

# CERVISIA FENNICA

PERINTEISEN OLUEN SEURA • FINNISH SOCIETY FOR TRADITIONAL BEERS

SPECIAL PUBLICATIONS No. 1

## FINLAND'S INDIGENOUS BEER CULTURE

PETER OVELL

HELSINKI • 1996



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*Cervisia Fennica* is a series of special publications produced by Perinteisen Oluen Seura – Finnish Society for Traditional Beers ry. The series is specially for papers on beer culture and related matters. The geographical emphasis of *Cervisia Fennica* is on Fennoscandia, but papers dealing with other regions will also be considered. The publishing language will mainly be English.

Perinteisen Oluen Seura – Finnish Society for Traditional Beers ry was founded in 1990 to advance Finnish beer culture by encouraging the supply of different kinds of beers (including those brewed in Finland) to pubs, restaurants and retail shops. The goal of the Society is to increase the availability of traditional beers with a characteristic flavour in comparison to the international brands.

Perinteisen Oluen Seura – Finnish Society for Traditional Beers ry is a founding member of finnlubs, the Finnish League of Independent Beer Societies. finnlubs has been a member of ebcu, the European Beer Consumers Union, since 1993.

#### About the author

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# Abstract

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This paper is the first in the *Cervisia Fennica* series published by the Finnish Society for Traditional Beers (*Perinteisen Oluen Seura*). Under the title 'Finland's Indigenous Beer Culture' the paper seeks primarily to cover the history, traditions and brewing practices associated with Finland's traditional and ancient rustic beer style, sahti. Sahti is an unfiltered (in the modern sense), strong, ale-like beer made from the highest quality ingredients. It usually features a proportion of rye malt and a noticeable juniper character. A summary is also given of the related beverages, mostly milder brews based on rye meal as the principal ingredient. Sahti brewing, mainly as a celebratory drink for special occasions, has been carried out in Finland probably since as early as the 12th century, and possibly even earlier. The sahti tradition has predominated in southern and western Finland, while in the later-settled eastern and northern parts of the country it has generally either been absent or has survived in a modified form. The main area in which the sahti tradition survives today is illustrated. Recent developments in legislation are also described, as these have led to a revival of interest in sahti - both in terms of the commercial production of sahti and sahti wort and a growing interest in this ancient beer style in Finland and abroad. It is in this spirit that the present publication has been produced. Acknowledgement is gratefully given to the published work of Finnish sahti experts, whose names are referred to in the text. This paper is largely based on their research.

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## 1. Introduction

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Apart from Denmark's giant Carlsberg brewery, the Nordic countries are not known for their tradition of brewing beer. Instead, they have a reputation for distilling spirits and for imposing restrictive measures on the production and consumption of alcoholic beverages of all kinds. Moreover, the visitor might be excused for thinking that the ubiquitous bottom-fermenting lager beer represents the true Nordic beer tradition. While this might be said of Denmark, the indigenous beer culture of Finland is rather different: Finnish lagers represent a commercially produced style imported from central Europe in the 19th century and consumed widely only this century. Finnish 'sahti', on the other hand, represents the authentic Finnish tradition of brewing beer. It is a strong, unfiltered, rustic brew, typically home made, with a pedigree acknowledged by the world's top beer writers. Indeed, "the only 'primitive' beer to survive in Western Europe is the sahti of Finland" (Jackson 1988: 103). Sahti has also been placed in the company of two other ancient beers, the Belgian lambic style and Russia's kvass.

In this paper, the history and cultural tradition of sahti will be explored and its contribution to Finnish, Nordic and world beer culture emphasized. After examining first the origins of sahti and the general

background to its development, a fuller account is given of its cultural context. This includes the role of sahti in Finnish rural life, the tradition of making sahti as a special drink for celebratory occasions, the regional variations in the sahti tradition and the relative roles played by other traditional fermented beverages made from cereals. Sahti is considered to be the last surviving representative of a beer culture once common in the eastern Baltic region. Its recent revival following legislation that permits it to be produced and sold commercially is also discussed.

## 2. History

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Finland's national epic poem, the *Kalevala*, takes some 400 lines to cover the 'invention' of beer. This, at least, tells us that Finns have had some kind of indigenous beer culture for several hundred years, and possibly much longer. Indeed, through folklore traditions, archaeological finds and so on, the roots of Scandinavian beer culture have been traced back at least to the Viking Age (9th – 11th centuries). For example, Asplund (p. 25) notes that sahti barrels were found in the 1930s on a sunken Viking wreck off Norway. The design of the barrels was dated to the 9th century, when sahti may have been popularised in Finland and, to an extent, in parts of Sweden and Norway. Furthermore, Räsänen (1977: 70) reports that archaeological evidence shows that

grain was already being malted in the Åland Islands around the late 10th century. It is possible that beer made at that time may not have included any rye, as the earliest evidence of rye cultivation in Finland points to the 12th century.

