

Broad Daylight

Discovering cheese and tradition in the Swedish north



Antique milk jugs at Svedjan Ost dairy

WRITTEN BY SUMMER BRONS RYLANDER

Driving along Sweden's wildflower-studded E4 highway toward the city of Skellefteå, I'm in awe of how the landscape is just so, well, *Swedish*.

There is water in every direction: Calm, sprawling lakes are flanked by picturesque red cabins and surrounded by birch trees. The sky is endless and blue, the

sun shining: It's just what the Swedes dream of while enduring their long, dark winters. There's a sense of quiet adventure; this is a place to slow down and reconnect with nature, to experience a different way of life, or, in my case, discover Sweden's finest cheeses. »

PHOTOS THIS PAGE Summer Brons Rylander; OPPOSITE PAGE Cows/Provided by Hellström family

I

m joined by my personal Swede and husband, Johan. We've driven north from Stockholm, taking our time winding up the country's eastern coastline. We've made stops in the cities of Falun and Sundsvall, but it's finally passing the road sign welcoming us to Västerbotten county that I find most thrilling.

To me, this journey is akin to a pilgrimage: For years I've romanticized the region's most popular cheese: Västerbottensost. A staple of Swedish life, particularly around holidays and for *kräftskiva* (popular late-summer parties where crayfish are baked into cheese pies), I was hooked upon tasting my first crumbling, crystalline slice in 2012—and I've been shuttling wedges across borders ever since.

We're in *Västerbottens län*, the second-most northern county in Sweden and the southern entry point of the Lapland, Sweden's slice of the Arctic Circle. This county spans the width of the country, with Norway to the west and the Gulf of Bothnia to the east. My own Västerbotten experience begins in the northeastern city of Skellefteå (pronounced "shell-eff-tee-oh"), which

is largely defined by its all-encompassing proximity to water. There are hundreds of nearby lakes, many miles of coastline, and five rivers, one of which—the Skellefte—flows lazily through the city. (It's lovely to cycle along, particularly when pedaling toward local craft beer.) The sun never quite sets during the summer, so folks stay out late to enjoy the soft light, pleasant temperatures, and remarkable food scene.

From coffee at midnight to reindeer tartare, chanterelle toast to cloudberry jam, northern Swedes are creative with their eats. An emphasis on sustainability and preservation—logical for those long winters—leads to innovative dishes with ingredients plucked straight from Nordic forests. Västerbotten county's two largest cities, Skellefteå and Umeå, are full of the types of chic cafés and creative eateries you'd expect in cosmopolitan Stockholm. Fusion cuisine is popular here, with skilled chefs pairing Nordic ingredients with flavors inspired by Japan, Thailand, and the United States. There are outstanding burgers to be had, gourmet licorices to try, and a rapidly growing craft beer scene—but I'm here for the cheese.



Burträsk Mejeri dairy, where Västerbottensost cheese is made

HISTORY AND MYSTERY

My pursuit begins on a Saturday morning. The destination is Burträsk, a village 40 minutes south of Skellefteå. The dairy Burträsk Mejeri, where Västerbottensost cheese is made, is not open to guests, but a visitor's center right next door recounts the elusive origins of

its iconic cheese. It all started in 1872 with a dairymaid by the name of Ulrika Eleonora Lindström. She rose to head of cheese production within just three years of beginning farm work, praised for her attention to detail and meticulous record-keeping.

One fateful day, Ulrika Eleonora became distracted (by a lover, some say), and failed to keep an eye on the vat as the milk was curdling. While the resulting wheel was presumed a failure, later sampling proved otherwise. So the skilled dairymaid adjusted her recipe to continue creating the same fruity, salty, aromatic, and marvelously dewy cheese the Swedes still enjoy today.

