



Rising to the occasion

In a land where black bread graces almost every table, Kenneth Karjane and Eva Kõrvas — the duo behind one of Tallinn's most celebrated bakeries — serve up an Estonian feast

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It's a frigid -11C morning in the Estonian capital and the city has frosted over. Fat, fluffy snowflakes are cascading from the sky, blanketing the streets in inches of soft, sugary powder. It's the perfect weather for curling up by the fire, but instead I'm out and about on an Estonian food trail.

I'm spending the day with Kenneth Karjane and Eva Kõrvas, the affable young duo behind Tallinn's immensely popular Karjase Sai bakery. We're trundling along an icy road in a bus headed south for the village of Rahula, in Harju County, where Eva's family owns a little farm. Despite being locals, they're enchanted by the snow. "I haven't seen this kind of weather in a long time," says Eva, peering out the window.

It might be one of the coldest days of the year but the welcome I'm about to receive is as warm as I could have hoped for. As we open the gate to the farm, two enormous dogs, Hagu and Gusta, come bounding across the snow to greet us, tails wagging frantically. Close behind is Eva's youthful mother, Egle Kõrvas, a wide smile etched on her face.

We've made the 15-mile journey from Tallinn to taste some of Egle's famous apple juice, which she makes every year from her crop of 20 or so apple trees, many of which bear heirloom varieties. "It's a hobby for me," says Egle, who, as it turns out, has many pastimes: besides working as a physical education teacher, she also dabbles in furniture restoration and enjoys dancing. In fact, she's participating in a traditional dance performance in a nearby village this very afternoon, which explains her distinctive outfit: a striped skirt that's part of the rahvariided, a colourful folk costume, hand-stitched using a blend of linen and wool.

Este explains that she usually harvests her apples around August/September, extracting the juice using an old-school fruit press and bottling it in glass jars. "It's 100% apples, no sugar or water," she declares proudly. This season, Este has managed to make around 400 litres of juice — a "medium year", she reckons.

"This apple juice is something that we enjoy throughout the year," says Eva. "We always drink it whenever we have lunch together as a family. We also sell it in our bakery. It's really loved by our customers, who say it's the best they've ever had."

This, I'm about to discover, is no exaggeration. After laughing at the excitable dogs, who have mischievously chased Egle's goats and sheep into hiding, we retreat into the house — a cosy, wooden structure decked out with delightfully mismatched chairs and a host of four-legged residents. In addition to Hagu and Gusta, there's Marta, a geriatric dachshund; Jussi, a plump, sleepy-eyed cat; Totu, a feisty, blue-eyed feline; and Misha, another cat that apparently has an identity crisis. "Misha thinks he's a dog. He always greets us at the door, and prefers dogs instead of cats for company," Egle says affectionately.

She wastes no time preparing some refreshments: bowls of gingerbread biscuits, some scented with orange peel; steaming mugs of sage tea, brewed with leaves Egle picked from her vegetable garden just minutes earlier; and, of course, a large jug of apple juice. This batch, she tells us, is made purely

Previous pages: Kenneth Karjane, Eva Kõrvas and her mother, Egle Kõrvas, in front of Egle's house in Saku Vald.

Clockwise from top left: Tallinn Old Town; Egle at her house in Saku Vald; labneh with picked onions, shallots and fermented beetroot in elderflower vinegar, topped with white fish roe; Egle's apple juice





Clockwise from left: Lennart Lind with Kenneth and Eva at Karjase Sai bakery; sunset in Port Noblessner in Tallinn's Kalamaja neighbourhood; roasted pumpkin; Kenneth prepares pasta



from perfectly ripened summer apples, which are “sweeter and more intensive”. Catching a whiff of the spread, Gusta pads over and quickly makes his presence felt, pawing at me insistently for table scraps.

I take a gulp of the cloudy golden liquid and immediately understand why it's so special. It's a medley of wonderfully complex flavours: mellow yet full-bodied, sweet yet refreshing — a tantalising hint of summer on a cold winter's day. Eva's customers are right, I think.

Daily bread

In Estonia, there's an old proverb that translates as: 'Have respect for bread, bread is older than we are'. Respect certainly isn't in short supply at Kenneth and Eva's bakery, Karjase Sai, which celebrates bread in all its various forms. Housed in a former rubber factory in the up-and-coming Tallinn neighbourhood of Kopli, it regularly draws long lines of hungry customers with its creative loaves and pastries.

The moment we step into the bright, airy, two-storey space, I'm greeted by the comforting aroma of fresh bread, and my eyes are immediately drawn to the rows of baked goods displayed on a rack by the counter. On offer are crusty baguettes, burnished sourdough loaves, plump brioches, flaky croissants, dainty pastéis de nata and bricks of leib (a dark sourdough rye bread). “There's



usually always black bread on the table in Estonia,” says Kenneth.

I'm told that almost every Estonian family will have their own leib recipe. “At Karjase Sai, we make ours with organic wholegrain rye and malt, which gives it a distinctive flavour profile and colour, and bake it really dark so you get lots of caramelised notes,” explains Kenneth. He tells me leib is supposed to rest overnight to let its crumb structure develop fully. “But in Estonia, people want their bread to be hot, so we bake and sell it straight away,” he says.

