

# MY HOME IS MY STAGE: RESTAURANT EXPERIENCES IN TWO ESTONIAN LIFESTYLE ENTERPRISES

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## ABSTRACT

This article\* discusses recent developments in the home-based lifestyle business featuring the example of two cases: Tammuri farm restaurant near Otepää in South Estonia, and home restaurant MerMer in Kolga-Aabla in North Estonia. We study the restaurants from a Goffmanian performance perspective, focusing on the lifestyle entrepreneur's viewpoint of creating a restaurant experience in their homes. Accordingly, the home and its surroundings are considered a setting in which food has an important role as a performance medium and multiple roles are enacted by a single entrepreneur as a performer. Freshness, quality and locality of food, homeliness and personalised service are used for creating a special home restaurant meal experience. The two cases also shed light on the dynamics of the concepts of home and lifestyle entrepreneurship in contemporary Estonia, challenging the understanding of restaurant cuisine and home cooking as oppositional practices of food preparation and consumption.

KEYWORDS: restaurant • home • performance • lifestyle enterprise • Estonia

## INTRODUCTION

Traditionally the restaurant and eating out belong to the public space whereas home cooking and domestic dining belong to the private sphere. In between these is a bor-

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derzone of domestic dinner parties and banquets organised by individuals with a high social status who welcomed selected people to eat and drink at their home. In modern culture restaurant cuisine and home kitchen cuisine have frequently been described as distinct styles of food preparation and presentation that are at odds with one another. According to Christian J. Krautkramer (2007: 254) they differ significantly in the aims of the cooks, the ethics of the kitchen and the aesthetics of the cuisine itself. In this article we wish to highlight the challenges to this conceptualisation and draw attention to the need to focus on the dynamic and ambiguous role of the contemporary home as a hybrid site of both private life and commercial hospitality.

Though, eating out has a long and varied history in Europe in which restaurants are only a part (Jackobs, Sholliers 2003). Predecessors of the modern restaurant – taverns, inns, *traiteurs* and boarding houses – were family businesses without fixed opening hours, menus or prices (Kiefer 2002: 58–59). Today small family run restaurants that offer traditional local food and homely service are popular destinations for the culinary tourists, both foreign and domestic foodies. In the case of an enterprise in a home setting there is a shared expectation of a homely atmosphere on behalf of both the hosts and the guests. There exists also a more general trend in the contemporary restaurant service towards more “familiar, friendly, entertaining and casual” (Warde, Martens 2000: 134), “spontaneity”, “natural hospitality” and attempts to engage customers as co-creators of the restaurant experience (Gibbs, Ritchie 2010).

In the last decades many new ways of eating out have been introduced onto the global restaurant scene. There are varied personal motives, social reasons and local names for such eating establishments in different countries but in general they may be called “underground restaurants” (Garbee 2008). Such restaurants are diverse by their nature but there are some common characteristics and principles of operation: distinction from the norms and formal settings of professional restaurants, not necessarily legal enterprises, the chef’s creativity and freedom is praised (chefs are usually amateurs and cooking their hobby), the quality of food products is more important than anything else, often a few dominant ingredients (the best of the season) star at the table, no fixed opening hours or menu, guests rather than clients are often selected by the host or “supper club” members, social media is used for marketing (*ibid.*). The emergence of such alternative restaurants may be connected to several developments in (post)modern consumer capitalism that might take opportunistic subcultural forms of “guerrilla hospitality” (Lugosi et al. 2010) realised, for instance, in temporary pop-up restaurants.<sup>1</sup>

Home restaurants are enterprises that Kerstin Rodgers (2011: 16–17) describes as most “intimate and authentic” in the underground restaurant scene where lines between public, work and family spaces are blurred. This illustrates the tendency underlined by several recent studies concerning the home that its conventional meaning as a place of private consumption has shifted. Home is no longer an enclosed and clearly demarcated space – instead it is in continuous interaction with the outside world and parts of the home are transferred to shared public spaces (Johansson, Saarikangas 2009: 11). The home is conceptualised as both the source and setting of mobility and change, rather than a backdrop or blueprint for practice and agency (Miller 2001: 4, 12). In this paper we focus on a novel cultural phenomenon in Estonia that has emerged during the first decade of the 21st century – the home restaurant.

Historically fine dining in Estonia for a long time was the privilege of the Baltic German elite who, in the 18th–19th centuries, manifested their hospitality through luxurious parties at which delicacies were served (Plath 2009; Hein 2011a; 2011b). In the 19th century the first restaurants were established in Tallinn that, until World War I belonged mostly to Baltic Germans, whereas inns and taverns were run by Estonians (Hovi 2003: 19). However, cooks were predominantly Estonians and the first cooking manual was translated into Estonian in 1781 (Viires 2001: 249–259). Between the world wars restaurants became places of not only gastronomic, but also broader cultural entertainment (theatre, cinema, dancing) (Hovi 2003). During the Soviet era, until the 1990s, restaurants were nationalised and the culture of fine dining decayed within the standardised state system of menus, allocations of foodstuffs and the shortage economy (cf. Gronow, Zhuravlev 2011). During the last twenty years, after the re-establishment of the independence of the Republic of Estonia, food culture has rapidly modernised and diversified in tune with the variegation of lifestyles. Alongside multiple eating establishments, mostly concentrated in urban settings, has emerged a revival of home cooking influenced by global trends of knowledgeable consumers who give preference to locally produced and healthy food.

The two home restaurants we explored as case studies share several similarities with underground restaurants – chefs in both enterprises are amateurs who praise good quality food and drinks, they turned their countryside homes into restaurants without a fixed menu where booking in advance is needed. In the commercial register the enterprises are qualified as limited-liability companies but the hosts see their activity most of all as a lifestyle business and rely on different forms of informal marketing. Our cases also illustrate the contemporary diversification of rural entrepreneurship in Estonia (Kirsipuu 2010; Värnik et al. 2011). We point to the non-productivist rurality and rural home as sources for commodification and consumption, though, the tensions of the multifunctional countryside are not the topic of this article. The existing research on home-based entrepreneurship has identified the significance of the home setting in the construction of the hospitality experience from the guests' perspective and suggested that the hosts' attitude to, and relationship with, their commercial home is critical (McIntosh, Lynch, Sweeney 2011: 511). In our paper we adopt the perspective of the entrepreneur as a director and the key actor who, through the personal relationship to the commercial home as a stage, manages the impression of the lifestyle business and restaurant experience in the home restaurant performance. Through using Erving Goffman's framework of a social performance we aim to provide new insights into rural lifestyle entrepreneurship as well as the dynamics of the concept of home in contemporary Estonia.

#### THEATRICALITY OF THE HOME RESTAURANT EXPERIENCE: A GOFFMANIAN PERSPECTIVE REVISITED

The restaurant as a cultural setting has attracted many researchers to study it from the theatrical or dramaturgical perspective, introduced by Erving Goffman (1959), because of multiple parallels between the staged-ness of the theatre experience and the experience of dining out (see an overview of literature in Beriss, Sutton 2007: 4–6; Gibbs,

Ritchie 2010: 185–188). Both experiences are scripted and set by director(s), enacted by performers playing different roles and visited by the audience who consumes aesthetic or culinary pleasures. The overall dining experience is not created by the food only, it comprises of the surroundings, setting, service and multiple roles played in such a social encounter (Krautkramer 2007: 255). Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2007: 85) claims that “the reciprocity of table and stage has a long history” – from banquets, spectacular festive events in Renaissance Europe that combined theatre, music and food to the modern restaurants that provide culinary shows in theatrical settings and scripts for social encounters (ibid.: 71–78). The restaurant kitchen can be compared to an “ensemble performance improvising in a scenario. The diners get a three or four act play, each table its own performance, complete with program notes or menu. For the staff, the whole evening has a rhythm and a dramatic structure.” (Ibid.: 76) The domestic setting, especially if adapted for commercial activity, can be similarly interpreted as a stage where the host as a director creates a total sensory experience for guests/clients that exceeds a simple economic transaction (Di Domenico, Lynch 2007). In our paper we want to contribute to existing research extending Goffman’s approach, combining it with the semiotic analysis of the theatrical performance and discussions from food culture research, in order to create a theoretical-methodological framework for analysing the case of the home restaurant.