The probable origin of the term 'sahti' has been traced by linguists to the early German word *saf*, later *safft* ('fruit juice'), suggesting the word has its roots from as early as about 1000–500 bc, when the southern Finnish coastal areas were settled by Germanic tribes. Of course, this does not mean that sahti was being made in those times, but rather the word was adopted at some later stage as an appropriate name for 'the juice of the barley'. The true origin of the word sahti, however, is not known with any certainty.

Although there is no archaeological or written evidence to prove it, some kind of basic beer-making skills may even have been brought by the earliest Finns who, it seems, arrived from the east, probably from the area between the Volga and the Urals. They first cultivated the land in around 1500 bc Räsänen (pp. 149–151) notes that the techniques and equipment familiar to us today in making sahti were generally not widely known in Finland until after the 12th and 13th centuries, when the knowledge gradually spread from Germany to Sweden and then to Finland. The earliest known written references specifically to beer date back to 1366, when it was noted that much beer

(sahti) was consumed on the occasion of the burial of Bishop Hemminki, and in the same year it was also reported that Bishop Torsten of Viipuri bequeathed a barrel of beer to a school in Turku. It is also of interest that later, in 1551, Agricola's *Psalttari* contained a list of the Finns' pagan gods, among whom was listed Pekko, God of Beer and guardian of the harvest.

The earliest known detailed account given of sahti brewing is the doctoral dissertation of Carl Hellenius, written in 1780 at the Åbo Academy on the subject of Finland's peasant brewing practices. Sahti also figured prominently in the doctoral dissertation of Michael Ticcander in 1792. Writing about the parish of Sysmä, he noted that its sahti was made using methods peculiar to that locality and was then stored in cool stone cellars, allowing it to keep for extended periods.

Jackson (pp. 7, 18) reminds us that the history of beer itself may even extend as far back as 10,000 years ago, and there is specific evidence of a fermented grain beverage having been drunk in Mesopotamia around 4000 bc, and later in Ancient Egypt. There is also evidence suggesting a fermented beverage of barley and oats being drunk as far north as the Hebrides in about 2000 bc. While other cereals have been used as supplements to barley, none have proved as suitable for use as the principal raw material in brewing beer. Hops, on the other hand, are a relative newcom-

er: as the main 'spice' in beer, the hop replaced herbs and berries across Europe only as recently as the 17th century.

In the Nordic countries it is probable that rye and oats were used to supplement barley for making early beerlike beverages, and juniper, bog myrtle and other plants such as Labrador tea, yarrow and caraway, even laurel leaves, were used in place of or alongside the hop. Occasionally, as was common elsewhere, local variations would arise, such as the popular addition of fresh raspberries in the Tammissaari area of southern Finland in the 18th century noted by Asplund (p. 25).

In spite of the harsh northern climate and short growing season, Finns did nevertheless also gain experience in cultivating their own hops. The use of hops spread to the Nordic countries as early as the 12th century (see Talve 1973: 98), although the earliest evidence of hop cultivation in Finland, in the Åland Islands, is from the 14th century. Thereafter, hops became widely used to impart flavour and preservative qualities to sahti, following the example of foreign beer makers. Its use became so widespread that by the 18th century hop bines were fairly common in Finland, assisted in 1734 by measures which sought to promote hop growing, though by the present century they had been replaced with imported higher-quality hops.

The indigenous Finnish sahti, however, has always featured juni-

per alongside the hop, the latter playing a relatively minor role. Juniper has also been used in brewing beer in Sweden and Norway, although a widespread brewing tradition akin to Finland's sahti never really developed in either country; in any event, it is the juniper berry that has generally been used in Norway and Sweden, in contrast to the Finnish tradition of using juniper twigs and branches, albeit with berries attached when in season.

As Räsänen (pp. 5, 30) explains, the tradition of brewing sahti became established over many centuries of unrestricted home-brewing rights; the rights of Finnish town-folk to brew beer were restricted for only a short time in the 17th century and the rights of country folk (the vast majority of the population) to brew for their own needs remained completely unrestricted, that is until the prohibition years of 1919–1932, which affected everyone alike. By contrast, many countries in central and eastern Europe (e.g. Lithuania and Poland) imposed severe restrictions on brewing rights outside towns, resulting not only in a diminished brewing tradition but also the growth of town-based breweries.

Sahti brewing was thus permitted to flourish in the Finnish countryside, helped by the fact that barley and rye could be cultivated successfully, at least in the southern and central areas of the country. Finnish sahti was even exported abroad, for example to Uppsala in Sweden in the 16th century and also

as far afield as Germany. Sahti taverns also became an accepted (or perhaps tolerated) institution in society during the 17th and 18th centuries. As Asplund (p. 25) points out, taverns were often run by clergymen, one such being a priest named Pauli who kept a tavern in Iitti during the 18th century.

