

NORWAY



Official name:

The Kingdom: of Norway

System of government:

Constitutional monarchy

The Royal Family:

Harald V, King of Norway, born 21 February 1937

Sonja, Queen of Norway, born 4 July 1937

Haakon Magnus, Crown Prince of Norway, born 20 July 1973

Mette-Marit, Crown Princess of Norway, born 19 August 1973

Area:

The Kingdom of Norway: 385 155 km²

Mainland: 323 758 km² (7.6 per cent protected)

Svalbard and Jan Mayen: 61 397 km² (57.1 per cent protected)

Population:

4 554 000 as of 1 January 2003

Monetary unit:

Norwegian kroner, NOK

1 USD = 6.45 NOK as of November 2006

Length of coastline:

25 148 km, including fjords

Largest lake:

Mjøsa, 362 sq. km

Highest mountain:

Galdhøpiggen, 2 469 m

Economic indicators:

Inflation rate, 2002: 1.3 per cent

Gross domestic product (GDP), 2001*: 1 510 869 mill. NOK

Gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, 2001*: 334 279 NOK

About Norway:

Magnificent landscapes, climatic contrasts and man, alone, pitted against the crushing forces of nature. All of these are part of the fascination that Norway holds for visitors from other countries. But nature and climate are more than merely the basis for memorable experiences, they are the very source of the ingredients from which Norwegian culinary traditions have evolved. Norway's long and varied coastline offers ample waters for both "wild" and farm-raised fish. The slow ripening process of everything that grows during the light Nordic summer imparts an extraordinary aroma to berries, fruits and vegetables, and the animals that graze on the succulent green grass provide meat with a distinctive full flavor.

Norway is a modern, urbanized nation with a booming petroleum and technology industry. However, with only four million inhabitants spread throughout an area the size of Italy, it goes without saying that unspoiled nature dominates most of the country.

Although many eyebrows are raised when Norwegian culinary artists win international awards today, it is not the first time that foreigners have been impressed by Norwegian fare. When papal envoy Cardinal Wilhelm of Sabina came to Bergen to attend the coronation of King Håkon V in 1247, he had misgivings about the food and drink, having been forewarned. However, in his speech following the banquet he lavished praise on the meal he had been served.

Unfortunately, the historical record of the cardinal's speech makes no mention of the menu, but foreign visitors to Norway in the 18th and 19th centuries speak highly of the salmon, fowl, game and strawberries with cream. These are treats that most present-day tourists will also encounter, and they don't even have to come to Norway to taste the salmon. "Norwegian Salmon" has become a familiar delicacy in many countries. Very few people are aware that salmon exports are a very recent industry, compared with the export of dried cod, for instance.

Stockfish and lutefisk

On the northernmost coast of Norway, cod has been hung on poles and dried in the wind without salt for more than a thousand years. For more than a millennium this product has been sold to other European countries in order to bring home such rare commodities as wine, wheat and honey. They called this fish "stockfish" - or *stoccafisso* or *estocafix* or however they may have written it. A French cookbook manuscript from 1393 explains how boiled *stofix* should be eaten with mustard or dipped in butter. However, the fish must first be pounded with a wooden hammer and then soaked in water for many hours. Adding wood ash lye to the water makes the fish particularly soft and flavorful. The result of

this process is the celebrated lye fish (*lutefisk*), today a Norwegian and Swedish specialty, and as in certain areas of the USA, closely identified with Norwegian and Swedish immigrants.

Flatbread and vegetables

Admittedly, many past visitors have told of distressing encounters with Norwegian food. A Parisian woman who sampled a particularly unyielding variety of Norwegian flatbread described it as follows: "Norwegian bread has the shape and size of a plate, and the same consistency." It may not have been baked with the same care everywhere, but the French lady was probably especially unfortunate on that occasion 150 years ago. Today, at any rate, this crispy, wafer-thin bread is a distinctive feature of a traditional summer meal in the country.