Frame is a concept as an organising principle, a set of “keys” or codes, that enable us to understand, interpret and act accordingly in particular communicative social situations (Goffman 1974). In the Western culture, the restaurant as a commercial establishment has a generally recognisable frame even if there are some variations on the theme used in order to enrich the experience of the customers (cf. Pine, Gilmore 1999). The home, in contrast, has a much less fixed frame and is more open to the personal interpretations of the host. There is usually a clear distinction between frames of home and work that are challenged by those for whom their home is also a place of business (Di Domenico, Lynch 2007). The dinner party at somebody’s home combines the frames of the domestic and formal dining experiences and makes the dining room or the kitchen into a stage where impressions are managed in order to enchant the guests (cf. Warde, Martens 2000: 56–61). In our paper we want to examine how the two frames – the restaurant and the home – are intermingled in the case of the home restaurant, how the restaurant frame transforms that of the home, and how the hosts creatively use the codes of professional hospitality and informal domesticity from both social settings. Besides particular frames, there is a broader physical context (for example, the location, the weather etc.) as well as social context (for example, media) surrounding performances and having an impact on pre- and post-performance experiences and interpretations (Whitmore 1994). We likewise want to consider how such contexts might shape the customers’ expectations of the home restaurant experience.

According to Goffman (1959: 106–140) social performances are given in “bounded regions” or settings that, both literally as well as figuratively, can be distinguished into “front” and “back” like front-stage and back-stage in the conventional Western theatre space. What is brought to the front is usually meant for impressing the audience, what is kept in the back is more likely to remain the territory for the hidden and private self. In restaurants as commercial settings the distinction between the front (the dining hall) and the back (the kitchen) regions is usually clear, even though there are many self-

consciously theatrical restaurants with more interactive restaurant settings that exhibit cooking in front of the customers (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2007: 75). Objects displayed in a home environment as well as in the restaurant space reflect the owners' values and identity. The domestic living room, as the front, is usually a selective display of meaningful objects, often those related to status and esteem (Riggins 1990). However, in commercial home enterprises as hybrid spaces the relationships between identity and setting are more complex than in mono-functional spaces and symbolic objects used by hosts may work as expressions of their lifestyle as well as means for impression management (Di Domenico, Lynch 2007: 12). The whole home setting with objects, colours, lights and smells makes a unique and memorable atmosphere for the commercial performance (cf. Olesen 2010). Our purpose is to look at the commercial home not as merely a background, but to analyse the active role of the domestic setting in host-guest interactions (cf. McIntosh, Lynch, Sweeney 2011). The key question for us is how home restaurateurs design and structure the space of their home/enterprise and how this setting is intended to function for the guest, contributing to the creation of the whole eating experience.

Goffman's understanding of roles results from his understanding of frame and region, and overall, from the way he interprets the interactional performance – the act and art of impression management. He divides an individual into a performer (the one who acts in order to create an impression) and a character (the figure that the performer wants to evoke in the others). Accordingly he distinguishes between impressions intentionally "given" and actually "given off" by social performers (Goffman 1959: 2). Arlie Hochschild (1983) elaborates Goffman's idea of the commitment in the service job roles stressing the importance of "emotional labour" and "deep acting" that involves the performer's management of his or her inner feelings not just external impressions. In the case of professional restaurants it is the team who enacts a set of specialised roles (Fine 1996). Yet, in modern restaurants team members are expected to be able to be creative and improvise instead of sticking to the script (Gibbs, Ritchie 2010). Different roles may be divided between family members at home, though, in the contemporary home complex and hybrid roles may be played by each member, and no clear gender or labour division borders can be drawn (cf. Hochschild 2003).

The professional chef should be able to cook using expert and artful techniques and sophisticated ingredients according to consistent standards, to share tasks with others and, as the result, to create an original cuisine that satisfies different anonymous customers (Short 2006: 63; Krautkramer 2007: 250–261). The home cook, in contrast, can improvise freely or repeat the same dishes. More important than the food itself is to express the care towards the guests and have an emotional, direct and personal relationship to the diners (ibid.). In the home restaurant, like in other micro-enterprises, a single entrepreneur or an entrepreneurial couple often performs multiple roles, with one person being simultaneously a scriptwriter, a director and actor (cf. Bardone, Rattus, Jääts 2013). In our analysis we aim to study how home restaurant entrepreneurs combine their personal characteristics and the role of the restaurateur, their commitment to the role(s) and, finally, how they enact, combine and switch between different roles related to both home and restaurant settings.

Restaurants were important settings for impression management for Goffman, although his interest was not in food but in social behaviour. Barbara Kirshenblatt-

Gimblett (1999) considers food a performance medium in its own right. Accordingly in the alimentary performance the food expresses different values and meanings. Performing with food can be related to products, techniques of cooking, ways of serving and rituals of consumption. In other words, culinary aesthetics comprises elements beyond the taste, texture, and design of a dish: how it is served, how it interacts with the other dishes during the meal, and how it fits the overall dining environment (Krautkramer 2007: 255). A dinner party in a domestic setting is more similar to the restaurant than everyday home eating – often it is a structured event that includes an elaborate menu, a prescribed set of rituals and patterns of interaction between hosts and guests (Warde, Martens 2000: 57). If domestic dinners are based on the social reciprocity between hosts and guests, then in the case of the home restaurant such symbolic reciprocity becomes commodified and the guests as clients are expected to pay for the service. However, this commodification involves entrepreneurial creativity as well as emotional commitment in order to provide personalised yet expert service in the domestic setting. We want to examine how the home restaurant chefs' values and ideals related to food are realised in the dishes they serve and what principles, techniques, and aesthetics are used in their cooking. All in all, we consider the domestic setting of the home restaurant as a stage where the entrepreneur as a creative agent performs multiple roles and creates a personalised dining experience and relationship with the clients.

#### MATERIAL AND METHODOLOGY

This article is part of a wider range of research projects concerning rural entrepreneurship in Estonia from a theatre analogy perspective (Bardone, Rattus, Jääts 2013) and the dynamics of the meaning of home and its role in identity construction in contemporary Estonia (Kannike 2002; 2009; 2013).

The study focuses on two unique cases illustrating recent developments in the home-based lifestyle business: Tammuri farm restaurant near Otepää in South-Estonia, about 50 km from Tartu, and home restaurant MerMer in Kolga-Aabla in North-Estonia, about 60 km from Tallinn. Both restaurants are family enterprises that were established some years ago and have become popular among connoisseurs of quality food. They have been awarded the title of belonging among the 50 best restaurants in Estonia. These restaurants provide interesting material for comparative analysis as two similar success stories in different contexts. Their carefully planned and professionally directed meal experiences have much in common with theatrical performances and thus correspond with the proposed theoretical and methodological approach. The hosts of both restaurants agreed that restaurant and theatre have a lot in common. For Erki (b. 1973), the chef of Tammuri, theatricality was associated with his behaviour, especially the stories he tells while serving the guests, whereas for Jaan (b. 1943), from MerMer, a former actor and director, with the improvisations of different restaurateurs as performers relying on a similar script (for example, such as the restaurant).

Neither of the two home restaurants was established spontaneously. The opening of the enterprises (Tammuri in 2007 and MerMer in 2009) was a final and decisive step in a longer process of dreaming, preparing and planning. Merrit (b. 1959), the chef of MerMer, learned to appreciate good food and festive dining in her childhood home. As

a student of philology in the 1970s she prepared elaborate dinners for friends “out of nothing”<sup>2</sup> at a time when even the most basic products were scarce. Jaan comments that his wife’s hidden talents matured over a long time. Erki felt that choosing urban life was a mistake and looked for ways to return to the countryside. Neither of the *chefs de cuisine* has a culinary education. However, what seems to count, for Erki as well as Merrit, is their previous experience in entrepreneurship. Erki’s studies in the field of economics and work in the field of design had prepared him for important aspects of restaurant management. The previous success of Jaan and Merrit in theatre, art and real estate, and some years living abroad in Sweden, gave them confidence in their creative and communication abilities. While the hosts of MerMer say that they had no previous connections with their location, and just fell in love with it at first sight, Erki’s relationship to his farm is different. He is the fourth generation here and running a restaurant means continuity, even though its function has changed in comparison with the agricultural past: “I try to keep the family tradition alive” (Oll 2008).

Both Tammuri and MerMer restaurants define themselves as lifestyle enterprises – it is a business activity that enables comfortable living but does not give considerable profit. The quality of life in the countryside and getting positive feedback and emotions are for the entrepreneurs themselves more important. Erki says:

When I like my lifestyle and can live off it, then I’m happy. Once I was stupid enough to move to the city, but pretty soon I started to feel extremely uncomfortable between the stone walls. I needed a place where to mow the lawn.

The hosts of MerMer define their restaurant similarly:

This is certainly a lifestyle enterprise, if it wasn’t, we couldn’t do it. Some of our conservative friends still look at us with stupid faces and ask: When do you rest? Isn’t it horrible having strangers in the house?

Erki calls his enterprise a farm restaurant and himself provocatively a farmer even though he does not deal with fields or cattle but only with landscape and forest maintenance. Jaan and Merrit stress their ambivalent identity admitting that though they would never become “rednecks” and their lifestyle is more urban than rural, there are some tasks they cannot avoid here like brush cutting, lawn mowing and snow-ploughing.

