home kitchen. So I found this dairy plant that is a part of an agriculture college in upstate New York to make it in. It was only rented out when it wasn't being used by the students. And I didn't know this, but you have to have a compliant label to take the yogurt out of the plant and this person at the Department of Agriculture has to approve it. I didn't know that until I was about to start making the yogurt and the guy at the test facility asked me about it. So I had a day to do a label and to decide on a name for the product. So under this pressure, last minute, I picked the name Siggi's Skyr. I did my first professional batch of yogurt there and it tasted awesome. When I was making it in my house I'd have six or seven cups, and now I had 300 cups. So I started giving them away.

To whom?

Well, one of the people I gave it to was a friend who worked at Murray's Cheese. And without me knowing it she took the samples to a staff tasting. Then out of the blue I got an email from one of her colleagues saying they liked it and they wanted to start selling it. That's when I started to think maybe I could make a real business of it. I was still young, I didn't like

my day job, I had this product I was mad about, and I had somebody willing to sell it. So I quit my job in the fall of 2005. And a few days before I started selling at Murray's [about a year after he quit his job] I started selling at the [Nolita] Green Market, and we sold out there on the first day!

You also had a bit of luck getting into Whole Foods.

I donated some yogurt to an eclectic retreat of artists and environmentalists in Long Island. There was someone from Whole Foods there, and she liked it. And Whole Foods wanted to stock it. But it was scary: right from the start the demand was too much. We were going from 15 stores to like, 100. It wasn't all wine and roses. We couldn't make the yogurt and cool it fast enough. We had to shut down for three months to rebuild the whole production process. As an entrepreneur it was the worst thing that could happen: People want your product and you can't supply it. I was worried I wouldn't be able to make it again. When I started this and thought of it as a business, I thought it would be a cool niche New York yogurt company. I wasn't sure it would have this huge commercial appeal. I didn't think it would be as well-received as it has been. It doesn't cater to the mainstream American market. It's not sweet; it's more tart. And we use the real fruit, not any concentrated flavorings. Being out of production was a scary time. I'd lie awake in the middle of the night worrying, but then I'd have a yogurt and think: Ah, it's actually really good and I would feel OK again.

The flavors – ginger and orange, for example – are fairly unusual. How did you hit upon the variations you make?

The first one I made was blueberry—that was my childhood favorite. I love blueberries. I love how they explode when you bite them. The orange-ginger one—I always liked that combination. I just was making things that I myself like. The pomegranate-passion fruit one a lot of my friends asked for pomegranate yogurt, and it sounded good to me because I like tart stuff but I later added the passion fruit for more flavor. I wanted to make a honey raisin one because my mom used to make a honey-raisin granola. But the raisins turn back into grapes in the process! We used to make a pear and mint one, and that happened because the mint yogurt lacked body, so I added pear to give it body and crunch. But we had problems with the supply chain for our pears. First it was going to be a month out of production and then that became a year. And it's been two years. I still get emails about it from customers all the time, asking for it. I want to bring it back.

How did you fund the company?

I got some seed money [low five-figures] from a professor of mine at Columbia. I'd been a teaching assistant for one of his classes. And it was simple to ask him: Once when I was making the yogurt at home I'd given him some samples. He liked it and encouraged me to start the business, and said he'd be willing to invest if I did. So it was pretty straightforward. My first round of financing after that then came from friends and family. Last year, I got funding from Revelry Brands. I'd met the [founder] Brendan [Synott] at a natural food trade show. He was very supportive of what I was doing, liked the brand, and was very generous sharing his experiences as a

food entrepreneur. [Synott, 31, founded Bear Naked, a natural snacks company he sold to Kellogg Co. in 2007.] So when it came time to raise money I had no doubts they would be a good partner.

Why don't you brand the yogurt as fat-free? Isn't that a selling point?

The product is the product—it is what it is. I don't want to call out certain attributes more than others. I just want it to look nice. It's a simple product—it's yogurt with fruit. It's not rocket science. So the label should reflect that and be pretty simple.

You've done no advertising, and it's only recently – years after you started the company – that you've joined Facebook. How did the word about Siggi's spread?

The product is different. If you like it, you are likely to tell other people about it. And I've been very fortunate with people spreading the word. I also think people are waking up to the importance of reducing the amount of processed sugar in their diet, which certainly helps a product like ours.

What have been your biggest mistakes?

It sounds kind of funny to say, but I wasn't prepared for success. I didn't believe that things were going well, and I think I always thought if it didn't work I could always do something else. So I was very conservative about building my infrastructure and hiring people, which I think has its own problems. I think you have to plan for success but still be cautious and guard against failure. It's not very Scandinavian to assume you'll be successful.

What advice would you give other entrepreneurs?

Try to sleep well. You never make worse decisions than when you're totally sleep deprived. People will tell you that you have to make a decision right then and there. You don't. Sleep first and then wake up and decide.

