



EUROPEAN REGION OF GASTRONOMY  
SAIMAA CANDIDATE 2024

# SAIMAA

Tables crossing borders





Sculptor Hanna Vahvaselkä:  
Wood Relief: Mamman reseptillä  
(With Grandmother's Recipe 2016)

The work deals with traditional ways of thinking, the place and role of women and the related intergenerational expectations. Questioning all this in a soft and playful way.

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Leverage from  
the EU  
2014–2020

Cover photo: Visit Karelia / Harri Tarvainen





# Saimaa bidding for European Region of Gastronomy 2024

Our scenic Lake Saimaa region is best known for its pure nature and exceptionally clean waters. We get to live in a unique area that provides a totally unique environment for high-quality raw materials, food and food know-how. We still have a connection to our traditions and they are a strong part of our everyday life and celebrations. We show our hospitality to visitors by cooking, baking and serving the best parts of our Arctic Food.

The regions of South Savo, North Karelia and South Karelia with other founding stakeholders have a common view that Eastern Finland needs a boost and that this will only come through good and strong cooperation, in a way that has never been done before. I see the European Region of Gastronomy as an economic cooperation project that can be used to turn the development of Eastern Finland in a better direction. For this, we also need to utilise the unique cultural and creative resources of our area to better develop the attractiveness of the Saimaa region.

As Minister of Agriculture and Forestry but also as a local farmer I would like to express my warmest support for the Saimaa region's candidacy to be nominated as the European Region of Gastronomy 2024 by International Institute of Gastronomy, Culture, Arts and Tourism, IGCAT.

With this nomination the Saimaa region would be able to strengthen its existing collaboration with Europe and build new networks.

**Jari Leppä**

Farmer

Minister of Agriculture  
and Forestry

Photo: xx

# The serenity in the wilderness of the Saimaa region has been hidden from tourists for too long

In the Lake Saimaa area in Finland, you can find dramatic seasons in a serene landscape between Helsinki and Lapland. In mid-summer when the sun shines throughout the night, you can take a swim in the clean water and also take a sip of the water from our pure lakes. In the Saimaa Lakeland summer is for pure feast and joy. In winter, when nature covers the blue lakes with ice and forests with white snow, it is time to enjoy the silence and darkness.

Throughout the year you can enjoy our nature's offerings. Imagine yourself going for a walk to the endless woods in spring, summer or fall, and meeting spiders, squirrels, or even foxes, or picking delicious mushrooms, berries, and herbs. In wintertime, walking on the ice and ice fishing in the middle of endless white scenery is a very special experience. This is the gem that we have in the Saimaa region and it has been a hidden treasure for too long.

When I moved to Punkaharju, to my beloved childhood landscapes, I decided to restore Hotel Punkaharju, our national treasure, to its former glory. During the years I worked as a supermodel in several of the world's metropolises, I learned to understand what true prosperity is and what is truly meaningful for people.

I'm happy that one by one we have found more and more local producers and entrepreneurs who share the same thoughts. By working together, we are ready to share our treasure – our gastronomy and exceptional culture, the unique and transformative experiences and services to a wider number of tourists.

When we head towards the European Region of Gastronomy title year, I hope that the journey will also serve as a reminder for the inhabitants of our region of our rich food culture and spark new spirit and interest towards our natural products. It is time to renew our traditions and share our diverse food culture.

I hope that people will find passion towards our nature and its pure offerings. For me the passion is the mushrooms. I can't help it – whenever I walk to the woods and find delicious mushrooms for dinner – I fall in love and feel there is pure magic.

*From the heart of all the entrepreneurs of our region: Welcome to Lake Saimaa!*

**Saimi Hoyer**

Owner of Hotel Punkaharju  
Part of Saimaa Gastronomy company network  
Queen of mushrooms

Photo: Eilina Simonen



# Finnish Recipe for Good Life

One could say that in Finland we have found the recipe for a good life. Finland has been named the happiest country in the world by the World Happiness Report in 2018, 2019, 2020, and 2021. One reason is the connection we have with nature and the outdoors – over 90 % of Finland is covered with either forests or water. Compared globally, our air, forests, lakes and drinking water are exceptionally clean.

Finland often reaches the top of the statistics in questions concerning security, standard of living and level of education. The Finnish schools and our education system have been widely recognised and praised around the world and have been a source of pride for us. In several international studies Finland's education system has even been chosen as the best in the world. Researchers also point out that Finland has a high level of trust within its population.

Finnish food production is one of the world's most sustainable. Good practices in primary production are the basis for high quality food. Environmental issues and animal welfare are key focus areas. Finnish food is pure, and throughout the food chain its hygiene, traceability and accountability are among the best in the world. Along with corporate social responsibility,

## Three provinces of Saimaa

- *Population 423,160 (2020)*
- *5,036 agricultural and horticultural enterprises which is 11.3% of the national total (2021)*
- *347 food refiners, of which 46 were organic (2020)*
- *Ca. 800 dairy farms (2020)*
- *188 organic livestock farms (2019)*
- *One third of the area of South Savo, almost a fifth of the area of North Karelia and over a quarter of the area of South Karelia is water*
- *There are ca. 80 full-time commercial fishermen, and about 470 part-time commercial fishermen in the area. The typical freshwater whitefish vendace (*Coregonus albula*) is the main fish species. Approximately 65% of the vendace catch in Finland comes from our region, that is 1.7 million kilos vendace per year.*

these elements form Finland's competitive advantages in the export markets.

Our dark winters and long light summer nights create growing conditions found nowhere else. Only

by utilising all the available technology and know-how can our produce meet the highest possible quality standards. Finland is the northernmost place on earth where food is produced on this scale.



# The Saimaa region

Eastern Finland holds a treasure – the hidden gem – the enchanting Lake Saimaa with its pure nature. The largest lake in Finland is loved by many, several million guests visit the Saimaa region annually. Its cleansing waters and many bridges connect shores, towns, villages and people.

People living in this area are known for their perseverance and hospitality. There is always room for guests at the table and food is a matter of honour for eastern Finnish hostesses or hosts. Our cuisine is based on seasonal harvests. We still have the skills of living in perfect harmony with nature.

In the Saimaa region, we have found creativity as a resource in beautiful and favorable as well as in harsh conditions. That's why our culture is unique – and worth discovering. The cultural profile of the Saimaa region is rich. Our cultural heritage is enriching our everyday life in annual celebrations, handicraft traditions, storytelling and sense of community. Part of the heritage is our deep relationship with nature





Photo: Visit Saimaa

## Saimaalainen

*According to the survey made in 2020, family and friends, nature, landscapes, water bodies, and forests come together to create a sense of place for the inhabitants of the Saimaa region. This creates a sense of belonging and community throughout Eastern Finland. Our neologism "saimaalainen" (person with a sense of belonging to Saimaa) cements local pride, speaks of our special relationship with nature, and removes unnecessary barriers, which may exist between regions in Eastern Finland. It engages and allows us to tell stories about our lifestyle, and the products and services we offer.*

passed from generation to generation. In addition to professionally produced cultural services, such as museums, city orchestras, libraries and theatres, we have a significant number of small independent artists and art groups. Every village has local events, and main festivals like Savonlinna Opera Festival, Joensuu Ilosaarirock, Mikkeli Art and Design Weekend, Imatra Black and White Theatre festival, Lappeenranta Ballet Gala and Kitee International Music and Art Festival have international guests every year.

The proximity of Russia is also evident in our daily lives: we have 600 km of common borderline. Even historically we are used to living between East and West. Cultural influences have arrived from both directions. The provinces of Savo and Karelia have been shaped throughout history by changing geographical and regional borders.

Many dishes considered to be national dishes of Finland originate from the Eastern Finnish culinary culture. The rich and varied cultural roots and traditions, folklore and cuisine are also a source for creation and renewal for us.

As a European Region of Gastronomy we will mix our famous Eastern Finnish hospitality with delicious food and unique cultural experiences. We focus on strengthening the communal spirit of the area by preparing locally sourced food and eating together. Our Ambassadors will build bridges between the culinary cultures and the various culinary professionals.

Our cooperation covers the three regions of Eastern Finland: South Savo, South Karelia and North Karelia. We work closely with the North Savo and Kuopio regions, which have previously been designated the European Region of Gastronomy for 2020–2021. The cooperation contributes to continuing the tradition we created during the Saimaa Phenomenon bid for the European Capital of Culture 2026, during which we established a food tourism consortium in our region.

# Taste Saimaa

*Different traditions are very vibrant in Eastern Finland. The Savonian and Karelian cultures resonate strongly with us, and Eastern Finland and the Saimaa area are often referred to as the cradle of Finnish culture. The long tradition of hunting and fishing, and picking berries and mushrooms from the wilderness is still apparent in our everyday lives. The traditional foods can be seen as rural and unrefined, but the secret lies in their purest ingredients and the tastes resulting from the vast amount of daylight the crop absorbs during the summer season.*

The agri-food sector of the Saimaa region is sourcing from extensive primary production and natural resources such as crops, animal and dairy production, fishing, hunting and gathering of wild growing nature products. With regard to harnessing the natural resources for food supply, when looking back to our history, we see a strong continuity stretching back over centuries. Our ancestors ate local, even hyper local food. Their diet had many valuable nutritional features, such as consumption of fish, wholegrain and berries. The diet of ancient Finns, the "Kalevala Diet", assists in weight management and heart-healthy nutrition also today. The roots to the Kalevala Diet can be found in the national epic's poetry. Elias Lönnrot, who collected the poetry tradition for our national epic Kalevala during long trips to Savo and Karelia, also wrote Flora Fennica, Finland's first flora to describe wild herbs, their properties and manifold uses, too. The Kalevala will thus serve as a source of inspiration for the European Region of Gastronomy programme.

## We are proud to present our local excellence

### **BAKING-OVENS: BREADS, BUNS AND PASTRIES**

In Eastern Finland the food is often prepared in a traditional large wood-burning oven. These traditions are still vivid today and they have been a part of the Russian and Karelian cuisines for centuries. Different grains and flours are used to bake a variety of breads from darkest sourdough rye breads to mixed grain barley flatbreads. As the Finnish saying goes, the *beloved child has many names*, and so the names of different bakes are numerous. Many of the names come from or are derived from Russian origin.