As one of Sweden's most beloved cheeses, demand for Västerbottensost regularly exceeds supply. To keep up, attempts have been made to produce the cheese outside of Burträsk, but it's never worked; beyond this dairy, the cheese simply does not develop its unique character. While no one agrees on the precise reason, several myths have emerged. The chalky, lime-rich Burträsk soil—which may have resulted from a



The pastures of Svedjan Ost overlook Lake Storkågetrask

PHOTOS: Burträsk Dairy/Erik Hillbom; Swedish landscape/Summer Brons Rylander



Thomas Rudin, cheesemaker at Burträsk

meteorite impact millions of years ago—is often credited. Others argue that the magic is in seasonal lighting conditions, as spending half the year shrouded in darkness only to be bathed in round-the-clock summer light surely impacts vegetation growth. Or could it be the northern cows themselves, munching on this lively grass springing forth from calcareous soil, frolicking in the midnight sun with more passion and zest for life than their southern sistren? Maybe it's the spirit of Ulrika Eleonora, watching over the curds of each batch.

More likely, it's the flora at Burträsk dairy. While cheese production was moved to a new building in the 1930s, most of the original fixtures were preserved, along with the 19th-century presses and linen cloths. Even the brine itself was carried over, bucket by sloshing bucket. The Burträsk dairy is quite literally its own ecosystem of historic, thriving bacteria. Combining this impossible-to-replicate flora with the original (and

still highly secretive) recipe, produced in the same hands-on, attentive manner since 1872, it seems to me that making Västerbottensost anywhere else would be impossible indeed.

"We've actually sold 66 percent more cheese [in the shop] this summer than all of last year," says Mårten Warg, a visitor's center attendant. "There's so

"In my personal opinion, it's the best cheese in the world."

much demand, we haven't even been able to keep it in stores." And as with most good things, Västerbottensost requires waiting. Each 40-pound wheel is aged for a minimum of 14 months on shelves made from local spruce. They're turned each day for the first three weeks before taking a paraffin bath

and retiring to the maturation room. An extra-aged version—produced in limited supply—rests there for at least 24 months.

After purchasing a responsible quantity for myself, I ask Warg what he thinks of all the hype over a cheese that has remained largely unchanged since the late 1800s. His answer is simple: "In my personal opinion, it's the best cheese in the world."

A NEW CHAPTER

One hour north of Burträsk, in the tiny locality of Södra Svedjan (population: 20), is a picture-perfect small farm that looks as spectacular in person as it does on Instagram. The sloping green hillsides are peppered with lively cows flicking their tails against shiny coats as they amble down to a crisp, blue lake. Red farmhouses, rustic and cozy with their white trim and tiny porches, are scattered throughout the property.

This is Svedjan Ost, a dairy run by husband-wife duo Pär and Johanna Hellström. Their specialty is Svedjan Gårdsost, one of Sweden's most decorated cheeses.

It's a warm Sunday when Johan and I arrive, and we're just in time for an afternoon of activity. A table of cinnamon buns, coffee, and small sandwiches is being prepared for *fika*—the Swedish tradition of taking a break and a bite with colleagues, while local artists arrange crafts for display inside a repurposed barn. Friends, family, and visitors are gathering for one of the many events Johanna and Pär host throughout the year to support arts and culture. I keep my eyes peeled for Johanna, who I've been emailing; when I locate her, busy with a thermos of coffee and last-minute directives for her baker-extraordinaire son Alfred, she hugs me as though we're old friends. Her warmth and hospitality are infectious, her sense of community inspiring. "We have all this space," she says, gesturing with an open arm after I remark on the dozens of smiling faces. "We may as well use it to let people come together."

The Svedjan Ost story began in 2009 when Johanna and Pär felt their former farming life was due for a change. An interest in artisan foods led them on a journey of discovery; while visiting cheesemakers in southern France, they saw the lifestyle they wanted to lead. "Cheese is a cool product," Pär says, as we enjoy an open-air dinner of roast lamb later that evening. "Swedish milk producers have been decreasing since the 1950s, and there are fewer people making cheese. We like history, we like tradition, we wanted to get into cheesemaking to help refresh the profession." The Hellströms knew it would take time to develop their craft, and their focus has always been on the well-being of the animals and land they care for, fully aware of how environment connects to what's on our plates.