Eiríks Saga Rauða
The Saga Of Erik The Red

Translated from Icelandic by Emil Bjarnason. He explains, "In translation, except for the obligatory substitution of th for þ and d for ð, I have used the Icelandic spellings of names and places."
It is believed that this saga was written in the 13th C. The author is anonymous. It is about the Norse exploration of North America around 1000 AD/CE.

Conclusion (continued from last issue)

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Thórdur was the name of a man who lived at Höfda in Höfdaströnd. His wife was Thorgerdur, the daughter of Thóris the saunterer and Fridgerdur, the daughter of King Kjarval of Ireland. Thórdur was the son of Bjarni byrdasmjörs, son of Hróald hrygg, son of Áslakur Bjarnason Ironside, son of Ragnar hairybreeks. They had a son whose name was Snorri; he was married to Thórhildur rjúpu, daughter of Thórdar gellis. Their son was Thórdur horsehead. His son was Thorfinnur Karlsefni. Thorfinn's mother was called Thórunn. Thorfinnur was a trader and considered a good seaman.

One summer Karlsefni decided to go to Greenland. Snorri Thorbrandsson from Alftafjörd went with him and on their ship they took forty fellow travellers. Bjarni Grímólfsson was a man from Breidfjörd. Another was Thórhallur Gamlason from Eastfjörds. That same summer, they readied their ship to go to Greenland. They also took forty men with them. They and Karlsefni set sail for Greenland. Nothing is known about their trip, but from all reports, both ships arrived in Eiríksfjörd in the fall.

Erik and other residents rode to meet the ships and received them courteously. They offered Erik any of their wares that he desired. But Erik showed them his greatness by declining their offer since he had invited these two ship captains to his home for the winter in Brattahlíd. This pleased them and they thanked him. Later their goods were brought to Brattahlíd. There was a large warehouse in which to store their goods. There was no shortage of the things they required, and they were happy with their situation.

Then as yuletide approached, Erik was somewhat cold and not as happy as usual. One day, Karlsefni came to Erik and said:

"Are you depressed, Erik? You have treated us with great generosity and we are much in your debt. Now tell me what the matter is."

Erik replied:

"You have been courteous and good natured. What is bothering me is that, coming from other countries, you will never have had a worse Yuletide than Erik the Red is able to provide for you in Brattahlíd, Greenland."

"It need not be so," said Karlsefni. "We have on our ship both malt and

wheat, and can provide whatever you need for a celebration as magnificent as you could want."

That pleased Erik, and a yule feast was then prepared which was the finest that men had ever experienced in this poor land. And after Yuletide, Karlsefni asked Erik's permission to propose marriage to Gudrídur, for he believed that Erik would have control. Erik answered that she must decide on her own future. The outcome was that they did get married, and a celebration took place. Then they stayed in Brattahlíd for the winter.

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In Brattahlíd, there was much talk of a search for Vínland the Good,[1] and it was said that there would be good profits. And it came about that Karlsefni and Snorri prepared their ship for such a voyage. Bjarni and Thorhallur also prepared to go in their ship, together with its crew and followers.

There was a man named Thorvardur who was married to Freydís, Erik's natural daughter. He also went along, as well as Erik's son, Thorvaldur, and Thorhallur who was called a fisherman. He had long been with Erik, as a fisher in the summer but left in the winter. He was a strong man dark and foolish, taciturn, but foulmouthed. He was a bad Christian. He was on the same ship as Thorvaldur and Thorvardur. They had the same ship that Thorbjörn had had. They had a hundred and forty people when they sailed to the Western settlement and from there to Bear Island.

From there they travelled two days southward. There they found land and went ashore in boats to explore the area and found there many large rocks, about eighteen feet wide. There were many foxes. They gave the place a name and called it Helluland.[2] From there they sailed two days, heading southwest by south, and found a land wooded and with many animals. There was an island to the southwest. There, they killed a bear and named the island Bear Island, and the country Markland.[3]

Then they followed the coast southwards for a long while and came to a cape, on their starboard side. There were beaches that were long and sandy. They landed and found a ship's keel on the point and called the place Kjalarnes. They also called the beaches Wonderstrand,[4] because of the long time they had been following them in the ship. Then the shore became indented with bays.

They anchored the ship in one of the bays.

King Ólaf Tryggvason had given Leifur a Scottish couple; the man was called Haki, and his wife was Hekja. They were fleeter than animals. These two were on the same vessel with Karlsefni. When they had sailed by the Wonderstrands, they sent the Scots ashore and asked them to run south over the land and to explore its resources, then return after three days. They were wearing a type of clothing that included a hood, no sleeves, and attached from head to foot with buttons and loops, and otherwise bare.