*"Lepuska, vatruska, sultsina, piirakka, rieska, hiivaleipä, ruisleipä, röpörieska, ohrarieska, Viipurin rinkeli, rotinarinkeli, kukot, kakkarat, supikkaat, patakukko, lihakukko..."*





Photo: aitojamakujafi / Julia Kiveliä

Tähän voisi laittaa kuvatekstin

### **KARJALANPIIRAKKA**

Karjalanpiirakka, the Karelian pie (or pasty), is a salty, open pie filled with porridge made from barley or rice or mashed potatoes. Originally and traditionally Karjalanpiirakka was made in the area of Finnish and Russian Karelia. After the war the evacuees from ceded Karelian areas brought this food to the areas of Finland where they were resettled. Today Karjalanpiirakka is a very popular and appreciated pasty both at family celebrations and official dining tables.

In the traditional manufacturing method, Karjalanpiirakka crust must be rolled almost translucently thin. More than half of the dough must be rye to meet the definition of a genuine Karjalanpiirakka. In addition, authentic pies must be baked according to a registered manufacturing method. Karjalanpiirakka was granted official status in the European Union's "traditional speciality guaranteed" (the TSG) register in 2003.

### **KALAKUKKO**

Kalakukko is a common national dish in both Savo and Karelia. Kalakukko is an oval-shaped fish and pork pie with a thick crust of rye bread. Its surface layer is cured and compacted by a short frying at high temperature. The shell seals the fish and pork filling during baking and stewing into a package inside which

the filling is simmered for 5 to 7 hours until soft and thoroughly cooked. Large fish can be used as chopped or small fish as whole. Often Kalakukko is made from perch or vendace. According to the European Union –approved Kalakukko recipe, it must be made from rye, wheat and barley and yeast is not allowed in the dough. Kalakukkos have been baked since the Middle Ages, as it was a handy meal also to travel with. Its written recipe was first found in 1893 in Anni Olson’s cookbook. Kalakukko was granted official status in the European Union’s “traditional speciality guaranteed” (the TSG) register in 2009.

#### **VENDACE, ESPECIALLY ‘PURUVEDEN MUIKKU’**

Vendace is an integral part of the cuisine in Eastern Finland. Eating vendace and other wild freshwater whitefish from Finnish waters is also an environmentally friendly choice for the diet. Freshwater fish has a much smaller carbon footprint, at best only 10% compared to pork meat, for example. The term Puruvesi vendace (‘Puruveden muikku’) is used for vendace (*Coregonus Albula*) caught in the Puruvesi lake basin in the northeastern part of Lake Saimaa. The vendace of Puruvesi is light silver in colour, has a soft skin and a high content of vitamin D. The characteristics of the vendace have arisen from the special conditions of the clear and oligotrophic lake and the diverse nutrition of the fish during its growth.

The tradition of fishing Puruvesi vendace dates back hundreds of years. The first notes on seine fishing in the area are from the 14th century. Traditional fishing sites are still in use and pass from generation to generation. Tradition is transferred for example by fishermen taking schoolchildren in wintertime to fish on ice and cooperating with researchers and other

stakeholders. The availability of vendace from Puruvesi for the consumers has improved significantly. This has been achieved with the increased cooperation between fishermen and the improvements made to the infrastructure for fish processing.

Protected Geographical indication (PGI) was granted to Puruveden muikku in 2013. Puruvesi vendace winter seine fishing was listed on the National Inventory of Living Heritage by the Finnish Heritage Agency in 2017.

#### **UNDERUSED FISH SPECIES**

We have a great deal of potential when it comes to increasing the sustainable use of fish. Up to 50 million kilograms of undervalued fish, such as roach, could be caught sustainably each year – and it would be a good way to keep the lakes cleaner. In recent years, food products made from traditionally underappreciated fish have begun to conquer the market. Now, research has identified new opportunities to turn these untapped resources into value-added products. For example in North Karelia the company called Pielisen Kalajaloste will soon be producing up to 30,000 cans of fish per day – including perch, vendace and roach. The operation is driven by a love of a clean environment and fishing.

#### **REGULATED HUNTING**

For a long time, hunting was almost a vital necessity for Finnish families. Still today hunters get annually more than 10 million kilos of pure game meat from their hunt. Game meat is naturally low in fat thanks to the animals’ active lifestyle. Despite this game meat is aromatic and filled with flavour. You can buy game meat from many online retailers or shops. Hunting clubs can also sell game meat. Finnish Hunters’

Association highlights the effects of hunting on well-being and on the valuable work done by hunters to maintain the biodiversity of the Finnish nature.

Hunting is regulated by hunting legislation that takes into account the size and development of game populations. Wild game never experiences a moment in captivity, it’s never coerced and it lives a truly wild life. The most important type of game in the Lake Saimaa area is moose together with waterfowl, rabbit and capercaillie. The amount of white-tailed deer has been increasing in the Saimaa region in recent years, which will mean more game meat for consumers.

#### **LEMEN SÄRÄ**

Lemi is a small village of 3,000 inhabitants in South Karelia. Lemin Särä is a traditional meat dish made in a wooden trough in a charcoal oven. This lamb delicacy, made according to a millennial tradition, is a mouth-watering treat. The Särä has mutton, Lemin Punane potatoes and salt. In 1972, Lemin Särä was chosen as one of Finland’s Seven Wonders of Tourism in a competition organised by the Finnish Local Heritage Federation, the Finnish Tourist Board and Finnair.

Tähän voisi laittaa kuvatekstin



Photo: Jussi Siivennöinen



Photo: Metsästäjälitto



Photo: Jussi Siivennöinen



Photo: Visit Saimaa



Photo: Visit Saimaa

## Treasures of our forests

The berries and mushrooms that grow in Finnish forests are part of the traditional Finnish diet, and for many families gathering them is an activity that has been passed down through generations. Approximately 500 million kilograms of berries and a staggering two billion kilograms of mushrooms grow in Finland's forests every year and the tradition of picking wild berries and mushrooms is as popular as ever, despite urbanisation. About 40% of inhabitants in Eastern Finland gather mushrooms as a pastime. Finland has so-called everyman's right of passage in nature, which allows everyone to move freely around the countryside outside human habitation, and pick berries and mushrooms and to fish with a rod and line, without permits.

### Some examples:

#### LINGONBERRY

In September the forests turn red with lingonberries. The berry is known as the red gold of the Nordic forests: it is easy to pick and incredibly nutritious. Lingonberries contain large quantities of fruit acids, which give them a sharp taste, and they keep well without sugar or preservatives. Lingonberries can be used to make jam, pastries and juice and they are often used in porridge and various desserts.

#### BILBERRY

Every year Finns roam forests to forage for blueberries – the ones which are growing in the woods are called bilberries. They are the most common and most loved berries. A stunning amount of 150–200 million kilos of blueberries are picked on a yearly basis within

the country. Blueberries are known for their health benefits. They are a superfood, because they contain high amounts of antioxidants, flavonoids, polyphenols, vitamins, minerals such as potassium, zinc, copper, and magnesium, and fibres. Bilberries are used in several traditional dishes in the Saimaa region.

#### NORTHERN MILKCAP

Milkcaps, as the name describes, are mushrooms exuding white latex from their caps. These are one of the safest mushrooms to begin with, as the white latex makes them easy to differentiate from other mushrooms. Finland offers plenty of different milkcaps; learn a few and you'll get your basket full in no time. All milkcaps need to be boiled in plenty of water for 5–10 minutes to remove the bitterness. In Finnish this type of boiling is called 'ryöppäys'. The traditional Finnish way to preserve the mushrooms is to salt them. Some prefer to ferment. Mushroom salad is one of the Christmas dinner must-be-dishes.

#### CHANTERELLE

The chanterelle is one of Finland's most easily identified and highly valued mushrooms. Every time you see something yellow peeking out from the moss on the forest floor, it is worth taking a closer look! Chanterelles are at their best immediately after they are gathered. They are suitable for a wide variety of preparation methods and do not require preliminary processing. They can be dried, frozen, or preserved in brine.

## Well-being and healthier living

It is scientifically proven that nature has healing effects on humans. Our forests are full of healing and medicinal substances, and we fortunately still hold the knowledge of the centuries-old traditions of making use of them. Syrup cooked from spruce needles helps with the flu, forest berries lower cholesterol and improve blood and sugar levels, broadleaf plantain stops the bleeding, and birch sap has been drunk for centuries in the spring to relieve the fatigue and exhaustion of a long dark winter, just to name a few.

One important natural healing substance is organic honey, which is one of our specialties in the Saimaa region. There are about 60 producers of organic honey in Finland, mainly in Central and Eastern Finland. There are more than 1,200 beehives in organic production in North Karelia alone, and more than 100 beekeepers work in the area.

Natural herbs are used both internally and externally, for example as herbal teas, extracts and baths, wraps or oils on the skin. Enthusiasm for wild herbs has been on the rise in recent years and they can also be found in the dishes of high-end restaurants. Products utilising natural healing ingredients are abundant in the Saimaa region, and new products are developed. One example are berry powders where one tablespoon is equivalent to about 90 g of fresh berries.

Homemade juices are traditional beverages in the Saimaa region. You can use all berries and fruit juices, and mixed juices give you a variation in taste; for example apple, black or red currant and raspberry, lingonberry and apple. Rosehips can be used to increase vitamin C. There are many companies who serve non-alcoholic bubbly beverages and high-quality juice concentrates but also juicing service for consumers.

## Berry industry

Being in an arctic food area, the long daylight hours summertime create special growing conditions for many cultivated berries. Because of these growing conditions, well suited soil and hilly fields, the Saimaa region has a long tradition for growing berries: currants, strawberries, garden raspberries, gooseberries and saskatoons. Berries ripen and get their aromatic, sweet taste in the long, not too hot sun-filled day of summer.

The two most important cultivated berry species in our region are currants (black, white, red and green) and strawberries. For example, in the North Karelia region, the cultivation of currants is concentrated in Finland's easternmost municipality, Ilomantsi, while a nationally significant strawberry growing hub is situated in Central Karelia. 70 percent of North Karelia's annual strawberry harvest, one million kilos, on 250 hectares, are produced in Kitee and Kesälahti area, which is home to the largest strawberry farms in our region. In 2021, the value of production at farmer prices was around 6 million euros.

Even though our berry farms are small on a European scale, the berry industry is a significant employer in our region. During the growing season the industry offers work to about 1,500 seasonal workers in North Karelia. Cultivation in our region is always responsible, because the farmers are known and traceable.

