

# LITHUANIAN HERITAGE

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# LITHUANIAN HERITAGE

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The Aestians were our ancestral people, and even in the first century A.D., Romans were touring the area to buy our amber for dressing up their beautiful women, and also for use in their gladiator arenas.

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Dill cucumbers in a bag; cabbage made in the oven; pickled string beans à la Kėdainiai, and heavenly chocolate frosting.

Cover Credits:

FRONT COVER: Sėliai (Laima Tubelytė-Kriukelienė)

BACK COVER: Sėliai (Laima Tubelytė-Kriukelienė)

INSIDE FRONT COVER: Mt. Rushmore (Low-fat Lithuanian Memes)

INSIDE BACK COVER: Shepherds crowning cows with wreaths at Pentecost, 1935 (Balys Buračas)



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# Getting Back to Lithuania's Very Sweet Roots

by Jennifer Virškus

Sweet Root, a restaurant in the Užupis district of Vilnius, features strictly local, seasonal cuisine. But don't go to Sweet Root expecting to order a generous plate of *cepelinai* or a "new twist" on a classic recipe; their goal is to find a balance between the ingredients they use, the emotions they want to create on the plate in a particular moment, and a new aesthetic for every dish.

The restaurant was founded by brothers Sigitas and Vilnius Žemaitis along with Agnė Marcinauskaitė. They had each begun their careers in business and marketing, working in Lithuania and abroad, but soon realized the corporate life wasn't for them. They had always had an inter-

est in food and came up with the idea to open a restaurant that served fresh dishes created exclusively with ingredients indigenous to Lithuania.

The three partners, who are all in their 30s, spent their formative years in the early days post-independence, a time when culinary variety meant turning to exotic, foreign ingredients. Replacing the local staples of beetroot, apples, and cottage cheese on Lithuanian plates were passion fruit, mascarpone, and Parmigiano Reggiano.

"We've been running so fast since getting back our independence, without actually looking where we're running to, and it's the same at the table," said Sigitas. "At Sweet Root,

we believe it's already time to slow down – in all aspects of life, including our gastronomy. We really care about bringing patriotic feelings to the plate again."

They originally wanted to find a name in Lithuanian but recognized that many of their customers would be foreigners – businessmen, diplomats, and tourists – and made themselves comfortable with finding a name in English, but it had to be a name that reflected their philosophy.



Sigitas holds a bouquet of freshly harvested Swiss chard.



Sweet Root co-founders/owners Sigitas Žemaitis and Agnė Marcinauskaitė, shown foraging, were looking for a slower way of life.

"Agnė and I were sitting on a bench in a park reading magazines and saw a lovely photo of a dirty, dirty carrot. Next to it was the headline, Sweet Root. We said, 'Why not?' We have a lot of sweet roots here in Lithuania. Most of our ingredients are root based, especially in winter," explained Sigitas.

"Sweet Root also means taking a few steps back, taking a look at what dinner really means to us; what it's supposed to mean to us. It's all about the discussions we have with each other at the table, and discus-





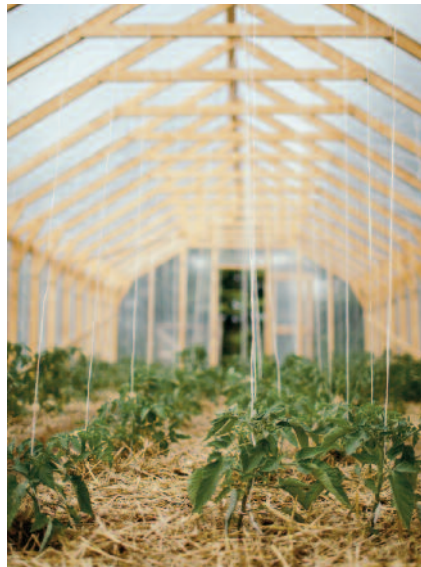
One of the summer dishes: Creamy green peas, currants, and cucumber.

sions with the food. That was our simple idea.”

Serving seasonal local cuisine is not a new idea or trend; it goes back to Alice Waters at Chez Panisse in Berkeley in the early 1970s and Carlo Petrini’s Slow Food movement founded in Italy in the 1980s; the goal was to prevent the disappearance of local food cultures and traditions in the face of globalism. At Sweet Root, they were aware of the Slow Food movement but were motivated first and foremost by creating a cuisine that would tap into Lithuanian emotions. “All of those ideas came naturally, and what we’re trying to do is present the way we live our lives, in and out of the restaurant,” said Sigitas.

Chef Justinas Misius has been with the restaurant from the beginning. Justinas first got interested in cooking at the age of 15 when his mother opened a tiny canteen in his hometown. He later graduated from culinary school and attended several international competitions, but had never worked in a restaurant with such strong ideas of locality, seasonality, and sustainability before he joined the Sweet Root team.

