

OPINION ARTICLE

Read the article and answer the questions below in your own words.

Do Swedish People Feed Their Guests?

After a Reddit post brought an unusual Swedish dining custom to light, Nordic people are trying to explain why they won't share the pickled herring.



A Swedish child sits at a dinner table while his friend and the friend's parents dine on meatballs, mashed potatoes and lingonberry sauce. The delicious aroma wafts below the child's nose, but there is no plate for him.

This setting, while quite normal in Sweden and other Nordic countries, has horrified people around the world, shocked to learn that some Swedish families do not invite their children's visiting friends to eat with them at mealtime.

Instead, when it's time to eat, a child might go home, stay in the friend's room and play or sit at the table with the family and not eat.

The custom was the subject of much conversation (and a little concern) online after a recent Reddit post circulated widely. The post asked "what is the weirdest thing you had to do at someone else's house because of their culture/religion?" and in one of the more popular replies, someone described going to their Swedish friend's house and being told to wait in a room while the family ate. "I wish my abuela were still around," Lynda Carter, the actress who played Wonder Woman, said on Twitter. "She'd be trying to airlift tamales to Sweden."

1. Why do you think some people were shocked when they found out that Swedes do not invite their guests for a meal?

2. What does Lynda mean by saying that her "abuela would be trying to airlift tamales to Sweden"?

The people of Sweden, a country UNICEF ranked as the most family friendly in 2019, were left to explain why there did not seem to be enough pickled herring to go around.

Hakan Jonsson, a food studies professor at Lund University in Sweden, said sharing food is the foundation of culture, so he understands why other people might see this custom as a “hostile” act. A few years ago, he was part of a program to discuss Swedish cultural customs with immigrants and this practice was “regularly mentioned” as being very strange.

Professor Jonsson said he had not studied the custom, and it was not one his family practiced, but he guessed it could be traced to several parts of Swedish identity.

Before advances were made in food storage, he said, Swedish people would have three to four months to harvest a year’s worth of food in the cold climate, so spontaneous dinners have never been a part of the culture. He said Swedish people also want to respect the independence of the family and offering another person’s child a meal could be seen as a critique of the other person’s ability to support a family.

“There has been a very strong urge of independence, to not rely on others’ good will for having a good and independent life,” Professor Jonsson said. “It was a very strong driver toward the welfare state, to create this impersonal assistance, where you did not have to rely on any other person.”

3. What are the explanations Professor Johnson gives to justify this “hostile Swedish custom?”

4. What does Professor Johnson imply by “strong urge of independence”

Zara Larsson, a Swedish pop star, said the custom was “peak Swedish culture,” though her family and many others she knew did not practice it.

Ms. Larsson said on Twitter that at the homes of people who did practice it, she would either be told to go home at mealtime or be left in the friend’s room, something she said was “kinda fun because that gave me time to snoop around.”

5. Why do you think Zara’s family does not put this custom into practice?

The custom is not exclusive to Sweden, though the country is incurring the bulk of the internet’s wrath. People in Finland, the Netherlands and other parts of Northern Europe said online that the practice was familiar.

“It can seem a bit stingy and very unfriendly to exclude someone if you’re eating,” she said, “but I think it is about respect for the family unit.”

Professor Holm said she had been surprised by American students who described to her how they could open the refrigerator at their friends’ houses and eat whatever they wanted.

Sofi Tegsveden Deveaux, director of LYS förlag, a publishing house in Stockholm that focuses on works related to the process of moving to Sweden, said in an email that it was not considered impolite to decline an offer in Sweden. So, children sometimes decide they don’t want to eat with their friend’s family but are still invited to the table while the family nibbles at fish fingers with rice.



When Ms. Deveaux was a child in the late 1980s and early 1990s, she said, she spent many afternoons after school at her friends’ houses and dinner was a natural moment to end playtime. As a mother now, she said she had never asked her children’s friends to wait while they have dinner, but she has asked them to leave when it’s dinnertime.

“In some cultures, food is very important,” Ms. Deveaux said. “In Swedish culture, it’s very important to respect others’ privacy and their rights to take their own decisions and do things the way they prefer.”

6. How different is Swedish mealtime custom to American according to an article?

7. Can you think of any example of your own culture that may be surprising for others?
