



A TASTE OF SWEDEN IN EDINBURGH, SCOTLAND

We had arrived at Akva, at 129 Fountainbridge in Edinburgh. The sign outside read “Swedish café, bar & venue,” which pretty much summed it up (except that it didn’t mention a two-tiered restaurant and a beer garden).

We met with the cafe’s owner, Anna Christopherson. Her big welcoming smile was infectious. Busy as she is — she and her husband Mike own five other bars and cafés in Edinburgh — she appeared wonderfully relaxed.

We sat down, chatted for an hour or more, and enjoyed some excellent food and drink. Asked about what prompted her and Mike to go to Scotland in the first place, Anna told us they had been keen on leaving Stockholm for a while. They had looked at a few places, and on a whim flew over to Edinburgh for a week. As she put it, Edinburgh won their heart: The people seemed so friendly and less stressed than in other cities. That was back in 2004.

That same year they found a shabby old pub on Leith Walk and turned it into a cozy bar, featuring comfortable sofas, old-fashioned lamps, and the kind of floral wallpaper typical of Swedish homes back in the 1950s. Called Boda Bar, it became an instant success and was followed by several others, a couple of which served food with a Swedish twist.

And now there’s Akva, supposedly named for the nearby Union Canal, but more likely because of its obvious connection to the word “aquavit.”

“So which are your favored aquavits?” I asked.

“Skåne, Linie, O.P. Andersson and Jubileum.” Her answer came without hesitation and sounded good to me.

I wondered aloud about how Scots react to things Swedish, and Anna smiled and said, “Oh, they love everything Scandinavian. You can almost convince them to do anything as long as you say it’s Swedish.” As an example, she cited a Viking Pub Crawl, where participants had to create a beard from wool and paint a shield on old cardboard. And in celebrating Swedish holidays, there’s hardly any length to which Akva won’t go. At Midsummer, the beer garden would have its own Maypole. Much attention is given to “krans”(wreath)-making. And all the usual songs are sung, including “Räven raskar över isen” and “Små grodorna.”

Other events include special crayfish nights, a gingerbread house competition, Lucia of course, and even a Kladdkaka day.

We asked about the Swedish food served in the restaurant, and Anna immediately rattled off a list of things, such as meatballs, herring (specifically “citronsill” (lemon herring)), cinnamon buns and kladdkaka.

At this point, our “starter” was served. Consisting of crisp bread loaded with smoked salmon and hardboiled eggs, and accompanied by a light salad,



it proved quite delicious.

While waiting for the main meal, a Smörgåsbord Sharing Platter, I did a little tour of the restaurant.

Since this was right between lunch and dinnertime, there was just a sprinkling of guests, all of whom seemed to be enjoying themselves. The place struck me as utterly friendly and very relaxed. Then I discovered a kid’s corner with a selection of toys and a small library.

Bringing it to Anna’s attention, she told that when she and Mike announced that Akva would welcome children, their liquor license was rejected. (Edinburgh has strict liquor laws against children under 18). Fortunately, they invited the committee to inspect the place, and the ruling was reversed.

The sharing platter turned out to be a sumptuous array of, among other things, smoked trout and mackerel, gravlax, pastrami, cream cheese and plenty of crusty bread.

Satisfied and quite satiated after our meal, we indulged in yet another treat: a platter of the sticky Swedish chocolate cake known as kladdkaka.

How Swedish can you get? And in Scotland of all places.

*Text & Photos: Bo Zaunders
For more info, see www.bodabar.com/akva*