In the 16th century, the practice of distilling spirits began to spread rapidly throughout Finland, having been introduced via trading links abroad and later through military escapades in Russia. Its impact on barley stocks and the general increase in drunkenness led to the imposition of restrictions on home distilling, as Mäntylä (1985) describes at length. These restrictive measures were introduced intermittently throughout the 18th century and again at the end of the 19th century when opposition to the abuse of cheap spirits became the driving force behind the rise of the Finnish temperance and workers' movements. This eventually led to the imposition of more draconian measures in the form of complete prohibition on the production, sale and consumption of alcohol, which lasted from 1919 until 1932 and applied to sahti as much as any other alcoholic beverage.

Prior to prohibition, however, the lack of any major restrictions on the brewing of sahti (presumably seen as 'the lesser evil'), as noted above, coupled with comparatively late urbanisation in Finland, meant that the country's beer culture, based essentially on home brewing

in the countryside, was able to keep its traditions alive into the 20th century. This has continued in recent decades too, in spite of the period of prohibition and the rise of large-scale commercial beer production.

### 3. Tradition

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Before the arrival in Finland of large-scale commercial brewing (beginning with the establishment of the Sinebrychoff brewery in Helsinki in 1819), the word *olut* ('beer') was often used instead of sahti to refer to top quality home-made beer, the beer for celebratory occasions. There were also other, older alternatives for the same word, such as *olvi* or those mentioned in Canander's dictionary of 1786, namely *olu* and *olonen* (see Räsänen p. 55). Sahti, on the other hand, was widely used as the generic name for any beer, no matter what its quality or purpose, although it was frequently associated with drinks inferior to *olut*. Only this century has the word sahti come to widely replace *olut* as the generally accepted term for the traditionally home-brewed top quality beer; *olut* instead became the general term for beer that is commercially mass-produced, which is quite different to sahti. In this paper the term sahti will be used throughout as it has been this century to refer to top quality home-made beer, unless specifically stated otherwise.

It should also be mentioned here that *kalja*, traditionally a rye-based beer relatively low in alcohol (see later), is now also commonly used as a colloquial name for *olut*. Moreover, to add further confusion to the uninitiated, *kotikalja* (literally 'home kalja') is a non-alcoholic (or low-alcoholic) version of the traditional *kalja* (see section 5 of this paper).

Although *sahti* has always been made in more-or-less the same way and in similar rural home circumstances, there was a considerable degree of local variation from one parish to the next, especially in the details of ingredients, method and equipment. Perhaps the most significant variation is that eastern and northern Finland have no major tradition of brewing *sahti* (see later).

As Räsänen explains in his very comprehensive study of Finnish beer culture, *sahti* has traditionally been a drink to be consumed in company on celebratory occasions: public festivities, such as Christmas, Easter, Whitsun, Midsummer's Eve and harvest time, family occasions, such as weddings, funerals, christenings, birthdays and name days, and other occasions, such as parish meetings for religious instruction (*lukukinkerit*), feasts after elk-hunting (*hirvenpeijaiset*) and days when all folk in a village would assemble to carry out some tasks together (*talkoot*), such as cleaning or repairing. The purpose of serving *sahti* at these gatherings was, of course, to toast and

celebrate the occasion, but also to encourage singing and the recital of folk poetry.

*Sahti*, then, was always the best beer, taking longer to make and using superior methods and ingredients compared to the other barley and rye-based fermented beverages. The latter, made more quickly and from inferior ingredients, were not generally reserved for special occasions but were instead the everyday beverages to accompany food, especially in autumn and winter when milk yields were down, or to be consumed as thirst quenchers after a day's work.

Although today the *sahti* tradition is generally identified approximately with the Häme and Satakunta regions in southern and southwestern Finland (see Figure 1), it was formerly much more widespread. The area in which *sahti* formed a key element in cultural traditions covered the part of Finland which lies west of a line drawn between approximately Kotka, on the south coast near the Russian border, to Oulu, on the northern Ostrobothnian coast (see Figure 1). This division between western and eastern cultural traditions is reflected in many other cultural spheres as well (e.g. cuisine, religion, dialects) and results from the historical pattern of settlement, having spread from south-west to north-east, such that a majority of eastern and northern Finland was not settled and farmed or its forests cut before the 15th century. This is the most usual explanation for the fact that eastern

Finland exhibits many cultural traits in common with Russian Karelia and that western Finnish cultural practices (including sahti brewing) became adopted much later, if at all, and often in a modified or simplified form.

