

RØMMEKOLLE REVIVAL

- The story of the vanishing and resurrection of a bacterial culture.

"Art no longer wants to respond to the excess of commodities and signs, but to a lack of connections. The loss of the "social bond", and the duty incumbent on artist to work to repair it, are the words on the agenda... It's not only the forms of civility that we have lost, but the very sense of co-presence of beings and things that constitutes a world."

Jacques Rancière¹

In my childhood I spent every summer with my grandparents in the North of Norway. My grandmother was brought up on a farm and carried all that knowledge and the traditions with her. Despite being a mother of two and a busy nurse she grew vegetables and picked berries, baked bread and made all her food from scratch. I was often involved in this work in various ways from baking or weeding the vegetable garden to picking caraway seeds or strawberries in season.

Every summer I witnessed her rather peculiar ritual of emptying the windowsills of her beloved geranium plants. She put them all outside in the garden and replaced them with mysterious looking bowls filled with milk and covered with saucers. They were left like this for a day or two to set. I was frequently served this mildly sour, thickened milk as a pudding or a snack sprinkled with sugar or adorned with some berries of the season. It was called *rømmekolle* and it instilled in me the taste of carefree summers and my grandmothers gentle nurturing. Delicious!

When she died, the *rømmekolle* tradition sadly died with her. I forgot all about it till one day, many years later, I was awakened from my childhood memories in southern Finland. I was served some *viili*, and low and behold, I was transported back all those years to my grandmothers dining room. The same taste and the same consistency but many years later and hundreds of miles away. "Why?" I pondered. "What is the hidden connection?"

This was the beginning of my *rømmekolle* journey. A deep dive into the world of a once thriving bacterial culture, nurtured and cultured by humans in Scandinavia for centuries.

WHAT IS RØMMEKOLLE?

Rømmekolle, or *tettemelk* as it is sometimes called, is the Norwegian version of a fermented yoghurt-like milk dish also known in Finland as *viili* and in Sweden as *filbunke* or *tätmjölk*. *Rømmekolle* was common in the whole of in Scandinavia. In the northern regions it was a particularly important staple as winters are long and the climate tough for growing food. Most families had a cow or two and the *rømmekolle* was made with the fresh milk and fermented with

¹ Kristin Ross on Jacques Rancière, *Arforum*. March 2007, p.255

local microbial cultures handed down through generations. People made and shared rømmekolle, partly to preserve the fresh milk and partly to enhance its taste and inadvertently also its nutritional properties. The fermented milk provided an invaluable source of nutrients and I have been told that the rømmekolle literally kept people alive during hard times when food was scarce.

In the Northern regions, particularly in Finnmark, there were two types of rømmekolle. The Finnish immigrants brought their local, stringy variety called viili with them on their long journey to Finnmark in the 18th and 19th century. In Norway the local rømmekolle was shorter and more jelly-like in consistency.

The rømmekolle culture originates from the sticky and carnivorous plant Butterworth that in some areas contains particular bacteria and enzymes that have the magical ability to transform milk into rømmekolle. They eat the sugars and transform it into lactic acid that coagulates the milk, which is the basic action of fermentation. There is an entire community of microbes that performs this action but the main bacteria responsible for the stringy consistency is *Lactobacillus Cremoris*. The knowhow of making rømmekolle from this plant was first described by Carl von Linné in his records from the 16th century but may go as far back as Viking times. Nils Gissler gives a good account of the method in his book from 1749 (N. Gissler, *Beskrifning om tåtmjølakens tillagning*) but few people nowadays know how it was done. Some older folks that I interviewed in Finnmark, told stories of their mothers having had this knowledge and ability. Modern biologists have frequently failed and therefore deemed it impossible. I have tried and failed, and realised that it takes more than following a recipe to create a good rømmekolle culture.

To make the bacterial culture from the Butterworth people gathered the sticky leaves and poured fresh milk over them and left it to ferment for a few days. The milk then thickened and became *tette*, or “seed” as it is called in Finnish. In practice this is the same substance as the rømmekolle itself, but for some reason the bit used to regenerate the new rømmekolle was given the particular name of *tette*. People soon discovered that once you had acquired a good *tette* from the Butterworth plant you could bypass the plant altogether and cultivate the rømmekolle just by adding a small amount of the fermented milk at the bottom of a bowl and pour the fresh milk over it and let it sit for a day or two to make rømmekolle. If the taste and consistency was good, the *tette* was then kept and cultivated with raw milk, often handed down from mother to daughter for generations. You would just save a small amount to cultivate the next batch. If anyone ran out or lost their *tette* they would get fresh supplies from their neighbour or someone in the local community known for their good culture. Rømmekolle was like the invisible glue in these communities. Everyone shared cultures with each other and consequently also shared their bacterial gut flora, creating an interior, local, cultural bond between the people, the land, their animals and the microbes.

OUTMODED CULTURES

As time and progress eliminated the need for the family cow, home made rømmekolle became less common. The younger generation have not been raised with the taste and the traditions of making and eating rømmekolle, and hence this unique culture is rapidly dying. In the '50s commercial dairies gradually took over the production and people started buying it in the shops instead of making it themselves. But commercially made rømmekolle is an inferior product. The culture is pasteurised, the milk homogenised and the microbial community limited to a few components in order to produce a consistent product. The lack of diversity in the microbial community affects the taste, quality and resilience of the culture. Therefore it is impossible to use this as an ongoing starter culture, as apposed to the old heirloom (A **heirloom** culture is an old and precious fermented culture, like yoghurt or kefir, that has been cultivated and passed down for generations through family members.) culture, *tette*, teaming with a living community of microbes that can be cultured and reproduced ad infinitum.

