



[HELSINKI]

STEAM PUNKS

In amongst the saunas and winter markets of Helsinki, a new breed of chefs is pushing culinary boundaries in the Finnish capital, writes Bre Graham

1,559,558

Population
of Helsinki
metro area

10°C

Average
temperature
in May



SOME CITIES STAY with you long after you've left. For me, that's Helsinki. The urge to return to holiday destinations can be fuelled by so many different things, but with the Finnish capital and me, it's a feeling. I first came here at the start of summer almost five years ago. I'd spent a week up in the north of Finland way past the Arctic Circle chasing the 'midnight sun' among reindeer, pine forests and lakes, and exhausted from nearly no sleep thanks to the constant daylight, but I had

STREET SPIRIT:

[above] Locals and tourists snack on street food

a few days to explore Helsinki before heading back home.

Unlike London, Helsinki is a small city, with a population of just over a million people, and even on a Friday night, the streets don't feel full. The architecture crosses from mid-century brutalist to Nordic minimalism and every element from cuisine to design has been impacted by Swedish and Russian ruling influences. There was a calm I found here that I'd never felt anywhere else before and so I've been coming back to >

FINNISH PRODUCE IS EXCELLENT, IT'S UNPRETENTIOUS, MOSTLY VEGETARIAN AND MEAT IS SEEN AS SOMETHING SPECIAL

➤ Helsinki each year since my first visit, and with every trip I rely less on a map and more on memory. I master the metro, learn more than just 'thank you' in the notoriously difficult Finnish and revisit favourite restaurants from years gone by.

I often wonder why I feel happiest when I'm here – not because I know that Finland has often been voted the world's happiest country, but something else that I can't quite capture. Helsinki is consistently crowned as one of the most liveable cities, and I don't think it's just because of the clean air, good healthcare and preference for foraged food – there's a priority placed on feeling well. "There's an appetite for eating out and enjoying life here in Helsinki," says Luka Balac, chef and owner of two of the city's most interesting restaurants, Nolla and Elm. "Finnish produce is excellent, it's unpretentious, mostly vegetarian and meat is seen as something special," he says over dinner one night. Balac moved to Helsinki from Serbia ten years ago and swiftly fell in love with the city. Nolla (which means 'zero' in Finnish) is a fully sustainable operation that really can back up the use of that word in more ways than one.

Nolla is zero-waste. Leftover bread crumbs are turned into beer that's brewed on-site, an industrial compost machine churns away at the back of the stylish minimal dining room and everything from the server's uniforms



NEW NORDIC: [left]
A pumpkin dish from the Grön menu



(made from old hotel bed linen) to the soap in the bathrooms (leftover beef tallow) are on their second life. This is my third time eating here because if there's anything I learn as I get older it's that when you know what you love, lean into it. I sip a glass of beer made with blackcurrants and eat a plate of locally caught pike perch that's grilled until charred before being covered in a buttery smoked fish roe-filled sauce that I wish Balac sold in bottles for me to bring home. There are distinct

flavours that I find across menus in the city from dishes on multi-course tasting experience at Grön where sea buckthorn berries and the tendrils from young conifer plants don't feel out of place at casual cafes that serve bowls of salmon soup. "Everything shifts with seasons – if it's not local, it's not here," says Toni Kostian, the co-owner and executive chef of Grön.

On my morning walks on each trip, I go by the market square on the main harbour. It's home to a collection

of market stalls that sell everything from fruit and vegetables to reindeer key rings. I've been here in summer when ice-cream stalls are set up and bought little baskets of berries in a kaleidoscope of colours, from canary-yellow cloudberries to raspberries, and in autumn watched mushrooms piled high amongst herbs. At dinner one night, when I mention the mushrooms to a friend and ask what she'd cook with them, she laughs at the idea that anyone but a tourist would buy them from ➤

COME DINE WITH ME:
[above] The team at Grön, a restaurant by chef Toni Kostian



> the market. “We all go to the forest and pick them on the weekends,” she says, in a casual manner that suggests foraging is a standard activity for life lived in a big city. It’s an attitude that encapsulates the ease of good food integrating into good living here in Helsinki.

