



Food culture along Saint Birgitta Ways

Food culture research reinforces a famous tourism trail in Sweden.

EAFRD-funded projects

Location: Linköping, Sweden

Programming period: 2014-2020

Priority: P6 - Social inclusion and local development

Focus Area: Local development

Measures: M01 - Knowledge transfer & information actions

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Timeframe: 15/01/2021 - 30/09/2023

Project promoter: Egendomsförvaltningen i Linköpings Stift

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Summary

Native crop varieties of vegetables, grains, fruit and berries and Swedish medieval food culture were topics of this research project that aimed to promote sustainable production based on traditional plant varieties along the Saint Brigitta pilgrimage routes. The CAP funds helped identify common traditional crops along Saint Birgitta's pilgrim routes (and from the Nordic gene bank) that could be used to promote their food products to local growers, food producers and pilgrims.

Sweden's Saint Birgitta's pilgrimage routes attract an increasing number of hikers each year, which boosts demand for catering and accommodation options. In line with the principles of sustainable tourism, this project aimed to promote a traditional food culture along the routes, which would promote local food production and preserve history.

Project results

- Results have, in several cases, exceeded the objectives. More crop plant varieties were identified than anticipated, more growers and chefs than expected came forward to get involved in the project, and general interest in the project has been wider than anticipated.
- Thanks to this project, the resilience of endangered crops is sustained and a better food culture has been established in the cafés, bakeries, breweries, guesthouses and restaurants along the pilgrimage routes.

Key lessons and recommendations

- The project has shown that investing in local and traditional plant varieties can enhance culinary and cultural tourism.
- Despite a clear demand from the catering sector, it has proven to be very difficult to get professional growers to invest in medieval crops. The interest is greater among hobby growers.



Context

The Saint Birgitta Ways are hiking routes that lead to one of Europe's well-known pilgrimage destinations, Vadstena: a small town with around 6 000 inhabitants in southeastern Sweden. The monastery of the Order of Birgittine was founded here by Sweden's patron saint - Saint Birgitta - and it is here that her remains have been kept since 1373.

Since 2019, the Birgittavägarna or Saint Birgitta Ways were developed in order to link Hamburg, Trondheim and Uppsala/Stockholm, thus connecting the Saint Birgitta Ways with other pilgrimage destinations in Europe and across Scandinavia.

This development has led to the Saint Birgitta Ways becoming increasingly popular over the years, which has also increased demand from pilgrims for wholesome and natural food options along the route. This project aimed to revive traditional crops and recipes among local producers as an opportunity to diversify regional economies by adding value to farm produce and launch new business ventures by highlighting the area's cultural and culinary history.

The project was carried out in close collaboration with Kålotsakademien (for their cultural history expertise and wide network), Stockholm University's Matti Leino (for his expertise in the history and evolution of crop plants), the NordGen and National Genebanks (for seeds and vegetative materials) and Mathias Dahlgren innovation AB (who developed the new recipes). This was in addition to many growers and chefs, who participated in various ways during the project.

Objectives

The project promoted traditional food crops. It aimed to preserve and disseminate cultural heritage knowledge and practice in new ways by providing actors (new and old) in an often-dormant countryside area with an opportunity to develop a new gastronomic visitor attraction.

Specific objectives sought to:

- Create new innovative food products and dishes through revived local varieties of plants.
- Establish networks and collaborations between restaurants, farms, universities, the tourism sector, etc.
- Share knowledge about growing and cooking medieval varieties of plants.
- Develop a living cultural heritage based on local food sources.

Activities

Project activities included:

- Identifying a large variety of vegetables, grains, fruit and berries that are representative of the agricultural practices of the Middle Ages, as well as those that have a regional and/or cultural association with the route of the St. Birgitta Ways.
- Developing contemporary variations of Middle Age recipes using the species and varieties identified.
- Initiating the cultivation of these plants with 11 producers and stimulating interest among seed growers to produce seeds for the continued cultivation of those crops.
- Raising awareness about these varieties across the catering, agrifood and tourism sectors through a website, a workshop series, and other communication tools and activities.
- Delivering webinars and conferences about the project for actors in the hospitality industry in Vadstena, Sweden and Norway.
- Producing educational material that enables the continued development of cultivation and cooking after the end of the project.
- Saving one of Sweden's oldest pear trees, which came as a bonus in the search for old varieties.

Seed companies, including Runåbergs fröer, were contacted concerning the ongoing propagation of identified seed varieties.

To help share the project results with as many stakeholders as possible, this project also collaborated with the National Pilgrim Association of Sweden, the National Framework for Hiking Trails (and other hospitality industry organizations in Sweden) and the National Pilgrim Centre in Norway.

Main results

- Thanks to this project, endangered crops are grown again and a food culture has been established in the cafés, bakeries, breweries, guesthouses and restaurants along the pilgrimage routes.
- The results have, in several cases, exceeded the objectives. More plant varieties were identified than had been anticipated; despite the pandemic, more growers and chefs than expected came forward to get involved in the project; and general interest in the project has been wider than anticipated.
- The project has delivered against all of its objectives except offering seeds to farmers. The project team decided that working with professional seed growers was more realistic, and this adaptation required a formal modification to the project.
- The project redistributed part of the budget to print more copies of the compendium as there was a large demand that will last for several years.
- One of the bonus results is that the project inadvertently helped save the life of Sweden's oldest pear tree (Nunnepäron from Kärnskogen). The project saved live twigs from the (likely 800-year-old tree) and successfully grafted these. The variety has now been secured after what turned out to be the last example of its kind was felled in the autumn before the project completed its inventory.

Key lessons and recommendations

- The hospitality and nature tourism sectors have been particularly interested in this work, especially actors who combine small-scale growing and food production.
- Despite a clear demand from the catering sector, it has proven to be very difficult to get established professional growers to invest in medieval crops. Interest is greater among hobby growers.
- The project has generated a great deal of knowledge and experience concerning medieval plants and food cultures, which has attracted widespread interest.
- Embedding this new food culture along Saint Birgitta Ways will take time, but this project has launched the process.

Additional information:

Website:

<https://pilgrimsmat.se/>