The southern and western part of Finland contains the majority of the population and has the richest history. It is in this area that sahti brewing was widespread. The northern and eastern 'periphery' was not only an area unsuitable for cultivating barley but also an area in which there were fewer festivities and celebrations for which special beers could be brewed. However, the traditions of the extreme south-eastern areas were somewhat more extensive. It is also significant that in eastern Finland brewing was more often carried out by men, whereas in the west brewing was apparently much more the preserve of women (see Räsänen p. 29).

## 4. Making sahti

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The basic raw ingredient for sahti is malted barley. A proportion of malted rye is typically added, though in some areas (e.g. in the Sysmä district) malted oats or even a proportion of unmalted cereals is added instead; sugar is not needed, in contrast to modern methods of making home-brewed beer (generally made from malt extract instead of real malt, and with the addition of sugar). While nowadays sahti malt is made commercially, malting

(i.e. germination, drying and roasting of the grain) was traditionally carried out by steeping sackfuls of grain in a nearby lake or stream (or even in the large wooden *kuurna* trough described later); after sufficient germination had occurred, it would be dried and roasted in a purpose-built 'malt sauna' or on special malting trays placed in a traditional smoke sauna (juniper or alder were sometimes burnt in the sauna stove to add their aroma to the malt — see Asplund p. 58). The year's supply would be malted after the harvest, during which time the malt sauna would have been a popular meeting place.

The malt would then be crushed by hand or with a stone grinder before the mashing process could begin. Nowadays, of course, the sahti malt is normally supplied ready for mashing. Mashing involves mixing the crushed malt in several stages with increasingly hotter amounts of water in an open wooden mash tun (*mäskisaavi* or *titiinu*, but note that, as with all the items of equipment, many other local names were also used, and today many of the items are of plastic or metal) and leaving the mixture for several hours so that the malt sugars slowly infuse into the water. The final stage of mashing usually involves bringing the mash mixture to a boil. This requires either applying direct heat underneath the vessel or, as was traditional in some areas, inserting red hot stones fired in the sauna, occasionally after first burn-

ing sugar or rye on the surface of the stones.

While no longer carried out, the practice of inserting hot stones is an ancient tradition also once practised in the Baltic states and in Germany. In Finland, it was largely practised in the sahti heartland areas, mainly in Satakunta, Häme and northern Uusimaa. It was still practised in Päijänne and Uusimaa at the turn of the century. It should be noted here that there were (and are) considerable variations across the country in terms of the detail of the brewing procedure followed. These are illustrated in the maps and diagrams appended to Räsänen's (1977) work.

The sweet liquid or wort resulting from the mashing process is then filtered before eventual fermentation. Filtering the wort involves a traditional process characteristic to sahti and considered unique in the modern beer world. The wort is filtered in a long wooden trough or *kuurna* (also known e.g. as a *kuurina*, *kynä* or *rusta*), about two metres long and up to half a metre wide and deep, with a bunghole at one end. The filtered wort (known in Finnish as *vierre*) is run out through the bunghole directly into a large wooden receiving vessel or initially into a pail. The trough, which was traditionally carved from a single piece of wood (often aspen), is first cleaned with hot water which has been boiled with juniper branches, which act as a natural disinfectant (the other brewing vessels and implements are

also disinfected in this manner). The base of the trough is lined with a lattice formed of small pieces of wood (or, today, sometimes plastic netting), on top of which is placed a bed of fresh straw and then juniper twigs and branches. The entire mash mixture (the mashed grains and the liquid) is then ladled out with a special scoop onto the filter bed so that the wort filters steadily through to the base of the trough. The bung is then released and the wort runs out into the pail. Sometimes the first pailful is re-filtered.

After all the mash has been transferred and the wort filtered, the spent grains are usually given a final wash through (before being used e.g. as animal feed) to extract the last remaining fermentable sugars. In this case, the resulting thin wort (*jälkijuoma*) is usually set aside for making a separate and smaller lower-quality, lower-strength brew, sometimes destined to become so-called 'women's sahti', and sometimes with the addition of sugar to become a quick-fermenting, coarse beer substitute.

While sahti was traditionally brewed to have a full taste and character and to be strong in alcohol (the malt used to produce one litre is approximately double the amount used in a modern commercial lager brewery), it was also common to make a partially-fermented batch better suited to women folk. This, too, was called 'women's sahti', as was the drink made from unfermented wort or wort that had been inadvertently left to cool too much

so that fermentation had come to an end. This is now less common, as women generally drink the same sahti that men do, but the tradition is preserved strongly in the Heinola and Hollola areas and eastern Häme, as noted in Appendix 1 of the Sahtityöryhmä report (1988). In some localities women were not offered any sahti at all, however. Asplund (p. 81) reports that this was the case in Satakunta on certain feasts, when it was only men who consumed sahti.