The hosts of both restaurants emphasise the uniqueness of their enterprises in the Estonian restaurant scene, and that it is a challenge and an advantage at the same time. The distance from bigger cities means that potential guests cannot just drop in when they feel like it (a majority of the restaurant guests are urban dwellers), but have to plan their visit in advance. This puts some pressure on the entrepreneurs to make a lasting impression on the guests. On the other hand, a certain isolation reinforces the image of exclusive and original service that both hosts want to offer. The restaurants are mainly oriented to the domestic market, although some foreigners have visited them as well, usually in the company of their Estonian friends.

As relative newcomers in the neighbourhood, most of their network of business partners and friends also consists of migrants who have moved to Lahemaa and Otepää, popular places of leisure and recreation among Estonians, over the past few years. Though they have different personal histories, the entrepreneurs can be charac-

terised as in-migrants who participate in the wider process of “rural gentrification” in Europe (Woods 2011: 104–105). The village where MerMer is situated, is quite big (100 families) and vital. Both traditional and new forms of entrepreneurship have become more active and this creates a cumulative effect. MerMer not only buys local products, but also aims to promote cultural life in the area, at the same time offering its guests diverse experiences. At present, they are participating in the making of a film that aims to promote small entrepreneurship in the countryside. Such kind of co-operation of course serves mutual business interests as well. Erki’s ambition is likewise to profit as well as to contribute to the cultural tourism in the wider area of the southeast of Estonia.

The investigation of home restaurants from a theatre analogy perspective raises certain methodological issues. Firstly, there exist challenges in terms of exploration and identification of subjective feelings of the home-host relationship (McIntosh, Lynch, Sweeney 2011: 511). Therefore an interpretive approach using the performance perspective as both a theoretical lens and methodological tool was considered appropriate. We established a personal rapport with the hosts through visits to Tammuri (by Ester Võsu in July and August 2009, including assisting the chef at cooking) and to MerMer (in December 2009, July and November 2011). The hosts were open to discussion and enabled us access to both the front- and backstage of the restaurants. However, as they all were quite explicit about the importance of their domestic privacy and willingness to receive guests who stay for a limited (dinner) time only, short-term fieldwork seemed appropriate from the ethical viewpoint, although we are aware of some of its shortcomings. There is a risk of overestimating the festive or performance-like side of the hosts’ everyday life and, thus, the theatrical analogy of the functioning of their enterprise. The researchers may be charmed by the picturesque surroundings and warm atmosphere of the establishments and overlook some of the hidden tensions and contradictions arising from such kind of entrepreneurship. Paradoxically, fieldwork itself might be viewed as a kind of performing art where performance comes first and the script later (Castañeda 2006). In the case of extended fieldwork “those in the study cannot maintain a pretence or pose forever” (Wolcott 1995: 75) and, likewise, the ethnologists’ longer stay in the fieldwork area enables them to better understand the everyday functioning of the local community and the dynamics of entrepreneurship in this context.

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with the hosts of Tammuri and MerMer before, during and after having dinner, and photos taken at the site. In addition to the interview transcripts, previously published interviews with the hosts by professional journalists, food weblogs, the homepages of the restaurants and the book *Õgivad ja blogivad* (Gorging and blogging), a chronicle-recipe-book published by MerMer (Hummer 2011), provided material for the analysis. Key research questions focused on the motivation and ideas that led to the establishment of home restaurants, the construction and perception of the home setting by the hosts, staging the restaurant experience and the roles performed, the principles and values reflected in the food and service, the meaning and perspectives of lifestyle entrepreneurship for the informants. Although performer-audience communication was part of our research interests, the analysis did not concern the expectations or experiences of the guests in the commercial home, or their feedback, as this would have required a different methodology and exceeded the present research question.



## CONTEXT AND FRAMES

The two home restaurants attune their visitors to a special experience already before the visit takes place. The fairly minimalist homepage of the Tammuri restaurant is more informative than advertising in character. Food is described in quite general terms:

We prepare seasonal food using fresh and mostly local products. There are influences from Estonian and European cuisine, but also small hints and ploughs from farther corners of the world.<sup>3</sup>

So the actual menu and style of the food remains a secret. A photo that depicts the dinner table with empty dishes also prepares the guests for culinary surprises. Some articles in the press have further reinforced the image of Tammuri as a mysterious and magical place (Kokk 2008; Eilsen 2009; Press 2011). On the other hand, the restrained style of the information hints at the restaurant's orientation for exclusivity, a wish to host primarily "admirers of gourmet food and enjoyers of culinary pleasures". However, Erki believes that most of his guests come to his place after having heard about it from friends or relatives and thinks that his homepage and articles in the press have only created some additional value or added to the positive image of the establishment.

Unlike Erki, who prefers to market his business relying on word of mouth, the restaurant MerMer invests considerable energy into providing a continuous news flow from the restaurant, using their homepage, social media (Facebook) and a blog, the fictional author of which is the family dog Hummer. The latter, who is called an assistant waiter by the hosts, plays an important role in the restaurant experience and beyond. He welcomes guests who arrive to the restaurant and once in a while makes a tour around the living room. Furthermore, in an interview Merrit has revealed that one day she would like to have her own cooking show on one of the local TV channels (Tähismaa 2009). The blog has inspired the recently published book mentioned above: a combination of recipes, attractive photos and chronicle of the restaurant's everyday life over one year. The book is like a visit card that describes the home restaurant as an absorbing adventure for the hosts as well as the guests. In Hummer's book sometimes dramatic natural conditions are presented as a part of the performative experience staged by Jaan and Merrit. Thus, a storm at sea is not bad weather that could spoil the idyllic atmosphere, but something of extra value:

That picture may have even deserved an Oscar for special effects. A cloud interwoven with sulphuric circles, rushed towards us, it was darker than at night. The whole nature froze in screams of horror ... (Hummer 2011: 214)

Publishing a cookbook featuring photos of the surrounding landscape and describing the close relationship with local producers that broadens the overall performance and enhances the experience of the restaurant visit, is a marketing strategy used by gourmet restaurants elsewhere, for example the famous *noma* restaurant in Copenhagen (Larsen 2010: 94). Whereas Tammuri prefers a matter-of-fact style of communication, the belletrist style of MerMer makes the (potential) visitor believe that it is a place of no routine but of constant culinary surprises.<sup>4</sup>

The fact that there is little or no information on pricing also distinguishes these establishments from ordinary restaurants, as well as from the standardised meals offered

by Estonian farm tourism enterprises. A conscious guest can guess anyway that fresh products and improvised food are not cheap and be ready to pay for the quality. In both cases the guests not only have to plan their visit in advance, but also consult the hosts about their wishes and gastronomic preferences.

Arriving at these restaurants also requires some planning and orientation in the geographical sense. The descriptions on the homepages do not give details and it takes the guests some effort to arrive. But for seasoned guests such wandering associates with adventures in Italy and France and stokes the fires for exotic experiences (Kahvlispiioon 2009: 110).

Tammuri farm restaurant is located on a picturesque hillside in a village near the small town of Otepää, in an ancient farm that the head of the house inherited from his forefathers. The restaurant's homepage gives an overview of the dramatic history of the farm and its owners, emphasising the prosperity and success of earlier generations, the Soviet-time downfall and devotion of the new owner who aims to give back the farm "its own soul". Erki presents even his expertise on wines as a continuity of his ancestors' tradition. So he gives the impression that Tammuri has never been a home of ordinary farmers, but of somewhat special and creative people. The photo of a wine-cellar that looks like those in traditional European wine-producing regions tells the visitor to the homepage that he/she can expect professional service.

The buildings are not only renovated, using authentic materials (shingle roof, moss lining, clay plaster), but also look more attractive than ordinary farmhouses. The landscape is carefully groomed and the whole complex offers a nice view to the approaching guests. Haystack piles on the log wall and a brick terrace give a touch of originality to the ancient facade of the restaurant. In front of the old storage the owner has put some Biedemeier-style ironwork and wicker chairs for relaxing and enjoying the view. The impressive farmhouse which is painted in Swedish red, with new large windows, a balcony lost among greenery and carefully cut ornamental plants, responds to the urban middle-class notion of an idyllic countryside, a place of relaxation and a dream home in the middle of nature (for the development on these ideas in Estonia, see Kannike 2002: 79–89). The designed ideal landscape creates mental images not only of holidays in a homeland, but also of stereotypically ideal exotic destinations.

Picturesque hills and sunshine made us feel like real gourmet tourists and the grove bordering the top of the hill further away became cypresses in Tuscany in my imagination (Press 2011).

