



FINLAND

BREAD

What is Rievä, Anyway?

Rievä is a traditional barley bread. It is the provincial bread of Pirkanmaa. Tampere was once known as “Rievä-town” for the quantity of the bread consumed there.

The word *rievä* is ancient Finnish and means fresh or unleavened. In other parts of Finland there are many similar types of barley or mixed-grain breads, known by different names. *Rievä* is not really very different from other yeasty breads; it is its role in the history of Tampere that makes it special.

“*Rievä* is a special kind of flatbread. Water and salt, barley flour and oat flour, fine wheat flour and of course yeast. Of all the everyday breads eaten in Finland, this has the most water and is the lightest and most porous.”

– Jussi Linkosuo, *rievä* baker from Tampere

Barley (*Hordeum vulgare*)

Barley is one of the oldest cultivated plants in Finland and the world. It is resistant to the cold conditions of the north. Rye overtook barley as a popular grain for bread, but barley has again become our most important crop, thanks to its role in animal fodder.

Wheat (*Triticum aestivum*)

Together with rice and corn, wheat is one of the most widely cultivated and oldest cereals in the world. Wheat is more demanding than the other grains grown in Finland. Up until the twentieth century, only limited amounts of wheat were grown here, and wheat dishes were delicacies enjoyed by a select few.

Oat (*Avena sativa*)

Oat is one of the youngest grains, even though it, too, has been cultivated for thousands of years. In Finland, oat cultivation did not become common until the 1800s. It is mainly used for animal feeds.

Rye (*Secale cereale*)

For centuries, rye was the most important and commonest grain in Finland. It was used to make Finns’ daily bread. In contrast with other grains, it is sown in autumn.

Yeast (*Saccharomyces cerevisiae*)

Yeast began to be used in baking in Finland in the eighteenth century. Before that, dough was leavened using mash from the bottom of a beer barrel. Yeast is now industrially manufactured by feeding yeast cells.

Salt (sodium chloride, NaCl)

Table salt is obtained either from seawater through evaporation, or from salt mines. Salt was once an important commodity.

Water (H₂O)

Clean water is needed in baking. Sometimes the liquid used for *rievä* is milk, buttermilk or whey from cheese making.

Bread Consumption in Finland

In the past, people in Eastern Finland favoured soft bread, while Western Finland made hard bread. In the west, households would carry out huge baking operations a couple of times a year, “filling their ceilings” with bread. The ring-shaped rye loaves were strung onto stakes and dried under the rafters. In the east, on the other hand, they would bake soft rye loaves once a week.

These traditions sprang from cultural differences. In the west, flour was ground at a mill and then baked up into dry loaves that would last, whereas in the less densely populated regions of the east, flour was made by hand, a little at a time. In the east they used the same ovens for baking and heating, whereas houses in the west had separate, large bread ovens.

On holidays and festivities, even the west would feast on fresh bread. The lighter fresh loaves were known as rievä and made a change from the rock-hard, dark daily bread.

From Rye to Rievä

Rye bread is traditional in Finland, but it is by no means the oldest bread enjoyed in the country. The first breads were flatbreads, of which the rievä is a descendant.

Simple flatbread could be made out of porridge, which had been cooked on an open fire from coarsely ground grains. The main flatbread ingredient was barley. As baking traditions developed, especially in Häme and Satakunta, dough began to be leavened and the rievä attained its well-known shape and name.

Rye bread continued as the everyday bread in most parts of Finland, except the very north, where barley grew better than rye. Rye bread required fairly advanced millstones and the skill of souring the dough.

Barley and Wheat

There is no one and only correct recipe for rievä; in the olden days, every housewife had her own method. The main body always consisted of barley flour. Originally rievä was baked completely out of barley, which made it crumbly and perishable – it would go off in just a few days. In addition to barley flour, the bread was made out of whatever happened to be at hand: whey, buttermilk, rye flour, even potato or swede.

Very little wheat was grown in nineteenth-century Finland, and it could not be ground in ordinary mills. Only industrialisation made wheat flour commonplace. Thanks to ocean liners and railways, affordable wheat could be imported from the 1880s onwards. Steam-powered mills ground the flour, which was sold by grocers in paper bags to consumers. It gradually meant the end of manual millstones and loaves hanging on stakes.

Wheat also began to be used increasingly for rievä. The addition of wheat flour made the bread less crumbly and longer-lasting. Although wheaten rievä became common, the traditional, full-barley version was still extensively baked.

