**Types of Nordic Cuisine**

Smörgåsbord:

It literally means ‘buttered table’ – indeed, the Swedish word for sandwich is smörgås. An array of small dishes, both warm and cold, a traditional smörgåsbord starts with fish, moving on to cold meats, and then warm dishes.

Cheeses come at the end. In Sweden, the smörgåsbord is always laid out in advance; in Denmark (where it’s called det kolde bord, or ‘the cold table’), dishes are sent to the table throughout the meal. A traditional lunch can take hours, and aquavit is enjoyed at regular intervals, of course.

Popular dishes for a smörgåsbord include bowls of pickled herring served with rye and crispbread, beetroot and apple salad, meatballs, pâtés, and different types of cured and smoked salmon.

Fish:

You probably already know that our most popular fish is herring. We eat it pickled, but also smoke and fry it. Scandinavian varieties of pickled herring are less sharp than what you’ll find elsewhere in Europe, as the brine is sweeter.

Any kind of cured or smoked salmon is also loved. Gravadlax (dill-cured salmon) is probably the most famous of these. Smoked mackerel is also served, as are less commonly known fish such as Arctic charr.

Sweden celebrates the crayfish in August, with outdoor parties where we eat bowls of them washed down with aquavit.

Meat:

Pork is an important meat in southern Scandinavia. Flæskesteg pork roast, eaten with a heavy gravy and caramelised potatoes, is as Danish as roast beef is British – and is also the quintissential Danish Christmas lunch. Further north, game such as reindeer and elk is served – and it’s not difficult to find bear sausage in some places. Northern Norwegians eat a lot of smoked, dried lamb.

Of course, we can’t discuss meat without mentioning meatballs. There must be tens of thousands of different recipes – actually, that’s probably a vast underestimation.

In Sweden, a mixture of pork and beef is usually prepared, whereas Danes prefer pork and veal. In Norway, there’s more regional variation, but beef is popular. In Sweden, meatballs are small – and in Norway, they’re big. If you’re going to learn how to make meatballs, you’ll need to find a good, basic recipe and then put your own spin on it.

Across Scandinavia, meatballs are usually served with potatoes, either boiled or mashed. If you’re looking for a Swedish or Norwegian twist, add a dollop of lingonberry jam. But all leftover meatballs are great in sandwiches.

Sweets:

Scandinavian baking is getting a lot of attention in the UK right now, and you’re probably aware that cinnamon is an important factor in our cakes and buns. Cardamom is just as popular as well.

Kanelbullar – cinnamon buns – are massive in Sweden (and, of course, the dough sometimes has notes of cardamom). A cinnamon bun can be eating morning, noon and night – usually with coffee.

In Denmark, Danish pastries are the thing, you might be surprised to learn. But they’re called wienerbrød there – ‘Vienna bread’. If you’ve never eaten a Danish Danish pastry, then go to a bakery there on a Sunday morning and buy a smørsnegl. It’s a taste like no other.

Other favourites include kladdkaka, a sticky Swedish chocolate cake, and anything packed with fruit and berries.

Bread:

While we have the same word for bread as you do (brød in Denmark and Norway, bröd in Sweden), our loaves are quite different. We love rich, dark rye in any shape or form. Rye bread, rye buns, and rye grain thrown into many different dishes.

Crispbread is delicious and healthy – and not the same as what you buy in the supermarket here in the UK. Check out the vast variety that we sell in the shop.

Bread can also be a sweet treat – try vörtbröd, limpa or franskbrød.

The scary stuff:

Yes, we admit it. Some of those horror stories you’ve heard about Nordic food are quite true. And if you want to give them a go, we can help.

Surströmming is Swedish fermented herring, popular in the far north where crayfish aren’t as plentiful in the summer. It actually tastes amazing, but smells really bad. We advise you to open the tin outside.

Lutfisk is cod preserved in lye, and eaten in Norway at Christmas. To British eyes it looks a bit like tripe. It’s on sale during the festive season.

Hákarl is Icelandic fermented shark, buried for weeks and hung for months. It’s the very definition of ‘an acquired taste’, and not on sale in the UK. Sadly, or happily, that’s for you to decide!

The Scandinavian Pantry:

‘What can I use instead of…’ is probably the most common question I’m asked when it comes to Scandinavian recipes. ‘What is this spice called in English’ is the second (I’m also asked to translate from English to Scandinavian languages for plenty of homesick Scandis, too). Sometimes the answers are not that simple, so here are some of the most common ingredients we use for Yuletide cooking, along with their names in Danish, Swedish and Norwegian.

**Spices and Herbs**

Caraway:

In Denmark and Sweden, the word for caraway sounds similar to cumin, so it is often translated incorrectly in recipes (cumin itself is spidskommen or spiskummin). We use caraway seeds a lot in breads, as well as cheeses.

Cardamom:

It’s said that the Vikings first brought this spice back from Constantinople (now known as Istanbul), but there is little to support this idea. However, around 1300, a Danish monk used cardamom in a cookbook influenced by Moorish recipes (Libellus de arte coquinaria), which is the earliest evidence we have for the spice’s appearance in Scandinavian cooking. Today, we use cardamom a lot, including in the dough for our renowned cinnamon buns. I always buy the little seeds and crush them in a spice grinder for maximum flavor – it beats the pre-ground variety hands down, and really lifts the flavor of the buns.

Cinnamon:

Some cheaper varieties of cinnamon are made from cassia bark, which contains high levels of coumarin (not good for you in high doses). If you can, go for high-grade Ceylon cinnamon instead, which has lower levels of coumarin and a better flavor.