In the future our berry farms will invest more and more in top quality. New innovations will improve the shelf life and method of preserving berries.

## Small breweries, wineries and distilleries

In addition to good food, we also serve our guests excellent drinks, when they are visiting the Saimaa region. Our local products are inspired by the surrounding pure nature. The ingredients found from our forests also give many products their recognisable flavour. The particularly clean waters of the area serve as the basis for excellent taste. In our area you will find a diverse selection of locally produced alcoholic beverages for everyday and festive occasions.

- **BERRY WINES AND LIQUORS** have been made in the Saimaa region for decades. Berry liqueurs even have the EU's Protected Geographical Indication.
- **THE CRAFT BREWERY** boom has come to stay on the shores of Lake Saimaa. Our local breweries have their own characters and they are reviving the old tradition of local brewing. Each of our three provinces has their own craft brewery, some several.
- **STRONG ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES** are also produced in the Saimaa region. Whiskey, rum, absinthe and gin are made in our area, of which Kalevala, made in North Karelia, is the only Finnish organic gin. One of the gems of our region is Arctic Blue Gin, which has won double gold and Best in Show in the World Spirit competition in San Francisco. Distillation has also been a monastic livelihood ever since the First Crusade, when monks brought the skill to Europe from the Arabs. Later on, monasteries stopped making whisky. At the Valamo Monastery's distillery in North Karelia, this centuries-old tradition is finally returning to its monastic roots.

Photo: Valamo Winery & Distillery



## Quality labels for food and food products in the Saimaa region

### D.O. Saimaa



Designation of Origin Saimaa means that the product or raw material has been produced in the Saimaa region in accordance with high quality criteria. The brand says that the product comes from the clean nature of the Saimaa region and it represents the uniqueness of our area. The label can only be awarded to a producer who meets strict quality

criteria. D.O. Saimaa products and raw materials have been produced responsibly from the perspective of the environment, sustainable development and social responsibility. D.O. Saimaa is the first Finnish regional quality label for food and food products that are produced in the Saimaa region. The label can also be granted to unique design, arts and crafts products that originate from the Saimaa region.

### Karelia à la carte



Each company in the Karelia à la carte network with its own food-related stories is a distinctive and interesting operator, well worth visiting. Locally produced flavours and food prepared with love are served with genuine North Karelian

hospitality and joyfulness in natural, impressive environments where contemporary and cultural history go hand in hand. The Karelia à la carte culinary tourism network currently includes 60 North Karelian food companies: restaurants, tourism companies, bakeries, other food processing companies and producers.

### Saimaa Geopark Geofood



Saimaa Geopark Geofood logo can be awarded to a company that operates in accordance with the principles of sustainable development and responsibility and wants to further develop its operations. The company that uses the

Saimaa Geopark Geofood logo is either a producer of raw materials or a processor that uses local foodstuffs in its food services.

In addition to Saimaa Geopark, there are currently Geofood producers in Finland's Rokua Geopark, Iceland's Katla Geopark, Norway's Magma Geopark and Denmark's Odsherred Geopark.

# Saimaa Gastronomy

## Map of your gastronomic journey

*The cooperation network of Saimaa Gastronomy consists of four companies: Hotel Punkaharju, Sahanlahti Resort, TeaHouse of Wehmais and Tertti Manor.*

*The companies are located in different parts of Saimaa, which means that the area is widely represented. In addition to locally produced food products, the business model includes the employment of local people. Saimaa Gastronomy food events with varied activities, are held outside the busiest summer season.*

*The Saimaa Gastronomy network's theme weekends won the Best Food Tourism Product of Finland award in 2019.*

Photo: Visit Saimaa



1

Photo: Visit Saimaa



2



Photo: Visit Saimaa



3

Photo: Jani Snellman



4

**1. Tertti Manor** is a stunning manor house with an award-winning restaurant, a delicatessen, a café and a cosy farm hotel. In the summer time the guests can visit the manor’s magical gardens. The atmospheric manor milieu is second to none and suitable for any occasion from intimate family celebrations to events with hundreds of attendants, both for businesses and private individuals. Tertti Manor is known for its exceptional organic and locally sourced foodstuffs, which mostly come from the manor’s own gardens and growers nearby.

**2. TeaHouse of Wehmais** is located in the atmospheric courtyard of the old Wehmaa Manor in Juva, Eastern Finland. They specialise in bringing together high-quality tea and delicious food and pastries, which are prepared from local and organic ingredients. Entrepreneur Anna Grotenfelt-Paunonen is a qualified tea sommelier. They offer diverse tea experiences both in their own premises in Juva and elsewhere in Finland – and even virtually.

**3. Sahanlahti Resort** is a traditional and renowned tourism centre in a stunning lakeside location just under an hour’s drive from Mikkeli. On the shore, you will find a restaurant, hotel, saunas and a guest harbour. Their unique event space offers a versatile programme, which consists of various musical and theatrical performances, concerts, events and interdisciplinary celebrations in collaboration with artists and cultural actors from various fields.

**4. Hotel Punkaharju** is a unique destination in the famous Punkaharju national landscape, offering hotel accommodation, experiences and events. Buried deep in the pine woods, built originally as a forest ranger’s house, Hotel Punkaharju is a treasure chest full of stories. Available activities include art exhibitions, concerts, themed dinners, forest bathing, historical tours, sauna yoga, mushroom cruises, mushroom weekends, mushroom excursions and other nature experiences. Hotel Punkaharju is also famous for its decor, and food. Their kitchen team has created delicious and imaginative dishes using all-natural ingredients sourced from local producers: fresh fish from the fishermen, meat and vegetables from the local farms, and berries and mushrooms from the nearby forests.



Photo: Visit Salmaa

# Guesthouse to Guesthouse

## Karelia à la carte Sauna Tour

*Four guesthouses situated in North Karelia have been co-operating for over 20 years in order to present the Karelian culture and traditions to travellers. They have developed a special Guesthouse to guesthouse product family and offer various tours in all seasons. All guesthouses are run by great personalities. Hostesses Anni, Henna, Minna and Ritva give the best hospitality in Finland.*



### 1. Guesthouse Puukarin Pysäkki sauna trail to the log sauna

Before going to the sauna, the hostess of the guesthouse leads the guests to nature's own treasure trove. She guides you to different ways how to utilise healing wild herbs during the sauna session. At the same time, you will hear stories about the Karelian sauna tradition. Fresh wild herbs are picked together for the sauna experience from the surrounding nature. The sauna evening culminates in a Karelian dinner. The menu consists of wholesome local organic food, which is prepared following the methods of Karelian cooking.

### 2. Laitala sauna trail to the smoke sauna

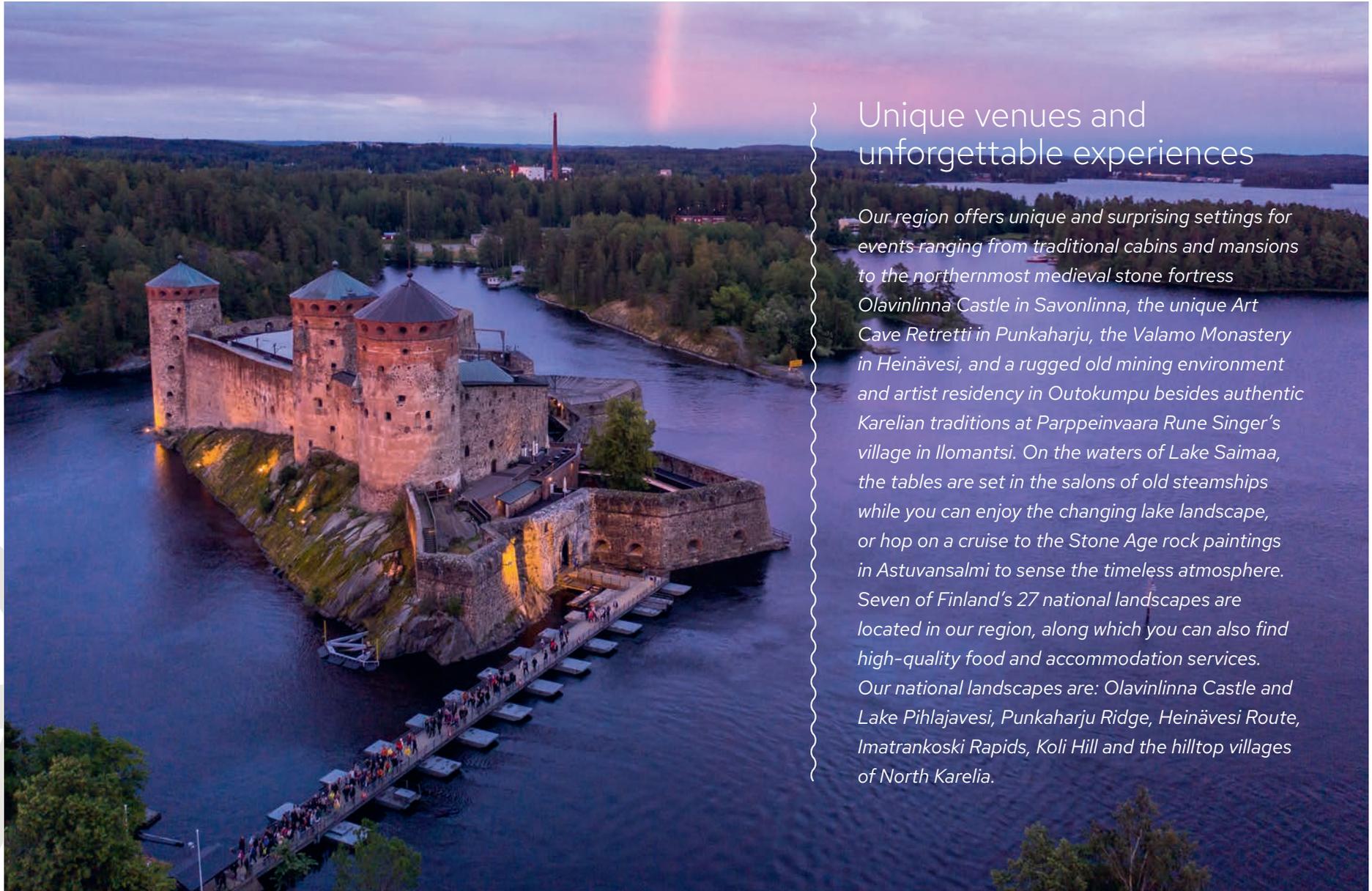
The day begins with stories about Laitala's history and saunas – and in hammocks for enjoying forest baths. In the sauna the hostess tells us tricks and tips on how to heat the smoke sauna properly for a magical experience using sauna spells and local handmade natural soaps. The sauna evening is highlighted by a hut dinner, which is enjoyed by an open fire in an atmospheric hut of Laitala.