The road to MerMer meanders through coastal villages and the silence of coniferous forests in the Lahemaa National Park. The restaurant that was built in rustic style some years ago blends into the landscape of the old fishermen's village, but, on the other hand, stands out with its perfectly groomed lawn and spacious garden cleansed of brush that offers a magnificent view to the sea. Sea dominates the first impressions of the guests; it is the symbol of this restaurant, a central element in design, food and marketing. Like in Tammuri, the surrounding natural environment is romantic, and the hosts add colour to it in their descriptions, creating a fairy-tale image of the place:

A wonderful pearl of nature, thrilling thousand-faced sea greets the guests and the chariot of Helios that goes to bye-bye at Jaaniranna, offers incredibly amazing spectacles in its unique beauty (MerMer).

The location of both enterprises and their immediate surroundings correspond to idyllic imaginations of rural landscapes that are consumed by urban clients as part of the overall restaurant experience and valued as living environments by the hosts themselves (cf. Woods 2011: 104–105). Through verbal and visual means of communication the hosts of Tammuri and MerMer emphasise their professional devotion and respect for tradition and authenticity, but also love for improvisation. In both cases the marketing strategy involves stressing uniqueness, even exclusivity, but at the same time the cosy and homely atmosphere. In Tammuri the expectations are shaped in restrained minimalist style, in the case of MerMer with a playful and emotional tone.

## SETTINGS OF HOME RESTAURANTS

The owners of the two home restaurants undertook extensive building, renovating and decoration works before the businesses opened. Erki did not have a detailed vision of the result at first, he just started building, using the existing old storage house and adapting his plans to available resources in the process. Jaan, on the contrary, built a completely new house, so he did not have to make compromises with any existing structures. He had a clear understanding of what kind of home he wanted: “new, but looking ancient”. Jaan’s strong vision sometimes caused disputes with the builder, and, although there were some changes in the project, he didn’t make any compromises in the overall design or building quality. Being an amateur painter and former actor/director himself, Jaan took full responsibility for the restaurant’s architecture and interior design: “It is staged, my whole life is staged. There are no casual things here.”

Tammuri restaurant is set in the dim storage house of the farm in which historical log walls and joists, darkened by weather and time, create the rustic atmosphere. Two walls are covered with warm apricot-colour loam plaster; a hot wall of red bricks dominates the wall between the two dining areas. The furniture is minimalist: typical peasant chairs surround the wooden table. White (tablecloth, napkins and plates) and glass dominate in the setting of the table, functioning as a canvas or empty space (like a blackbox in the theatre) that emphasises the forms and colours of carefully designed food. The rest of the furniture consists of only a few antique items: a creamy sofa, a simple cupboard that has been polished, and a workbench used as a serving table.

However, Erki has consciously avoided a complete peasant style look, by using material objects, music and light to also add a touch of elegance and cosmopolitanism. Old black and white family photos hang on the wall, side by side with Italian views. Stainless steel details (lamps and wall sockets) as well as shiny white tiles and a brownish-golden mosaic wall in the bathroom animate the plain wooden surfaces. The less-is-more-principle that adds the intimacy of a salon to the old farm milieu is also manifested in the use of light. During late in the evening, only a window near the end of the table and a small open door give light to the diners, some of the minimalist lamps are also lit. The dimness makes the rest of the interior melt into one and draws the attention to the food and setting of the table. He takes great care to prepare the atmosphere before the arrival of his guests:

It always takes me about half an hour before the guests arrive to burn an incense or scent candle. All such things. That you come and the candles are burning or those

lamps on the wall, that gives you another feeling. Such things are important. Such small details. That I don't have that cheap paper towel in the toilet, but real towels. But, of course, you don't have to lay it on thick; there is no need for extra glamour.

The living-room/restaurant in Merrit and Jaan's home is colourful and full of decorative details. Natural materials are combined with artificial, natural colours with bright ones, Art Nouveau style with modern, etc. Jaan stresses that mixing different styles was his intention: "There is a lot of eclecticism here, I deliberately mixed the styles and made them match". Being an expression of subjective creativity, the interior actually feels cosy. Indeed, according to Grant McCracken, arrangements are perceived as homely when they combine diverse styles of furnishing in a single room. For many people, the important principle of arrangement is redundancy and they bring many homely things together into a single arrangement (McCracken 1989: 170).

While in Tammuri the end-of-19th-century peasant style dominates, side by side with some contemporary details; the temporal heterogeneity of MerMer is much greater. There is also some stylised furniture, for example a massive oak dining table and chairs, that does not associate with a concrete historical period, but gives an archaic as well as dramatic touch to the space. Several smaller decorative objects – especially numerous candlesticks and chandeliers in Art Nouveau style – have elaborate and fantastic forms. The playful artifacts create an intriguing background for Jaan's expressive-naivist paintings on the walls. In the living room and dining area the colours are milder, natural materials and tones counterbalance the intensity of the kitchen space. The colour of the rough plaster walls was chosen to match exactly that of the sand dunes behind the house. Broad floorboards, imitation joists and brand new bricks treated with hydrochloric acid are used to improvise in historical mood, at the same time consciously avoiding peasant kitsch.

Similar domestic interiors where self-made solutions, authenticity and naturality are important principles, have become trendy in Estonian home decoration over the past ten years and also earned most public acknowledgement at recent home decoration competitions (see in detail Kannike 2009; 2013). The dominating colours (brown, brick red, peach, cream), unfinished natural materials (timber, clay, brick) and rustic wooden furniture that dominate in these interiors, are generally associated with homeness (McCracken 1989: 169). In Estonia these characteristics are also used for describing an ideal home, but, on a more general level, associated with the traditional and the national (Kannike 2002: 88–89).

Erki's simple and functional kitchen is separated from the dining area and hidden from the visitors. Jaan's and Merrit's open shiny red kitchen furnished with high-quality home appliances stands out as the heart of the house, emitting warmth in an aesthetic, culinary, as well as emotional sense. The layout of the kitchen area emphasises the high standards the hosts have set for cooking and their openly passionate relationship with food. The central position of the kitchen table underlines its importance as the 'altar' where the most sacred ritual is carried out. The open kitchen affords to exhibit more of the cooking process whereas Erki's backstage kitchen demands more effort with the aesthetic design of food on the plates.

In Tammuri the interior is deliberately low-key. The single modern element of furniture – a stainless steel wine fridge – underlines the special role of wine in the conception of the restaurant. As an occupational object (Riggins 1990) it accentuates the profession-

alism and devotion of the owner in an otherwise ordinary homely dining room. In MerMer personal statements through objects are stronger. Kitchen tools as well as Jaan's paintings are proudly displayed. The hosts keep a guestbook that would be an easy way of impressing new guests with compliments from previous ones (including the president of the Republic of Estonia, top chefs and businessmen). But Jaan and Merrit have decided to ask every visitor to fill a white sheet of paper with descriptions of their emotions that are later added to the guestbook. So, although they are well aware and proud of their success, they want to be sure that the feedback is always honest. Thus, the guestbook is not a typical esteem object, but a means of communication between the hosts and the guests.

In Tammuri the host's living rooms are in the other building and so the private and working space are clearly segregated. The kitchen where the food is prepared is separated from the dining area with a wall, so the guests do not enter this region where "illusions and impressions are openly constructed" (Goffman 1959: 112). Here the performer can prepare his show, relax and step out of character. The furniture of the kitchen is simple and serves only practical needs. Erki has made some necessary kitchen equipment himself, for example he uses an old oven for warming the plates. Since he works alone, and all his different tasks have to be carefully planned and co-ordinated, the distinct borders of the frontstage and backstage help him maintain control over the situation and switch between roles when necessary.

In MerMer the structure of the space is more complex and dynamic. The living-room/dining area includes an open kitchen. For Jaan and Merrit, open space and the absence of doors is an important characteristic of their restaurant. In winter, the kitchen area is part of the front region, but in summer, when the guests eat outside in a simple renovated boathouse, it becomes an entirely private backstage. The border between food preparation and eating areas is marked by the contrast in design and materials described above, but in some situations the symbolic line becomes amorphous. While the stove, oven and fridge are placed in the peripheric areas of the kitchen where only the hostess operates, the island-shaped working space between the kitchen and dining table enables those guests who are willing, to participate in the preparatory processes, communicate with the hosts and with each other and learn new skills. In such situations the kitchen table also functions as a social facilitator that allows people to publicly demonstrate skills or acquire new knowledge about each other (Riggins 1990: 351). The hosts of the restaurant live in the same house, but the private bedrooms are situated on the upper floor and separated from public areas by a staircase.

The border between interior and exterior is more transparent in the Juminda MerMer restaurant due to the huge windows that offer a view to another 'stage' – the sea and coastal landscape. Nature may give dramatic and even frightening performances, but the guests can enjoy them from their safe loge at the restaurant table, so the window is also like a huge screen. Thus, the theatrical space of MerMer involves not one, but several foci of visual attention: the kitchen, the landscape outside, and the dining table, whereas in Tammuri the table is the single fixed focus of visual attention as well as of verbal interaction. Erki does not serve meals outdoors even in summer, because he claims that hot food cools down quickly and the aroma of the wine disperses in the air. Eating indoors gives him the chance to direct all the attention of the guests to the food on the plate, not so much on the surroundings.