On my first morning on this trip, I go to Löyly, somewhere I often say is my favourite place on earth. It’s a sauna, but unlike any that you’re imagining. Perched on the shoreline and looking out over the Baltic Sea, it’s home to two saunas as well as a restaurant and bar. I’ve come here to meet author Katja Pantzar; she’s Canadian but has been living in Helsinki for more than 20 years, and written books on the role saunas play in Finnish life and wellbeing. We say hello before swiftly stripping off,

Hot hot heat: Sauna is an integral part of culture in Finland and Estonia, so much so that it’s on the Unesco Intangible Cultural Heritage List.

ready to head out to the traditional wood-fired **sauna** that leaves your skin and hair scented faintly with smoke. “There are more saunas than people in Finland,” she says as we sweat together in a room of roughly 20 people perched on small white towels.

I’ve been to Löyly in the height of summer and now I’m here in the middle of winter just weeks before

BIKINIS AND BEANIES ARE A COMBINATION I’D NEVER NATURALLY PUT TOGETHER, BUT THESE ARE UNIQUE CIRCUMSTANCES

(Skyline) Jussi Helisten; (market) Robert Lindstrom

Christmas. The sea outside has started to freeze over and the roof of the building is covered with thick sheets of snow. “Are you ready?” asks Pantzar, as I nod despite not knowing if I am. Even though I feel like I could pass out from the heat, I can’t quite comprehend how cold it’s going to be outside. We sprint from the sauna outside into the snow down to the water’s edge where a little metal ladder waits. Pantzar descends first and plunges into the dark, ice-cold water. We’re both wearing bikinis and beanies, a combination I’d never naturally put together, but these are unique circumstances. The euphoria felt the second your skin hits the freezing water after you’ve been in a sauna is unparalleled. My head feels clear for the first time all year, as I wrap myself up in a

towel, it’s as if my universe is finally back on its axis.

We sit by the fire inside, and I order a plastic cup filled with ‘Finnish long drink’, a blend of grapefruit soda and gin. Sold in iconic striped cans at convenience stores and supermarkets, it’s what I raid all my Helsinki hotel mini bars for as soon as I check into my room.

There are so many of these Finnish essentials – each of them so intertwined with the reasons I always want to return to this place. The original Fazer chocolate store where I go to fill a paper bag with Fazer mints and salted liquorice; the deli in Vanha Kauppahalli; the old market hall where you can taste spoonfuls of bright gold smoked Finnish pike roe; and the bakery where I buy loaves of rich rye bread that get smushed in my suitcase for >

LOCAL FLAVOURS: [clockwise from left] The Helsinki skyline; the old market hall is full of treats; relaxing at Löyly sauna



► breakfasts back in London. On my last night, it's snowing as I've never seen it snow before and I regret returning to a place that's famous for cruelly cold winters. I wrap up in more layers than I thought possible and push through the storm outside to meet Luka Balac again, this time at his new restaurant Elm. "You wouldn't know it, but the terrace outside in summer has the most beautiful view," he says, as snow covers every surface in sight. "When we opened last summer, we sold 80 bottles of rosé in two days," he continues, trying to make me remember what summer, sunshine and cold wine feel like as I start to think my eyelashes might have frozen.

I've been in Finland for over a week at this stage and I'm starting to crave things like garlic and chilli, flavours not often found on Finnish menus. It's this homogeneous

MAKING TRACKS:
[above] Pedestrians enjoy the sunshine in one of Helsinki's tramline-laden intersections

nature of cuisine in the city that Balac is fighting against with this new venture. He pours me a negroni from local Kyro gin that's on tap and a special bottle of aged Campari (a signature of Elm, where he shifts more than 17 litres a week) and a traditional Cuban rumba band starts playing in the corner. "I wanted to break through from the traditional here in Helsinki," he says. "It's hard but I'm excited to be bringing something different." The menu here is much more influenced by his Serbian heritage, with garlic aioli paired with traditional Finnish sprats caught off the nearby Åland Islands, and linguine served with melted local butter.

So far on every trip I've stuck to quintessential Finnish fare. Karelian pies for breakfast; reindeer blood sausage, smoked reindeer meat omelettes and reindeer soup for lunch; lots of blueberry juice, soft rice porridge with butter spooned into little cups outside in the snow for breakfast; and, of course, pickled herring on every occasion. It's the sort of food you need after a long session in the sauna and a swim in the sea, but there's a new side of Helsinki coming home with me on this trip, one that I'll need to come back again to see. ♦

THE MENU FEATURES AIOLI PAIRED WITH TRADITIONAL FINNISH SPRATS CAUGHT OFF THE NEARBY ÅLAND ISLANDS