Many complained about the lack of fresh meat and vegetables. A Frenchman describing Norway lamented, "It is a dreary country. There is nothing to eat. Believe me, sir, in the whole of Bergen there is not a trace of vegetables or fresh meat, no fruit, no pears, no plums!" His criticism was probably justified to a certain extent, as the choice of comestibles at the time was extremely dependent on seasons. Had he come in the autumn, however, he would have found boats laden with apples from the fruit districts along the Hardanger Fjord. Fruit and berries ripen slowly in the Norwegian climate, but this gives them a unique flavor. Thanks to the cool climate and very few insects, use of pesticides can also be kept to a minimum. Today Norwegian vegetables, fruit and berries such as Chinese cabbage, apples, cherries and strawberries are in great demand in many countries due to their high quality. Norway has always grown tasty root vegetables which chefs today have become expert at combining in new and exciting ways.

Salmon and bacalao

Almost every visitor raves about Norwegian fish, such as fresh trout and salmon. Fresh fish is prepared in a variety of ways, though it is commonly served poached as steaks. Restaurants now also offer a wide range of other types of fish, many of them unattractive in appearance, but with a taste that is difficult to beat. For hundreds of years, fishermen scorned these species, throwing them back into the sea. One such fish was the wolffish, despite the advice of North-Norwegian epicure and baroque poet, Petter Dass, who insisted that one should not be put off by its appearance.

Another fish that is popular all over the country is cod, which Norwegians prefer to eat as fresh as possible. Thanks to air transport and modern refrigeration methods, other Europeans too can now enjoy this gift from the sea. Their forefathers were more familiar with the dried varieties of cod, such as the

stockfish mentioned earlier, and clipfish, which is more popular abroad than in Norway. Clipfish is both salted and dried. Formerly, it was laid out on bare rocks in dry summer weather, but today this drying process takes place in thermostat-regulated drying rooms. Clipfish is exported to Portugal, Italy, Spain, South America and the Caribbean, where it is called bacalao and prepared in hundreds of different ways. In Norway, as a rule, it was simply boiled and served with potatoes until the Spaniards taught us to use olive oil and tomatoes. In recent years, however, Norwegian chefs and gourmets have concocted exciting new dishes from this traditional ingredient.

Milk - the mother of all dishes

Sour milk cheese (*gammelost*) is made by boiling milk without adding rennet as is customary in European cheese production. However, this is just one of a broad range of cheese products made in this manner. The oldest Norwegian desserts were sweet milk dishes, such as *gomme*, which a lucky visitor may still find in certain rural areas. Special dishes for weddings and childbirths included *rømmegrøt*, a sweet, filling sour cream porridge that is a traditional feature of Norwegian summertime lunches accompanied by flatbread and dried, cured meat.

Brown goat's cheese (*geitost*) may be one of the most distinctively Norwegian sandwich toppings today. Foreigners often think it tastes like caramel and find it difficult to understand why so many Norwegians include a goat's cheese sandwich in their traditional packed lunches. Several types of cheese made of cow or goat's milk are exported, primarily to the USA and Germany.

In earlier days, soured milk was used in the daily porridge, which was made of water and grain, usually barley or oats, which Norwegians have appreciated through the ages as much as the Scots and horses. Some people also added milk to beef and pork stews. As it was readily available all over the country, milk has played a prominent role in Norwegian cooking. Moreover, milk was used to make butter, one of the most coveted Norwegian "units of currency" in the days of a barter economy. Butter had such high status that it was placed on the table as a decoration at weddings, moulded into large pyramidal sculptures. The original, hand carved wooden moulds can be seen today in ethnological museums and are a prime example of Norwegian handicrafts

Cured meat

All the cheeses and dairy products were a natural consequence of the fact that milk could not be kept fresh for any length of time. In this respect Norway was even worse off than other countries because winters were so long. Animals could only be put out to pasture for a few short summer months. Norwegians were therefore extremely dependent on dried, smoked, salted and pickled meat. Fresh meat was scarce and thus a luxury. As for cured meats and sausages, Norway may not have the same abundant selection as Spain, for instance, but we can boast a unique national specialty, *fenalår*, or cured leg of mutton.

