VINAR TERRA – VÍNARKAKA – VÍNARTERTA

However you spell it, it's a taste of home

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While in Iceland, I made a rustic vínarkaka in a Reykjavík kitchen with ingredients from the Bónus grocery store. The eggs were incredibly yellow, the butter was the most buttery ever, the flour was fluffier, the sugar more granular, the cream was heavenly, the cardamom was an extract, and the resulting cake character was totally different than one made in my Ontario kitchen.

As the cake making marathon is upon me once again, I got to thinking about that summer rustic *vínarkaka,* based on an old Icelandic recipe, and how true it is that *vínarterta* looks and tastes uniquely like the visual and cultural landscape it is created in. The features of the food of individual culinary regions gives us a window into the environment and what is harvested and sourced for food making. The location and the gifts and demands of the seasons, wherever you are, is what provides food opportunity to repeat or evolve recipes, to become emotionally connected to culture and the stories of the past. All of this forms how we feed ourselves today and in the future.

Across North America dreams of perfect holidays begin around the making of our beloved "terta" that few people seem to know how to spell.

"I loved Vínar terra, you know, vínar terta, everyone does, after the surprise of the prune filling." – Betty Jane Wylie

But really, what is it about quirky traditional Icelandic food, and the cake that's hard to pronounce and spell that we love so much?

What I know is that Western Icelanders' connection to food is nicely said in Betty Jane Wylie's book *Letters to Icelanders: Exploring the Northern Soul* – Chapter Six, "Food, Letter to my Grandmother." It's a wonderful heart and recipe filled expression of appreciation, and sometimes bemusement of traditional Icelandic food and taste sensations experienced as a child. Mýsuostur (whey cheese), skyr, harðfiskur and "vinar terta" are highlights. You'll find out how to make the best coffee in the world, Icelandic brown bread, rúllupylsa, fish dishes, and more. I'm missing Gimli, Riverton, and Lake Winnipeg just thinking about it all.

Betty Jane's book has been reprinted and the copyright has been gifted by her to the Icelandic Canadian Club of Toronto to benefit youth programs. In *Letters to Icelanders,* Betty Jane regularly intentionally spells "vinar terta" with two words, believing that this configuration is consistent with our cake's origins in the Manitoba community cookbooks. How do you spell it? Recent emails from Betty Jane refer to "vinar terra" in a nod to pretty much everyone who spells it the way they think it is spelled.

People seem to spell it based on the sound they heard as a child without the added knowledge of the Icelandic language. Vina tata, vinartata, vinatera, vinettata, veneteta, veenartara, and veinertera are just a few spellings we know of, with the closest to the correct spelling, vinaterta. They are all wrong, technically, but perhaps the various spellings really do refer to different versions, number of layers, flavouring, and fillings? Nope. Mostly it's just a very real indicator of the loss of the Icelandic speakers in our community, and maybe a culture that thrives on argument.

I yearn to get folks back to spelling *vínarterta* correctly to preserve our traditions and language. And through this awareness, I think we can keep alive our precious cake and how it importantly defines us as Western Icelanders.

Perhaps vinar terra, and all the other permutations are descriptors of vínarterta, and of our moment in time and evolving cultural landscape. It is fascinating how many people are still in shock about how popular and culture-wide the phenomenon of our Icelandic cake really is. And even more, how protective they are of their family's ownership, and disturbed by buttercream icing or lack thereof.

One of the original recipes from an Iceland cookbook is called vínarkaka, made with four layers and filled with plum jam. Icelanders mostly maintain these four-layered configurations and change up the filling. However, in North America, Icelanders have tended to vary the number of layers and spices, and make it iced or not, based on family preference.

A clue as to why *vínarterta* evolved and became so popular with pioneers of New Iceland though, is found in Betty Jane's book. "Like people, food has to adapt to new surroundings. People take the tastes, the memories, habits and cooking methods and apply them to whatever similar material they can find in a new local."

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The beauty of *vínarterta* is that it can be made with minimal equipment, baked over a fire without an oven, and last a long time without refrigeration. Even with the abundance of wheat in North America, Icelanders kept up their traditional methods of making a little go a long way. More layers made it more special. Like all things that appear complex – like the delicious striped Icelandic cake – it's really simple. Many an amma made a very pragmatic cake with what was available, especially at Christmas, as an expression of love for their family. Their families never forgot it because of its incredible uniqueness and great taste.

Wanting to hang on to moments of closeness, love, and connection – and share them with others through food – is a constant over time. The taste of a sweet has a powerful impact on the brain. We remember with precision what is good, rare, and only available in certain places seasonally. Why this generation can't seem to get their heads around the spelling of *vínarterta* is confounding, but maybe that will change. Regardless, what makes it great is that it reminds us of good and happy times. It reminds us of home.

"The easiest way for most of us to hang onto the past, however, is through the food. And I guess that's why arguments can become so heated about the right way to make vína terta," says Betty Jane.

What I think is true about quirky traditional Icelandic food, and the cake that's hard to pronounce and spell that we love so much is this: it's all about preserving the past, a taste of home, and a connection with the Icelandic heart. And a culture of argumentativeness.

It is *vínarterta.* It is us.

Across North America, dreams of perfect holidays begin around the making of our beloved "terta." Thank you, Betty Jane and everyone, for carrying on holiday traditions and for being insufferable romantics, nostalgic for the past, for amma and afi, aunties and uncles, cousins and friends, coffee made with a bag, rúllupylsa, hangikjöt and some form of *vínarterta.* And thank you for just loving storied cultural food, all things Icelandic, the delicious striped Icelandic cake, and for being interested in Icelandic and Icelandic North American culture.

May I offer you some vínar terra?

Arden Jackson is CVO (Chief Vinarterta Officer) at Vinarterta.ca and principal at Arden Design Inc. As a multi-disciplinary design professional, chef, and specialist in the traditional Icelandic culinary and cultural landscape, her goal is sharing the pure love and pioneer spirit she has found through tasty connections to food, culture, history, and design.