Alternatives to the *kuurna* trough are also used for the filtering process, notably an upright three-legged tub (*kimpipunkka*) with a bunghole or tap in the underside or lower section. This was particularly common in the Åland Islands and southwestern parts of the mainland, and also in eastern Finland. The trough was dominant elsewhere though, in the major sahti-brewing areas.

The use of small juniper branches in the filter bed of the trough is essential to the unique aroma and flavour of sahti. An additional flavour is imparted when berry-bearing (in late summer) juniper branches are used. The juniper water (*katajavari*) boiled for the disinfecting process is often used to top up the volume of filtered wort (rarely this would be water boiled only with juniper berries, or simply just boiled water), in order to add flavour and to reduce the strength of the resulting brew to about 6% – 10% abv (alcohol by volume). Of course the reverse was occasionally

necessary if the filtered wort was considered too thin, i.e. the wort could be boiled to reduce its water content and thereby raise its strength (e.g. for the strong *tupulisahti* sometimes made in the Sysmä area, as reported in Asplund p. 93).

The fermentation of sahti is achieved by the addition of a yeast solution (activated first in a small sample of wort) once the wort has cooled down after filtration. Note that in contrast to modern brewing methods the wort is normally not boiled (with hops) before fermentation. The yeast turns, of course the sugars in the wort into alcohol and carbon dioxide. The yeast was typically recycled from one brew to the next, being skimmed from the top of the previous brew or removed from the bottom of the barrel. It was then mixed for example with hop cones, barley husks or oatmeal and dried (see Asplund p. 101). The skimmed yeast was a top-fermenting variety, while that taken from the barrel was bottom-fermenting. The bottom-fermenting variety was more suitable for the slow, cool 'secondary' fermentation, though the difficulty of cooling sahti in summertime meant that top-fermenting yeasts were commonly used, as they work at higher temperatures. Sometimes, however, the two yeasts were used together. The commercially produced baker's yeast typically used today encourages a fairly vigorous primary fermentation before the cool storage recommended for the secondary

fermentation stage. Historically, the first yeasts used were said to have originated from pigs' saliva (see Räsänen p. 90).

The addition of yeast is usually accompanied by a small quantity of fresh, dried or boiled hops (or occasionally water in which hops have been boiled). In some localities the hops were (and are) instead added at the filtering stage, being placed on the filter bed of the trough, alongside the juniper branches.

After the initial or primary fermentation activity is complete (i.e. after about two or three days), the hops are strained out and the sahti is transferred via a funnel into a wooden barrel for cool storage and slow secondary fermentation. Barrels varied in size (50–200 litres) and design, with the more unusual upright barrel being common in the Karelia area. The secondary fermentation takes place in a cool location such as a cellar or, in winter, in a room not likely to freeze, and lasts a week or perhaps two. Warmer fermentation would produce drinkable sahti more quickly, but at some cost to its flavour.

After fermentation is complete, the barrel is tapped and the sahti enjoyed by all, often by imbibing in turn from a traditional two-handed wooden (e.g. juniper) mug or *haarikka*. Sahti is and was very susceptible to spoilage (due to low hop content and the absence of pasteurization), and so the practice was to consume the entire brew during the course of the event for which it

was prepared. This is also the main reason why there is no major tradition of bottling sahti for sale or storage.

Owing to sahti being an integral part of local cultural tradition, it has been given a great many local and pet names. These include *soiro*, *sojo*, *pellonpiimä*, *pellonmaito*, *tupuli* and *vaarinkalja*.

## 5. Related beverages

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While the malt sugars for making sahti are obtained by mashing malted grain, the principal alternative method in Finland for making milder beerlike beverages has been traditionally quite different, though it also has a history extending back to at least the late 9th century (Räsänen p. 43). The main raw ingredient for such beverages is not malted barley but rye meal. This rye-based beer, usually lower in alcohol than sahti (often very much lower, as it commonly is today), was made in western Finland in the same manner as sahti, though as a quicker, weaker beverage for everyday consumption. However, it was particularly popular in eastern parts of Finland (also in the eastern Baltic region and parts of eastern Europe), where there was no significant sahti tradition. Somewhat confusingly though, the term sahti was used in some localities when referring to this type of beverage, even when it was not intended as a

high-quality brew. The extent to which this tradition of making everyday, milder rye-meal-based beers is still practised is unclear.

The fermentable sugars for these rye-based beers are obtained by mixing the rye meal (often with an amount of malted barley or malted rye, the proportion typically being higher the further west in Finland the beverage was made) with water in a pot and then leaving the porridgelike mixture to simmer on a stove or in an oven. The subsequent stages in making this beerlike beverage known generically as *kalja* varied (and perhaps still vary) considerably, although generally, and in contrast to sahti, none of the methods include filtration or the addition of hops or juniper, and all produce a beer milder and of lower quality than sahti. Räsänen (p. 37) classifies three different categories.