### 3. Pihlajapuu sauna trail to the ground sauna

Thanks to the vaulted roof, the air circulation of this ground sauna is optimal and the steam is evenly distributed and feels soft. The sauna has a direct view to Lake Viemenjärvi in Salmenkylä. The evening menu offers for example wild mushroom stew, elk goulash with a juniper taste and blueberry pie.

### 4. Männikkölän Pirtti sauna trail to the summer cottage beach sauna

The sauna trail to the Vaakanansaari summer cottage is done by boat. A traditional log sauna and a hut have been built next to the summer cottage, where you can enjoy the peaceful atmosphere while the campfire is blazing. It is a magical experience to take a swim in the clean waters of Lake Pielinen during the sauna session. Before dinner, we get to practice baking karjalanpiirakka with a rolling pin and crumpling the pie. Homemade karjalanpiirakka is enjoyed for dinner.



## Unique venues and unforgettable experiences

*Our region offers unique and surprising settings for events ranging from traditional cabins and mansions to the northernmost medieval stone fortress Olavinlinna Castle in Savonlinna, the unique Art Cave Retretti in Punkaharju, the Valamo Monastery in Heinävesi, and a rugged old mining environment and artist residency in Outokumpu besides authentic Karelian traditions at Parpeinvaara Rune Singer's village in Ilomantsi. On the waters of Lake Saimaa, the tables are set in the salons of old steamships while you can enjoy the changing lake landscape, or hop on a cruise to the Stone Age rock paintings in Astuvansalmi to sense the timeless atmosphere. Seven of Finland's 27 national landscapes are located in our region, along which you can also find high-quality food and accommodation services. Our national landscapes are: Olavinlinna Castle and Lake Pihlajavesi, Punkaharju Ridge, Heinävesi Route, Imatrankoski Rapids, Koli Hill and the hilltop villages of North Karelia.*



# Tables Crossing Borders

Photo: Petra Tiihonen

Ruokateatteri: PIDOT! (Food Theater: Feast!) is an experiential performance format that combines food, theater, dance and humour - all the ingredients of a good life. }

# Main Theme & Focus Areas

Our main theme is based on gastrodiploacy – as we all know, the way to someone’s heart is through their stomach. With our Tables Crossing Borders theme, we aim to reduce conflicts between people, to bring them to a common table for discussions and negotiations, and to exchange cultural knowledge. Our theme aims to connect the past and the future. By getting to know our roots better, we gain a better understanding of ourselves. Thus, it is easier for us to work with a more diverse group of people, even those who disagree with us. As we welcome people to our dinner tables, we also welcome them in our lives and to share our traditions. In Eastern Finland hospitality is a moulded tradition based on our history. It has been strongly influenced by the changing borders, religions, and military history. Our hospitality encompasses care, willingness to serve, passion, humour, heart, warmth, kindness and shared experiences.

We will form a year-round programme to support our main theme by bringing alive the most authentic and genuine type of gastrodiploacy: celebrating together, enjoying good food, discussions, culture, and music. In 2024 tables will be set over many kinds of borders – between cultures and generations, the

past and the present. The main events are organised in cooperation with the cities and municipalities of the Saimaa region. We invite our international networks to host their own satellite events or join our tables virtually. Events will be held all over the Saimaa region from the busy city centres to cultural sites and in the peaceful natural landscapes. We will also plan a concept for smaller, more inclusive communal grass-roots level events. Future food trends alongside our traditional knowledge and recipes will be gathered to one platform and provided to all via social media.

## Strengthening our main theme through three focus areas

### Extended and Shared experiences

We want to enable the development of culinary experiences that are extended by diverse and multisensory cultural content that can be incorporated





Ilosaarirock, known locally as the best weekend of the summer, takes place in Joensuu in July. The festival is held at a scenic lakeside location, and gathers around 64 000 visitors every year. Ilosaarirock was the first Finnish festival to be awarded the international Green'n'Clean environmental certificate in 2008, and for several years received the prestigious A Greener Festival Award.

into our programme. We can form a new union of food, art, culture and tourism by connecting virtual and digital experiences to gastronomy. It is also a way to promote the accessibility of the area and, on the other hand, to bring culinary culture to completely new target groups. The table can also be set virtually to the other side of the world.

## Service and product design

Our existing service and product offerings will be used as a basis for creating new, easily accessible combinations through our partner network. We are building new, high-quality product and service packages based on our region's food and tourism services reinforced with artistic and cultural content and unique experiences. Relating to the product design of the World Food Gift Challenge, we will arrange local competitions in the Saimaa region in the years 2023 and 2024.

## Responsibility

We are building the region in terms of sustainability, diversity and equality. We aim for transformative tourism experiences that will enable a lasting change in travellers. At the heart of it all is food from the Lake Saimaa area, made from pure raw materials, which are produced responsibly. For example, the D.O. Saimaa label supports this goal. The table is set for all, not excluding anyone. Social and cultural responsibility are at the core of all our operations. We are challenging actors in the region to work together to produce a common responsibility plan during 2022, which will be required for the implementation of all events and programmes.





# Goals and Strategies

In the strategy of Visit Finland, Finnish Lakeland – and the Saimaa region as a part of it – will join Lapland and Helsinki to become a significant tourist destination. By becoming a part of the European Region of Gastronomy Platform and working with IGCAT we will have a wide range of experts, networks, visibility, and cooperation that we need to promote our region and build a lasting ecosystem for all. The Saimaa region has been one of Finland’s most precious hidden treasures – and now it is time to step forward.

## Our goals for the Saimaa region for 2025 are:

1. We have reached a genuine transformation. The region is more vibrant, sustainable and attractive, well known for its food and culture.
2. The region is an inspiring travel destination for artists, entrepreneurs, visitors, tourists and locals.
3. Innovative and achievable food and culture routes, services and products are easily found and purchased.

## The Tourism Strategy for Saimaa

The strategy is part of the long-term cooperation that South Savo, South Karelia, and Varkaus have been working on to promote tourism in Saimaa for many years. The region’s tourism operators have signed a Saimaa treaty expressing commitment to together increase the number of tourists and tourism income in the Saimaa region through tourism marketing based on the common Lake Saimaa – Purest Finland brand. The strategy supports the national tourism roadmap and the Lakeland strategy.

In 2025, Saimaa will be among the top three tourist destinations in Finland, according to this vision. The region’s tourism income has increased above the country’s average and tourism is more year-round than at present. The emphasis is on sustainability: the phenomenal Lake Saimaa that has fascinated tourists for hundreds of years and is now preparing to host a substantially increased number of visitors has to be preserved.

## The Cultural Strategy for Saimaa

The strategy was worked on during autumn 2019. It was made with an ambitious interregional approach, in which the objectives of the cultural strategy serve the needs of all four regions and the central cities. What makes the strategy interesting is also its approach to making and developing culture; culture is carried out between different actors without strict sector-specific boundaries. The focus is on building bridges and renewing cooperation, for example, between the travel sector and cultural services, involving various service providers. The new way of collaboration with the focus on the arts and culture was inspired by our candidacy for the European Capital of Culture title for the year 2026.

## Strategies of the Regional Councils

The regions of South Savo, South Karelia, and North Karelia have their own regional strategies, which are currently being developed and formalised for entry into force from the beginning of 2022. As Eastern Finland is a strong primary production area, agricultural products and their processing are reflected in the strategies. In the strategy of South Karelia, food is strongly connected to cultural tourism. The aim is to create and market tourism products combining food with different activities, e.g. by creating cruise products and cycling products based on routes connecting different cities and provinces. The strategy of North Karelia emphasises strong primary production, especially the share of milk production, clean raw materials, and increasing the share of organic food. Food tourism is best seen as a strategic priority in the region of South Savo, where

water, forest, and food are the top three strategic focus areas.

Food tourism needs its strategy, combining strong primary production with higher value-added business, research, and innovation services. Digitalisation and digital applications are the keys to growth and development.

The target areas must take into account the specialisation and smoothness of food chains, the demand for local and organic food, and the impact of the seasons on the demand for services. Gastronomic culture also has value in terms of competitiveness. Saimaa as a European Region of Gastronomy can serve as a development platform that increases business and well-being. The development, and affordability of cultural tourism services are important, as well as the strengthening of cooperation between tourism companies, cultural services, and various other service providers.

## Cluster development

The regions around Lake Saimaa promote food-related cooperation and cluster development. The cooperation is based on East and North Finland Smart Specialisation Strategy 2019–2023, and it has chosen primary production and food as one of its key topics to be promoted and developed. The cooperation promotes cluster activity recognised by Cluster Collaboration Platform in the area, as well as the cooperation between regions in the topic. The cooperation aims at creating more livelihood from the regional strengths.

Relating to more efficient usage of cultural heritage, we will utilise the results of the Local Flavours Interreg Europe project in which Lake

Saimaa was involved as one of the stakeholders. As a result of the cooperation of the international partnership, eight Action Plans were produced as main outcomes, targeting various policy instruments (ERDF Operational Programmes, development and marketing strategies) supporting the addressed locations in their pursuit to become more integrated and integral players in regional tourism, based on their recognised and properly used authentic cultural assets. In the Action Plan for the Savonlinna Region and Lake Saimaa Area one of the goals is to form a cluster of actors in the cultural and creative industries in the Saimaa region.

## South Savo food industry development programme

The South Savo food industry development programme has been prepared for the years 2021–2027. Its vision is “Responsible, successful and flexible food industry in South Savo”. The measures of the development programme are grouped into five themes: competence, food communication and food education, added value from nature and locality, flexibility and responsibility for change, and new operating models. Programme has been drawn up as a common direction of development for all food business operators in the South Savo area. Food tourism has been identified as one of the areas for development.



Photo: SaimaaLife / Marianne Ahonen

## The Food Tourism Strategy for Saimaa ensuring the legacy of the European Region of Gastronomy

Our next step will be formulating a Food Tourism Strategy for our region, building on the existing strategies made in the Saimaa region. It will be made within our networks in 2023. As a basis for our strategy work, we use Finland's first food tourism strategy, which was first made for 2015–2020 and is being updated for the years 2020–2028. In five years, food tourism has become the core of international tourism, it is no longer just a niche area for tourism. The search for authentic cultural experiences is one of the global tourism trends at the moment.

