



The Swedish Slow Food Inn

The Slow Food movement is an international association defending the culinary arts in order to increase the respect for the human rhythm of life. Christina and Paul Aarts, who run the inn *Vårdshuset i Dala-Floda* in Sweden, have joined this rather special movement.

BY EVELYN PESIKAN
PHOTO NICLAS ALBINSSON

IT TAKES A LONG TIME TO TRAVEL by public transport from Stockholm to the little community of Dala-Floda, situated between Borlänge and Malung. Sometimes you need to change trains three times, and then take a taxi for the last leg.

On the other hand, travelling as slowly as possible for this mission feels just right. The destination is *Vårdshuset i Dala-Floda*, whose owners are worthy members of the international Slow Food association, a pretty strange movement that praises the principle of slowness, particularly in cuisine. Hurrying to this apparently ultra-Swedish, idyllic village in a speedy car would have been highly inappropriate since Slow Food's membership symbol is a cute little golden snail.

As soon as you enter the door of this yellow ochre house, situated on the shores of Lake Flosjön in a cluster of red log houses, you will be surprised – is this really Sweden? Here, the scent of food is far from that of classic Swedish family hotel fare, if

anyone happens to remember how this used to smell. As soon as you approach the pleasant little reception desk, you are met by the warm scent of all kinds of exotic spices, mixed with the subtle, old-fashioned fragrance of typically Swedish geraniums that fill the windowsills.

One of the world's most well-travelled dogs is also there to meet you, Johari, a cute and friendly dog that was brought here from Kenya after a long but probably comfortable quarantine in Paris together with the author and film-maker Marianne Ahrne. This adaptable dog, whose name means 'precious stone', has, without a whine, acclimatised to life in chilly Scandinavia and is now doing a very good job receiving guests from all over the globe.

Everyone already knows that *Vårdshuset i Dala-Floda* is hardly your typical Swedish restaurant and family hotel.

»This has in fact been a family hotel off and on since the late 1800s,« explains Christina Aarts, who together with Paul,

her Dutch husband, bought what was called *Joneses Vårdhus* back in 1979. Without any experience of the hotel and restaurant business, they have proven the truth of the expression 'nothing ventured, nothing gained'.

IT ALL STARTED WITH A SMALL, ISOLATED SUMMER FARM

The couple had met in Kenya a few years earlier, when Paul was working as an artist and Christina, a former Swedish teacher, was studying linguistics. Both of them realised early on that they wanted a change in their lives and wanted to start anew together. When they moved to Christina's homeland, they thought it would only be a temporary stay until they found something better in France or Italy. But then a small, isolated summer farm came along that they couldn't resist buying, and one day in 1979, they happened to drive past the village of Dala-Floda and an enticing sign saying 'Inn for sale'...





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»And believe it or not, we're still here,« laughs Christina while she conducts a tour of the breathtaking yet cosy rooms of the inn.

With artistic passion and little means, the host couple have accumulated and mixed furnishings, art and other things from all over the world. Most of what is to be found in the 14 rooms – each with its own name and ethnic theme – was purchased at flea markets, and it has taken a long time to get everything 'in order'. This inn is as far from the Hilton as you can get!

»We chose to refine our concept instead of striving for growth and conformity. We value quality far more than quantity,« she says.

Many hotel owners would claim the same thing, but this hotel has proof in that Vårdshuset is now certified by the 'Swan'* and KRAV. From the start, the Aarts have been very thorough in choosing local organic products for their dishes. They were viewed as back-to-nature eccentrics back in the 80s, which was hardly surprising, but that comes with the territory if you're part of a new trend. This inn, which is truly 'inn'-ternational, has organised many seminars and conferences over the years, everything from yoga and cognitive body awareness to African dance. All these years, physical and emotional well-being have characterised the couple's ambitions, and what could be more important than food and drink in making guests feel good?

The kitchen, where Paul, a true artist, creates unconventional and imaginative dishes, is the heart of Vårdshuset. Here, Swedish produce is transformed into international cuisine. Salmon from Lake Siljan shares the same plate as sweet potatoes and tamarind sauce. Swedish pike is dressed in a 'suit' of African spices, including cumin, coriander and turmeric; breast of duck is boldly brushed with apricot jam, tuna mousse is spiked with a daring Cajun mixture, genuine Swedish elk is sometimes turned into a provençal stew, a hearty *daube*, while saddle of venison is slowly marinated in walnut oil. In other words, in this inventive kitchen, anything can happen!

It is hardly surprising that friendly but sceptical locals over the years have occasionally found this global menu of cross-

fertilisation to be 'a little strange'. Few people have the perspective of Christina and Paul, who know people everywhere and each year try to spend a few months on an island in their beloved Kenya. The reason that these two globe-trotters have managed to stay on their tiny Swedish 'island' for so many years is that they have succeeded in combining tranquillity and comfort with the exotic. Instead of travelling themselves, they let the world come to them.

STRESSLESS CONCEPT

A couple of years ago, they heard about the organisation Slow Food for the first time through guests. It was founded in 1989 in protest against the growth of the McDonald's hamburger chain in Italy. Today, the association has more than 65,000 members in 45 countries, including nearly 100 members in Sweden.

When the Aarts understood the movement's philosophy (see the manifesto), based on respect for the culinary arts, they realised that it dovetailed with their own concept.

»We never intended to belong to a movement or chain, but it felt so right. Now we have a basic philosophy behind our refusal to get stressed or compromise with our food,« says Christina, and tells us the story of the guest who stood impatiently in the hall and asked angrily how long it would take to get her food.

»I explained that we take it easy here and gently asked her if she wasn't on holiday. She then calmed down and admitted that I was right. We prefer to have guests who really appreciate our food and don't just view meals as a necessary evil during conferences.«

This is also an attitude that is a part of the Slow Food philosophy. Swedish Slow Food members ordinarily meet three or four times a year at carefully selected restaurants, and their dinners often have a particular theme.

Last year, the first Slow Food dinner was held in Dala-Floda. Despite the fact that the KRAV-raised calf hadn't been hung long enough, the 18 guests had such a nice time in the relaxed atmosphere that the association decided to give Vårdshuset i Dala-Floda one of its rare diplomas.

Besides the personal touch and high level

of ambition in the kitchen, director Carlo Barsotti, Slow Food's Swedish representative, particularly appreciated the thoughtful wine list, which is characterised by a relationship between quality and price. For example, an exquisite Amarone wine is served for 350 kronor in addition to an inexpensive but good organic wine from Tuscany. The culinary arts that Slow Food is trying to protect around the world naturally include mealtime beverages, which often is wine.

»Seeing to it that our guests can afford a good wine with their food is a part of our job. Wine belongs to a real meal,« says Christina, who together with her inventive husband published her best recipes in 1994 in a cookbook called *World food from a Swedish multicultural inn*.

**The Nordic eco-label, the Swan, shows that the hotel has a carefully considered and long-term environmental programme involving the staff and covering the entire business.*



The Slow Food movement

Slow Food/Sweden is a part of the international Slow Food movement that originated in Italy. This movement defends the right to pleasure, the respect for the human rhythm of life and a harmonious relationship between people and nature.

The movement also promotes good discipline of the senses of taste and smell from childhood and protects and defends local culinary culture.

Read more at www.slowfood.com.

You can also register as a member on Slow Food's homepage.