

Cheese on the Menu of Latvian Contemporary Migrants as a Sign of Intercultural Encounter: Texts by Alvils Bergs and Laima Muktupāvela

Abstract: In world cuisines, cheese can be found in many different types and forms. It is a popular item on our daily menu and is associated with regional, ethnic, and social identities, as can be gleaned from its wide range of prices and the varied palate. Traditional Latvian cuisine is not rich in cheese variety. Perhaps that is why cheese as an exotic token is sometimes used in literary texts to describe specific choices, contradictions, or conflict situations. In the contemporary Latvian migrant or intercultural narrative, cheese is becoming a widely used gastropoetic element. Cheese in literary texts forms a whole paradigm of situations through which social, emotional, experiential and identity aspects of migrants' lives are revealed.

The paper provides a detailed analysis of two contemporary Latvian migrant texts – *Šampinjonu derība. melnie balti ķeltos* (*The Mushroom Testament. The Black Balts among Celts*, 2002), the debut novel by Laima Muktupāvela, a pioneering literary work on contemporary migration, and one of the latest examples – the text *Divi stāsti par Barsu* (*Two Stories about Barça*, 2018) by Alvils Bergs.

Both texts reflect different migration experiences; they are significantly different in terms of attitudes and construction. Focusing on the place of cheese in gastropoetics gives a new perspective on intercultural encounters and reveals the dynamics of change in the semiotic connotations of the cheese paradigm in Latvian migrant narratives.

Keywords: gastropoetics; cheese; migrant literature; intercultural literature; Latvian contemporary novel; Laima Muktupāvela; Alvils Bergs

Introduction

Studying food in literature is an enjoyable and rewarding endeavor. However, it is also a very dangerous one. In cooking, every little detail of the recipe is of grand importance. It seems that the same holds true for food in literature – almost every detail is significant and adds to the general foodscape of a particular text. Food has very wide and various opportunities to participate in the formation of the textual universe, but when distance, longing, nostalgia come to the fore, food acquires a special meaning.

There are many literary texts with explicit gastropoetics. This article will attempt to give an overview on how important food is, particularly in the literary accounts of migrants, touching upon one particular aspect in the texts of contemporary Latvian intercultural literature that in large part are (auto) biographical. And this aspect is the presence of cheese.

Some Methodological Considerations

The aim of the article is to look at Latvian contemporary migrant literature from a gastropoetical perspective, focusing on a specific gastronomic image, that of cheese. Through this specificity a new view on intercultural encounters is gained. The article deals with specific texts in the paradigm of migration, interculturality, imagology and gastropoetics. The latter receives particular attention, recalling the dictum of the 19th century French author Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin (incidentally, this man has also given name to a kind of French cheese *Brillat-savarin*): *Dis-moi ce que tu manges, je te dirai qui tu es* (“Tell me what you eat and I will tell you who you are”, Brillat-Savarin, 1848). Food plays a very central role in one’s identity, health, and well-being; it can be a status symbol, and even a sexual toy.

Lithuanian scholar Laura Laurušaitė has created an important framework for research of Latvian migration texts in developing an imagological approach to eating identities (Laurušaitė, 2015; Laurušaitė, 2019, etc.). Her point is important and topical: “As migrant identities are usually fluid and transformative; migration seems to be a continual threat to the self-image. On the other hand, émigré

literature is very handy for studying self-images as you can discover yourself better through the relation with the different and foreign Other” (Laurušaitė, 2015, 169). In her monograph published in 2019, Laurušaitė also focuses on the topic of dietetics and food (Laurušaitė, 2019), thus marking the common horizon of gastropoetics and migration text research.

Focusing on one specific product, cheese, that is both a simple source of nutrients and a cultural sign, this article provides innovative insight into contemporary migrants’ attempts to conserve their identity in vast intercultural networks. When we study migrant narratives, we in fact also focus on what “we now call literary food studies” (Shanani, 2018, 8). This literary food in recent Latvian fiction happens to be cheese, which allows one to better understand the functions of the so called “gastronomic injections” (Appelbaum, 2006, xii) in a particular text.