Our main theme – Tables crossing borders – has an important role as a roadmap to the lasting ecosystem in our region combining food, tourism, and culture. The aim is to refine the food tourism ecosystem of Eastern Finland into a cluster that enables the exchange of know-how in the tourism and cultural industries regionally, and internationally. We want to ensure the continuation of the development of tourism, cultural sector and food cluster done during the European Region of Gastronomy process and that good practises are implemented in the development of the region also in the future.

Tähän kuvateksti?

## Ambassador

# Jyrki Tsutsunen Cooking & Culture

A culture chef and a passionate forager. Creating new flavour experiences by using ingredients that have been collected from the Finnish forests. Often Jyrki works hand in hand with different artists, DJs and performers, building cultural mashups. Jyrki constantly strives to surprise, teach and compose something new. Food is life and wild food is a passion!

Jyrki has cooked food in many of Helsinki's top restaurants and worked at the Consulate General in St. Petersburg, creating many different food events and concepts for example in Madrid, Frankfurt, Berlin and Plovdiv. In the end, his heart is always willing to come back to the childhood roots and Saimaa's serene nature.

"I think that eating is a multi-sensory and multi-dimensional experience where not only tasting but also listening, smelling, looking and feeling different textures are brought to the foreground and bound together. I want to shake people up and bring them with us on a journey of all senses. The Saimaa region is unique with all the berries, mushrooms, game meat and wild herbs. It is a pleasure to open our inspiring world to larger audiences."



Photo: Kimmo Brandt

## Ambassador

# Anni Korhonen New Food Traditions

Anni Inkeri Korhonen is the hostess of a wellbeing guesthouse, chef, "kantele" instrument performer, poet, singer, and organic farmer. She has been running the guesthouse Puukarin Pysäkki for ten years, creating her own food and service concept based on Eastern Finnish food culture.

Her main aim is to offer the opportunity to connect with nature, culture, yourself, and your loved ones. Laughter and crying may be present with this hostess at the same moment, as she follows her daily motto: life-tasting like life!

"For me as a hostess, the greatest sense of accomplishment and satisfaction arises, when I see our guests relaxed next to meat pots after their time exploring the spiritual nature and Finnish sauna. These are the moments that our guests take home with them and remember for the rest of their lives. For people and companies in the Saimaa area, it would be a great chance to show to the world how we live, eat and feel life by the lake shores. Finnish gastronomy and hospitality are so important to me that I can speak on behalf of them at every stage."

Photo: Lari Lievonen



## Ambassador

# Ulla Liukkonen Global Pioneering

Chef Ulla Liukkonen has been conjuring food both at the Independence day reception for the president of Finland and at small village parties. Hundreds and hundreds of young people who have participated in Liukkonen's teachings for decades have also experienced it. She is a long-term chairman of the Finnish Chefs Association and has received numerous awards during her career. Recently she received the highest honour for a chef; an honorary membership in The World Association of Chefs Societies.

"The best moment is still when the food tastes good to the customer! I grew up in the vegetable land, transporting cows for milking and selling eggs became familiar. The shores of Lake Saimaa are my home and my main task is to take the industry forward and ensure that knowledge is passed on to future generations here. This is a great opportunity to really work with larger audiences, it is time for Saimaa. I love food – and I believe that I will continue with my purpose as long as I'm able to do that."



Photo: Virpi Kulomaa

# Seasonal Plan

*Combining food and cultural content into unique experiences plays a key role in our programme. We want to promote dialogue and new forms of cooperation over provincial borders and between industries and sectors of arts, gastronomy, and tourism. We also aim to start up a totally new way of working between our regional art institutions. We invite orchestras, museums, theatres, and libraries in the area to implement their own interregional programme content combining culinary experiences with art and culture.*

We will bring the city and municipal centres to life by creating opportunities for organising spontaneous events and campaigns in public spaces. An increasing number of properties owned by municipalities are slated for sale or demolition. However, decision making and waiting for the actual demolition can take time, leaving empty spaces and buildings in limbo. We will identify and map potential spaces in our area, in cooperation with municipalities, cities and private owners, to be used for projects combining food and cultural content. We will lay the foundation

for year-round offerings, which enhance the cities' appeal by enlisting these empty spaces for a variety of experimental and new activities. The operating model also offers an opportunity, for example, to present local food production and farms, as well as to sell products in shorter, experimental periods.

Our ambitious goal is to have a wide range of events from smaller communal village events to bigger food and art festivals in every region of the Lake Saimaa area in the year 2024. We encourage local events to more sustainable and cross-sectoral

collaboration by organising workshops and developing incubators for them during the years 2022–2023. The outcome is an increase in accessibility, inclusion, responsibility and marketing.

The season starts in spring, when nature awakes after a long and dark winter and the environment bursts into colours, wild herbs and false morels pop out from the earth. In summer, we enjoy the warmth and retreat to our cottages – which we have over 90,000 within our region. In autumn, at harvest time starting in mid/late August, we lay the tables crossing borders

throughout the region and the whole of Europe. Our seasonal harvesting is concluded with Kekri – a harvest festival celebrated widely in Finland. The Christmas season in Finland is long and families gather together to celebrate it according to their own traditions from the first Advent to the more riotous “Nuutinpäivä” festivities on 13th January. Christmas is traditionally a time to settle and enjoy the offerings of nature, candlelight and warmth inside as the temperatures outside drop often well below zero.

## Reviving and updating our traditional communal events

In the year 2024 we want to encourage communities and local associations to organise village and town festivals that are based on our traditions, and open to all. Bringing the younger population to join the planning of new content to the events gives a much-needed new perspective to the communities and helps reach a broader group of people.

### Karjalanpiirakka Challenge Day

All Finns love Karjalanpiirakka! We can buy Karjalanpiirakka at any grocery store, and baking them at home is a growing trend. We want to cherish and respect our tradition and invite everyone to participate in our Karjalanpiirakka Challenge. In 2022 we will organise the first version of the challenge with our Finnish European Capital of Culture Network which includes Oulu and Tampere. The challenge combines

tradition with modern means of communication and passes the skills from generation to generation. What is “pulikka” and how to pinch the sides? Anyone can join the day via social media channels, podcasts or videos. The challenge will be organised annually and in 2024, it will be held internationally. We invite the national and international media to follow the progress of the Karjalanpiirakka Challenge Day.

### Communal Easter Traditions

We have a long history of celebrating the feast of spring. The tradition includes wishing another person health and happiness on Palm Sunday by tapping them lightly with a decorated willow twig and chanting a rhyme, preparing a festive meal and burning bonfires that brought happiness to the harvest. At Easter, eggs are boiled and beautifully decorated for the people of the house. The egg is a sign of the vitality of nature, which holds in itself the possibility of a new life. At Easter, eggs reflect both the awakening nature and the ability of people to influence the future with their actions. In the year 2024 we want to encourage communities and local associations to organise Easter festivities that are open to the public and also cater to international guests.

### Rantakala – Communal fishing and cooking events

Rantakala fish soup is traditionally made from water, vendace, butter, onion, and dill. In addition to the basic ingredients, only salt and pepper are used as spices. Rantakala once became common among inland fishermen as an easy and quick food to prepare, while they were at work. The dish was quickly cooked in a

cast iron pot by the campfire. Rantakala is still cooked in communal village events on the shores of Lake Saimaa. The events have also become very popular among seasonal residents. In the year 2024 we want to encourage communities and local associations to organise communal events, where visitors can try fishing, fish handling and cooking together.

### Peijaiset – a celebration of hunting traditions

“Peijaiset” is a traditional communal autumn event. Originally peijaiset was related to the commemoration and celebration of slain animal after hunting. Descriptions of this tradition can even be found in the poetry of our national epic Kalevala. Recently, festivities that respect these ancient traditions have been held again. Hunting clubs began to organise the more popular version of “peijaiset” for their members and landowners in the 1950s. It gradually developed into an important part of the Finnish festive tradition and year. Sustainably caught game is a good option for the environment, and most often these events are celebrated around a huge casserole of elk stew. Hunting is regulated by hunting legislation and taking into account the size and development of game populations. In the year 2024 we want to encourage hunting clubs to organise events open to the public, highlighting the traditions of hunting through food and cultural programme.