The first involves transferring the simmered mixture from the stove straight into a barrel and then adding a yeast solution to it after it has cooled to an appropriate temperature. Variations on this method include: beginning the fermentation in a separate vessel before barreling (sometimes without simmering on the stove, e.g. in southern Ostrobothnia); leaving the mixture to settle on the stove before transferring only the liquid part of it to the barrel (chiefly in western Finland); omitting the yeast and thereby allowing a natural souring to occur; and adding pieces of sour black bread as a yeast substitute in order to trigger a light fermentation.

This form of beer was made quite widely, although in western more than in eastern Finland. It was brewed to a low strength as an everyday thirst quencher rather than for celebratory occasions, or otherwise as a quick substitute for sahti in emergencies.

The other two categories of *kalja* are both associated chiefly with the eastern Finnish tradition and were very characteristic of that part of the country. They both involve simmering the rye meal mixture in an oven. In the first of these methods the porridgelike mixture thickens and browns, more water is added and the mixture then barrelled and yeast (or pieces of sour bread) added. The second method was very characteristic to Finnish and Russian Karelia, though it had a counterpart in Sumerian and Ancient Egyptian beer making and was also used in parts of Germany in the late 19th century (see Räsänen pp. 43, 157).

This second method involves the following stages: cooking the rye meal mixture (to which potatoes were sometimes added if rye meal was in short supply) in an oven until very thick; making it into a dough and baking it; placing the loaf (*möykky* or *taarileipä*) on a bed of straw (juniper or hops rarely added) in a large wooden tub; and adding water and leaving it aside for a few days, during which the 'bread' imparts its flavours and colour and generates a light fermentation (yeast was not generally used).

Although these were principally everyday beverages, they were made for celebratory occasions as well, when they would be fermented longer and more vigorously, usually by adding yeast.

*Kalja* was often known by other names, such as *vaassa* (from Russian *kvass*) or, in Karelia, *taari*, particularly for the version in which the raw ingredients are baked into a loaf. It was also sometimes called *sahti*. *Kalja* was also the name sometimes given to the weak, inferior quality beer made from the final filterings of the spent grains in *sahti* brewing. In eastern Finland these spent grains or meal would sometimes be stored until they began to turn sour, at which time water would be added and the dubious result drunk after a couple of days — this was known as *rap-ataari*.

Other traditional mild alcoholic beverages in Finland include birch sap beer (*mahlakalja*) and juniper berry beer (*katajanmarjolut*). The birch sap beer, as Räsänen explains (p. 140), was popular in, for example, Swedish-speaking communities on the southwest coast and was made by taking fresh sap (also drunk by itself, e.g. in eastern Finland) in the spring and either adding it to ready-fermented *kalja* or otherwise mixing it with flour and then fermenting it. Juniper berry beer goes further than just using the berries for flavour and in fact uses berries as a raw ingredient. The berries ripened in autumn, when they would be picked,

pressed, mixed with water (and possibly malt) and fermented. This beverage was traditionally made in the Karelia area and in the southwestern Turku archipelago.

*Metu* was yet another type of alcoholic beverage, a kind of mead made of honey and water. The modern drink *sima* (a springtime, sugar-based fermented beverage) originally meant the same as *metu*. There was also a beerlike drink in southwestern Finland known as *lutura*. In 1732 Carl von Linné encountered it in the Turku area, describing it as thick and almost the colour of milk. In addition, Talve (1973: 99) reports that a type of beer was once made from turnips in Karelia.

## 6. Sahti today

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The areas in which *sahti* survives as an essential part of the local culture are in the region earlier referred to as the heartland of *sahti*, namely in Satakunta, Pirkanmaa and the Kanta-Häme and Päijät-Häme districts (shaded in Figure 1). As indicated in the maps contained in the appendix to the Sahtityöryhmä report (1988) and in Asplund (p. 156), these districts are surrounded by a number of other municipalities in which the *sahti* tradition is somewhat weaker. Interestingly, Suuronen (1983: 330) employs a rather stricter view of the number of municipalities in which the *sahti* tradition is strongly upheld, naming only 9 municipalities (as opposed to 29

in Asplund): Sysmä, Asikkala, Lammi, Joutsa, Pertunmaa, Hartola, Hollola and Padasjoki in the Häme region, and only Ikaalinen in the Satakunta region.