Eva must have noticed my longing gaze, because she's soon bringing out an array of pastries for me to sample. There's a rum and vanilla canelé with a crispy shell and custardy centre, and a plush, pillowy cardamom bun — inspired by Kenneth's stint in Stockholm, where he was an intern at Valhallabageriet bakery for several months. But my favourite is a rich, buttery pastry packed with apple slices, scented with black pepper and cardamom, and glazed with an apple juice reduction. The addition of spice is an ingenious touch — the taste lingering on the palate long after each bite.

Karjase Sai doubles as a restaurant and natural wine bar, called Barbarea, in the evenings. The pizzas they sling here include ‘mushroom’ (made with garlic creme, parmesan, buffalo mozzarella and jerusalem artichoke) and ‘cinta senese’ (salami, fennel, parmesan, buffalo mozzarella, black pepper

and sage). However, Kenneth and Eva are gradually moving towards small plates — a concept that, I'm told, is still fairly new in Estonia. The duo feels it's a format that's especially conducive for conversation, as diners will naturally chat about the food they're sharing. “We think that it's the nicest way to have a meal,” says Eva, as Kenneth nods in agreement.

A seat at the table

These words ring true the following day, when I revisit Karjase Sai to have lunch with Kenneth, Eva and a few of their friends. The morning is even colder than the first, but the bakery is, to my relief, pleasantly warm.

I find Kenneth in the kitchen, chopping onions and garlic with practised ease. Behind him, a massive wood-fired oven is roaring away merrily. “We imported it from Italy and it couldn't fit through the door, so the delivery men had to cut a hole in the wall,” he chuckles. Kenneth removes a tray of roasted pumpkin, seasoned with brown butter and ras el hanout spice mix, from the oven's mouth, and then uses a brush to glaze the golden chunks with a carrot juice reduction for extra sweetness. Next, he hurries over to the pastry oven, extracting tins of dark leib and a glossy loaf of brioche, which will be topped with rosemary.

Over the next hour, Kenneth bustles about, rolling out fresh pasta, grilling sourdough

slices and stirring soup on the hob, tasting his food every so often. He's devising dishes on the fly. "It's super fun doing things you've never done before. That's the joy in cooking," he enthuses. Witnessing Kenneth's dexterity, it's hard to believe he wasn't always so capable in the kitchen. "I didn't grow up in a wealthy household — it was just me, my mum and my brother. Food was to sustain us," he says. "But at university, I started cooking and something sparked in me. It suddenly made sense in some weird way."

As the clock nears 12, other guests start streaming in. They include Eva's longtime friend, Lennart Lind, looking dapper in a green turtleneck and thick, black-rimmed spectacles; Karjase Sai baker Erik Otti, tall and sporting a red beanie; and Barbarea sommelier Laura Maria Pujó, dressed in black and smiling cheerily. The trio are no strangers to Kenneth's cooking, regularly partaking in his staff lunches and dinner parties. "We're lucky to have Kenneth's food," beams Laura as she begins filling everyone's glasses with wine.

Soon, the first dish is served: a dip of finely chopped herbs and root vegetables layered with lemon-infused yogurt and crowned with white fish roe from the Baltic Sea. We devour it greedily, mopping up the creamy goodness with hunks of buttery brioche and, of course, slices of nutty leib.

This is followed by a rich tomato soup made using Sicilian passata — "the best tomato product I've ever tasted," Kenneth declares. It's garnished with glazed pumpkin, capers, garlic, anchovy oil and fermented chillies from the bakery's own greenhouse and served with pieces of sourdough grilled in brown butter. In no time at all, the conversation is flowing as freely as the wine, with Laura regaling everyone with hilarious tales, ranging from rogue Parisian rats to broken teeth.

Eventually, the talk turns to Estonian food. "Traditionally, there's plenty of meat — mostly pork, vegetables and potatoes; lots of potatoes. There are seven different ways to do meat, and seven different ways to do potatoes," says Erik. "And black bread too," Laura chimes in.

They go on to explain that because of the harsh climate, fermenting and pickling are a key part of Estonian cuisine. "In the summer, we pickle fruits and berries, and in the autumn, we do mushrooms and everything else. We typically eat these throughout the off-season, when it's like this outside," Erik says, gesturing to the snow. He tells me that dishes are similarly guided by the seasons: fresh produce in the summer, hearty soups and stews in the autumn and winter. And in the spring? "We eat the food left over in the cellar from winter," he laughs. He goes on to note, however, that locals are becoming more influenced by global cuisines — a case in point being our meal, which has thus

Kenneth's bread pudding

For this modern take on Estonia's popular dessert you can use any frozen berries you like, but sour fruits work best.