Soon, the Scots came back, one carrying vines[5] and the other self-sown wheat. Then they set out in the ship. Then they entered a fjord. There was an island outside. Around it were swift streams, they called it Straumsey. There were so many ducks on the island that one could hardly walk for stepping on eggs. They called the place Straumfjörd.[6]

They carried their goods from the ship and settled there. They had with them all kinds of livestock. There were beautiful surroundings. They did nothing but explore the land. They stayed there over the winter and did little work. They fished for food and were poorly fed.

Then Thorhallur the fisherman disappeared. They had already prayed to God for food, and received little. They looked for Thorhallur for three days and found him on the peak of a crag. He lay there looking up at the sky, with both mouth and nostrils gaping and burped a little. They asked why he was there. He thought it of no importance. They asked him to go home with them, which he did.

A little later they caught a whale and butchered it, though no man knew what kind of whale it was; when cooked, they ate it and all of them took sick. Then said Thorhallur:

"Hasn't old Redbeard got the better of your Christ this time? Now I have this for my poems, that I compose for Thor, who has never let me down."

When they realized this, they carried the whale to the water and plunged it in and then directed their prayers to God. Then the weather improved and they were able to row out to sea and catch fish. After that there was no shortage of food, for they had animals on land, eggs from the island and fish from the sea.

1 Newfoundland (land of wine due to currants found there)
2 Baffin Island (country of flat stones)
3 Labrador (forest country)
4 Coast of Labrador or coast of Cape Breton Island
5 Translation for vínber meaning wineberry
6 Fjord in Newfoundland – exact location unknown

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It is said that Thorhallur the fisherman wished to go north to Wonderstrands and Kjalarnes to search for Vínland, but Karlsefni preferred to go south. Thorhallur left the island with not more than nine men, and a much bigger group went with Karlsefni. And when he got going Thorhallur composed this verse:

Men have said I drank well
when I came here
it suits me to blame the land
I have to lift the bucket
wine will not touch my lips
I prefer lime water.

And when they were at sea, he spoke:

Later we will go
where our lands are
let us sail the open sea
while men who fail
and praise the land
stay at Wonderstrands
and cook whale meat.

Later they sailed north to Wonderstrands and Kjalarnes intending to sail west, but then came a west wind and blew them to Ireland, where they were beaten and enslaved, and there Thorhallur died, according to what merchants have said.

10

Now it must be said that Karlsefni went south with Snorri and Bjarni and their people. They travelled a long time until they came to a river that descended from the land, through a lake and to the sea. There were many islands and one couldn't enter the river except at high tide.

They sailed into the river mouth and called it Hop. On the land they found self-sown wheat where lowlands were and trees. Where there were brooks, they were full of fish. They dug trenches and when the tide went out, the trenches were full of fish. There were a great many animals of all kinds in the woods. They were there for half a month, resting and needing no watch-keeping. They had their livestock with them.

Then one morning early, when they looked about, they saw a great number of canoes in which wooden sticks were being waved and flailed. Then Karlsefni asked:

"What can this denote?"

Snorri Thorbrandsson replied:

"It could be a token of peace. We could

take a white shield and meet them."

This they did, and the strangers came ashore. They were dark and evil looking, with ugly hair. They were large-eyed and broad cheeked. They stayed a while pondering the visitors, then returned to their boats and went south along the point. Karlsefni's men had built their shacks some near and some farther from the water. They stayed there that winter.

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There was no snow and their livestock were able to feed themselves. But when spring came, one morning early they saw a large number of canoes on the south shore, so many it appeared as if coal had been spread over the sea. All of them carried sticks and were waving them.

Karlsefni's men then held up their shields and put their market goods between them. The Skrælings[1] wanted especially red cloth. They offered in exchange leather goods and pelts. They also wanted to buy weapons, but Karlsefni forbade it. The Skrælings bought red cloth and wound it around their heads and the trading proceeded apace. The supply of such cloth shrunk and the Karlsefni followers took advantage of it by cutting it into smaller pieces, for which the Skrælings gave the same amount of their goods as before. It came about that a bull owned by Karlsefni emerged from the woods and bellowed loudly. This frightened the Skrælings who ran out to their canoes and left for the southern part of the land. They were not seen again for three weeks.

But after that, they saw a large number of canoes arrive. Then all the staves were waved counterclockwise, and accompanied by loud howling. At this, the Karlsefni people raised the red shield of war. The Skrælings jumped from their canoes, advanced and fought. There was a shower of missiles, for the Skrælings had catapults. The Karlsefni people saw that the Skrælings carried ball-shaped objects about the size of sheep stomachs, mostly blue coloured atop their staves and were flinging them at the Karlsefni crew. They made a hideous noise when they fell.