Although by its history and its nature the sahti tradition is concentrated in the countryside, the principal sahti-brewing areas also include several major towns, such as Lahti, Heinola, Hämeenlinna and Tampere. It is reported (Sahtityöryhmä Appendix 1) that sahti is consumed widely in these urban areas, though it is generally either obtained from sahti master-brewers in the countryside or is made from purchased wort (see below). However, both in town and country it is still made above all for home use, and particularly for festive occasions and family celebrations. It is estimated that in the heartland areas sahti is drunk, even today, in as many as four households out of five (though perhaps only on infrequent occasions), and it is thought to be made in every second to tenth household.

Sahti brewing in the above-mentioned areas, however, is no longer quite the same as in times gone by: malt saunas have disappeared and been replaced by commercial maltings; many of the old wooden vessels and troughs have decayed and been replaced by plastic or metal equivalents (of course improving hygiene and reducing infections); cool storage cellars have either been replaced by refrigerators (but often too cold for secondary fermentation) or by proper cooling equipment; people no long-

er have time to spend making sahti, or are perhaps too lazy when faced with the alternative of purchasing it; and local community spirit may have dwindled and common festivities become fewer. The long-term impact of all these changes is a reduction in the number and an ageing of practising sahti masters. Such masters are in high demand, and might typically be paid to brew, say, 1000 litres of sahti at a strength of about 5% abv for a wedding party of 200 guests.

Regarding the recent proliferation of commercially-brewed sahti, it should not be forgotten that, as Asplund notes (p. 34), sahti was already being made commercially as early as beginning of this century, for example at the Ikaalisten Juomatehdas factory (1898–1942). Another producer was the Vihti cooperative, which reportedly made a weak version of sahti in the 1930s, though Asplund suspects that in both cases the so-called sahti was more like commercial beer, as it was filtered and/or pasteurized and bottled.

Naturally, the period of prohibition (1919–1932) brought an abrupt halt to (legal) sahti brewing. The new alcohol legislation of 1932 then imposed strict controls on sahti brewing — these controls changed little until the late 1980s. In 1932 the new legislation permitted the brewing of sahti for personal use only. Controls were tightened in 1968 with a further provision applying to brewing in general, which allowed only the use of natural fer-

mentation, i.e. it was not permitted to add sugar (not common in sahti brewing anyway).

In 1979 the law was again changed in the wake of the new home-brew beer kits, effectively banning the use of these malt extract kits in making strongly alcoholic beer (although in practice this meant only that the manufacturer was compelled to add a label with the message that the user should add the necessary amount of water in order to ensure that the result did not exceed the specified strength). However, the wording of that 1979 provision also made it illegal to make sahti from ready-made wort, a practice not widespread at that time but was to become so in the 1980s.

In the early 1980s there were attempts to raise the profile of sahti as a part of Finland's national and local cultural heritage. For example, in 1983 the Hämeenkyrö municipality tried to revive its sahti tradition (see Asplund p. 84) by asking Alko, the State alcohol monopoly, to permit its production and sale on special occasions. The people of Lammi attempted the same in 1984, again with a negative response from Alko.

In 1986, however, a more positive response was forthcoming: a Sahti Working Group was set up by Alko, following representations from various local representatives and a petition from five interested parties. The Working Group recommended that the law be altered to permit the commercial production and restricted sale of sahti. Permits

were granted to Lammin Sahti and to Joutsan Sahti to sell their sahti at local events to buyers who had a licence to serve alcohol. Thus, on June 13, 1987 sahti went on sale at a special market day in Lammi, and then at the *Joutopäivät* days in Joutsa on July 10–12, 1987. Although purists have commented that commercially-brewed sahti lacks the strength (it is brewed in tax category III, i.e. about 4.5% abv) and flavour of the home-made version, it has generally proven popular with sahti drinkers. Indeed, the brewing method and the raw ingredients are basically unchanged, being simply on a larger scale to accommodate the required production volume.

Following the experiments mentioned above, Alko decided to permit retail sales of sahti from January 1, 1988, although the system was rather cumbersome and not designed to permit easy sale: the prospective purchaser had to first buy a voucher from an Alko store and then exchange the voucher for sahti at the sahti brewery. 1988 also saw permits granted to sahti brewers Honkajoen Sahti and Hämeen Sahti, and in 1989 a permit was granted to Sysmän Sahti. Unfortunately the last two mentioned have since ceased brewing, a sign that making sahti commercially is by no means a profitable business under the present tax conditions. However, other sahti brewers have come on the scene more recently: Sahti-Mafia, Finlandia Sahti and Koivulan Sahti, the last-mentioned being in Kajaani in northern Finland and,

therefore, the only commercial sahti producer well outside the traditional sahti heartland.

