

Scary is exciting -- sheep's head is not for wimps

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Sheep's head is not for wimps. Until now very few of us have been tempted by this traditional Norwegian dish.

"It's a pity, because you will really have to look far and wide for a more tasty traditional dish," says Professor Reidar Mykletun at the Norwegian School of Hotel Management at the University of Stavanger.

"With good potatoes, rutabaga mash, beer and aquavit sheep's [head](#) is a tempting experience for genuine lamb enthusiasts. But sheep's head is an example of a dish that is scary for many of us. With both [ears](#), mouth, [teeth](#), tongue and eyes looking at you from the plate, it's close to being revolting for the uninitiated", he says.

Conquering fear

Together with associate professor Szilvia Gyimóthy from the University of Aalborg, Reidar Mykletun has done research on the concept of scary food, and how entrepreneurial persons have called attention to traditional food and made it popular. Studies have resulted in two research articles on the topic.

"To eat scary food has been part of adventure tourism", Mykletun says. He believes this interest in extreme food experience has become trendy.

To eat sheep's head is a demanding experience for many people.

"It is like overcoming fear. One is proud when one has mastered it", Mykletun says.

"We experience a conflict between trying new tastes on the one hand and avoiding bad tastes on the other", he explains.

Many obstacles

The reason why some dishes are scarier than others, is often that we come uncomfortably close to the experience of eating something that has been alive. The appearance of the sheep's head is frightening: To eat a face can be disgusting.

Moreover, we are accustomed to what is right and wrong food to eat. For many, a head falls into in the latter category and thus something we feel is revolting.

The smell of smoked mutton can also be an obstacle for us. The powerful aroma of a cooked sheep's head has a subconscious effect on us and this is often a warning of something dangerous or unpleasant. And then we may not want to eat it.

According to the UiS professor, consistency can be an important barrier. A sheep's head has several types of meat. Some of it is tender and fine, some is fat, and the [tongue](#) has its own grainy consistency. The eyes are soft and gelatinous.

"Sheep's head is clearly a meal that one must learn to like", Reidar Mykletun says.

Commercialization

Eating scary food is therefore practice in overcoming fear. In the tourism industry a few entrepreneurs have commercialized this idea and thereby raised traditional food to new heights.

"Voss in Norway has a long tradition in eating sheep's head. People in Voss have developed a special way of cooking it. They do not skin the head, but burn off the wool to obtain a lighter brown color of the meat. Some entrepreneurs have seen this as a good idea. They have been inventive and courageous in using sheep's heads as culinary experience in the promotion of the area. Selling extreme experiences, whether it is food or sport, has made Voss an attractive destination for tourists and other visitors", Mykletun says.

He especially mentions the sheep's head entrepreneur Ivar Løne and his family business which currently produces most of the sheep's heads on Norwegian tables. On Løne's farm restaurant you can enjoy sheep's head with Vossa beer and aquavit.

"Then we have "Smalahovesleppet," a special festival where visitors can both sample sheep's head and be entertained too. Fleischer Hotel is also an important sheep's head business. The hotel offers large sheep's head dinners, arranges sheep's head parties and has the dish on its à la carte menu", Mykletun says.

"In this way sheep's head has been highlighted as an experience, and also a product for tourism. The meal has been developed gradually. Today tourists can buy both sheep's head plates, cutlery and aquavit as souvenirs from their visit to Voss", Mykletun says.

Shark, haggis and dogs

According to Mykletun there are many scary dishes around the world. In Sweden, eating fermented herring from a can is traditional. In Iceland,

rotting shark's meat is a treat. Scots swear to haggis, which is sheep's entrails stuffed into its stomach.

In France, frogs are a dish that many foreigners are reluctant to eat. Chinese often have dogs on the menu, while New Zealanders eat seagulls' meat. In several Asian countries snakes are a type of food that may scare the tourists.

"Those who have been successful in selling sheep's head have managed to create a new product and activities outside the tourist season. We may well say that they have packed sheep's head into new wrapping paper", Mykletun says.

Provided by University of Stavanger

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