At this, Karlsefni's men were greatly frightened and desired nothing more than to flee across the river, for they felt that the enemy was attacking them from all directions; they didn't feel easy until they had reached certain hills where they took a stand and fought back fiercely. Freydís came out and saw this, and called out:

"Why are you running from these worthless people, worthy men that you are, that I would think you would slay like farm animals? And if I had a weapon, I think I would fight better than any of you."

They paid no attention to her words. Freydís wanted to join them, but was held up because she was not well. Neverthless, she followed them into the woods, and the Skrælings went after her. She came across a dead body, that of Thorbrandur Snorrason. There was a flat stone in his head and his sword beside him. She picked it up to defend herself. The Skrælings attacked her. Then she drew her breast out from under her clothing and struck it with the sword. With that the Skrælings took fright and ran to their canoes and left. This won her the praise of the crew.

Two of Karlsefni's men died and many more Skrælings. The Karlsefni men were outnumbered and returned home to their quarters to bind their wounds and consider how many men had come down from the hills. Some held that it had been only those who disembarked from the canoes, and the rest an optical illusion. The Skrælings also found a dead man, and an axe that lay by him. One of them picked up the axe and chopped at a tree, then each of them tried it in turn and thought it a treasure. Then one took it and hit a stone which broke

the axe. Then they thought it useless since it couldn't cut stone, so they threw it away.

The Karlsefni people now saw that, although there were good resources, there would equally be fear and unrest if they settled here. Later they set sail for their own country, sailing northwards. On the way they found five Skraælings in skin jackets sleeping near the shore. They also had cases containing mixed animal marrow and blood. They assumed that these were outlaws, so they killed them. Later they found a point of land with many animals. There was much cow dung to be seen indicating that animals spent the nights there.

Now Karlsefni reached Straumfjörd, and they remained there for all the good things they needed to have. Some people say that Bjarni and Gudrídur had been there later, together with a hundred others and went no further south than Karlsefni had gone, and forty men with them and stayed there less than two months, then returned.

Then Karlsefni took one ship to search for Thorhallur the fisherman, while another crew stayed behind and went north to Kjalarnes, and went west from there with the land on their starboard side. There was nothing to be seen except a desert and no openings. And before they had gone very far, the east wind subsided and was replaced by a west wind. They entered an estuary and laid up on the south bank.

1 Natives

12

One morning the Karlsefni people saw a spot above the clearing that glittered. They shouted at it. It moved and turned out to be a one-legged man and it ran to the river bank where they were located. Thorvaldur Eiríksson sat at the helm and the one-foot shot an arrow into his abdomen.

Thorvaldur drew out the arrow and said:

"The belly is fat. Good land has nourished us well, but we will hardly enjoy it."

He died shortly after. Then the one-foot ran to the road and to the south. The Karlsefni people chased him and sometimes saw him. They last saw him running to a certain cove. Then they left. One man then composed the following verse:

We men chased
this is true
one one-footer
down to the shore
a strange man who raced us
over the hills near Karlsefni

They went north later thinking to find the land of the one-footer. They did not wish to endanger their men further. They intended to gather at one mountain that was equally far from the water at both ends. They stayed at Straumfjörd during the third winter. The men stayed together, and guarded their women, while the unmarried ones were responsible for much unrest. Karlsefni's son, Snorri, was born the first autumn, and was there three years before they left.

When they left Vínland, they had a southwind and reached Markland where they found five Skrælings, one of them with a beard; two were women and two children. They took the two boys. The adults they buried. The two boys remained with them and learned the language and were baptised. They said their mother was named Vethilda and their father Ovægi. They said that Skrælings were ruled by a king whose name was Avaldamon and another king was called Avaldidida. They said they had no houses, and that people slept in caves. They said that there was another land, opposite to their country, where men wore white clothes and carried

staves in front of them, and were given to shouting. People concluded that this must have been a whiteman's country, possibly Greater Ireland. Now they reached Greenland and stayed the winter with Erik the Red.

13

Then Bjarni Grímólfsson sailed in the Irish Sea and got into a sea of worms and the ship sank under them. They had a small boat that had been tarred with seal fat to protect it against seaworms. They got into the boat and immediately realized that it was not adquate for all of them. Then Bjarni said:

"Since the boat will not hold more than half of us, the men will draw lots, so none will be preferred over others."

Everyone felt this was so properly advanced, that none would oppose it. The draw resulted in Bjarni and half his crew entering the boat. But when they were in the boat, one Icelandic man who was left on the ship, and whom Bjarni had brought from Iceland, said:

"Are you, Bjarni, going to leave me here?"

Bjarni replied:

"So it will have to be."

The man answered:

"You promised my father when I left Iceland with you, that our fates would be shared."

The matter was settled by Bjarni returning to the ship and the other man entering the boat. They went their separate ways until they arrived in Dublin and told this story. But it is believed by most people that Bjarni and the men who were with him on the ship, perished at sea, for they were never heard of again.

