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A food nation without culinary heritage? Sweden and the politics of gastronomy

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Abstract

Sweden has a complicated history when it comes to gastronomy. Starting with the creation of public monopolies for sales and serving of alcohol in the 1850s, the history includes phenomena such as a state monopoly on restaurants for the working class (1937-1955), a prohibition against dance and vocal entertainment at restaurants (1898-1957) and the detailed regulations on eating and drinking in public have remained until present day.

In the 1980s, the situation started to change with an upgrading of both the status and quality of the restaurant scene. The last decade an attempt to position the country as “Sweden – the new culinary nation” has been made by the government. However, unlike most nations marketing campaigns, culinary traditions are not highlighted. When UNESCO called for nominations for intangible cultural heritage, a number of food related proposals (including smorgasbord) were delivered to the government. They were all declined. A government official stated that no nomination would come from Sweden since it was problematic to argue that a certain cultural heritage or a particular tradition would be more important than others.

The anxieties surrounding the intangible cultural heritage comes from a supposed juxtaposition between the dominant ideology of multiculturalism and the promotion of national heritage (which is associated with xenofobia). In a heated political struggle between liberals and right wing populists, the use of heritage is one of the most contested spaces.

The paper discusses the role of culinary heritage in contemporary Swedish politics and how different views of culture, nationality and progress are played out through the lens of gastronomy. The empirical material is mainly interviews with officials and persons working in organizations promoting Sweden as a culinary destination. For the historical background, archive material have been used as supplement. The theoretical framework comes from the Cultural economy tradition, with Scott Lash and John Urry’s “Economies of signs and space” as a central piece.