This paper is focused on the works of two Latvian writers, Laima Mukstupāvela and Alvilis Bergs. The author began this study several years ago (Lāms, 2019) and continued in collaboration with Latvian-Icelandic researcher Dens Dimiņš (Lāms & Dimiņš, 2019). In the context of “gastronomic injections” created by Latvian writer Alvilis Bergs, it is worth to supplement the methodological framework by “asking how dietary regimes and sexual regimes intersect in literature and culture” (Shanani, 2018, 10). In this respect, a scholarly study by Elspeth Probyn *Carnal Appetite*, with the subtitle *FoodSexIdentities*, is very useful and enlightening (Probyn, 2000). Probyn points out: “It seems to me that the sensual nature of eating now constitutes a privileged optic through which to consider how identities and the relations between sex, gender and power are being renegotiated” (Probyn, 2000, 6–7).

Brief Insight into Cheese and Human History

People have been consuming milk for 6,500 years (Evershed et al., 2008). According to scientific knowledge (Itan et al., 2009), it took thousands of years for human genetic lactose tolerance to develop so that milk could be used not only by infants but also by adults. Even before the use of milk, the Neolithic man had discovered pyrotechnology, while “the subsequent development of

pottery was an enormous step forward from the standpoint of food storage, processing, transport, and culinary capability in general” (Kindstedt, 2012, 10).

People came to cheese production in many ways, and it was a significant benefit for each culture. The diversity of cheese types is also a cultural issue for the Self and Other. As Paul. S. Kindstedt, a scholar of cheese history and cultural relations, states, “[t]here is a story behind every traditional cheese” (Kindstedt, 2012, 1). Cheese is indeed associated with traditions of different countries.

The traditional cheeses that took shape in various location over the centuries, along with other traditional foods that arose alongside them, shaped the surrounding culture. Thus, in regions of the world that share long histories of making cheese, one finds deep cultural imprints of these cheeses and other traditional foods embedded in the human landscape to this day (Kindstedt, 2012, 1).

Accordingly, when people from different landscapes of the cheese tradition meet and interact, the cheese can become a catalyst for various situations to be reflected in literary narratives. This works especially well in the migrant narratives, where cheese as a product is associated with a wide range of options. There are more than 3400 cheeses in modern Germany (Tolkdorf, 1993, 187), while France and other countries can compete with Germany.

In addition, there is a wide variety of cheese-making technologies that produce diverse products in terms of taste, aroma, price, and other characteristics. Consequently, these variables provide opportunities to compare, contrast, and express new cultural and social experiences.

Cheese in Traditional Latvian Culture

Latvian cheese-making traditions are more limited than those of the Western and Southern countries. Apparently, the scarce Northern sun is not propitious to generous milk production and surpluses that could be turned into cheese. However, Latvia also has its own ancient cheese history. Latvians traditionally made cheese during the summer solstice – it was yellow and round – and it became a symbol of the summer solstice ritual. It is the main food during

midsummer festivities. Cheese was mainly produced by the the landlady, the woman of the house, and it was associated with the fertility of cattle and the productivity of the crops. Cheese is also used as a means of sexual bait, something women used to attract men, attested by folk songs (Kursīte, 2018, 466–467 and the songs quoted). This fresh cheese was called *Jāņu siers* (“Midsummer’s cheese”) and in 2015 it received the status of a protected designation of origin (PDO) (Publication, 2015). *Jāņu siers* has remained the most important cheese on the Latvian menu, especially during the summer season. At any event, it is the best-known type of Latvian cheese.