SERVES: 8-10 **TAKES: 2 HRS PLUS**

OVERNIGHT RESTING

INGREDIENTS

80g caster sugar, plus extra for serving
4 large egg yolks
240g whole milk
150ml double cream
250g leftover croissants or brioche, cut into 2.5cm pieces
250g frozen berries (such as raspberries and blackberries)
butter, for frying

For the creme anglaise:

150g whole milk
30ml double cream
½ vanilla pod
3 large egg yolks
30g caster sugar

METHOD

- 1 Prepare the pudding and creme anglaise the day before serving. Heat the oven to 150C, 130C fan, gas 2.
- 2 Add the sugar and egg yolks to a large bowl and beat with a hand whisk. Add the milk and cream plus a pinch of salt and whisk until well combined.
- 3 Place the croissant or brioche pieces in a large bowl and pour over the egg mixture so the pieces are evenly coated. Let it stand for 30 mins, then fold the frozen berries into the mix.

4 Grease and line a large loaf tin, then pour in the pudding mixture. Bake for 1 hr — it's ready when you press the top and the mixture doesn't seep from the surface. Leave in the tin to cool, then place in the fridge.

5 Meanwhile, make the creme anglaise. Add the milk and cream to a small pan. Scrape in the vanilla seeds and add the pod too. Place over a medium heat.

6 While the milk is heating up, add the egg yolks and sugar to a bowl, plus a pinch of salt. Mix using a hand whisk until smooth. When the milk reaches 80C (or reaches just short of a boil), take off the heat and remove the vanilla pod.

7 Gradually add the hot mixture to the beaten eggs, mixing as you go, taking care to add it slowly so you don't cook the egg. Transfer the combined mixture back to the saucepan and place over a medium heat for a few mins, whisking constantly, until it's thickened slightly. Strain through a sieve and place in the fridge overnight.

8 The next day, when you're ready to serve, lift the pudding out of the tin and cut into 2.5cm slices.

9 Melt some butter in a large frying pan over a medium heat, then add the pudding slices. You may need to do this in batches. Fry for 2 mins per side, until golden brown and warmed through.

10 Sprinkle some sugar on top of each slice and use a blowtorch to brulee the surface (or place under a hot grill to caramelize). Serve with the cold creme anglaise on the side.





Rosemary brioche

Above: Dinner is served at Karjase Sai

far featured flavours from the Middle East and Italy.

Once our soup bowls are empty, Kenneth dishes up a creamy, cheesy *cacio e pepe*, made with homemade pasta and roasted Jerusalem artichokes sourced from a local farm. “At Karjase Sai, we really want to use Estonian ingredients, but the climate is so tough that it’s hard for the farmers. We are, however, trying to get better at it,” he explains.

It’s the perfect comfort food, but for me, the meal’s *pièce de résistance* is a decadent, raspberry-studded bread pudding fresh from the pan. “Good for my diet,” Lennart jokes. Eva explains that bread pudding is a traditional Estonian dessert, typically whipped up at home with stale bread and served with cold milk. “It would also be offered during school lunches on soup days,” she shares. Kenneth’s version, however, is much more luxurious. Made with croissants and brioche left over

from the bakery, it’s drenched in a Tahitian vanilla *creme anglaise* and torched to create a crunchy, *brulee* top. After my third spoonful, I decide that it ranks among the best desserts I’ve ever had, and my fellow guests concur. “Super, super nice,” Eric pronounces. “One of my favourites,” Laura adds.

All too soon, every plate and glass is empty, and Lennart bemoans the fact that he has to drag himself back to his office — despite the blizzard, he’d travelled across the city just to enjoy a taste of Kenneth’s cooking. I empathise wholeheartedly, thinking to myself that even the heaviest snowstorm couldn’t deter me from a meal as delicious — and as delightful — as this. ●

HOW TO DO IT Air Baltic has nonstop flights from Gatwick to Tallinn from £109 one way. Doubles at Nordic Hotel Forum, in Tallinn, start at £78. airbaltic.com nordichotels.eu visitestonia.com

FLAVOURS OF TALLINN

Leib

Rye has been cultivated in the Baltics states for over a thousand years, thanks to its ability to flourish even in harsh conditions. Leib is a quintessential Estonian foodstuff, served up for breakfast, lunch and dinner. The dense, nutty bread can be slathered with butter, topped with Baltic herring, dunked in soup or simply savoured on its own.

Rosolje

Like leib, potatoes are a mainstay of Estonian cuisine. In the past, entire villages would come together for the September potato harvest, storing their precious bounty in burlap sacks for the cold winter months ahead. Rosolje is a fuchsia-hued salad containing bite-sized cubes of potato, beetroot, apples, boiled eggs and, sometimes, pickled herring, all smothered in a creamy dressing.

Verivorst

Similar to black pudding, this traditional sausage is made of pig’s blood, barley, onions, allspice and marjoram — all stuffed into a pig’s intestine. It’s usually served as a starter during Christmas, when it’s enjoyed with copious amounts of sauerkraut, sour cream, and lingonberry or cranberry jam. Pig’s blood — mixed with flour, fried onions, lard and seasoning — is also used to make dumplings called *verikakk*.

Herring

In 2007, Baltic herring was named Estonia’s national fish — and for good reason. This oily, silver fish is a key component of many traditional dishes — be it served atop slices of leib, enjoyed in *rosolje* or cooked in hearty casseroles. As herrings are typically fished in the spring, they’re often salted, marinated or pickled for consumption in the winter months.