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The second summer after returning, Karlsefni went to Iceland, and Gudrídur with him and they went home to Reynines. His mother felt that he had not made a good match, and she stayed away from home the first year. But when she learned by experience Gudrídur's good qualities, she returned home, and their relations were good.

Snorri Karlsefni's daughter, Hallfrídur, was the mother of Bishop Thorlak Rúnólfsson. They had one son, called Thorbjörn; his daughter, Thórunn, was the mother of Bishop Bjarni. Snorri Karlsefnisson also had a son called Thorgeir, who was the father of Yngvildur, mother of Bishop Brandur.

And here this story ends.

POETRY

Iceland First Seen

by William Morris

Lo from our loitering ship
a new land at last to be seen;
Toothed rocks down the side of the firth
on the east guard a weary wide lea,
And black slope the hill-sides above,
striped adown with their desolate green:
And a peak rises up on the west
from the meeting of cloud and of sea,
Foursquare from base unto point
like the building of Gods that have been,
The last of that waste of the mountains
all cloud-wreathed and snow-flecked and grey,
And bright with the dawn that began
just now at the ending of day.

Ah! what came we forth for to see
that our hearts are so hot with desire?
Is it enough for our rest,
the sight of this desolate strand,
And the mountain-waste voiceless as death
but for winds that may sleep not nor tire?
Why do we long to wend forth
through the length and breadth of a land,
Dreadful with grinding of ice,
and record of scarce hidden fire,
But that there 'mid the grey grassy dales
sore scarred by the ruining streams
Lives the tale of the Northland of old
and the undying glory of dreams?

O land, as some cave by the sea
where the treasures of old have been laid,
The sword it may be of a king
whose name was the turning of fight:
Or the staff of some wise of the world
that many things made and unmade.
Or the ring of a woman maybe
whose woe is grown wealth and delight.
No wheat and no wine grows above it,
no orchard for blossom and shade;
The few ships that sail by its blackness
but deem it the mouth of a grave;
Yet sure when the world shall awaken,
this too shall be mighty to save.

Or rather, O land, if a marvel
it seemeth that men ever sought
Thy wastes for a field and a garden
fulfilled of all wonder and doubt,
And feasted amidst of the winter
when the light of the year had been fought,
Whose plunder all gathered together
was little to babble about;
Cry aloud from thy wastes, O thou land,
"Not for this nor for that was I wrought.
Amid waning of realms and of riches
and death of things worshipped and sure,
I abide here the spouse of a God,
and I made and I make and endure."

O Queen of the grief without knowledge,
of the courage that may not avail,
Of the longing that may not attain,
of the love that shall never forget,
More joy than the gladness of laughter
thy voice hath amidst of its wail:
More hope than of pleasure fulfilled

amidst of thy blindness is set;
More glorious than gaining of all
thine unfaltering hand that shall fail:
For what is the mark on thy brow
but the brand that thy Brynhild doth bear?
Lone once, and loved and undone
by a love that no ages outwear.

Ah! when thy Balder comes back,
and bears from the heart of the Sun
Peace and the healing of pain,
and the wisdom that waiteth no more;
And the lilies are laid on thy brow
'mid the crown of the deeds thou hast done;
And the roses spring up by thy feet
that the rocks of the wilderness wore.
Ah! when thy Balder comes back
and we gather the gains he hath won,
Shall we not linger a little
to talk of thy sweetness of old,
Yea, turn back awhile to thy travail
whence the Gods stood aloof to behold?

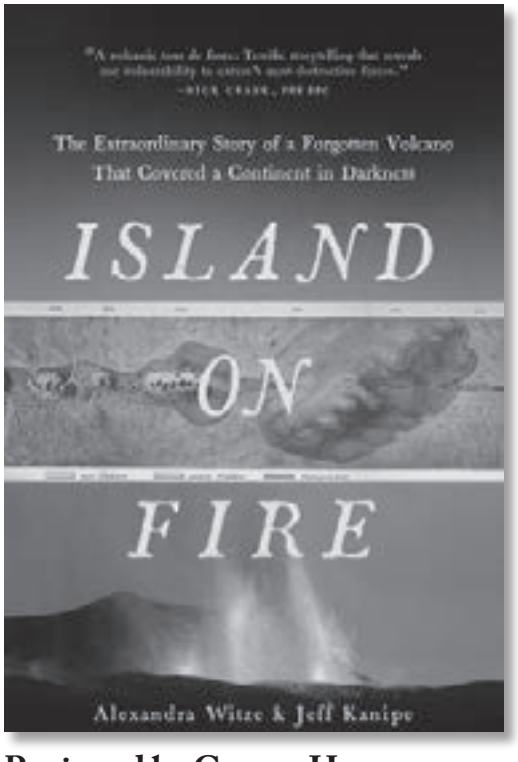
(1891)

Book Reviews

Island on Fire

The Extraordinary Story of a Forgotten Volcano That Covered a Continent in Darkness

by Alexandria Witze and Jeff Kanipe



Reviewed by George Hanson

York and London
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When I was living in Iceland during the 1961-62 academic year, my mother called me from our home in Chicago. I quickly discerned the concern in her voice as she asked me, "Are you OK? I heard that there has been a volcanic eruption in Iceland." I assured her that I was fine and that the eruption was far enough away that all I knew about it was what I read in the newspapers or heard on the evening news.