The sale of wort to customers who could then ferment it for themselves at home was still a contentious issue, however. Wort was already being sold in some municipalities where, in spite of the illegality of doing so (as stated in the 1979 law), the local police apparently turned a blind eye as they were of the opinion that the law needed clarification on this point. Interestingly, sahti consumption at small local gatherings was also, strictly speaking, illegal if a licence had not been obtained, but this was usually overlooked as well. The new sahti producers were understandably annoyed that they were not being allowed to sell wort while in other localities the practice was being overlooked. In 1988 the Sahti Working Group was reconvened to consider the issue. It found (see Sahtityöryhmä p. 27) that there were at least six main wort producers (e.g. Orimattilan Tilaussahti Ky in Orimattila and Sahtipojat Oy in Heinola), all seemingly operating in conflict with the law but with the 'permission' of their local police.

As a result of the Working Group's recommendations, parliament approved on June 12, 1990 a change to the 1979 alcohol legislation, making it legal for home-made alcoholic beverages to use wort as a raw ingredient. The sale of wort is now extremely popular, amounting to well over half of turnover at some of the sahti producers, as it is sold

free of duty and is therefore only about a quarter of the price of ready-fermented sahti. However, sales of the latter were boosted in October 1990, when Alko allowed direct sales of sahti over the counter at its stores, in place of the voucher-and-collect system. In 1989, total sales of sahti (excluding wort sales) amounted to 109,000 litres, of which 75% was purchased in Alko stores, the rest being purchased direct from the producers. Sales of wort are estimated to be far in excess of this figure. Regarding home brewing of sahti, figures for the amount of sahti malt sold indicate that in 1987 3–4 million litres of sahti were made.

A note of caution should be sounded, however, regarding the continued success of the sahti producers: recent changes in packaging tax have resulted in steep rises in the retail price of commercially-brewed sahti and a consequent drop in sales. However, more positively, a recent change in the regulations has led to Lammin Sahti opening its own 'brewery tap' pub, serving Finland's first draught sahti!

Sahti has been revived as an essential component of annual festivities, at least in the sahti heartland areas, and there is now an annual sahti market at Padasjoki and an annual sahti competition organised by the Finnish Sahti Society (*Suomen Sahtiseura*). The Society, founded in 1989, has helped promote interest in Finnish indigenous beer culture and in sahti in particular. In common with the

Finnish Society for Traditional Beers (*Perinteisen Oluen Seura*), the Sahti Society is a member of the Finnish League of Independent Beer Societies (*Suomen Itsenäisten Olutseurojen Liitto*), which seeks to protect and diversify Finland's beer culture. Many local museums have also taken a more active interest in collecting old wooden sahti-making equipment. All this has resulted in considerable and growing interest abroad, stimulated too by the favourable publicity given to sahti by the world's best-known writer on beer, Michael Jackson.

Outside Finland there is also a surviving and ancient sahti tradition, principally in the Swedish island of Gotland and in the Estonian island of Saarenmaa, though sahti-like beverages were once made across a much wider region including the area of the Baltic states and even parts of mainland Sweden and Russia (see Räsänen p. 27). Suuronen (p. 328), referring to research done by Salomonsson on Gotland, notes that there has been a revival of interest in brewing Gotland's version of sahti (*Gotlands-dricka*), and that this is because people are interested in making a traditional and relatively inexpensive beer, and they want to maintain the tradition, particularly for festive occasions. The revival, he notes, has been part of a wider interest in folk traditions, including dancing, local dialects, etc. As in Finland, there are also town dwellers (in Visby) making sahti, often using improvised equipment.

## 7. Concluding remarks

This paper has covered in some depth the history and cultural traditions of Finnish indigenous beer. Though chiefly consisting of sahti, this indigenous beer culture also includes beerlike beverages made principally from rye and using methods ranging from the standard sahti method to the eastern Finnish and Karelian practice of first baking the ingredients into a loaf. The many and varied techniques, equipment, raw materials, names and local traditions are referred to in the text and are based chiefly on the monumental research efforts of Räsänen and Asplund. The principal local variation is that sahti has traditionally been made in the area west of a line from Oulu to Kotka, i.e. in the areas of Finland first settled, while in eastern and northern Finland there has been no strong tradition of sahti but rather a tradition of making weaker, rye-based *kalja* beverages.

The position of sahti in Finland today is discussed in the context of the recent changes in alcohol legislation which have permitted, one step at a time, the commercial production and sale of sahti and of sahti wort. The contribution of sahti to Finland's indigenous beer culture is clear, and its status amongst the world's beer styles has also been fully acknowledged in recent times. The tradition has truly been revived, as it also has in Gotland and Saarenmaa, and should continue to prosper in an age when people are

more and more interested in and concerned about their cultural heritage and about traditional beers. Let's drink to that. *Kippis!*

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*Source: Asplund, U 1990: Sahtikirja.  
Suomen Sahtiseura ry, Valkeakoski*

**Figure 1:** Main area (shaded) where sahti tradition is alive today