Cheese and Latvian Contemporary Food Consumption Trends

Wider cheese production in Latvia began in the 19th century in manors that seriously modernized the dairy industry. In Latvia, several Western varieties were introduced and became the stepping-stone for Latvian varieties and a prosperous cheese industry, which reached its peak export capacity in the 1930s. As can be deduced from both literary sources and questionnaires¹, however, cheese in Latvian food culture has the role of a supplement rather than staple food. The question “Which types of cheese do you prefer?” often elicited the response “Discount cheese”. Today supermarkets, especially the ones of the luxury segment, offer many types of cheese. But the menu of Latvians seems to be consistently dominated by some cheeses that survived from the times of the First Republic (1918–1940), some with changed names. For example, the semi-soft *Tilzītes siers* (Tilsiter cheese) popular during the prewar period was renamed *Krievijas siers* (Russian cheese) in the Soviet times. It is still produced by Latvian manufacturers, while Lithuanian manufacturers have returned to the old name. There are probably technological differences, but in essence these types of cheese share the same origin.

The already mentioned “discount cheese” tellingly characterizes the attitude of the majority of Latvians toward cheese consumption, and in this

1 The author of this paper conveyed a small-scale anthropological survey, in which twenty-five Latvians were asked questions about cheese use, including people from the older generation who had witnessed a change in cheese consumption traditions during various political regimes.

attitude we see that cheese can also characterize a person's social status and movement on the social stairs, which becomes especially visible in migration texts. For comparison, it is worth mentioning an episode from the novel *Atkal Eiropā* (Again in Europe, 1968) by Latvian exile writer Aīda Niedra (1899–1972). There is an episode where two young Latvian women in exile travel across Europe to Zurich, and “[...] on the way home, they went to a cheese shop, where a merchant cut a fragrant slice from a huge Emmental cheese roll. And in the evening, eating the fragrant cheese, Vilma laughed” (Niedra 1968, 46).²

During the years of Soviet occupation, there was only one cheese shop in Riga, Brīvības Street, which at that time was called Lenin Street. The shop was located opposite the KGB building (however, this was a coincidence). There were no more than 3 to 5 varieties in the store at the same time, with no Emmental cheese among them. In Latvia, however, an analogue of Roquefort cheese was produced, and from the mid-1970s also a local variation of Cheddar cheese, but no one bought just a slice of cheese.

Latvians in exile took with them the traditions of prewar cheese consumption and developed them in the new conditions. From the prewar media and postwar exile periodicals, however, it can be gleaned that the path from simple consumption to enjoying cheese as a special dish has been rather slow and tortuous.

Cheese has always been recognized as an important nutrient. It is very useful for people who do manual, physical labour. However, cheese must be eaten with great care, because it can create acid in the body, inflammation of the guts and even in the genitals. In such cases, it must be abandoned altogether. In summertime, eating cheese is not recommended because it creates heat. The cheese should be eaten on bread or with unleavened biscuits. Vegetables and fruit can be eaten during the meal. Heavy cheeses such as Swiss and Parmesan can be made lighter by adding a little grated horseradish and lemon juice. Besides, cheese can be grated and mixed with freshly prepared rice and pasta (Anonymous, 1932, 22–24).

Assessing these recommendations from a modern point of view, it needs to be said that there are no such precautions against cheese anymore;

2 All translations of quotations from Latvian texts were made by the author of the article.

the recommendation to use cheese with pasta is firmly established in Latvian cuisine, but there is no recommendation to use cheese with rice.

In the exile media of the 1950s, one can read recommendations for Latvian housewives on how to adapt to the wide range of cheese types of the West. It is worth quoting a broader passage from Margaret Kerls' story about cheese, as it covers all Latvian sorts, both traditional and imported, including the more delicious types:

Cheese production is a very old way of processing milk. It's familiar to almost all nations engaged in with livestock and dairy farming competition. However, each area has its own preparation techniques. If we remember our own Midsummer's cheese, then we must admit that it tasted differently from farm to farm, because each hostess had her own set of preparations type and recipe. We will find even more variety and difference in large grocery stores, where cheese converges products from many countries and countries. There we see the magnificent Swiss cheese, Edam cheese dressed in red wax, Tilsiter cheese wrapped in tin foil, spicy Roquefort cheese, hot Chester, gentle Gervere, the peculiar Camambert and many more, many more.