But communication was very different in 1783 when the volcano Laki erupted. News about this catastrophe was slow in reaching the outside world. Actually, the Laki eruption was a fissure eruption of over 100 craters. When the eruption was over, a year and a half later, so much lava was spewed from the earth that it could have covered all of Manhattan up to the 71st floor of the Empire State Building. The effects of this outburst were felt throughout northern Europe but nowhere more than in Iceland – especially in the Skaftafelssýsla district.

This book is the story of an island and, in particular, the account of the disastrous eruption of 1783.

Several famous volcanic eruptions are covered in this book. Today the Greek island of Santaroni, with its white buildings, gleams against a blue sky. Years ago I hiked from the blue Aegean Sea to the top of this small island, overwhelmed by the beauty all around me. However, it was very different around 1600 B.C., when Thera, as Santaroni was then known, blew its top. In 79 A.D,

Vesuvius suddenly erupted and the citizens of Pompei were frozen in time. We can still see their tormented figures.

But this book is mainly about Iceland and the Laki eruption. Here the people died slowly of starvation and disease as poisonous gases showered down upon the helpless population, destroying the sheep in the hills and the fish in the sea. We are unable to see tormented faces but we can imagine how deep was the torment was as we look upon this vast field of lava. The effects of this *Island On Fire* spread far beyond Iceland. Clouds carried the toxic gases to northern Europe, where tens of thousands died.

The hero of this book is The Rev. Jón Steingrímsson (1728—1791). He was born to an impoverished family, which became even poorer when his father died when he was only eleven. There seemed little prospect that he could continue on to higher education. But he was able to attend the cathedral school at Hólar. He graduated at the top of his class, and in those days it was assumed he would continue his studies at the University of Copenhagen. But Providence had other plans. He did study with the National Physician of Iceland, and with this basic training he treated about 2,000 patients. He eventually made his way to the south of Iceland, where he later became pastor of the Kirkjubæjarklaustur congregation when he was 55 years of age. It was a time of widespread prosperity. People had so many sheep that they could not count them all. The rivers were filled with fish and the ocean yielded its bounty.

But then the cloud. The first chapter of *Island On Fire* begins with the words, "Around 9 a.m. on Sunday, 8 June 1783, Reverend Jón Steingrímsson stepped out of his small farmhouse, mounted his horse and began the five kilometre journey to church. Sunday services were his favourite part of the week, but he was particularly looking forward to today's service. It was Pentacost Sunday…."

"Jon chanced to look northward over his shoulder, and abruptly his reverie dissolved. He pulled up his horse and gazed in wonder and alarm. Looming over the foothills was the enormous, roiling black cloud."

The time of testing had begun. The erupting volcanoes released tons of ash and poisonous gases, turning the land of the midnight sun into almost total darkness at midday. The mad flow of lava rushed down a 19-mile gorge, 60 metres wide and 280 metres deep, destroying everything in its path.

On 20 July 1783, Jon's congregation made their way to church, groping in the darkness. Once inside the church, the pastor implored God to save his flock. Meanwhile, they could hear the fury of the lava just a few yards away. After the service, when the church door was opened, they saw that the lava had not advanced an inch further. From this time the service was known as the eldmessa (fire mass) and Jon as the eldprestur (fire priest).

Until the eruption ceased, in February 1784, few were killed by the lava. Instead, they were doomed to die slowly by disease and starvation. Sometimes Pastor Jon conducted funerals for as many as ten people in a single day and buried in a single grave. Known as "famine of the mist," this catastrophe took ten thousand lives, or one fourth of the population, including Pastor Jon's beloved wife of 38 years, Thorunn.

As Sulphur Dioxide from the volcanoes descended to lower elevations and encountered moisture, it turned into sulphuric acid that tore into the lungs of people and livestock. Toward the end of the 18th century the population was reduced to a mere 40,000. There was even thought of moving the entire population to Denmark. Thus ended one of the worst periods of Icelandic history.

