

Ask any Finn if there is a national dish in Finland, and most probably the answer will be “Karelian hot-pot”. In 2007, this hearty stew was selected as the national dish by readers of a Finnish evening paper. By definition, a “national dish” is something that is eaten frequently, and real Karelian hot-pot has certainly not been a common everyday dish, as meat was considered luxury in the old days.

Karelia is the area between the lakes Ladoga and Onega, up to the White Sea in the northeast. The area is now split between Finland and Russia, with only a small part of it being today on the Finnish side of the border. A large part of the population of Karelia migrated west into Finland due to the Finno-Russian Wars 1939-44, and that is why everything Karelian is seen through a veil of nostalgia in Finland today.

The origin of this dish can be sought in the method of house heating centuries ago. In the area around the Baltic Sea, clockwise from eastern Finland and westernmost Russia, right down to southernmost Sweden, houses were usually built around a relatively massive, heat-accumulating hearth, the so-called “East European central oven”. It was fired every morning and offered a convenient baking oven for the rest of the day. Much of the cooking was done in this slow oven.

The original population of Karelia did not use the name “Karelian hot-pot” of this dish, very much like Frankfurters are not known as Frankfurters in Frankfurt. The dish had different names in different areas of Karelia, such as “oven roast”, “meat stew”, and “crock meat”.

What kind of meat?

Today, practically any supermarket in Finland offers “meat for Karelian hot-pot” a blend of two kinds of meat, pork and beef, boneless, and cut into one-inch or smaller cubes. However, the traditionalist does not approve such simplification. Most cooks know that quality meat does not necessarily have the best taste. Traditional Finnish recipes always recommend cheaper cuts, with some marrowbones, fat, and gristle. “Meat for Karelian hot-pot without bones is like a ladle without a shaft”, says a well-known Finnish cook who has spent years studying traditional recipes in the countryside.

Although purists say that at least two, sometimes three kinds of meat should be used, often only pork is used for everyday purposes while veal, beef or mutton are only used on special occasions.

Should offal be used?

In some recipes a pig’s kidney is recommended and sometimes even liver. However, it is said that liver easily makes the broth cloudy, which is considered bad. Sometimes the pot contains some heart, and many say that pork rind must be included.

Size of the pieces

The size of the meat cubes is a matter of individual taste. Traditionally, the meat was cooked in egg-sized or even larger pieces, but modern demands of convenience in serving tend to cut the meat into about one inch cubes. Bones and lumps of gristle are cooked with the stew, and are taken out before serving.

Browning of the meat

Even with the browning, the recommendations vary. In some recipes, all the meat is seared separately on a frying pan before cooking. While in many recipes the meat is not browned, the cubes are placed in the pot with the fatty pork and rind pieces on top. Then the pot, after adding water nearly to cover, is placed in a hot oven so that the topmost meat gets a light-brown crust. Also, if pork rind is included, it will convert to delicious crackling. According to some recipes, when the meat has browned the oven is turned down, a lid put on the pot and the stew baked in a low oven.

Oven temperature

Basically, the stew should be cooked in a low oven as the ovens in the old houses were never very hot. One traditional recipe even recommends baking the stew overnight at 80 to 90 degrees C only, to avoid boiling of the broth, which then will stay clear. However today for hygienic reasons a higher, sterilizing temperature is used so most modern recipes call for a couple of hours at 150 to 170 degrees C. Even that temperature is too low for successful browning of the surface meat hence the pre browning.

Additional ingredients

Fresh vegetables are a rather late addition in Finnish cookery, so in most published recipes, only onions are used in the stew. Some writers remind us, however, that broad beans were a staple in Finland, and some root vegetables, such as turnips were eaten in the early days. The Karelian hot-pot has been extended with both, as well as sometimes with barley, but for festive occasions, only meat was used, usually with some onion as spice.

When allspice, also known as Jamaica pepper or pimento, became available in Finland, it rapidly became very popular. In fact, according to trade statistics in the year 1977, Finland imported 45 grams allspice per inhabitant, while the corresponding number in England was only 5 grams. It is an important spice in the Karelian hot-pot, used as whole or crushed peppercorns, not ground. Another spice, traditional in Finland, is bay leaves. One or two leaves can be added to the pot at an early stage.

Serving

When the meat is done, the bones are usually taken out and the meat cut into smaller pieces. Today, it is usually served with mashed potatoes, and garnished with pickled beet-root and cucumber. The gravy is delicious as sauce, and leftovers can easily be enriched with new vegetables, cream, pasta, or just anything. Thus, a large pot will make several good meals for a family. ♦