Thanks to this great diversity and for the versatility of taste, various kinds of cheese tend to be served even after the proudest meals. When eaters are tired of fish and poultry, when roasts are no longer tempting and various sauces and salads no longer lead to tasting, then the cheese plate still finds many supporters. Cheese plates tend to be arranged on trays or large plates. Place a nice dish with butter next to them, one or more varieties of bread, or also toasted bread or unsweetened cake and, most importantly, several cheese varieties, different in taste and characteristics.

But not only on holidays and celebrations sometimes we can serve various kinds of cheese, they can be put even the most modest tables. There are many varieties of cheese, despite the high-value composition, cheese is, however, cheaper than meat and meat products. Cheese is useful for breakfast as well also for dinner as a snack on bread (Kerls, 1952, 29).

Although Kerls's article was written seventy years ago, it not only essentially reflects the diversification of the Latvian cheese consumer after the restoration of independence, but also the intercultural experience that Latvian 21st century migrants discover through food, including cheese.

Cheese: Some Opposites in Poetry

In literature, cheese appears as a micro-image: a vivid detail for the characterization of the environment or as a detail that supposedly reveals the inner world of the hero when talking about the environment. With the image of cheese, it is possible to revive the beauty of the past, as Elmārs Apse does in the poem *Siers* (Cheese, 1973):

A man with elbows rolled up his sleeves,
Mother sowing cheese,
The whole house then smelled
After cumin and wind.
Dandelions bloomed in December,
Cows with sharp tongues
Licked yellow sun,
Listened to the grasshopper game.
The milk squirmed warmly in the milk,
Clouds covered in foam,
And larks in their songs
How the seventh heaven felt.
Mother sowing fragrant cheese,
We sat around,
Full mouth like broken
We ate last summer. (Apse, 1973, 3).

Latvian Poet Aleksandrs Čāks, on the other hand, conjures up a still life in his poem *Neurastēnija* (Neurasthenia, 1932), in which cheese, together with other products, indirectly and metaphorically reflects the sad mood of the poem's protagonist:

Six
at the grocery store door,
where in the window
were evicted
five pies, solid as gum,

Dutch cheese,
more fragrant than the cheapest powder,
last summer radishes
Send feedback
History
Saved
Community. (Čaks, 1932, 153).

For Čaks, cheese is a sign of everyday life but evokes associations with the smell of powder. This erotic line will be developed in Alvils Bergs's novel.

Concluding the review of cheese in Latvian culture, two findings are important. On the one hand, cheese culture is well-known, as it forms an integral part of the summer solstice rituals and is associated with the liveliest aspects of Latvian pagan heritage. On the other hand, cheese is not a widely and variably used product. Consumption is mainly restricted to some cheap and hearty, taste-neutral varieties, which are a means of absorbing the nutrients needed on a daily basis rather than a sign of gastronomic taste.

Migrant Narratives and Gastropoetics: Peculiarities of Cheese Imagery in Fiction by Laima Muktupāvela and Alvils Bergs

Identity and its fluidity are the essential themes of migrant, exile, and diaspora texts. Although the question of identity can be looked at from many perspectives, one of the most prolific is the gastronomical, as most migrant literary texts provide abundant material in this aspect. We will be able to sketch out only some aspects of the gastronomical in Latvian migrant texts and examine how foodways depicted in these texts shape, reinforce, and change the identities of the *dramatis personae*. In contrast to Latvian exile literature of the 20th century, the themes of which were defined by the political exile, contemporary Latvian migrant literature deals with situations defined by economic or adventurous exploratory motives. Although there are a lot of Latvian migrants, there are not so many contemporary Latvian texts dealing with migration themes, including food. Still, most of these works have attracted critics and readers. The most prominent texts are: *Šampinjonu Derība* ("Mushroom Testament", 2002) by