I started this project as part of the Barents Spektakel Arts festival in Kirkenes in North Norway. My mission was to find living stories and knowledge related to the rømmekolle culture in the region. I also hoped to find an old heirloom rømmekolle culture that was still being made at home. I wanted a culture with roots in the landscape and the people, animals and bacteria from the area. I made many interviews with people and eventually met the wonderful lady, Ovidia Kurthi who, aged 92, still lived by herself in a cottage in the Pasvik valley. Ovidia had made rømmekolle since childhood with a *tette* that she had inherited from her mother when she passed away. Not a week had gone by where Ovidia hadn't made rømmekolle. But one day, four months before I turned up on her doorstep, for some reason beyond comprehension, the rømmekolle had not set. She had done all the preparations in her usual way. The last few years she had resorted to using shop bought milk, she explained. In retrospect she thought that this possibly could have been contaminated by minute traces of antibiotics that could have wiped out her rømmekolle bacteria. Or, as Ovidia cheerfully declared, maybe it was because she had stopped baking her flatbread "lefses" that she always ate with her rømmekolle. Perhaps there was a mysterious connection between the two? Either way, the reality was irreversible. The very, last, original rømmekolle culture in Norway had gone. Despite numerous articles in newspapers and radio, calls through social media, emails and countless telephone conversations my rømmekolle hunt was fruitless. I had to search elsewhere, outside its natural habitat.

CULTURE IN EXILE

Fortunately, most bacteria are incredibly resilient and inventive when it comes survival strategies. If there isn't enough food, they transform themselves into a superseed and lay dormant for years till the conditions are right to spring alive again. In 1995, a scientist found bacterial spores in the intestine of a petrified bee trapped in amber from a tree in the Dominican Republic. The bee in the amber was 25 million years old. The spores miraculously germinated when the amber was crushed and the contents from the intestine of the bee was extracted and cultured in a nutrient medium. Bacteria are real time travellers!²

In the late 1800s a Finnish family immigrated to the US. Packed in a suitcase between their most precious clothes and a few carefully chosen possessions, was also their treasured viili culture, dried on a handkerchief. As immigrants in a new country the viili culture was very

² <http://science.sciencemag.org/content/268/5213/977>

precious, linking them physically and sensory to their far away homeland. Consequently the family managed to keep their viili alive through generously sharing it and carefully nurturing it for over a century.

Through the American fermentation revivalist Sandor Katz I got to hear about this expatriate viili, the Finnish strain of rømmekolle. As it is illegal to post live bacteria out of the US, I managed to get hold of some of this unique culture that was couriered back to Scandinavia in a friend's suitcase, after hundred years in exile. I am now thrilled to share it with anyone who wants to try and cultivate it.

WHY RESURRECT A CULTURE?

When cultures die the know-how and experience of generations die with it. With the loss of bacterial cultures the bond created by continually sharing the culture with others and your relationship with the animals and the microbes also gets lost. The world hence becomes a poorer place with fewer sensory pleasures and blander taste. Many fermented cultures have been lost through neglect, modern living and commercial streamlined production. A similar story to that of human cultures where diversity, languages and experiential knowledge are being wiped out and largely replaced by a homogenous corporate culture. By reclaiming, fermenting, sharing and digesting these remaining cultures, humans can also actively cultivate cross-cultural resilience, diversity and sensuous experiences.

Cultivating cross-cultural diversity is rewarding. It gives you a Robin Hood-like feeling of stealing back what has been lost in a world where the often invisible transformation processes of microbes* have been belittled, overlooked, neglected, combated, tamed or homogenised in physical as well as metaphorical ways. It is empowering to rekindle and embody the bond between nature and culture, and it is both tasty and rewarding to nurture and share these unique cultures. The skills, knowledge, stories and aesthetic dimension of fermenting and expanding your sensuous parameters are added values. Bacteria have a lot to teach us if we are prepared to listen and digest their world.

Despite being undervalued and misunderstood ever since humans first set their eyes on them in the 17th century, microbes are the oldest and most successful living creatures on earth. Their vast communities have found ingenious ways of surviving as well as creating opportunities for other life to thrive. Bacteria make the most of the air that we breathe by processing sunlight into oxygen and they magically digest and recycle the soil beneath our feet. Realising that our bodies actually host more microbes than human cells quickly expands your notion of self. We are all intertwined in each other's stories.

The sensuous pleasures to be had from making, eating and sharing fermented foods with others are brilliant ways to reinvigorate our relationship with these ancient magicians. I am convinced that bacteria and other microbes have essential lessons to teach us about adaptation and creative collaboration, about instant communication, problem solving, conflict resolution and treatment of ill health not to mention the aesthetic dimension of creating patterns as an act of pure existence and collaboration. Incorporating a daily relationship with microbial communities and fermenting together could thus be a way to widen our horizons and give us new ideas and tools for how to live more in balance with this earth, and even to survive as a species in the future.