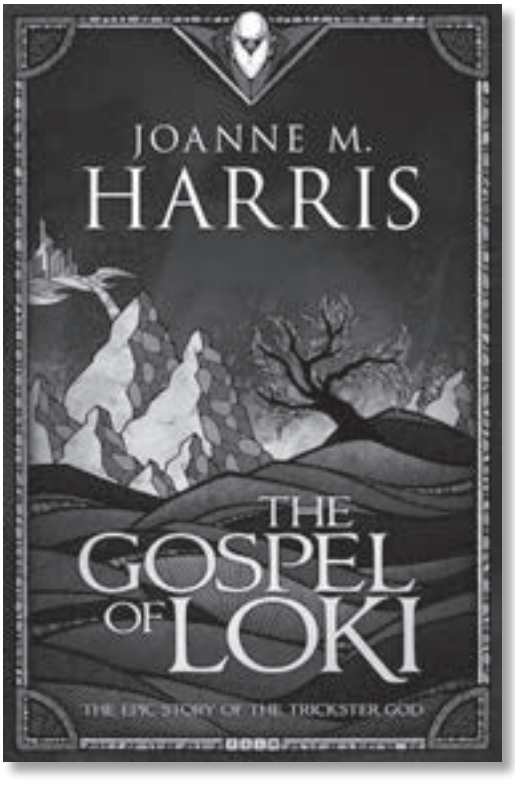
Pastor Jon Steingrinsson was a man of faith and also a scientist. He held a traditional view as far as his faith was concerned. He had to somehow reconcile his faith with a scientific outlook. His treatise on the Laki eruption, translated into English as "Fires of the Earth" in 1998, gives a detailed account of the event. In fact, he was the first volcanist in Icelandic history. His book remains the primary reference of this historic event. His autobiography, perhaps the greatest in the Icelandic language, was translated into English in 2002 by Dr. Michael Fell under the title *An Ever Present Help in Trouble.*

While *Island on Fire* is primarily about the 1783 eruption, it is much more. It covers some of the great volcanic eruptions in history. Between its 224 pages, it covers a lot of material over the ages.

Today I'm looking out at beautiful Mount Baker, an active volcano. It's a cloudless day, but still I wonder....

The Gospel of Loki

by Joanne M. Harris



Reviewed by Andrew McGillvary

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In *The Gospel of Loki* Joanne Harris retells the Old Norse mythological cycle from the point of view of one of the most challenging characters from the Norse pantheon: Loki Laufeyjarson. Old Norse mythology is not a cohesive group of narratives, and interpretations of Loki's character differ from one story to the next, and for that reason Harris' portrayal of the story of the gods would seem to be a daunting challenge, for the author as much as for the reader. For her source material Harris has drawn from *The Poetic Edda* and *The Prose Edda*, both of which are collections of mythological material written in 13th century Iceland. Entering a reading of *The Gospel of Loki* the reader can ask: how is all of this diverse, often

conflicting material tied together?

The answer is through the author's imagination. Harris creates a first person narrative from the perspective of Loki. The reader is encouraged to sympathize with Loki, and see the downfall of the Norse pantheon not as a result of Loki's treachery, which is a plausible interpretation of the 13th century material, particularly *The Prose Edda*, but rather of the utterly human flaws of Odin, Heimdall, and other Norse gods who never welcomed Loki into their divine society in the garden of the gods. Trapped on the outside, in the novel Loki does everything he can to try and be accepted, but in the end he is a castaway, and succumbs to the maliciousness for which he is so well known.

The framework in which Loki's *Gospel* is set is that of a straightforward retelling of almost each and every scene in which he appears in the sources with little alteration made to the plots of the mythical retellings. What has changed is the movement from a third person narrator—the perspective many of us are familiar with from reading the *Eddas*—to the troubled inner self of a character we can relate to, even if we wish it were not so. What the novel as a genre has brought to world literature—the challenge to view the world from a different perspective—this novel brings to Old Norse mythology.

The Gospel of Loki reminds its reader that the story most commonly known can always be reinterpreted and retold. It is the hope of the present reviewer that Harris' achievement is regarded as a creative exploration of the Norse myths in modern literature. I recommend this book for the reader who has no prior knowledge of mythology and for the reader who is familiar with the source material. The myths as they are represented in the novel deviate from the original source texts, but it is likely that the source texts also deviated from earlier narrative forms, and in this way *The Gospel of Loki* reminds us that Old Norse mythology is still a living mythology, even today.

Contributors

EMIL BJARNASON, BA MA PhD, b. 1918 Wynyard, SK d. 2006 Vancouver, BC Emil was fluent in Icelandic and read the Sagas as a resource to research his genealogy. Not being satisfied with some translations, he decided to write his own.

GEORGE HANSON is the son of George and Vigdís Hanson. His mother was born in Iceland and immigrated with her parents who were early pioneers in Arborg, Manitoba. George grew up in Chicago, earned a BA from Northwestern University, MA in Library Science from University of Chicago and a PhD in Education from Chicago's Loyola University. He did post-graduate studies at the Fiske Icelandic Collection at Cornell University and in Iceland at the National Library and Menntamálaráðuneytið (Ministry of Education). After a career in university libraries he has retired to Port Townsend, Washington. He is a descendant of Séra Jón Steingrímsson.