Cloves:

Cloves are used whole in aquavit and mulled wine, and sometimes on Swedish Christmas ham. Crushed cloves are common in biscuits and cookies. In Denmark at Christmas-time, windows are often decorated with fresh oranges studded with whole cloves – a great way to bring a wonderfully festive scent into your house! The word krydd (spice) sometimes prefixes the word for clove in all three languages.

Dill:

We use dill a lot to give a lift to salads, fish or chicken. Crown dill (where the herb has been allowed to flower) is used for its strong flavor at crayfish parties. That variety is quite hard to get hold of outside Sweden, but you can always grow your own or use fresh dill instead.

Fennel seed:

We use fennel seed mainly in bread, both for loaves and as a flavoring for crispbread.

Ginger:

Ground ginger is commonly used in biscuits, cookies and cakes. Whole dried ginger is essential in mulled wine, but fresh ginger is actually not that common in Scandinavia.

**Berries**

Cloudberries:

These orange berries, which look a bit like plump raspberries except for the color, are found in the wild and are almost impossible to cultivate artificially. They can’t be picked by machine, only by hand, and even that is tricky as the berries burst easily. Cloudberry season is around three weeks long, so that only adds to the cost and scarcity of the fruit. Frozen cloudberries are much easier to get hold of than fresh, but they are still expensive. Most Scandinavian shops stock cloudberry jam/preserves, which can be substituted for fresh berries in almost every recipe. In North America, cloudberries are often referred to as ‘bakeapples’. Cloudberries are very tart and pair very well with apples, strong cheeses and vanilla (the jam is particularly wonderful heated up and poured over vanilla ice cream). To replace this flavor in recipes is hard, and a tart raspberry is the closest ingredient in taste.

Strawberries:

We have two varieties of strawberries: the normal ones from the garden, available in all shops – and then the little wild strawberries. The latter can be found in Norwegian and Swedish forests towards the end of July. Wild strawberries are very sweet, small berries (often less than 1 cm/1/4 inch long). If you have ever tasted wild strawberries yourself, you will know that they are utterly delicious.

Lingonberries:

Northern Scandinavians have lingonberries in their freezers throughout the year, while fresh ones are picked in August. The berry is small, red and tart, and found in abundance in Sweden, Norway and Finland. From the same family as the cranberry, the tartness of a lingonberry lends itself well to being served with meat (it is most famously served with meatballs). Lingonberries can also be used in cookies and cakes – pair them with something quite sweet, as they are really quite sharp in flavor. If you can’t get hold of lingonberries, substitute with raspberries for sweet recipes, or cranberries for savory dishes.

Elderberries:

In Scandinavia, elderflower is used mostly in jams/ jellies, cordials and cakes. The Elderberry is also used a lot in Denmark to make elderberry cordial – a strong-tasting drink which is full of vitamins.

Blueberries:

The type of blueberries you buy in the shop are called blueberries, of course. The type of blueberries you find in the wild all over northern Scandinavia we also call ‘blåbär/blåbær’, but in English, these are actually known as bilberries. Wild blueberries or bilberries have a delicious sweet flavor and are a lot smaller. If you can get them then go for them – they are a deep blue color even inside. Bilberries can be bought frozen from specialty shops or online.

**Flavorings**

Saffron:

Like cardamom, the origins of saffron’s arrival into Scandinavia are unclear. Some say it came via ancient Asian trading routes, while others think it was brought northwards from France and Italy. Regardless, saffron in Scandinavia has always been used for special occasions only, most likely because of its high value (if you’re shopping for it in Scandinavia, it’s probably kept behind the shop counter or till). However, it is an essential ingredient at Christmas time for Lucia buns. We commonly use ground saffron, but if you are using strands, grind them well first. To intensify the color, soak the strands in warm water before using.

Salt:

Scandinavians have been preserving food in salt for centuries, so it’s not surprising that we have a love for using it in anything from well-seasoned savory dishes to sprinkling it on biscuits or cakes. Not all salt is equal, but if you ever spot a brand called North Sea Salt Works, buy it.

Sea buckthorn:

Sea buckthorn grows wild across Scandinavia, parts of the UK, parts of Canada and as far east as China. It is quite unpleasant to eat raw, and some people find the smell of the fresh juice offensive! However, when sugar is added, the flavor complexities change. It is brilliant in jam and desserts. It’s also good for you, being rich in vitamin C and carotenoids.

Seville orange peel:

We use this in mulled wine and also in some Christmas breads and biscuits. You can substitute with normal dried bitter orange peel, but the flavor will not be as subtle.

Vanilla

Most Scandinavian cookbooks use vanilla sugar in recipes, which is a quick and easy substitute for whole vanilla pods/beans. You can buy this in Scandinavian food shops, or make your own by grinding 275 g/2 cups icing/confectioners’ sugar with 2 dried vanilla pods/beans in a food processor or spice grinder until pulverized. Sift to remove the woody bits and use as needed. You can normally just substitute with vanilla extract or vanilla pods/beans too. If you are buying, Tørsleffs is a great brand.

Licorice:

The Finns became hooked on the flavor of licorice, used in a lot of cough medicine, at the turn of the 19th century. Someone had the bright idea to add the flavor to sweets, and from then ammonium chloride began to be added in greater quantities (this is the salty flavor also known as ‘salmiakki’). The salty flavor in Scandinavian licorice is now so strong that most non-Scandinavians can’t eat it. Although, if you become hooked on the acquired taste, you will need the stronger stuff. Use as a syrup or powder in cakes, meringues or ice creams.