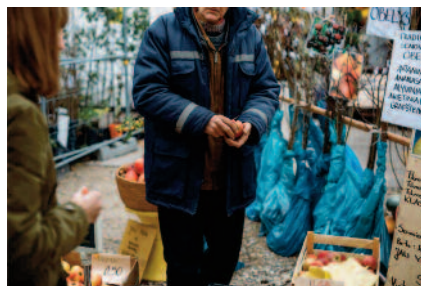
“When you work only with local products, every year you have to be more and more creative. New textures and techniques can transform a dish in an unexpected way, and that helps us to create new dishes,” said Justinas.



In their first year, many dishes at Sweet Root were created using vegetables from the family garden. The next year they thought, why don’t we have our own garden and greenhouse?

In the beginning, he created new dishes by finding ingredients with similar flavors. Now he chooses a primary ingredient and experiments with flavor, texture, and form, and then works with the small details. The final dish is created once he puts all the pieces together, and they are as visually stimulating as they are flavorful. There are rectangles, cubes, cylinders, and squares; dollops, dashes, and splashes of sauce in every color on the spectrum. “Flavor is more important than form, but the complete dish must have both,” he said.

The restaurant opened in July 2014. It was difficult at first to find enough products to buy exclusively



Agnė (left) combs the Vilnius markets talking to the stall owners to determine where their produce and products come from.

from small artisan producers, and they had to rely in part on large importers. That summer, they often visited Agnė’s parents who had a little garden and a greenhouse. They began to take some of the surplus from that garden back to the restaurant. Over the winter they decided to build another greenhouse and add a second garden to grow the vegetables, fruits, and berries they wanted to use in the restaurant, and the Sweet Root Garden was born.

Agnė spends most of her time seeking out new ingredients and suppliers. She combs the farmer’s market, speaking with the men and women behind each vegetable, grain, or honey stand to determine where and how they produced their products. She is most interested in finding ingredients they haven’t used before, ingredients that may have dropped from mainstream consciousness, for example, the sea buckthorn.



Sea buckthorn is a current favorite ingredient at Sweet Root.

Their producers today come from all walks of life. Some of them have left the city seeking a quieter way of living, while others work farms or mills that have been in the family for generations. Last fall, she discovered a tiny farm run by a young couple growing sea buckthorn, a bright orange berry that grows on a low shrub that is most often used to make pies, teas, wines, or liquors.

They get their cheese from Giedrius and Birutė Prapakavičiai in Molėtai, who left Vilnius some 20



Goat cheese from Ekologinis Giedraius Prakupavičiaus ūkis and bread made with grains from Šlyninkos Vandens Malūnas.

years ago to raise goats and sheep with a focus on natural farming. Their wheat and rye flour come from the Šlyninkos Water Mill in Zarasai, which has been run by the same family for several generations.

Sweet Root menus are created not just seasonally, but micro-seasonally, and they are a collaboration between Sigitas, Agnė, and Justinas. “We spent the first two years trying to figure out what ingredients we would have each month, and how long their season would last. Agnė contributes by finding new ingredients, and I am trying to get to the emotional side of the plate – thinking about what that means, how Lithuanians like to put things together – and Justinas has an incredible ability to gather all the ideas we have and to present them on the plate,” said Sigitas.

So what are the ingredients they use? Rowan berries, evening primrose, wood sorrel, black currant, wild thyme, spruce tips, fava beans, and even garfish. “We put the garfish in a green juice made from cucumber so that it looked like the green Baltic Sea. Two years



At Sweet Root, chef Justinas Misius says Lithuanian summer soup doesn't necessarily have to be pink. Served on a plate, this soup is a tribute to the freshness of cucumber and the fragrant aroma of dill.

ago, we used the leaves of the wild evening primrose with some cold tongue, horseradish, and sour cream. It's always a discovery, and we're always discovering so many wonderful things,” he said.

Every season is different, and some are easier than others to create new dishes. February and March are the most difficult months; everyone is waiting for spring, for something fresh. When they find a new ingredient in those late winter days, it's pure joy, like when they began to harvest maple sap. By contrast, in early summer, the flavors and colors are nearly overwhelming. “You can't appreciate every single ingredient in summer because you have so many,” said Sigitas. “The most exciting season is early summer when everything is about the color green – the new leaves, herbs, plants, flavors, and aromas in the air.”

Moving into their third year, their goal is to visit each producer they work with, and spend time with them and to get to know them. They want to spend more time exploring the emotional side of their cuisine and put more focus into sustainabil-



Chef Justinas Misius has a knack for taking all of their ideas and transforming them into something wonderful on the plate.

ity in a way that supports local ingredients and their producers. “We want to make Sweet Root a better place, a more true place, and to focus on the quality of every single detail,” said Sigitas.

This summer, they will publish a book, “Proud of Lithuania: A Fairytale by Sweet Root.” Written by Algė Ramanauskienė with photographs by Šarūnė Kajietė, the book tells the stories of their favorite ingredients and many of the many artisan producers they work with. Through this fairytale, Sweet Root seeks to rediscover where their roots grow, both physically and philosophically.

While there are a handful of other restaurants serving dishes made exclusively of native ingredients, local, seasonal cuisine is still more of a trend than a way of life in Lithuania; however, Sigitas is optimistic that slowly the trend is making its way back into the average home. As for Sweet Root, the future, he says, is bright – bright green.

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