ANDREW MCGILLIVRAY is a Winnipeg, MB, resident and sessional instructor in the Department of Icelandic Language and Literature at the University of Manitoba. He is currently finishing his PhD thesis for the University of Iceland on Old Norse mythology, and has a keen interest in ancient, medieval, and modern literature.

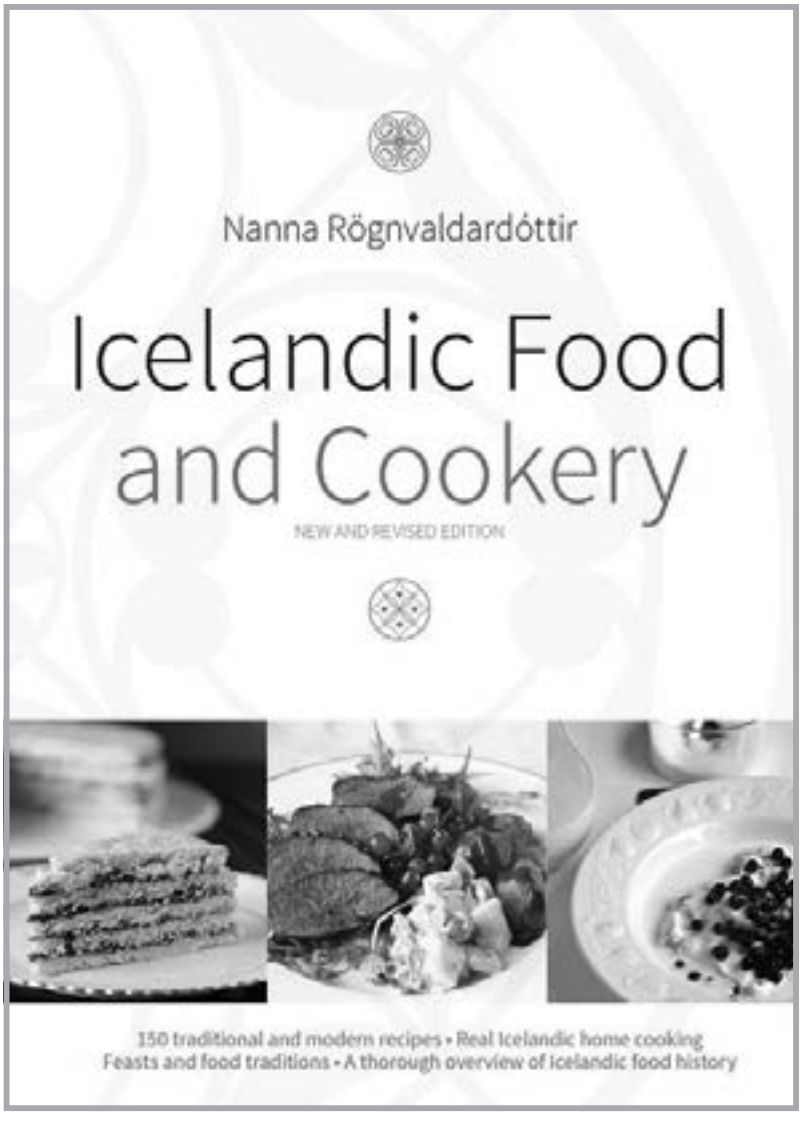
WILLIAM MORRIS (1834-1896) was an English poet, translator, textile designer and social activist. He made two trips to Iceland in 1871 and 1873. His two visits to the country profoundly influenced him, in particular in his growing leftist opinions; he would comment that these trips made him realize that "the most grinding poverty is a trifling evil compared with the inequality of classes."

COURTNEY RUBIN Now based in New York, Courtney has written for such publications as the *New York Times, Time, Marie Claire* and others. She is the author of *The Weight Loss Diaries.*

AVERY SIMUNDSSON grew up on a farm in rural Manitoba. She has a degree in Mechanical Engineering from University of Manitoba and works in that profession.

ELVA SIMUNDSSON is a member of the *Icelandic Connection* board of editors and a regular contibutor to the journal. She lives in Gimli, MB.

JOHANNA ("JO") WILSON was born in Winnipeg and spent some early years in Selkirk before moving back to Winnipeg. For 62 years she was married to A. Frank Wilson. She is the mother of three, grandmother of four and great-great grandmother of three. Johanna was a Fjalkona in 1991.
She holds a life membership in the Jon Sigurdsson Chapter IODE, has served two terms as Regent and has been a member for nearly 70 years. Johanna co-edited *Veterans of Icelandic Descent* in 1990 and has raised money for scholarships through her baking for the Jon Sigurdsson Chapter IODE.



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Nanna Rögnváldardóttir's *Icelandic Food and Cookery* cover

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