The hosts of both restaurants light the candles when the dinner is served. This not only makes the mood more festive, but also focuses the attention to the dining area. As Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2007: 72) puts it, in the restaurant performance the table might become a physical extension of the stage (the regions where the chef is acting). Then the kitchen and the rest of the living room blend in with the backstage. Homeliness is also marked by the fluidity of temporal borders. Unlike in public commercial establishments, guests do not feel the pressure to leave immediately after having finished their meal or cup of coffee. In our contemporary life marked by constant time pressure, this is perceived as a special act of hospitality, a luxury.

Like in the case of other types of performances, in both home restaurants the region that is thoroughly established as a front region for receiving guests, functions as a back region before and after the visit of a group. In Erki's case the average guest does not know, what happens in the restaurant when there are no diners. As for MerMer, Hummer's blog keeps us updated on everyday events in and around the house, reinforcing the image of openness and transparency. Erki underlined the importance to keep his privacy in such a business – like in MerMer he gives his performance as a chef only according to the pre-agreement. If the gate of the farm is closed, there will be no performance. Although he has a small guesthouse near his restaurant, he doesn't want the guests to sleep in his own house.

I understood that I don't want to receive guests in my home. This creates terrible stress. When they leave in the evening, it's kind of solved. You wake up in the morning and know that you are on your own, that's a good feeling.

The importance of private quality time for themselves, especially during holidays, was stressed also by the hosts of MerMer. Jaan is categorical: "I would never establish a tourist farm, here the border is very strongly marked, I am such an individualist".

The interior and exterior of the building as well as the dramatic tension between front- and backstage(s) actively contribute to the atmosphere and restaurant experience the hosts want to create. Both restaurant settings evoke nostalgia for the peasant life and rural landscapes, but also bourgeois understandings of domestic comfort: luxury, relaxation, privacy and intimacy (Rybczynski 1987; de Mare 2006).

#### FOOD AS PART OF THE HOME RESTAURANT EXPERIENCE

In the home restaurants meanings and values related to home and restaurant cuisines were quite intermingled. The food was considered the main performance medium by the entrepreneurs – everything else is seen to happen around food. Both restaurants can be categorised among menuless restaurants.<sup>5</sup> Neither of the chefs informs their clients beforehand about the menu of the day, unless there are some customers with special desires or needs (for example, some food intolerance). The lack of a fixed menu makes customers feel as if they are eating at somebody's home. On the other hand, compiling new menus for each week, considering the ingredients available and the budget, is a challenge that involves complex skills characteristic only to excellent domestic cooks (cf. Short 2006: 60). Besides, chefs from both restaurants ask from returning customers what they ate the last time, in order to personalise each new meal. In addition, the chefs

explicitly emphasised that they share with their guests the same food they enjoy themselves. Therefore, the food reflects both their personal values as well as values related to hospitality and commensality.

MerMer, as well as Tammuri, have adopted from the professional fine dining context the importance of top quality fresh ingredients. Their menu depends on what foodstuffs are available at that particular time. By valuing high quality produce and real tastes they clearly distinguish themselves from the mainstream restaurant food in Estonia. Jaan says:

Who can buy the most expensive oil in a big restaurant? This is our privilege. We don't need to use prefabricates. In Mediterranean countries the fish has three different prices according to its freshness. A big restaurant in Estonia cannot afford itself to have the fish from the same day. [...] We don't offer "a dead Romanian" [a cheap and low quality (Romanian) wine] as a housewine. Only such wine that we drink ourselves and use for cooking.

For Merrit good quality ingredients associate with healthy food:

People can eat their fill but it's not feeding up. Our food goes well with olive oil. We offer low fat meat – the lamb does not ooze with fat. Healthy food tastes good, and what tastes good doesn't necessarily make you fat.

While high quality ingredients are valued by both restaurants, the chefs' principles and values related to the ingredients of local origin are quite different. MerMer is aiming to offer as much local food as possible and at the same time such ingredients that are not commonly available (for example, rabbit, ostrich and pheasant from local farms; wild Baltic salmon etc.). What is the local food? According to Merrit, in Estonia one can consider local all food that is produced here, there is no point to become an organic freak. For MerMer it has been crucial to establish trustworthy contacts with local foodstuff providers. What they cannot find directly, they buy from the markets or suppliers in towns. Their local berries and fruits come from Merrit's sister's garden. However, as the chef likes to cook in the Mediterranean style she needs olive oil and balsamic vinegar and if she wants to cook tomatoes in winter, she does it: "We are not so crazy that we offer only beetroot in winter."

What concerns local foodways, Tammuri seems to be more isolated and has to face bigger problems in getting good-quality local products regularly. According to Erki's words foodstuffs at the local market are not always of fine quality and producers of ecological food have not organised an efficient sales network yet. For Erki the quality and availability of products is more important than its domestic origin. Because he runs the restaurant alone, logistics and supply are a problem, unlike in MerMer where Jaan is taking the role of the victualler. It is hard for Erki to keep looking for different products from different sellers. Therefore he prefers to buy vegetables and fruits from a wholesale dealer, who supplies his restaurant six days per week if needed. However, there are also very local ingredients in Erki's kitchen – for example, different greens, herbs and berries from his farm's garden for making salads or garnish in summer. Like his grandfather, Erki keeps bees and uses honeycombs for adding an exclusive touch to seasonal desserts. In addition, his mother provides the restaurant with several home-made berry liquours. As a result, Erki sees the connection between good food and locality in a different way:

Why should local people, who have never tasted green-lipped mussels in their life, suffer because I want to offer these disgusting duck mussels that are not edible. Well, they come here and eat these green-lipped mussels. Three and five year olds come and tell me: "Oh, they're so good!" This emotion is the reason why I cook them.

Thereby, serving good food, often of exotic origin, is a way for Erki to create memorable culinary experiences for locals and to bring gourmet values usually associated with urban life into the rural setting. The products of local origin do not have any extra value for him and if the logistics are too complicated, he prefers to keep things simple for himself as a solo entrepreneur, and order the foodstuff from big resellers. The hosts of MerMer, instead, see rare local produce as a speciality of their enterprise and due to working in a duo have established multiple contacts with small local producers.

Chefs of Tammuri and MerMer both take Mediterranean cuisine (especially Italian food), and Merrit also Swedish cuisine, as their examples, but the principles of composing the menu and cooking are rather different. What dictates the script of the menu for the particular day are the ingredients available (including seasonality) and the chef's inspiration, "every meal is inspired by the hostess's emotions" (Restoran MerMer pakub).

As Erki runs his restaurant business alone, an important pre-requisite for composing the menu is the possibility to manage with everything alone:

Most of all [I like to cook] traditional European dishes, because I'm not familiar with Asian cuisine. I must consider what I can cook alone, therefore the simple Italian cuisine is the nearest to my heart. What concerns the rest, I base my decisions on what season it is, what is growing, which raw materials are at their best. (Vihma 2009)

Merrit admits that she learned about what ingredients can be used for cooking while living in Sweden where she discovered garlic and lamb (Tähismaa 2009).

Even though both chefs admit that they read cookbooks written by professional chefs, they consider independence important in their culinary improvisations and combine different sources for gastronomic bricolaging rather than imitating a particular cuisine (cf. Short 2006: 45–47; Krautkramer 2007: 254). For instance, Merrit admits that she got some inspiration for making some dishes from Jamie Oliver's cookbooks, but the final result has still been her interpretation. Erki has not made any effort to make cook's explorations to Italy, unlike many professional chefs, and is not keen to try to copy Italian cuisine in his restaurant:

I haven't the vaguest idea about how they cook in Italy. I've been in Milan city centre only once. [...] I don't know if they make ravioli with goat cheese. But, you know, pasta is pasta – eggs and flour. Mine will turn out a little bit different.

Similarly, Erki also feels free to interpret classical French recipes in his own way (for example, he offers the dessert *crème brûlée* with seasonal berries or rhubarb in the bottom of the ramekin).

The creative cooking ideals are nowadays cherished not only in professional but also in home cooking – such ideals may increase the burden of housework but they may also become an inspiration for home cooks as well as entrepreneurs (cf. Short 2006: 44–45).



In our interview Merrit acknowledged that she might get tired of some ingredient or recipe quite fast, therefore she needs to try something new over and over again. Erki explains his motives to cook in a similar way: “Usually I cook what I like myself, what gives me some creative challenge” (Vihma 2009). That is to say, realising the creative potential of cooking is an important trigger for both chefs, something that encourages them to develop their skills and culinary repertoire.