Photo: aitojamakuja.fi / Julia Kiveli



Photo: Puukarin Pysäkki



Photo: Metsästäjäliitto



Photo: Puukarin Pysäkki



Photo: Visit Karelia / Harri Tarvainen



Photo: Visit Saimaa

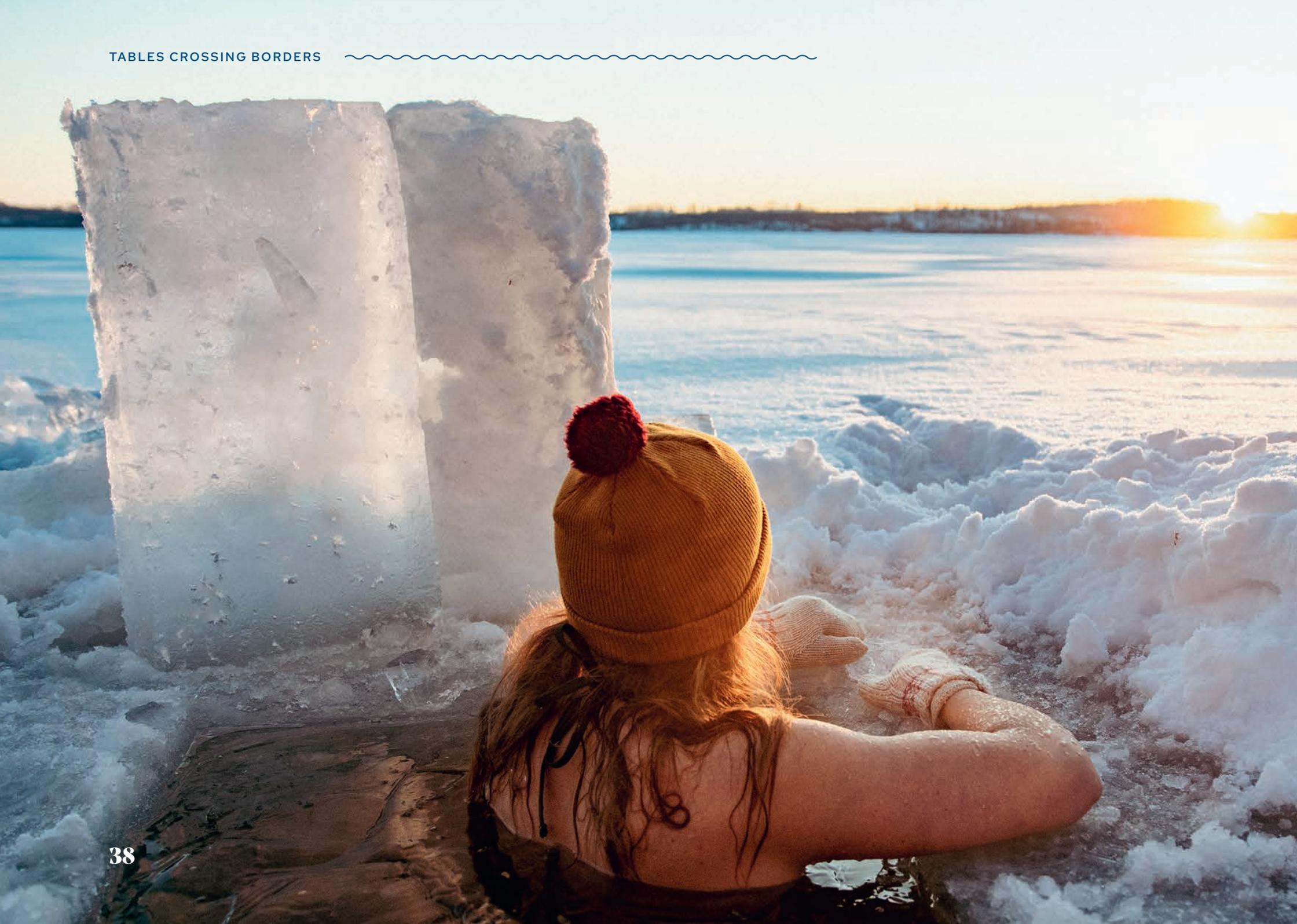




Photo: SaimaaLife / Marianne Ahonen

# Winter

## Put the plan on ice

The title year begins in the coldest months of the year, when the scenery is covered in white. Winter parties and events often feature ice or snow. We bring new types of food experiences and innovations to winter events, such as icy hiking trails, ice sculpting competitions and sport events. The programme is designed in collaboration with regional actors and international guests in the years leading up to the title year. The time is right to highlight both the area's specialties and new emerging talents.

Saimaa European Region of Gastronomy organises the European Young Chef Award in our area in cooperation with local students and institutions. We will also cooperate with Michelin star awarded chef Timo "Lintsi" Linnamäki. Linnamäki and his cultural restaurant Finnjäväl serve traditional Finnish dishes

As crazy as it sounds, swimming in a hole in the ice really does make you feel amazing. The traditional way to relax has nowadays in Finland new, stylish places where ice swimming is offered alongside other spa and bathing options.

in a unique way. Rooted dishes are made salon-ready for today's fine dining restaurant. They have also been awarded the Michelin Nordic Countries Welcome and Service Award in 2021.

### Activities

- National / International Karjalanpiirakka Challenge Day with a Finnish home economics organisation The Marthas
- Ice fishing events with local fishing clubs
- Food innovation (Ruokaoivallus) contest to 16–29-year-old students, related to food tourism
- Saimaa Sauna Day events
- Creative Pop-up – bringing culture and culinary activities to empty spaces
- Christmas events – celebrating our rich cultural heritage
- Tables Crossing Borders – setting the tables virtually with the topic of social gastronomy
- Kalevala Day – On 28th February, we celebrate our national epic Kalevala and the Finnish culture. As part of the celebration we also highlight our food traditions

# Spring

## Fifty shades of green

Spring is the time of rebirth and creation. We will invite the creative sector to engage in culinary product design and formulation of new events and happenings to the region. We encourage our local arts and crafts events and actors to build networks and co-create.

The spring's blossom and over fifty shades of green invite us to step into the mythical nature. Trails begin from our back doors, and we invite people to rejoice in the new season in various nature trails. The possibilities to combine art and food with nature are part of our spring celebration.

### Activities

- Design meets Wild Food & Taste: We will organise a design challenge for European chefs, designers and artists, inspired by nature, wild food and design. The competition and judging will be organised in cooperation with the IGCAT network.
- Wild herbs – events for citizens introducing the region's gastronomical richness
- Easter events – celebrating our rich cultural heritage
- Table over the Borders – setting the tables into nature with the topic of sustainability
- Challenge2024 – collecting 2024 ideas to enhance food citizenship in the Saimaa region. Target group: school kids and students from kindergarten to universities

Food visionary Sami Tallberg's passion and purpose of his life is to make Finnish nature and its unique, wild products accessible to everyone. Photo is taken in Hotel Punkaharju, just before dinner with wild herbs collected from nature.

Photo: Ritva Astikainen









# Summer

## Wild Finns in their natural habitat

Summer is a breathtaking time in the Saimaa region: almost every town has its own summer event, where culture and food meet. In summer the region's population grows substantially (in parts by over 40%) as the seasonal residents spend more time in their second homes. Traditionally they are located in the most sparsely populated areas and thus produce revenue for numerous entrepreneurs.

Preceding the year 2024 we organise and promote interregional workshops for actors and entrepreneurs to create new service packages and routes that combine food tourism, art and culture into unique experiences. Summer is the time to explore and live like locals.

The Saimaa European Region of Gastronomy Network creates a communal summer cottage event, "Summer Cottage Open Doors", where anyone who wishes can open their cottage to visitors, organise a thrift market or a pop-up summer kitchen in their garden. Organic food, fresh self-picked ingredients and the experience of summer are emphasised.

### Activities

- Food and art integrated into existing summer events / festivals
- Summer Cottage Open Doors
- Rantakala Day Community Events
- Tables Crossing Borders – setting the tables into city centres and cultural sites with the topic of multiculturalism
- Culinary, Art & Culture Tours
- Midsummer events – celebrating our rich cultural heritage

Photo: Visit Karelia / Harri Tarvainen

# Autumn

## Eastern F(East)!

Autumn is the time of harvest, and our area has a long tradition of organising both Kekri\* festivities and communal feasts after successful game hunting ("peijaiset"). The darkening autumn invites us also to open house events at museums and exhibitions, theatre premieres and various literary and musical events. We will renew our traditions and create new kinds of extended experiences from them.

Our main theme, Tables Crossing Borders, gives rise to numerous events where the table is set across different borders and barriers. We aim to unite the traditional regional gastronomy and cultural events and actors. Stirring together food, discussions, merriment, culture and music without avoiding even difficult or controversial topics. We invite professionals and amateurs from different fields to participate in setting the tables in new, unconventional venues and organising the programme.

*\*Kekri is an old Finnish agricultural harvest festival celebrated in autumn with a hint of magic: as it was the darkest time of the year, it was believed that the spirits were walking among the living and were able to visit their homes and families.*

### Activities

- Cooperation between educational institutions
- Digital experiences in artistic and cultural events
- Markets combining food and culture
- Creative Pop-up – bringing culture and culinary activities to empty spaces
- Kekri events – celebrating our rich cultural heritage
- Tables Crossing Borders – setting the tables virtually
- Peijaiset Communal events

Photo: SaimaLife / Marianne Ahonen









Photo: SaimaaLife / Marianne Ahonen

# Sustainability

## Balanced and sustainable tourism – Visit Saimaa’s Commitment

The Tourism Strategy for Lake Saimaa emphasises sustainability: the phenomenal Lake Saimaa that has fascinated tourists for hundreds of years and is now preparing to host a substantial increase in visitors has to be preserved.

The Finnish Government has approved Visit Saimaa’s Commitment to Sustainable Development. The commitment aims at reinforcing sustainable tourism, communicating the values of the Saimaa region as well as increasing the hospitality companies’ awareness of sustainability and the tourists’ appreciation towards nature and responsible travelling.

Sustainability is a goal that can be achieved only by people taking responsibility together with each other. Responsibility is small things – eating in a restaurant that uses local produce or enjoying nature by walking, kayaking or snowshoeing. From the nature nearby, the restaurants get the purest ingredients. It is also the source of the liveliest tales, materials for our lodgings and the most memorable experiences.

Visit Finland awards the Sustainable Travel Finland (STF) label for hospitality companies that persistently and systematically work to promote sustainable tourism. The label is awarded to companies that fulfil the national criteria for sustainable tourism in Finland. There are several companies in the Saimaa region that have been awarded the STF label.

## Feeding the planet

In regard to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, Saimaa Region of Gastronomy promotes the broad and vivid organic primary and secondary production in the region, plus introduces the expertise of Finnish Organic Research Institute. Sustainable farming practices, such as use of flower stipes in vegetable production, add diversification and biodiversity. Long tradition of gathering wild food, for example berries, mushrooms, and wild herbs, together with fishing freshwater fish has a solid base in our food culture. These food products alongside new energy saving solutions in greenhouse cultivation lower the carbon footprint of consumed/produced food.

Food education in schools is one way to present the significance of local food production. Actors in our region are advancing sustainable practises, for example by putting Green Key certificate to use and adopting ecological thinking in city strategies, like Greenreality Lappeenranta. Through sharing knowledge and best practises and supporting project ideas, we are contributing to our collective future food security.

# Involvement

## Citizenship participation

Gastronomic culture is for us a union of food, arts and people gathering, interacting and attracting one another. Thanks to our extensive cross-regional network of actors, our program spreads throughout Eastern Finland and in some parts throughout the whole country. Many of our programs also concretely challenge actors and residents of the area to participate in both program content and volunteer work, and thus involve a large number of actors.

In terms of participation, it is important to reach those who do not recognize the prevailing conception of culture as their own. This requires active dialogue and listening to identify different forms of participation. Digitalisation plays a key role in reaching out to those who are unable to come to enjoy culture physically and to those who are not used to search for cultural activities.

We encourage people to engage in civic activism and take over the space in the form of various art and food-themed small events. The aim is also to increase the citizens' contribution to the production of a Saimaa food strategy.

