More Than a Cake: The Living Tradition of Vínarterta

From childhood memories in Manitoba kitchens to a thriving specialty business in Ontario, **Arden Jackson** has spent more than a decade preserving one of Western Icelandic culture's most beloved traditions.

By **Katrín Níelsdóttir**

For generations of Western Icelanders, vínarterta has been far more than a cake. Its delicate layers, spiced prune filling, and unmistakable flavour evoke memories of Christmas gatherings, family kitchens, and the grandmothers and mothers who prepared it for special occasions.

For Arden Jackson, an Ontario-based entrepreneur with deep roots in Manitoba's Icelandic community, vínarterta has become both a passion and an unexpected career.

"I don't think I have a bakery," she says. "It's an accidental business. Connecting with Icelandic culture." Instead, she describes her work as an ongoing adventure. "I follow the cake. The cake takes me on adventures and always has."

AN UNEXPECTED BEGINNING

Arden's vínarterta business began in 2011 when, after falling from a ladder and breaking her arm, she turned to rolling dough as a form of rehabilitation. "I had so much vínarterta in my freezer, I needed an intervention," she recalls with a laugh.

Around the same time, a friend involved with Toronto's Icelandic community was organizing a concert featuring the Icelandic band Of Monsters and Men. Arden offered to provide vínarterta, arriving with two suitcases filled with cakes. The response surprised her. The cakes disappeared, and band members returned repeatedly for more, curious about what they were eating.

"It's more than Icelanders who love this cake."

She began experimenting with selling a single specialty product online, borrowing commercial kitchens to test her production methods. By Christmas 2012, she was selling vínarterta commercially. "I could not keep up with the demand," she recalls. "It went absolutely nuts. I was totally in shock."

Fourteen Christmas seasons later, Arden is still making vínarterta, although the business has become considerably more refined.

A CAKE THAT CONNECTS GENERATIONS

Arden grew up surrounded by Icelandic family traditions in Manitoba, particularly in the kitchens of Riverton. Although she was never formally taught Icelandic, the language, food, and customs remained part of her upbringing.

During a visit to Iceland with her mother in 2007, Icelandic guides commented that her mother's language sounded particularly traditional, reflecting older pronunciations preserved among Western Icelanders.

Even small experiences brought back memories. Watching an elderly man in an Icelandic café drink coffee through a sugar cube reminded Arden of the same custom in her own family.

Vínarterta holds a special place within that heritage. Although its origins lie in European layer cakes and Icelandic baking traditions, it developed a particularly strong cultural identity among Icelandic immigrants and their descendants in North America.

"Vínarterta represents us as an Icelandic community, specifically North American culture," Arden explains. "It is us, because it really is."

She has encountered families fiercely protective of their recipes, convinced that their particular number of layers, spices, or filling makes their vínarterta unique. Arden finds these variations fascinating and believes she can often recognize regional influences simply by examining how a cake has been made.

BRINGING VÍNARTERTA BACK TO ICELAND

One of Arden's most memorable experiences came in 2016, when she organized a journey to Iceland called the *There and Back Again Tour.*

During the trip, she prepared vínarterta in Reykjavík using Icelandic ingredients. The richer butter, different flour, and even the eggs required adjustments to her carefully developed methods. She served the finished cake at restaurants along the group's route, offering samples to staff and others after regular service had ended.

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In northern Iceland, near Skagafjörður, one woman's reaction was unforgettable. Upon tasting Arden's seven-layer vínarterta, she began to cry. The flavour reminded her of the vínarterta her grandmother had made. There were differences. Arden's Canadian version included icing, while the woman's remembered cake did not. But the flavour of the layers and filling had survived.

The experience highlighted the curious place vínarterta occupies in modern Iceland. Although familiar to Western Icelanders as an essential part of their cultural identity, it is not necessarily recognized in the same way by Icelanders today.

THE ART AND SCIENCE OF BAKING

A professional interior designer by training, Arden approaches baking with a keen appreciation for design, technique, and the relationship between materials.

