The first Professor in Food Culture – Helsinki-February 2012

Interview with Pr. Johanna Mäkelä, Department of Teacher Education, University of Helsinki, Finland

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Pr. Johanna Mäkelä is currently working at the Department of Teacher Education at the University of Helsinki. Mäkelä was Head of Research at the National Consumer Research Centre until 2011. She has been working on food for more than 20 years, focusing on the sociology of food and consumption, meals, the practices and patterns of eating and how they have changed.

Breaking news - University of Helsinki - 24.11. 2011

“Johanna Mäkelä appointed Professor of Food Culture at the University of Helsinki - Finland’s first chair of food culture was founded with donated funds. The professorship is the first in Finland, and uncommon all around the world. [...] The new professorship is to take food culture to the same level as other cultural fields in Finland. Even though the significance of food culture is recognised and understood in Finland and food-related education is offered and research is carried out at several colleges and universities, there has been no academic chair to bring all the knowledge and competencies together. The food culture chair is to provide an opportunity for holistic development of the field.”
Announcement for the position of Food Culture Professorship –
Quoted from the text.

“The field of the professorship is food culture. The professorship has been
established with donated funds and is financed by the support fund for food
culture, administered by the University of Helsinki Funds. There are several
professorships financed by donated funds but the professorship of food culture is
exceptional because its support fund has 50 donors. There are five types of donors.
About half of the funding is from foundations and the rest is from public
organisations, private companies, private persons, and associations. A group of
active fundraisers managed to mobilise a large number of donors. They also
established new forms of fundraising like a gala dinner that acted both as a means
to raise awareness and attract new donors.”

Interview

1 Virginie Amilien: Johanna, you are the first Professor in food culture in Finland, and
obviously in the Nordic, and even European, countries. As we can read in the
description of your position, this emerged from a cooperation between public and
private companies: Such a financial support from both university and industry is highly
unusual! And it is fascinating. But what is your particular role at University and in your
Department?

2 Johanna Mäkelä: Officially we can read that “The professor of food culture is
responsible for teaching and research in the educational programme of Home
Economics. The position focuses especially on the social and cultural dimensions of
food choice and food behaviour in Finland. Research duties include deepening the
multidisciplinary approach to food culture and leading research projects. The position
should promote national and international cooperation and networking in the field of
food culture.”

3 I feel that my main task is to explore and interpret food cultures. My job consists of
four areas that are research, teaching, societal interaction, and administration. At the
moment I’m involved in two large research projects. The first one is “Food in Nordic
Everyday Life” coordinated my Lotte Holm at the University of Copenhagen and funded
by NOS-HS. This project and its predecessor are described in this number of AoFood, in
a common article. The second one is “Fatty foods and fat bodies: Diversification of
ideals and practices in healthy eating”. The FAT project is funded by the Academy of
Finland and it combines perspectives from social and cultural food studies and critical
fat studies by focusing on the case of ‘fat’ both in food and in bodies. I am the leader
responsible of this consortium that includes researchers from the Finnish National
Consumer Research Centre, the Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy at
University of Jyväskylä and the Finnish National Institute for Health and Welfare.

4 VA: You have to deal with teaching and research: How do you manage to combine the
two perspectives?

5 J.M: My research is essential for my second task, teaching, as the Department of
Education strongly emphasises research-based teaching. I am in charge of a new
multidisciplinary study unit of food culture that is a unique collaboration between
three faculties of University of Helsinki and Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences.
25 students with 11 different majors started this study unit of 25 credits in September
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The aim is to deepen the students’ understanding of food culture and related phenomena with the help of a multidisciplinary approach.

The new professorship has stirred a lot of interest in Finland and in other Nordic countries. There are few positions like this in the world. Therefore, my societal interaction during this first year has to a large extent been about introducing this unique position, its background, and my ideas to various stakeholders. It has been a pleasure to realise how widely people have expressed their interest and support. The numerous donators have created a network to turn to.

VA: Although there is a huge numbers of donors, this position is obviously a political focus area? Is food, and particularly food culture, a priority area in Finland nowadays?

J. M: There is a lot of debate around food production and consumption and many societal debates crystallise in current discussions and actions around food. Remarkably, the programme of the present government includes, for the first time ever, a section titled “Food Policy”. Food has been recognised as an essential part of the Finnish culture and a legitimate research subject. I have started my job as the professor of food culture in interesting times!