Johanna and Pär Hellström of Svedjan Ost



Svedjan Rustik cheese

PHOTOS THIS PAGE: Erik Hillbom. OPPOSITE PAGE: Johanna and Pär Hellström/Ted Logardt; Cheese/Provided by Hellström family



Pär and Johanna Hellström examine a wheel of Gårdsost, left; Saleta Beiro of Visit Skellefteå greets a cow at Svedjan Ost



HOMESTEAD HOSPITALITY

The next morning begins early, when Johan and I wake up in a circa-1830 cabin. “The first house in our village,” Johanna had told us the night before as we traipsed through a cow pasture to reach our accommodations. The fire we’ve lit to keep the mosquitos at bay has long since burned out, and the sun is already stretching its rays across the lake as we make our way to the main house for coffee before continuing to the dairy.

As we suit up in hairnets and aprons, the first order of business is to slice open a month-old wheel of Svedjan Blå blue cheese for inspection. “I want to see the eye pattern,” Pär explains, referring to the distribution of blue mold. With a swift motion of a slicing wire he splits the cheese, revealing a creamy white center with what looks—to me—like lovely patterns of blue mold. Pär nods in approval, then we taste. “This is not so bitter, it’s mild in a good way,” he says, slicing off a wedge to enjoy at lunch.

We shuffle over to the vat where nearly 700 liters of morning milk are being heated to create a new batch of blue cheese. Pär preps the cultures, working so methodically I can’t help but comment on his efficiency. “My dream is to have routines,” he says. “When you have routines you have 50

percent of the work taken care of.” I can’t argue with his logic, so I just watch the artist at work. “Tradition is very important, but to be too strict is kind of boring,” Pär explains. As a modern cheesemaker, he’s on a constant quest to find the best flavors and textures, using all the tools that are available to him. “But to have your starting point in tradition,” he adds, “gives meaning and pleasure.”

After the rennet has done its part and Pär is giving the cut curds a stir, he muses aloud: “I wonder if in 50 years someone else will be standing here,

talking about tradition and how all of this started with two farmers who wanted to change their lives.”

The scale of what these humble farmers have created becomes apparent when Pär leads us to the aging room, where 16,500 pounds of Svedjan Gårdsost rest on spruce shelves. This aged farmstead cheese boasts notes of ripe pear and citrus balanced by subtle nut-butter flavors; it develops lovely crystals while aging for at least 14 months. As we wander through the rows, shelves laden with cheese in various states

of maturation from three weeks to nearly four years, my thoughts mischievously turn to the logistics of smuggling one of the 33-pound wheels out of the country.

Svedjan Gårdsost has won the popular vote for best cheese three years in a row at the annual Stockholm Cheese Festival; it has earned two silver and three gold medals in the Eldrimner Food Craftsmanship championships, a yearly competition for food producers in the Nordic countries; and even found its way onto the table at the 2017 Nobel Prize dinner. Inspired by their accolades and fully

in love with their way of life on the farm—which they run alongside their daughter and cheesemaking prodigy, Matilda—Pär and Johanna aren’t ready to call it a day.

“I definitely think our best cheese is yet to come,” Pär says over lunch, holding up the piece of blue he sliced earlier that morning, admiring it in the daylight. Johanna nods in agreement and adds: “[We try to] look for traditions and create something new.”

SUMMER BRONS RYLANDER is a freelance food and travel writer based in Nuremberg, Germany.

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To Do

Meet cheesemakers

The Västerbottensost Visitor Centre is open daily every summer. Enjoy a coffee and snack at the café, then purchase Västerbottensost cheese straight from the source.

vasterbottensost.com
[+46 90-18 28 00](tel:+4690182800)



Svedjan Ost welcomes visitors into its dairy with prior notice. Swing by in July to enjoy a fika with a lake view at their Svedjan summer café, located on the picturesque farm.

svedjanost.se
info@svedjanost.se

Älgens Hus, a moose farm located 45 minutes from Umeå, offers an opportunity to interact with tame moose and try the farm’s own moose cheese. It’s open six days per week during summer and by appointment year-round.

algenhus.se
[+46 70932-500 00](tel:+4670932500)

Stay in a historic country manor

The centerpiece of the hotel **Stiftsgården Skellefteå** is its manor house and former vicarage built in 1802, the latter of which was supposedly spared from the destructive flames of a Russian invasion thanks to Margareta Renhorn, a housemaid who won over her captors by treating them as cherished guests. The peaceful property features a wine cellar from the 1600s and lovely breakfasts of homemade regional specialties. Borrow a bicycle and ride alongside the Skellefte River to reach the heart of the city in 10 minutes.