As a result, the food offered in both home restaurants is not homely in the sense that there is not much traditional Estonian food on their table. They seem to consciously ignore the two most common ingredients in Estonian’s domestic kitchens, potatoes and pork, explaining it with their poor flavours. Instead of potatoes, the two chefs value more various vegetables as the accompaniment to the meat. The advanced taste of the hosts from both restaurants is reflected also in the drinks – no beer or vodka can be ordered. The wine selection in MerMer and Tammuri is carefully chosen and consists of an assortment not commonly available in stores or other restaurants in Estonia. Erki has taken a course for sommeliers and his wine cellar holds more than sixty different wines.

However, both chefs admit that there is a demand for Estonian dishes, especially among foreign customers, and therefore they have worked out some dishes with a local twist. For instance, both restaurants offer *kama* mousse, a dessert that uses a traditional peasant food, a flour mix of roasted cereals and peas, gentrifying it with more noble ingredients like whipped cream, *crème fraîche* or a liquor. Erki describes how he worked out his *kama* mousse after the first unsuccessful tests with different ingredients:

I succeeded with the cottage cheese and it was praised [by clients]. I like it too, I would cook it also for myself. This salty taste. [...] And I also add some *crème fraîche* in the whipped cream [...]. There is likewise a lot of sugar going into it, but it is the salty taste that brings up the sweet taste. It’s not written in any recipe and this is something you will not discover also going abroad. At one moment it just occurred.

Such novel interpretations of Estonian food culture are in tune with recent quests for the modern Estonian kitchen by professional chefs who use one or two ingredients characteristic to Estonian food and mix them with ingredients of international origin and cook using advanced techniques (Kirikal 2006). Fresh products of local origin are more praised by modern chefs following the principles of the New Nordic Cuisine than traditional recipes from national culinary heritage (Larsen 2010).

Like professional restaurants, both home enterprises want to offer culinary surprises for their clients either in the selection of non-familiar ingredients or taste combinations. Merrit and Jaan also like to enchant their clients with “showy dishes” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2007: 78) because their open kitchen affords exhibiting the cooking process. For instance an ostrich liver flambéed in armagnac fascinated one of the customers:

Merrit fries it [the liver] slightly in butter, then the host approaches and pours on it some cognac and sets it on fire. In the snowlight glancing from the window a spectacular flame makes our blood run cold. (Hanson 2010)

As the clearly separated back-stage kitchen is not making the same show possible for Erki, he seems to invest more into the composition and design of the plate following the principles of the professional *nouvelle cuisine*:

Herbs are clearly the Tammuri chef’s cup of tea and he is directing these skilfully

also for the main course: the leg of lamb, that has spent more than three hours in the oven, tastes tender, herby and soft. In cardinal wine sauce a dark chocolate note can be smelled, but the garnish is almost like a parade from the *Tale of Cippolino*: lightly stir-fried vegetables, a handful of brisky carrots and *il Signor Pomodoro*, blushing from the heat of the stove, in the middle. (Kokk 2008)

Unlike in many *à la carte* restaurants, neither of the chefs has created sophisticated names for their dishes – they have no menus to be read, the dishes are explained orally in the process. Erki stressed that fancy food names are often merely to catch customers' attention and in the long oral description most of the story would be lost anyway. Sometimes he risks using mundane names of local origin to describe his gourmet dishes creating contrasting associations (for example, Estonian *klimbid* [dumplings] instead of *ravioli*), even though, "nobody has left so far because the name of the dish was too simple." In the written discourse (the weblog and the cookbook) multiple stories around certain dishes are examples of the narrative creativity of the hosts of MerMer.

However, in terms of structure and sequence of meals, both restaurants share similarities with each other, as well as with professional restaurants. There is an appetiser offered to the guests, which is followed by two first courses, the main course, and finally comes the dessert. Merrit and Erki consider it important to have an attuning starter. In MerMer it is composed of home-made bread, the host's pesto from sundried tomatoes and olives marinated by him, and Merrit's "hot apple jam" (i.e. chutney). Erki likewise serves to his guests the self-made bread and *pâté* (depending on what liver is available it may be from chicken, duck or something else). The menu one of us tasted in July 2009 reflected the chef's food choices of mixed origin and the appreciation of pure and fresh tastes according to the season. The first courses were *gaspaccio* with fresh garden herbs and a layered fish dish from salmon and tilapia garnished with white radish, fresh baby garlic and horseradish cream; the main course was composed of the duck fillet in red wine sauce and turnip-celeriac casserole, fresh butter-sauteed chanterelle with baked tomato and paprika and red onion jam; and for the dessert a cake with a *brûlée* cover was served with the accompaniment of freshly picked black currants, raspberries, wild strawberries and a small slice of honeycomb from the host's beehives. Our menu in MerMer in November 2011 gave an overview of the chef's multiple culinary interests, her experimental mind and willingness to invest into slow cooking. The first courses were composed of the *gravadlax* in a beetroot-horseradish-limejuice-vodka marinade (a dish of Swedish origin inspired by Jamie Oliver's recipe) and of *tjälknöl*, a slow cooked moose tenderloin (another Swedish dish); for the main course a rabbit stew in Greek-style sauce was served with the accompaniment of oven baked zucchini and tomatoes and a broccoli-*crème fraîche* puree; a hearty meal was finalised with Merrit's hot chocolate cake with vanilla ice cream topping.

As a result, food is playing an important role in the home restaurant performances, even though due to the limited human and technological resources, there is not much of any showy cooking displayed. The overall aesthetics of food is related to the scenography of the restaurant space. There are several associations with professional restaurants and chefs in terms of high quality ingredients, carefully selected wines, creative interpretations of international recipes, unexpected taste combinations and advanced cooking techniques (cf. Krautkramer 2007). However, values like freshness, locality, homeliness and personalised service (including undisclosed and orally explained menus) are

successfully used for creating a special home restaurant meal experience (cf. Larsen 2010).

## ROLES PERFORMED IN HOME RESTAURANTS

In public restaurants a *chef de cuisine* has a whole team in the kitchen in order to realise his directorial aims and support his role as a director. Erki as a *chef de cuisine* totally controls the kitchen and in this respect his role is similar to the one in professional fine dining restaurants. However, Tammuri Restaurant is a one-man-show, a solo performance in which Erki is taking all the roles of the restaurant staff in one person. In theatre terms he is a director, a manager, a stage designer, a scriptwriter, an actor (embodying the roles of the porter, chef, cook, sommelier, waiter, busser, cleaner, etc.) and, sometimes, also a spectator (while observing customers' behaviour). Therefore it is not surprising that one of the clients compares him with a "superstar" (Ilover 2011), i.e. with somebody who can do his work as a chef plus the assisting jobs, including entertaining his customers.

While starting the business Erki had no resources to hire any personnel. Yet, a more important reason for establishing such a solo enterprise was its uniqueness expressed in privacy and the enchantment of the personal approach to customers. While establishing his business, Erki perceived that there was a need for a small and personally grounded enterprise (Oll 2008: 19). Such organisation of the business gives him the freedom and independence to plan his work the way he wants and to have holidays when he needs. Only in case of groups bigger than 15 people, he may invite somebody to assist him in the kitchen. Even though Erki alone is a key actor, his daughter Mia sometimes plays an assisting role, engaging in conversation with guests and strengthening the homely atmosphere. Therefore, Erki had also very private reasons for establishing a home-based enterprise. He wanted to be his own master and run a home business because it gives him an opportunity to be available for his daughter, who still goes to the primary school.

The major difference between Tammuri and MerMer is that the latter is a co-preneurship – it is run by a couple who have divided the roles between themselves. Merrit performs the role of chef, whereas her husband, Jaan, is taking several assistant roles (porter, kitchen assistant, sommelier, busser, supplier, waiter, etc.). This co-performance that is given together in the kitchen, living room and in summer also outside the house, stresses the homely aspect of the restaurant. They have expressed matrimonial balance also in names – the restaurant is named after the hostess (Merrit + *meri* ['sea' in Estonian]), whereas their homestead is given the name Jaaniranna (Jaan + *rand* ['coast' in Estonian]). Like Erki, the hosts of MerMer justify the micro-business with two employees with the possibility to thereby have maximum control over the restaurant experience and role dynamics between two persons.

The home restaurant hosts give off quite different first impressions with their appearance. Erki seems to intend to give a professional impression – when welcoming and later serving the clients he is wearing a white or black chef uniform with an apron. Whereas the hosts of MerMer give off quite a homely and artistically liberal impression with their smart casual clothes (that are certainly not homely careless). During one

of our visits the hostess was barefoot because she claimed that she likes to go around at home this way and she feels free to do it. Such differences in the selection of outfit refer to the different personalities of the chefs, their different life experiences, as well as their different role interpretations. It seems that Erki prefers to keep quite strict borders between his role as the chef and his private self, perhaps also some psychological distance with his role and the uniform supports that goal. Merrit, on the other hand, aims to be more immediate and the borders between her self and her role as chef are more fluid.