## Educating for our future

Educational institutions are involved in close cooperation and in the planning of events and training programs. Finland is for example known for having free school meals for children and young people of compulsory school age. We will organise challenge competitions related to school meals and local food production, and we also invite schools to plan their own food events. We plan to hold the Young Chef Award in 2024 together with the educational institutions in the area. We will organise a study trip to Trondheim-Trøndelag in 2022, and the first regional competition will take place in the Saimaa region during 2023.

## Saimaa Skill Share Lab

Saimaa Skill Share Lab will be a hub for new skills, information sharing, and mentoring. It will be implemented by the University of Eastern Finland with companies, schools and experts. It will offer a path for small startups and companies who are willing to develop their products and services.

Addressed themes can be for example creative entrepreneurship, digital marketing, sustainability in the core of businesses or new food traditions. One of the Skill Share Lab's events will be the community entrepreneurship event, which gives both experienced entrepreneurs and young growth entrepreneurs the

opportunity to network, exchange experiences and share new ways of working. Saimaa Skill Share Lab will grow over the years, in 2022 the goal is to cooperate with 10 companies, 2023 with 20 and 2024 with 30. As a result there will be dozens of new products and services in the Saimaa region.

## Saimaa Academy of Gastronomy

The Saimaa Academy of Gastronomy is a joint preparatory project of Ruralia Institute, upper secondary vocational education college Esedu, South-Eastern Finland University of Applied Sciences – Xamk and Mikkeli Development Miksei Ltd. There is a follow-up project coming, which will put the plans into practice. The Saimaa Academy of Gastronomy will be a unique, world-class training unit. The Academy's prestigious and high-quality activities will attract students and partners from all over the world. Students will be professionals from various fields working or interested in gastronomy. Training will be tailored, personal and practical, providing e.g. quality training on farms, at restaurants and at food sector enterprises. The Academy will play an important role in strengthening the Saimaa region's food culture and identity and in maintaining its food traditions, as well as raising the profile of the region's cuisine as one of the world's top cuisines. The Academy will be an active social actor, shouldering its social responsibility by



Kuvateksti tähän?

providing, for example, children and young people with a contact surface for the Saimaa region's agriculture, food production, food culture and food traditions. Through the Academy, regional cooperation with regional educational institutions and companies will also be strengthened.

- The Academy's activities highlight and enhance the food identity of the Saimaa region, including that within the Saimaa region itself. The appreciation of the locals for their own food culture will be strengthened.
- The Academy brings together primary producers, lake fishermen, people picking the gifts of nature, processors, local food manufacturers, restaurants and tourism enterprises in a network of excellence.
- Through the Academy, the expertise of food professionals and tourism enterprises will reach the international top level.
- The Academy's activities make the Saimaa region the number one destination for food tourism in Finland and the Nordic countries.

### School lunch system

In Finland, free-of-charge school meals have been provided since the 1940s, with the aim of supporting the educational system. These mealtimes also support healthy diets and nutritional knowledge in home economics education. School meals endorse food culture by serving seasonal dishes and at the same time, introducing new dishes and food ingredients, e.g. plant based proteins. Well-planned and well-implemented school meals also promote environmental, cultural, social, and economic sustainability. Commitment to favoring local and organic food within the limits of

public procurement can strengthen regional food entrepreneurship, create employment opportunities, and generate b2b partnerships.

#### Examples:

- South Savo: Mikkeli food services offers 9,500 lunch meals by 54 kitchens, has committed to #TasteLuomu [#TasteOrganic] program, and uses a wide variety of local raw materials.
- South Karelia: Saimaa food services uses ca. 1.5 million euros yearly, and is committed to purchasing local food.
- North Karelia: Polkka food services offers 11,000 meals per day, and favors local and organic food, when possible.

### Business cooperation

The Saimaa region will reach a genuine transformation through the European Region of Gastronomy process and make itself a vibrant, sustainable, and attractive food and culture region. The development of food tourism is guided by the food tourism strategy prepared jointly for the Saimaa region. We aim to create genuine collaboration between our regions' stakeholders in food, tourism, and cultural sectors.

#### How can this be done?

- We invite stakeholders from different fields to create e.g. flagship events or new products with us by creating roundtables. This is done via regional open forums and incubators.
- We will pinpoint and develop current events and business concepts in collaboration with higher educational institutions and regional development organisations.

Photo: Kuvatoimisto Rodeo





- We will create an involvement programme for individual entrepreneurs and artists. The programme highlights responsibility and cross-sectoral collaboration.

The business collaboration programme will be carried out together with all three Chambers of Commerce of the Saimaa region. Programme prerequisites emphasise and encourage responsible and cross-sectoral collaboration. In return, members of the programme can get e.g. sparring to organise individual events or service design classes for specific concepts. Additionally, joining the business collaboration programme provides an opportunity to participate in international competitions (e.g. the Food Film Menu), and the European Region of Gastronomy marketing materials. The programme is created in partnership with the Chambers of Commerce, educational institutions and the development organisations of the Saimaa region.

At the end of 2024, we aim to have a minimum of 100 individual committed enterprises in our network and 30 new or emerging local products, events, or services in our area.

### **Innovation, creativity and job opportunities**

Events, inspiring storytelling and creative participation are key factors when thinking about innovations and job opportunities in the Saimaa region. The current pandemic has affected people's behaviour. In future years one of our main tasks will be the reactivation of consumers: customers should discover the restaurants again, the entrepreneurs should find courage to innovate and the whole Saimaa region should grow into culinary thinking.

We recognise the potential of digital technologies, circular economy, cooperation with primary production and identification of the needs of food minorities as tools for creating more jobs and innovating new products to the Saimaa region. Through networking with other European Regions of Gastronomy we expect to get fresh ideas and expertise in creating new job opportunities in the area.

We have great examples of innovations concerning food technology. LUT University prepares food from the air, and Solar Foods, based in Lappeenranta, was chosen as one of the best teams in NASA's space food competition. Juva Truffle Center was founded with an idea to cultivate truffles, making it a non-traditional and sustainable agro-industry that would benefit the rural economy, providing employment opportunities as well as an extra income source to farmers. Nordic Koivu is one of the most internationally successful companies in North Karelia, producing birch sap straight from the tree into the package without the use of any additives or preservatives. The company has worked hard and been awarded for its perfect harvest and production process. Unlike other industrial producers of birch sap, Nordic Koivu can even pinpoint exactly from which of its groves the birch sap has come.

We intend to transfer this inspiring know-how and entrepreneurship into new innovations. Our artists, landscape, crafts, and traditional or contemporary culture will be the selling point for a variety of new creative services and experiences.

# International collaboration

The Saimaa region joined the European Region of Gastronomy Platform in November 2021 and we are committed to form close collaboration, as extensive as possible, with the other regions. We participated in the Platform Meeting in November 2021 in Portugal, hosted by the Coimbra Region. In connection with the Young Chef Award competition, educational institutions in our region have set out to develop their own regional competition for the Saimaa region, and we are planning a benchmarking trip to Trondheim-Trøndelag in November 2022. Our goal is to be able to send young chefs from our region to participate in the international competitions from 2023 onwards. We hope that we will be able to host the competition in 2024.

We will also make use of the networks created during the bidding for the title of the European Capital of Culture for the year 2026 (The Saimaa Phenomenon 2026). During the process, we established contacts with 50 European cities and 10 Russian cities and were involved in several networks, e.g. The Culture Next Network. We had the opportunity to learn from cities that previously held the European Region of Gastronomy title, such as Galway and Aarhus.

## The Saimaa Culinary and Culture Residency

We are planning to build a residency programme that combines culinary art and culture. In this programme we invite chefs and artists from other European Regions of Gastronomy to experience the unique nature, peace and quiet of the Saimaa region. We will search for cottages and local farms as locations for our residency programme. Interacting with the local people offers a perfect opportunity for encounters of cultures and traditions. It also provides an opportunity to create new collaborations of food and arts. We will combine the results of the residencies with our seasonal programme: Saimaa Sauna Day in winter, Design meets Wild Food & Taste in spring, Summer Cottage Open Doors in summer and Kekri harvest festival in autumn.

World class opera in a medieval lakeside castle, under the barely setting sun of the magical Nordic summer – this is only possible at Savonlinna Opera Festival.  
– Artistic Director Ville Matvejeff.

Photo: Markku Pihlaja







Photo: Visit Saimaa

# Marketing & Communications

The promotion of our culinary heritage, our customs, culture and our way of life will be central in our marketing and communications. Our plan is to ensure high visibility at local, regional, national and international levels.

The marketing and communication will be linked to the Lakeland Finland brand and the Visit Organisations of the region. We will also strongly cooperate with the Lake Saimaa – Purest Finland umbrella brand in the Saimaa region, which has promoted the unified visibility of the whole area in the international and domestic markets since 2017. Cooperation has also been close with the Visit Finland Organisation in promoting international tourism and creating wider cooperation networks. Measures have been widely targeted at Europe, in particular Germany and Italy, but also Russia, China and the United States of America. The area has hosted several dozen international media groups, the most recent guests were from Italy. Local food, culture and nature are always highlighted during the media visits. The Saimaa region has been presented two times in the annual Grüne Woche trade fair in Berlin, the world's largest event in the food, agriculture and horticultural sector, with 400,000 visitors. In 2019, the Saimaa region was displayed in the Finland Hall of the fair with the largest

exhibition stand. In addition to food, Saimaa attracted the audience with the sounds of Saimaa's nature.

In 2022 we will start to gather a visitor portal especially planned for the gastronomic journey in coming years with sustainable food, cultural and creative experiences. The new portal will participate in the Top Websites for Foodie Travellers Award. Audiovisual materials are an important part of our promotion, and the Food Film Menu will be implemented with the media schools of our region. We will also start cooperation with the Savonlinna International Nature Film Festival.

## Activities

- Shared, simple and inspiring communication guide aimed at stakeholders, companies and communities
- Creating and developing a website as a main channel for the brand and content, where one can easily find routes, restaurants and packages, food & culture combining happenings in the Lake Saimaa area
- Producing new gastronomy-related marketing and communication materials & campaigns which will include modern ways to publish in print media as well as audio, video and digital experiences

- Finding new ways to offer food and cultural experiences can be extended to virtual and digital experiences
- Highlighting our gastronomy and culture and in all our channels and finding new ways to do it with ambassadors and influencers
- Supporting and coordinating inspiring materials to stakeholders' channels
- Preparing a catalogue for 2023 and for 2024 including the top restaurants, producers, routes etc., also inspiring articles and stories related to Lake Saimaa (in Finnish and in English)
- Organising PR activities, private food tours, wine experiences and cooking shows for food critics/writers, opinion-makers and bloggers
- Participating in selected international exhibitions and events, enhancing the region's reputation and the European Region of Gastronomy brand
- Cooperation with national and international media, Visit Finland, Finnish embassies and international collaboration partners



Photo: Visit Saimaa



Photo: Visit Saimaa

The Saimaa Ringed Seal (*Pusa hispida saimensis*) is one of the rarest seals in the world. Around 410 seals remain in Lake Saimaa. There is still plenty of work to be done to protect this species that remains on the verge of extinction.