Rievä Recipe from 1920s Hämeenkyrö

Heat up ten litres of milk until lukewarm. Mix with 200 grams of yeast and a handful of salt. Add approximately 12 kilograms of flour, consisting of 1 kg rye, 5 kg wheat and the rest barley.

The dough makes around 60 loaves of rievä. The dough was kneaded as little as possible. Flour was sprinkled on top of the loaves and a cross was made with the edge of the palm. This “blessed” the dough and the disappearance of the cross indicated when it was done rising. The dough was leavened either with store-bought yeast or with mash from the bottom of the beer barrel.

Rievä for Workers

Tampere became industrialised in the 1800s, and the city grew continuously. In cramped workers’ quarters there were seldom ovens suitable for baking, and long shifts at the factory wouldn’t allow for it anyway. Therefore, workers had to buy their bread.

Dried rye bread was the main staple, but for weekends, many factory workers might buy barley rievä, which was familiar to them from their home regions. They would enjoy the soft bread with coffee, sometimes spreading it with goat’s cheese.

As imported wheat became cheaper, it started to be added to rievä in the late 1800s. That allowed workers to taste a delicacy that had previously been reserved for the wealthier echelons. Wheat bread became quite a fashion. As living standards improved, rievä was no longer just for holidays; it became an everyday staple like rye bread.

Coffee and Rievä for Lunch

Before the end of the nineteenth century, rievä had become a part of factory workers’ everyday diets. They would enjoy it at breakfast, lunch and even dinner. It became so popular among women that it drew the attention of Finlayson’s factory doctor: he worried that they cared for nothing else than coffee and “Sladey’s 15” – a wheaten bread produced by Sladey’s Bakery, costing 15 pence per pound, which was dunked into coffee.

The popularity of bread was probably linked to the nature of factory work: workers could not leave their stations for long. It was easier to eat bread and sip coffee out of a bottle while standing at the machine. Rievä was said to be especially popular among unmarried factory girls. Living alone, they had no time, energy or space to cook in the shared workers’ kitchens after their long workday. Amid an everyday life symbolised by tooth-crackingly dry rye bread, fresh wheat bread was a glimpse of better living.

Places to Buy Rievä

The people of Tampere bought their bread at markets and from travelling salesmen at the turn of the twentieth century. The city’s first bakers specialised in patisserie and left bread-making to country folk. Provincial bakers travelled long distances to sell dry rye bread and fresh rievä in Tampere. Factory workers bought their rievä at market stalls, the factory canteen or, on payday, from travelling salesmen in the workers’ districts.

Market trading began in the early morning hours, so that workers could pick up their lunches before the start of the first shift. The loaves were sold without wrappers, directly off carts or stands. Ring-shaped rye loaves were tied up with string, whereas rievä was carried as it was,

under the arm or in a basket. Many people favoured specific bakers they had grown to like. Rievä was slightly more expensive than rye bread: in the early 1900s, one loaf cost 10 pence at the market. A professional labourer earned enough in one hour for three loaves.

Small bakeries were opened around the city in the late 1800s, and they took over the bread trade. Tampere's first cooperatives were established in the early twentieth century and led to rievä being sold also by grocers.

From Bakeries to Bread Factories

In the small urban bakeries, bread was made by hand and every rievä bore the mark of its maker. As the city grew and industry expanded, rievä began to be made mechanically in large central bakeries.

Work in a bakery was physically taxing. Bakers had to lift flour sacks weighing tens of kilograms, and strong arms were required to knead large doughs. Mechanisation made the work easier in many ways. Dough machines came in at the beginning of the 1900s. The bakeries' large bread ovens changed: first they were fitted with pull-out grates, and later with rotating hearths, which circulated the loaves through the oven as if on a conveyor belt.

Rievä-baking still involved handcrafting, however; the loaves were lifted aside to rise and perforated by hand. The best rievä is made from very soft dough, which is not easy to make by machine.

Dancing the Rievä Waltz

The packaging for Tampere Rievä from Linkosuo bakery was printed with the music for the "Rievä Waltz". Composed by Topi Honkonen, the piece is in the *Guinness Book of World Records* as the most extensively printed sheet music in Finland – more than 11 million copies have been printed on the bread packaging.

Greetings from Rievä-town!

Thousands of loaves of rievä are still baked daily in Tampere's bakeries and bought by households all around Pirkanmaa. In large bakeries, production is completely automated, but the bread is still made by hand by the smaller producers.

Naturally, many things have changed since the days of the cotton-factory girls; today's consumers take their rievä home from a supermarket and make their sandwiches from pre-sliced mixed loaves. Although the history of rievä is beginning to fade, it is still an essential part of the culinary tradition of Tampere.