Considering the home restaurant context and her business background, the impressions Merrit makes with her role performance are ambivalent. On the one hand, she seems to give an impression of an independent self-confident mature woman who performs the role of a chef for realising her personal talents, creativity and passion. She dared to open her business and create a change for self-employment when economical crisis still influenced people's consumption in Estonia and believes that one has to do what one has got a talent for, without copying anyone else (Sarjas 2009). Her husband admits that it is Merrit who is the practical and economical mind in their couple. However, there is also another impression she gives off, due to the traditional associations with the home kitchen, which is of a motherly figure, who expresses her care towards the guests through food (in spite of the fact that the couple does not have children).

Comparing the role performances of the host of Tammuri and the hostess of MerMer – both challenge the traditional understanding of domestic and restaurant cooking and likewise play with stereotypical gender roles. Even though Erki's role as a chef is more in tune with the traditional image of the professional male chef, he challenges the masculine approach to the work life that should happen outside of a domestic space. In addition, working as a chef is something that sustains him, but also something relating to his lifestyle and values. He might be compared to male celebrity chefs who have encouraged men to re-interpret domestic cooking as a source of pleasure and fun (cf. Hollows 2003: 237). Furthermore, as a young single father who works in a home enterprise, Erki is representative of a new, more flexible fatherhood emerging in the Western world (Gorman-Murray 2008). Merrit in turn, represents an independent woman for whom the roles of a domestic cook and entrepreneur are consciously selected and intermingle in her performance. She is a director and a star actor in the kitchen, but co-acting with Jaan seems to give freedom and balance to her roles. She deliberately stresses her feminine qualities (such as the emotions and moods that inspire her cooking) as part of her personal style. As a result we might draw a parallel between Merrit and British celebrity chef Nigella Lawson, a post-feminist woman who claims not to *be* a domestic goddess but to *feel* like one (Sholes 2009: 49).

Each employee of a restaurant has characteristics of her or his personality and appearance that become a part of her or his role performance. The clients of Tammuri restaurant have described Erki as "silent and modest as a real Estonian. He speaks as much as is needed and what he tells is thoughtful and low-key emotionally." (Mathisen 2011) His performance has given an impression of reservedness, even of a certain aristocratic attitude: "without making a fuss, the host acts there as a learned man and as a butler of the British gentry" (Press 2011). However, from our own experience we can add that Erki can be quite open and talkative if clients themselves are interested in having a conversation on the topics related to food and cooking. Merrit, in contrast,

describes herself as “not exactly a typical Estonian woman” (Tähismaa 2009), and somebody who rather shares the same “blood group with southern Europeans than with reserved Estonians”. She considers emotions as the main trigger and inspiration for cooking – what she cooks on a particular day depends on her mood. As a former actor and director Jaan has a high performative reflexivity and he is aware about how to use his body and voice for impressing the customers or engaging them in a conversation. As a co-performer Jaan plays an important role as a storyteller and fills the pauses with engaging narratives if needed. However, he expresses his opinion frankly and his attitude is similar to Erki’s – he gives more attention to those guests who are more concerned with topics of his interest.

Hence, the role performances at the home restaurants evolve and are sometimes co-constructed in the interaction with guests. What hosts of both enterprises valued most of all is the core of such personalised service – the chance for immediate interaction with the guests. For those guests who are interested MerMer provides an opportunity to come and assist Merrit at cooking. In our interview the hosts mentioned several examples from restaurant service in Estonia in which sincere communication between employees and customers is lacking and the question “How did you like it?” is merely a learned act of hospitality (cf. O’Connor 2005). Erki pointed to the same problem and explained that being simultaneously a cook and a waiter gives him the immediate feedback about “what is left on the plate” that chefs in large restaurants would never get. In addition, the hosts were concerned about the opportunity to play the role of an expert as well as the possibility to learn from their guests. Erki mentioned in an interview that he appreciates if his clients are open and interested in his cuisine, but sometimes it is especially enjoyable, if they ask for a particular wine and demonstrate more specific knowledge in fine dining. The couple from MerMer summarises the advantages of such a home enterprise: “There is no need to go far away to explore the world but the world is coming itself to your home” (Hummer 2011: 211).

In the public restaurant the role of the chef is to act professionally, which usually means how the food is prepared and designed, and sometimes also interaction with the visitors (for example, chef’s table; the chef coming to give explanations to clients, etc.). Both chefs in the home restaurants we studied lack either culinary education or experience in the restaurant sector; however they do not consider their amateurism as a disadvantage, quite the contrary. The hosts of the MerMer declare that:

We are dilettantes and we don’t have the remotest idea how it’s all done in real restaurants (starting from the meticulous recipes and ending with the devil know what). Our luck is that nobody prevents us from improvising or frowns upon us when we do things one way one time and the other way the other time. Each dish is unique, because we do not measure the amounts exactly. (Ibid.: 75)

Erki from Tammuri restaurant believes that one cannot learn from culinary school what to put on the plate. Especially if one wants to serve something special, then it “should be found from within oneself” (Kirss 2009: 30). He admits that the most important knowledge is not related to knowing recipes, but rather to knowing the peculiarities of particular foodstuffs:

I try to guess the harmony of tastes, select appropriate side dishes, and serve it all nicely. Technical knowledge is important, of course: how long and at which tem-

perature you should cook the meat. However, ovens are different and everything cannot be predicted in a recipe. Who is able to cook three basic soups can cook all of them. (Vihma 2009)

Erki believes that what matters most is the actual quality of the food he offers. Thus, both chefs trust their creative and perceptual abilities more than specialised technical skills and academic knowledge related to professional cooking (cf. Short 2006: 55–59). As a result, the lack of professional preparation makes both chefs more free to experiment with individual interpretations and improvisations. They can be compared with talented amateur actors who are free from the frames of a particular acting school or style. Though, such business demands talent, skills and creativity, otherwise the result would be dilettante in a negative sense, that merely imitates familiar clichés.

Actually, the chefs have several acting techniques in their repertoire in order to create the professional impression whether in a general performance role, in preparing, serving or commenting on the dishes. There is also a consistency needed in order to be coherent in the role performance as hosts. In Tammuri guests value the host's skills to stick to the role of a restaurateur:

Openness, cordiality and hospitality do not mean familiarity or being too obliging. Erki has been able to keep the subtle boundary [between the home and the restaurant], that is easy to cross for a home restaurant. After all, we are at the restaurant not just on a visit! (Press 2011)

Similar can be said of Jaan, who can be very engaging in his performance but who never plays the role of a fool who should amuse the guests while they are expecting the next course or eating. Even though there is no strict demarcation of front- and back-stage in MerMer, the hosts stressed to us that they never eat with their clients, even if the latter are good acquaintances.

Even though rehearsing the dishes at the backstage is usually crucial for professional chefs, Erki does not consider it so important:

Quite frequently I offer things [dishes] that I cook for the first time. Fancy chefs talk about how they make one dish for sixty times, how they tune up the taste. I don't rehearse. I don't have recipes. For instance, when I cook a soup, I don't add ingredients according to the measure but I follow my nose. Of course, I taste the soup while cooking it. It cannot happen to me that the soup is too salty.

Yet, as he is performing alone in the restaurant he has worked out certain techniques of cooking, preparing and serving that enable him to be efficient and also take some gaps for rest and as a result "to create an impression that things are done properly". For Merrit and Jaan, on the contrary, it is important to experiment and try out everything they offer to their clients beforehand (Hummer 2011: 128). Their well-rehearsed and coordinated co-play impresses the guests, especially if they cook showy dishes like liver *flambé*: "The hosts' movements are carefully measured and their cooperation runs smoothly" (Hanson 2010). Thus, as the result improvising with new taste combinations is important in both restaurants even though chefs interpret it in a different way.

Both Tammuri and MerMer want to serve one group at a time and dedicate all their attention to these particular people who are present at the moment (even though they might have 2–3 groups per day), otherwise they would lose the personalised service

and would not enjoy the job themselves. The more dedicated the performer is to the role, the more “deep acting” (Hochschild 1983) is used. It is engaging for the clients, but challenging for entrepreneurs. However, both hosts agree that such an emotionally demanding job also has a rewarding side, that is, an additional value emerging from the immediate interaction with, and the feedback from, the customers. Erki admits:

Here you can feel great after every working day. It’s an emotionally good job if you can be a chef and a waiter in one person. But it’s unbelievable what power and energy you need to invest into your work. I don’t need self-affirmations like “I’m a cool guy”. It comes naturally here. You get everything back that you do, emotionally. I can get up at 8 and be a zombie, but if it’s 19 and they [customers] are coming, then I awake. The tempo will increase. It’s such a rhythm. Then you can easily work until 22–23 and don’t feel tired. Especially if they [customers] say some good words in return.