Her flour is custom-milled in Ontario using a blend developed through extensive experimentation. She uses Icelandic sea salt, prepares her own vanilla and almond extracts, grinds cardamom immediately before adding it to the cake, and sources exceptionally fresh butter from Alliston Creamery in Ontario.

The process remains largely handmade. Arden estimates that producing a cake takes approximately four hours and that properly training someone to reproduce her methods requires three to four weeks. Even a written recipe is not enough. Humidity, temperature, and the properties of individual ingredients can all affect the finished product.

Although she has considered expanding into larger-scale production, Arden decided against turning vínarterta into a conventional industrial product. Her priority remains preserving its quality and traditional preparation.

A BUSINESS BUILT ON RELATIONSHIPS

Arden estimates that approximately 80 per cent of her customers return, many ordering year after year. "They have become part of my family over the last decade," she says.

For some families, her cake has become an established Christmas tradition. Their grandmothers and aunts may no longer be alive to prepare vínarterta, or younger generations may never have learned to make it themselves.

"I do not compete with an amma, or an auntie, or a mom," she explains. "I'm here for people who don't make it themselves, or don't have someone to make it for them."

Her customers regularly telephone to share family news, memories, and stories. Some leave their specially packaged vínarterta unopened until Christmas Eve, making it part of their holiday celebrations. Arden also sees baking as a personal and meditative practice. "I think about my customers as I'm making it, and I pour love into it."

KEEPING ICELANDIC TRADITIONS ALIVE

Arden's culinary interests extend well beyond vínarterta.

For approximately 15 years, she and her sons helped organize and prepare food for Toronto's Icelandic Þorrablót celebrations. What began as a potluck for 80 people eventually grew into an event serving more than 300 guests, supported by approximately 40 volunteers.

One memorable year involved a donation of ram's testicles, traditionally prepared as hrútspungar. Arden turned the unfamiliar delicacy into a playful challenge, encouraging participants to sample traditional foods they might otherwise hesitate to try.

The celebrations eventually attracted the attention of Parks Canada representatives from Newfoundland, who brought Viking Age interpreters to participate. Arden and other members of Toronto's Icelandic community later travelled to L'Anse aux Meadows for several summers, sharing Icelandic food, music, and culture with visitors.

She continues experimenting with contemporary interpretations of Icelandic cuisine. One variation of her vínarterta incorporates Icelandic liquorice, combining liquorice ganache with traditional prune filling and chocolate.

CHALLENGES ACROSS THE BORDER

Despite her loyal customer base, Arden's business faces a serious challenge.

Changes to American customs requirements and uncertainty surrounding tariffs have made shipping to the United States increasingly difficult.

Arden estimates that American customers have accounted for approximately half her business. After attempting to find a workable shipping solution, she reluctantly decided to suspend American orders for the 2026 Christmas season.

The decision has been emotionally difficult. Customers have already contacted her asking why they can no longer place their traditional holiday orders. For Arden, these are not anonymous transactions. Many have been part of her life for years.

PRESERVING HERITAGE, LAYER BY LAYER

Arden has explored opportunities to establish vínarterta production elsewhere, including Manitoba, British Columbia, and Iceland. However, she remains unwilling to compromise the ingredients and preparation methods that define her cakes. She also hopes to share her knowledge more widely, perhaps by teaching younger generations or organizing a vínarterta competition celebrating the diversity of family recipes.

Recipes are more than instructions for combining ingredients. They carry memories of migration, adaptation, family, and identity. For Western Icelanders, vínarterta has survived because generations of families continued making it, serving it, and sharing it.

Arden Jackson has found her own way of contributing to that tradition. Along the way, she has discovered that the real value of vínarterta lies not only in its layers of cake and spiced filling, but in the relationships and memories surrounding it.

As she explains, the foundation of her business has always been "connection, love and connection."

And perhaps that is the most important ingredient of all.

Learn more about Arden Jackson's vínarterta and culinary work at **ardenjackson.com**