Laima Mukstupāvela (now Kota), *Dzimtenīte* (“Moonshine”, 2012) by Andra Manfelde, *Stroika ar skatu uz Londonu* (“Stroika with a London View”, 2010) by Vilis Lācītis, *Divi stāsti par Barsu* (“Two stories about Barça”, 2018) by Alvils Bergs. All of these works depict the migration experience in the UK. The novel *Lopu ekspresis* (“The Cattle Express. A Tale of Wall Street and Siberia”, 2016) by Toms Kreicbergs, which is a translation of novel written originally in English “The Cattle Express” (2016) by Tom Crosshill (the same author), describes both the migrant’s life in the USA and his grandmother’s displacement to Siberia. Other texts featuring migrant themes are the novels *Muzejs* (“Museum”, 2017) by Jānis Rokpelnis, *Noraksītīte* (“Write-Offs”, 2018) by Ilga Rašcevska, and *Pazuduši lidojumā* (“Lost in Flight”, 2016) by Inga Puriņa, short stories *Sprīdīte* (“The Small One”, 2010) by Inga Žolude, the poem *Aizbraucot* (“Departing”, 2011) by Inga Gaile, and the play *Dērbijas vergi* (“Slaves of Derby”, 2015) by Ludmila Judina (now Roziņa). The themes of migration have recently appeared in movies as well, namely the film *Oļegs* (“Oleg”, 2019) directed by Juris Kursietis. A documental and biographical narrative by the writer Laima Kota (ex-Mukstupāvela) is her memoir *Mana turku kafija* (“My Turkish Coffee”, 2012) about her encounter with Turkey after her marriage to the Turkish poet Ahmet Kot – in this text, she contrasts the Turkish foodscape with her former culinary experiences in Latvia. Contemporary Latvian migrant texts in most cases are texts that do not depict permanent migration, but, in stark contrast to Latvian exile literature, deal with a continual movement between the homeland and the land of migration.

A Type of Cheese without Name

Of course, there is no such cheese type that is known to be “without name”, but for a user whose resources are limited and whose life is a struggle for survival, the variety of cheeses is reduced to one – discount cheese. In her novel *Moonshine*, Andra Manfelde compares the worldview of affluent locals with that of migrants: “They do not know what it means to borrow to be able to buy a *Gold Fish*³. Buy bread, milk, nag when there is not enough for cheese” (Manfelde 2013, 77).

3 Gold Fish (Latv. *Zelta zivtiņa*) – a pre-paid phone card offered by a Latvian phone company, Tele2. The name is taken from a folk tale where the goldfish is a symbol of miraculous transformation.

Widely and expansively, this “no-name” cheese motif, and cheese consumption as a sign of social failure, is used in Laima Mukstupāvela’s novel *The Mushroom Testament*. The novel consists of two parts – a first-person narrative about life and work on a mushroom farm, and a collection of recipes for the use of mushrooms in various dishes.

The novel includes 39 recipes. Cheese is mentioned 50 times in the novel. The recipes have gorgeous names (such as Purple Submarine, Mary Antoinette Flea Buckets, World Cover, White and Red Rose Peace, etc.). The titles basically have a distant connection with both the recipe and the events in the novel. These titles are like a beautiful world of imagination, covering the monotony of food and the monotony and poverty of a migrant’s life. Only eight times the recipes mention the name of the cheese – it is either Cheddar or Russian cheese, but they have no value in themselves. They form the opposite between the taste of the homeland and the taste of a foreign country. Nevertheless, in both cases it is life on the lowest rungs of the social ladder.