Similar mutual emotions emerging from the restaurant experience, created and shared with clients, are described by the hosts of MerMer:

[E]ach encounter is an experience. Especially in such a cadaverous time of *kaamos*<sup>6</sup> when a soul needs a tasty meal, a good drink, a bit of candle light and warm communication. This way there is no big difference between a cold Nordic and a warm Mediterranean country! (Hummer 2011: 58)

A very personalised act of saying goodbye and building emotional bonds with customers was demonstrated by Merrit when she hugged us in the corridor making us feel like close family acquaintances not like clients who just bought a service.

Notwithstanding the immaterial benefits, such an emotionally demanding job also has its disadvantages – there is a lot of backstage effort that is not visible to the customers. The location of the business in the countryside is not an advantage if a storm or thunder causes a blackout, if the road to the house is blocked with snow, or the dishwasher falls out of use and the maintenance man needs to be waited on for days. Sometimes inventiveness or humour helps to solve difficult situations. The hosts of MerMer described to us how they came up with the legend of how coastal men throw the fishbones in the seawater because they believed that new fish will emerge from these, because they had almost fifty guests to feed with the fish. While the clients ate the fish at the seaside they managed to clean the tables and to serve the next courses. During a fieldwork visit Erki pointed out that performing the role of the restaurateur might not be as creative and theatrical as it might seem after brief observation, and certain routines are a considerable part of his workdays.

In the home restaurant, the emotional work, that is often stressful for domestic cooks who need to give dinner to the guests (Short 2006: 59–61), has been skilfully transformed into “emotional labour” that involves managing one’s feelings as well as creating particular emotional states in customers (cf. Hochschild 1983). Multiple roles performed by one entrepreneur or a couple in the home restaurant and commitment to these roles are ways to impress clients, even though it is emotionally demanding for the performers themselves. It is the limited number of performers that makes the experience of hospitality at the home restaurant natural and its service unique and personalised in the very sense of the word (cf. Gibbs, Ritchie 2010).

## CONCLUSION

The home restaurants described above are unique in the local restaurant scene, but at the same time illustrate the general trends in rural entrepreneurship in Estonia as well as in Europe. The borders between urban and rural areas are becoming more and more vague. A great part of the new businesses in the countryside are initiated by people with an urban background who have moved or returned to their roots and form new networks of communication and entrepreneurship, introducing urban lifestyle values and contributing to the process of rural gentrification. Through entrepreneurial activities they may interpret the local environment and culture in ways related to their personal values.

We studied two lifestyle enterprises where the business is important from the viewpoint of the values and choices connected with the entrepreneur's own lifestyle. They are pragmatic in their calculations and marketing principles, but explicitly oppose the attitude of the owners of mainstream eating establishments who are mainly interested in income and compromise on quality. The entrepreneurial philosophy of the host of Tammuri is based on trusting his own aesthetic and culinary taste, knowledge and honesty towards the guests. The hosts of MerMer believe that the reliability of the family team and careful planning guarantee the high quality of the service. In the two restaurants we studied, food is given the status of the dominant performance medium. It reflects the hosts' personal values related to gastronomy as well as values related to hospitality and commensality. The aim of the owners is to provide an experience of fine dining in a carefully set domestic atmosphere with personalised homely service.

The expanded Goffmanian approach to home restaurant performances provided a theoretical-methodological framework that enabled detailed as well as holistic analysis. Fieldwork observations, interviews and conversations with entrepreneurs (both on and off the stage) gave information necessary for understanding different techniques of their impression management and also their values. Though, as brought up by one of our informants, the daily routine of the home restaurant life might not be as theatrical as it might seem during short visits. The lack of audience research (not explicitly part of Goffman's dramaturgy neither of the performance analysis in the theatre research) was partly compensated by considering clients and journalists' reactions and impressions in the media. We admit that the chosen framework is only one way to study the home restaurant as a sociocultural phenomenon.

Entrepreneurs from both restaurants use contrasts in different elements of their performances. They challenge the traditional understanding of restaurant cooking by demonstrating that the impression of professionalism can be achieved with commitment to the role and personalised service and passion for good food, not only by specialised knowledge and experience from the restaurant sector. As cooks they rely on fresh and mostly local products, using innovative recipes and presenting the guests familiar tastes with a scent of surprise. Homeliness and professionalism were successfully intermingled in the role performances. The entrepreneurs combined the strengths of their personal characteristics and roles enacted for the clients stressing emotionality or reservedness. In addition, they played with stereotypic gender roles in their professional as well as private life.

Erki's stage design is simple and rustic – the milieu of the old storage house creates an archaic atmosphere that highlights the gourmet food offered. The other elements



of the setting are subjected to the main ritual that unfolds on and around the dinner table. Homeliness emerges from the feeling of simplicity, intimacy and sincere hospitality. In Jaan and Merrit's case the diversity of interior decoration, the contrasts of the cosy living-room and seaside landscape outdoors and several foci of attention create a dramatic tension and engage the attention of the audience. Hummer's blog and book are used as additional channels to dramatise the experience before and after the visit. Despite some differences in the setting, Tammuri and MerMer both give the impression of well-balanced compromises between closeness to nature and the conveniences of modern life and modernist design, familiarity and originality.

The restaurants studied have achieved remarkable success and attracted attention in the press. This is explained by several factors that became manifest in our analysis. Both restaurants successfully communicate their central values: high cooking standards, devotion to food, honesty and flexible personalised service. Traditional elements are in proportion with innovations and classical qualities with improvisation. Hospitality and the illusion of endless time aim to recreate a caring sociable space that associates with the security of the ideal home. This is achieved by self-reflective and consistent performances and convincing acting of the roles, i.e. a high degree of expressive coherence according to Goffman.

The marketing strategies are adapted to the personalities and optimal functioning of the enterprises. In our case the home setting is crucial for the hosts, giving their performances credibility and power. They are capable to seize and hold the initiative in relation to service and at the same time enjoy caring for others and get satisfaction from the acknowledgements of their expertise. Erki, Jaan and Merrit are passionate about their work and meet their own needs for creativity and sociability at the same time as meeting those of others. They gave an impression that they are able to protect their personal life and ensure optimal borders of the public and the private through a flexible use of time and space.

Our study made explicit some new aspects of the dynamic meanings of home and homeliness in contemporary Estonia. Borders between public and private spheres are more and more conditional as new forms of home enterprises emerge. A private home may become a stage for a public performance for a certain time, extending its homeliness to become an essential part of the commercialised product. Likewise, the aims, ethics and aesthetics of home cooking are not necessarily oppositional to those of a conventional restaurant. The close personal relationship with the diner gives home restaurants their extra value and homeliness, and becomes a synonym of gourmet. Freshness, locality, homeliness and personalised service (including undisclosed and orally explained menus) are successfully used for creating a special home restaurant meal experience.

Exclusive dining in a homely environment makes an imaginative return to the past and/or an exotic journey away from the everyday routine possible. In a world where people's experiences of the home are increasingly mobile, food may help to constitute a "home from home" (Duruz 2001; Petridou 2001). In the two home restaurants the guests appreciate a sense and a taste of home that may not be available in their own house or apartment where they live. The restaurant experience becomes a part of the mental home-making process while looking for individual identity.

However, the conditions that render the atmosphere appreciated by the hosts and possible customers are not unproblematic. There are obvious questions of affordability concerning the potential clients and also issues of constraints and pressures concerning

the personal life of the owners of the establishments. The future of the rural economy, commodification and changing local communities, can bring along some advantages but also some challenges for the restaurateurs. The size of the team likewise sets certain limits to the forms of culinary performances. Still, considering previous life and business experiences, flexibility and creativity of our informants, they seem capable of adapting to changing circumstances and lifestyles.

## NOTES

1 Pop-up restaurants have gained popularity in the 2000s, especially in Britain. Since May 2011 international Restaurant Days are organised as food carnivals where everyone and anyone is encouraged to set up their own restaurant, café or bar (see Restaurant Day). As a part of the same initiative, a day of home restaurants took place at the Uus Maailm district in Tallinn on May 19, 2012 (see Uue Maailma linnaosa).

2 All citations without references here and below have been taken from the transcriptions of the interviews with the entrepreneurs mentioned above (see FM 2009 and 2011). Translations from Estonian were made by the authors of the article.

3 Tammuri Farm website (Tammuri talu). Here and below translations of homepage and weblog texts from Estonian by the authors.

4 MerMer restaurant website (Restoran MerMer pakub).

5 However, Hummer's blog and cookbook may be considered as a kind of post-factum menu.

6 *Kaamos* means the time of polar nights in Finnish.

## SOURCES

FM 2009 = Interview with Erki on 2nd and 3rd August 2009 in the Tammuri restaurant.

FM 2011 = Interview with Merrit and Jaan on 9th November 2011 in the restaurant MerMer.

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