Fresh lamb, given a fine, rich flavor by the fragrant summer grass, has become popular for both roasts and other dishes. In earlier days, the finest meat was reserved for the wealthier classes, while fresh mutton for the population at large generally meant the cheapest, fattiest parts from the autumn slaughter, simmered with cabbage and whole peppercorns to make what is now considered a national dish, *fårikål*. However, salted lamb ribs (*pinnekjøtt*), originally a regional specialty from Western Norway, have also won national status as Christmas fare. This savoury dish is now to be launched on the export market, hopefully with proper instructions for steaming and serving it with mashed rutabaga.

Christmas fare

A traditional Christmas dinner generally features roast pork ribs in Eastern Norway, and cod, halibut or lutefisk in the coastal districts, even though migration has virtually erased these culinary boundary lines. The time-honored rice porridge is still served, but seldom at the main Christmas meal in the evening. More and more Norwegians are turning to turkey, a type of poultry that has not been as common here as in other countries.

Other Christmas specialties include a variety of sweet and salted delicacies. Head cheese, prepared in the Danish and German fashion, rather than the French. Mutton roll, a similar dish made of lamb. Smoked leg of lamb. Many different types of marinated herring. Pork sausages and meatballs. Lutefisk has become an increasingly popular choice for pre-Christmas festivities.

One of the key components of Norwegian Christmas celebrations are Christmas biscuits, or cookies, of which a wide variety should be served. The expression "all seven sorts" clearly evokes the goal of any ambitious housewife about to embark on her Christmas baking.

Larger cakes, too, have played a prominent role on Norwegian coffee tables. Layer cakes (*bløtkaker*) are filled and frosted with whipped cream and jam, while

almond macaroon rings are piled high in pyramids to make the traditional tower cake called *kransekake*.

Beverages

Today, Norway is a major coffee-drinking nation. Up until the last century, however, 90 % of the Norwegian population lived in rural areas, where the everyday beverage was *blande*, a mixture of water and sour whey. Those who could afford it drank beer before the advent of coffee. On holidays, however, everyone was to have home-brewed beer, a tradition dating back to the Viking age - if not earlier. Now modern breweries have more or less taken over, some even exporting large quantities abroad.

It is difficult to cultivate wine grapes this far north, so wine must be imported, but Norway produces a type of spirits called aquavit (*akevitt*). Distilled from potatoes, it is usually flavoured with caraway. Aquavit and beer are the traditional accompaniments to lutefisk, mutton and cabbage and many salted and smoked dishes. The production of "*linie akevitt*" is not complete until the liquor has been shipped in casks on Norwegian vessels on a round-trip to Australia. Its name refers to the fact that it passes the equator - the Line. Whether or not being rocked by the waves improves the product has always been a moot point, but no one has ever claimed the opposite.

Norwegian cuisine

It is difficult to define a Norwegian cuisine in the same way we can talk about a French cuisine. Norway has no history of the aristocratic and bourgeois classes that traditionally have the necessary affluence to develop culinary traditions. Apart from the hotels, our restaurant traditions were limited primarily to a few mountain inns. Today, however, Norway can boast considerable diversity on the culinary front. Having travelled abroad, often as charter tourists, more and more people are eager to sample foreign cuisines. It has become much easier to find proper ingredients since immigrants from other cultures opened their shops in Norwegian towns. Chinese restaurants are no longer the only ethnic alternative, now that Mexican, Indian, Korean, Indonesian and Creole establishments offer new and tantalizing culinary experiences.

The process of internationalization has also brought other trends to Norway. As in many other Western countries, foreign visitors to Norway will now find a wide variety of snack bars and international chain restaurants. And a visit to a supermarket will reveal both semi-processed and fully prepared dishes, ready to be popped into the microwave oven.

A reaction to the streamlined, standardized fast foods is a tendency to return to long-standing Norwegian food traditions. In rural areas, people are once again

consulting their grandmother's recipe books, and a number of national dishes such as fermented fish (*rakfisk*), sour milk cheese (*gammelost*) and salted lamb ribs (*pinnekjøtt*) have again become popular.

The new generation of creative Norwegian chefs, who are proving as talented as the other European culinary elite, focuses on what is distinctively Norwegian. Applying the very best methods of classic French cuisine, these chefs are devising innovative menus that showcase Norwegian ingredients. Some of these products are among the best in the world, and are finding their way to the kitchens of top chefs throughout the world.