English Blue and Stilton Types of Cheese

Just as Mukstupāvela shows the monotony of a migrant’s life with the help of cheese, cheese may equally become a witness to the profit-making and pull-out situation. Perhaps someone while reading her recipes could imagine that champignons are the food are the reason for monotony in the novel, while all other ingredients including cheese play an opposite role, namely being meant to diversify recipes and therefore serve as a sign of emigrant ingenuity and gastronomic flexibility in the novel. However, cheese as an ingredient, one that is never very specific in terms of taste or other qualities, constitutes a primitive means of making food more satiable and more nutritional. Therefore, cheese merges with champignons in that it also plays its part in monotony.

In contrast to this, the novel also has two episodes of finely wrapped English blue cheese that is sold at an airport tax-free store. This type of cheese transfers a completely different meaning. Both of these episodes chime with the aforementioned episode of Aida Niedra, where cheese is the object of gastronomic pleasure. Mukstupāvela’s protagonist has also reached this level of cheese consumption after a year of hard labor: “I will eat cheese at home with

some light wine” (Muktupāvela, 2002, 8). However, the traces of poverty seem indelible: the “dish will be useful in the household” (Muktupāvela, *ibid.*).

Both the novel by Muktupāvela and the novel by Bergs feature episodes with Stilton cheese. Bergs’s text contains only one episode on cheese:

True life stories about the essence of Irish character [...] Regarding Celtic developments in Europe, it is claimed that the British name derives from the Celtic word *bridan* – tattooed. “A real warrior was like Stilton blue-veined cheese – a soldier armed with blue tattoos, whose appearance alone is already half of the weapons and armament.” (Muktupāvela, 2002, 263–264)

Moldy Blue Stilton’s cheese is little known in Latvia. It can be bought only in a few stores and even then, is not always on offer. As argued by historians of Stilton cheese, distinctive blue veins are created by piercing the crust of the cheese with stainless steel needles, allowing air into the core; the manufacturing and ripening process takes approximately nine to twelve weeks (Hickman, 1995). Muktupāvela uses Stilton cheese to create a distinctive visual image, while incorporating the need for supposedly secret knowledge.

Alvils Bergs has a similar approach. Stilton cheese also appears in his novel and requires the reader to know the cheese’s appearance, taste, and aroma. Latvian literary criticist Bārbala Simšone draws the reader’s attention to Berg’s unusual and powerful gastropoetical image:

The text is built with sharp, bright cuts that dazzle the mind like flashes of ruthless spotlights. After reading the stories, you may not remember for a long time the words of individual images or plot peripetias, but you will definitely preserve the paintings of sight, hearing and even smell – even an episode in which a couple of lovers, enthusiastically intertwined, generously lubricate each other not with an aromatic oil, but with a neat Stilton blue cheese. (Simšone, 2018)

This erotically saturated episode with a distinctly gastronomic interaction places special emphasis on pleasure. At the same time, it marks a turning point in the search for the protagonist’s identity, suggesting that however new, challenging, and exciting things are, they remain foreign and exotic, belonging to the realm of the Other. The protagonist still has some interesting adventures ahead but is slowly beginning to find their way back home.

Conclusions

Cheese has rich and varied semiotic undertones that vary from simple nutritional food element to status symbols and sexual toys. The foreign elements of exotic cheese types in Muktopāvela's novel could be understood as foreshadowing her social ascent.

It must be admitted that even though cheese has not historically been a central food product in Latvian cuisine, it has significantly improved its position over the last century. The everyday use of cheese has a strong potential to characterize the social environment, so its representation is included in migrant texts in various ways. With her depiction of cheese consumption in her novel, Laima Muktopāvela reveals the social and emotional insecurity that prevails in the lives of migrants. Alvilis Bergs uses the image of cheese to portray passion and eroticism that is found also in traditional Latvian culture, but the alienation produced by the foreignness of the expensive and exotic cheese also marks the inevitable collapse of this exotic, erotic relationship.

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