stiftsgarden.se
[+46 910-72 57 00](tel:+46910725700)

Sip local craft beer

Skellefteå Bryggeri opened in 2011 on nearly the same plot of land as former brewery Skellefteå Ångbryggeri, founded in 1855. It overlooks the Skellefte River



and is open for tours by appointment. The outdoor terrace (open late during summer) is perfect for enjoying the region’s daylight nights.

skellefteabryggeri.se
info@skellefteabryggeri.se

The aptly named **Beer Studio** was opened in Umeå in 2012 by brewing enthusiast Darren Packman, a British expat whose expertise and passion for the craft has made him one of the most prominent folks in Sweden’s growing craft beer scene. The spot welcomes visitors for tours and tastings by appointment.

beerstudio.se
info@beerstudio.se

Visit a 100-year-old smokehouse

Vindelns Rökeri began preparing fine charcuterie and sausages in 1917, and their meat-smoking traditions continue today. The farm shop, open five days a week, offers Swedish and Norwegian specialties, including smoked Västerbottensost cheese.

vindelnrokt.se
[+46 0933-100 35](tel:+46093310035)

Outdoor activities aplenty

Västerbotten county is an amazing place for all things outdoors. Enjoy fishing, canoeing, hiking, and camping in the summer; downhill and cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, ice skating, dogsledding, and snowmobiling in the winter. Oh, and you just might see the Northern Lights from here, too. (Autumn and winter are your best bets for solar activity.) Check out the Västerbotten tourism board to plan your adventure.

visitvasterbotten.se

To Eat

Västerbotten is a county and ost is the Swedish word for cheese, so Västerbottensost technically means “cheese from Västerbotten county”—but only the version from Burträsk has held the trademark since 1988. The flavor is distinct and well-balanced, with a salty, acidic fruitiness and hints of sweet toffee. Limited quantities of Extra Lagrad (extra-aged to a minimum of 24 months) and Vindelnrökt (smoked, in collaboration with Vindelns Rökeri) are also produced.

Svedjan Gårdsost, an aged, raw cow’s milk cheese, is a tribute to traditional Swedish cheesemaking. Fruity and sharp, the wheel is balanced with buttery, lightly floral notes and a hint of meringue-esque sweetness.



Earthy, creamy raw-milk blue **Svedjan Rustik** has an exposed rind and develops a naturally brushed texture and ashy surface; its appearance inspired the “Rustik” name.

Svedjan Löpeld—Svedjan Ost’s take on halloumi—is a mild, lightly salty cheese perfect for grilling or eating fresh over a salad.

Cloudberries (hjortron) are tart, amber-colored delights that thrive in the arctic climate of northern Sweden. They’re often made into jam, which pairs nicely with a dollop of fresh whipped cream in a crunchy almond tart shell.

Lingonberries (lingon), commonly served alongside the popular Swedish meatball, are vibrant red in color and are also usually found in the form of preserves; they tend to be bitter when eaten raw.

Chanterelle mushrooms (kantareller) are a serious matter in Sweden—foraging is a popular activity and when a good patch is discovered, its location remains top secret. The mushrooms are lovely when gently cooked in cream and butter, seasoned generously, and served atop toast.



Arctic Char (fjällröding) is a freshwater fish related to both salmon and trout. Commonly found throughout Swedish Lapland, the fish can be prepared in myriad ways—but you’re most likely to find it poached in vegetable broth or grilled with a squeeze of lemon and fresh dill.

Reindeer (ren) is a classic staple of the region’s cuisine. There’s reindeer steak, meatballs, stew, tartare, jerky—you name the meaty dish, and there’s likely to be a reindeer rendition. For centuries, the animals have figured prominently in the lifestyles of the Sami, an indigenous people native to northern Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Russia’s Kola Peninsula.

PHOTOS: LEFT Provided by Hellström family; RIGHT Ted Logardt

PHOTOS: Visitor’s Center/Summer Brons Rylander; Svedjan Cheese/ Provided by Hellström family; Arctic Char: Coprid/Adobe Stock