Photo: Visit Saimaa



Photo: Visit Saimaa





Photo: Visit Karelia / Harri Tarvainen



Photo: Visit Saimaa

# Evaluation

An evaluation plan was made in cooperation with the University of Eastern Finland, when our region bid for the European Capital of Culture title for 2026. We will partly make use of this extensive evaluation and research programme for the preparations of our European Region of Gastronomy projects, and we will build an evaluation and responsibility plan for the coming title year.

Visit Finland is launching a wide knowledge management initiative during the coming years. Eastern Finland will bring its contribution to these national endeavours by applying for project funding to a cross-regional knowledge management project. It will be operated in cooperation by the University of Eastern Finland and four universities of applied sciences located in Eastern Finland. The knowledge management project aims at creating a knowledge management dashboard especially for cultural tourism and indicators related to it. It will use the European Region of Gastronomy as one of the piloting platforms.

## Important priorities in the evaluation are:

- Cultural sustainability and responsibility
- Cultural and economic effectiveness
- Adherence to IGCAT guidelines

## The aim of the evaluation is to

- pass on best practises to actors
- produce relevant data for stakeholders
- produce comparable data

The results of the evaluation are distributed through reports, seminars, knowledge management dashboard and media releases.

# Partners, Budget & Organisation

## Support and Commitment

In recent years, the Lake Saimaa area has improved its cross-sectoral and interregional cooperation with many common goals, and enhanced encouragement to think and act at a more international level. The latest and most ambitious example of this is the joint bid for the European Capital of Culture title for the year 2026. During the process we learned that the culture-based identity, our unique food culture and sustainable tourism play a key role in developing the attractiveness of our region. We recognise huge potential in the title of European Region of Gastronomy. A joint application is something we already worked on during the European Capital of Culture process. By committing to the cooperation project, the founding members are enabling positive implications, such as the economic development of our region with the driving forces of culture, nature, and wellness being at the forefront.

Pentti Mäkinen  
Regional Mayor,  
South Savo Regional Council

## BUDGET 2022-2025

Project management .....	900 000
Marketing and communications .....	1 600 000
International collaboration .....	1 200 000
Development of tourism, cultural content and programme activities .....	2 300 000
<b>Total .....</b>	<b>6 000 000</b>



Savonlinna

J • ENSUU



MIKKELI



## Founding stakeholders

- City of Joensuu
- City of Mikkeli
- City of Savonlinna
- City of Lappeenranta
- City of Imatra
- City of Kitee
- South Savo Regional Council
- South Karelia Regional Council
- North Karelia Regional Council
- South Karelia Chamber of Commerce
- South Savo Chamber of Commerce
- North Karelia Chamber of Commerce
- Lake Saimaa ry
- South-Eastern Finland University of Applied Sciences

The total estimated budget amounts to 6,000,000 euros and it is tied to the funding received. The regional councils have agreed to direct regional development funds to support Saimaa European Region of Gastronomy 2024 projects within the framework of the funding period starting in spring 2022. Other EU programme funding will also be utilised. Food, culture and tourism are at the forefront of our regional strategies. Content will be developed through themed, individually financed projects organised in close collaboration with a diverse group

of actors in our region. Our common goal is to form versatile and effective funding for the European Region of Gastronomy 2024 activities, ushering in a new era of cooperation in the Saimaa region, making a permanent change to our way of doing things.

The marketing and communication will be strongly linked to the Lakeland Finland brand and the Visit Organisations of the region. Lake Saimaa – Purest Finland brand work will be tied to European Region of Gastronomy activities (including e.g international trade fairs, marketing campaigns and international media visits).

The budget plan covers long-term, multi-annual activities until the following year of the title. The budget for the title year of the European Region of Gastronomy in 2024 will be around 2.5 million. We consider it important to consolidate our operations and continue the development even after the actual title year.

## Organisation

The Saimaa European Region of Gastronomy 2024 cooperation project will commence its work in 2022 and is foreseen to work until the year 2025. It will work in close cooperation with the regional stakeholders to build the programme regionally as well as on a national level. It shall act as the main partner with the IGCAT organisation and other international networks.

A regional working group will be set up to support the Saimaa European Region of Gastronomy 2024

cooperation project. It consists of members of the participating regional councils, cities and other stakeholders and will steer the regional cooperation and promote gastronomic tourism and livelihood to the whole of Eastern Finland. They also play a key role in ensuring the legacy of the European Region of Gastronomy's activities.

A regional marketing and communication team will also be established with members representing all stakeholders to ensure the commitment and to promote common communication in accordance with the communication plan.

## Wide-ranging project cooperation

We have identified several active projects in the fields of food, tourism development, culture and arts in our area. Already in the preparation phase of our project, we have worked closely with these projects and identified opportunities for synergies. We plan to make use of the existing cooperation networks and the best practises developed in their projects. We have noticed that the joint search of the Saimaa region for the European Region of Gastronomy title has been identified as a much-needed link between internationalisation and regional development. The commitment of provincial associations, cities and municipalities has created a solid basis for enabling future action.



# Sustainable food tourism is regenerating and promoting Eastern Finland as a tempting travel destination

The region of Kuopio held the award of European Region of Gastronomy in the years 2020–2021, first ever in Finland. Now this title is sought for the greater region of Eastern Finland – the Lake Saimaa area – which is a continuum for the development process launched in 2020. The goal is to improve the attraction of Eastern Finland as an equally tempting travel destination as Lapland and the Helsinki region. Previous years have proven that our unique gastronomy has a central role in reaching this goal.

The European Region of Gastronomy Ambassadors nominated from Kuopio described the European Region of Gastronomy journey with words like “joy” and “love” in our closing seminar in 2021. The ambitious multi-sectoral cooperation linking travel, culinary and creative sectors has been the best achievement of the European Region of Gastronomy years. We have experienced a fascinating process of product design from our nature’s rich flora and fauna to new tourism products, following the natural cycle of our four seasons.

In a co-designing process of product design, it is necessary to find a common language, which generates a sense of trust amongst the operators. Thus, it is necessary to meet and promote cooperation on numerous occasions, before attempting to co-design

for example new food tourism ideas. We have succeeded in laying the groundwork for this trust during the previous European Region of Gastronomy years.

The region’s cooperation with the International Institute of Gastronomy, Culture, Arts and Tourism (IGCAT) and the European Region of Gastronomy network has been ongoing for several years now. Together we created and organized the first Local Food Gift program in Kuopio in 2020. This brought five international awards to our local products. There were approximately 30 businesses and 50 artisanal products from our region involved in the development process of this new program.

The international pandemic years commenced in the beginning of our award year of 2020. This had an immense impact also on the gastronomic travel sector. However, as the pandemic continued, the local tourism and local food production have risen to the forefront of consumers’ interests – and this has clearly boosted our accommodation statistics.

In the years 2020–2021 the region of Kuopio worked in close cooperation with the Saimaa region, and this cooperation is still vigorous. Our unique gastronomic culture is the thrust of attaining our bigger goal of promoting Eastern Finland internationally.

*I wish all the participants in this development process of gastronomic tourism in the Saimaa region lots of joy and enthusiasm and good fortune, too!*



Photo: xx

**Ilona Sares**

International Executive Director  
European Region of Gastronomy  
Kuopio Region 2020–2021  
EUREGA 2018–2022  
IGCAT expert

# Food unites us – to live, love and enjoy it as well as to cherish and preserve

Saimaa is much more than just a lake to us Finns in Eastern Finland. It has always been a part of our souls and minds and it has formed our way of living. Saimaa has been our waterway to the wider world, given us our livelihood and been the source of our creativity and resonance of our culture.

We can still enjoy the abundant fish reserves of Saimaa and sing our joys and sorrows to its waves. Living on the shores of Saimaa brings about special skills, knowhow and a way of life. This is deeply rooted in our regional identity, connected to a strong sense of belonging to our families, friends, nature and the lakes and scenery.

The pandemic years have repopulated the Saimaa region again. People have spent more time in their second homes, and even moved permanently to their summer cottages. There is a noticeable resurgence of interest in the traditions of fishing, hunting, picking wild berries and mushrooms and using these in our cooking and baking. We value the fact that the food on our plates is sourced locally. We appreciate the value of nature's offerings and have learned to respect our gastronomy, which in part dates back to the ancient days of our national epic Kalevala.

There is a strong will to act more responsibly and sustainably and thus protect our unique Lake Saimaa, its shores and the nature surrounding it. We will ensure that both our children and the visitors in the region will have memorable experiences in nature and beautiful scenery for decades to come. They will also have the possibility to pick a wild bilberry or taste the wood-sorrel and quench their thirst directly with the lake water.

Food and meals bring us together. We share the rich offerings of nature with friends and the loved ones. The sense of togetherness is strengthened with shared meals and numerous opportunities to enjoy coffee together. The possibility of being awarded the European Region of Gastronomy title would mean for us a possibility to unite our artists and cultural actors to this shared table. Obtaining the title would really inspire us to savour our outstanding food and tell the story of it together! What a feast this would bring about! As we all shall bring our very best to the table!

**Sari Kaasinen**

Saimaa Phenomenon Director  
Musician, Singer & Kantele player  
Hostess of an art residence



Photo: Ville Ruusula



Photo: Visit Salmaa



*This book was edited by Sari Kaasinen, Anu-Anette Varho and Jonna Ekroos. We want to express our gratitude to everyone who has helped in compiling the bid book and to all who have taken the time to meet, plan content or attend workshops. It is this generous contribution of time, effort and ideas that has made this phenomenal bid book possible. We thank our international partners for their invaluable advice and support. As references we have used documents, such as Arctic Food from Finland, and The Saimaa Phenomenon 2026 – Savonlinna Application for European Capital of Culture.*



EUROPEAN REGION OF GASTRONOMY  
SAIMAA CANDIDATE 2024