

## **An Abundance of Cakes: How a National Trauma Created a Unique Culinary Practice in Southern Jutland**

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### **Abstract**

The southern part of Jutland has its very own distinct food culture and traditions. Its history differs from other parts of Denmark because this region was under German rule from 1864 until the Reunification in 1920. Special laws were imposed to curtail the population's political and cultural ties to Denmark. Any political gatherings or sentiments were strictly forbidden. However, cooking was free of restrictions and cooking thus became one of the primary ways to hold onto a Danish identity. This led to a conservation of recipes and traditions that were disappearing in other Danish regions. The farm wives became the custodians of traditional Danish dishes, and the Coffee Table gatherings became a unique practice, that still exists today. Baking and hosting Coffee Tables became both a rallying point for the preservation of Danish national identity and a way to achieve social power and move up in the local female hierarchy. Attending a Coffee Table, one was served several rounds of cakes following a strict order. The servings progressed from the soft and creamy to the hard and dry. First came the "soft cakes," like buns, sponge cakes and layer cakes. Then the "hard cakes" were served. These consisted of different types of cookies and biscuits. The number of cakes and servings in each round varied but a full coffee table would have 14-16 different cakes.

### **Keywords**

Denmark, national identity, social gatherings, eating rituals, cakes, culinary resistance.

After the defeat at Dybbøl in 1864, which ended the Second Schleswig War, Denmark was forced to cede the duchies Schleswig, Holstein and Lauenborg to Prussia, which in turn made the duchies a part of the German Empire in 1871. The Danish state lost one-third of its territory and two fifths of its population. While the inhabitants of Holstein and Lauenborg already had strong ties to Germany and more easily transitioned into a part of the empire, it was not so for Schleswig, where there

were many inhabitants of Danish orientation and the change in nationality was felt more keenly.<sup>1</sup>

Any Danish minded political sentiments became strictly forbidden and public gatherings had to be almost demonstratively apolitical. The laws that were imposed to curtail the population's political and cultural ties to Denmark were in some instances specifically made to limit social interaction in public spaces and even the term "Southern Jutland" was forbidden to use on commercial goods such as postcards, beer mugs, coffee sets and the like.<sup>2</sup>

Denmark and thereby also Southern Jutland had already in the nineteenth century a very rich culture of *foreninger* (the closest translations may be "clubs" or "societies." They were democratic in organisation, based on membership, and run by the members themselves) centred on all sorts of activities both political, cultural or sports based. After 1864 Southern Jutland saw a steep decline in these *foreninger* and members meeting in public houses and hotels were harassed. By the 1880s, however, it became permissible for the male population to form *foreninger* for the purpose of sports activities or singing, as long as no nationalistic or forbidden songs were sung at the meetings. This led to the establishment of *forsamlingshuse* in the 1890s. It was a kind of community houses where the members of the local *foreninger* could meet for lectures and singing. For these gatherings food and drink would be served, but the German authorities would not give these *forsamlingshuse* a liquor license and thus no alcohol could be served, and so coffee became the drink of choice instead.<sup>3</sup> It was quite normal for attendees at these gatherings to drink at least 6-7 cups of coffee. You could not serve coffee without something sweet and therefore the traditionally coffee and cake servings, that until this time had been quite sparse and held within the home, were transformed into a much grander affair. These gatherings became known as "coffee tables" and quickly became a very important part of social life in the region. The *forsamlingshuse* were not usually equipped with adequate kitchen facilities, and any refreshments had to be brought in ready to eat, and this task fell to the women.

### ***Kirche, Küche und Kinder***

The farm wives of Southern Jutland took on the responsibility of custodians of a threatened culinary heritage, but at the same time they transformed this Danish tradition into a unique practice that would come to be one of the most defining

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<sup>1</sup> Mads Daugbjerg, *Borders of Belonging: Experiencing History, War and Nation at a Danish Heritage Site* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2014), 23-24.

<sup>2</sup> Inge Adriansen, *Det sønderjyske kaffebord – et samspil mellem nationalpolitik og kosttradition* (Grænseforeningen, 1998), 17.

<sup>3</sup> Inge Adriansen, *Smag på Sønderjylland: Madkultur uden grænser* (København: Forlaget Gyldendal, 2012), 119.

characteristics of the region's food culture. The coffee tables became pivotal in keeping up and maintaining cultural and national ties to Denmark.

The women of Southern Jutland found themselves in a more oppressive society, than the one they were used to, when they became part of the German Empire. In the Empire women could not be members of clubs and societies and this made much of the public sphere inaccessible to the Danish women. It was not until 1910 that membership became open to women. Women were encouraged to concentrate their activities in three areas of life: "*Kinder, Küche und Kirche*" ("Children, Cooking and Church"). The kitchen thus became an important place for women to express themselves and engage in mutual competition. Add to that the communal nature of the coffee table, and a recipe for local female ambition was created.

Inge Adriansen, who, up until her death in 2017, was the foremost expert on the history of the Southern Jutlandic coffee table, likened the competitive cake baking in Southern Jutland to the competitions among the different sports clubs.<sup>4</sup> Baking became a sport for the farm wives, and they devised their own framework for competing and judging each other. One important factor was the number of cakes served. There were two kinds of coffee tables: the public ones held in the *forsamlingshuse* where each female attendee brought a couple of cakes to be shared, and the coffee tables held in the home for a more select number of guests. At the private gatherings the hostess and her household were solely responsible for all the cakes. The number of cakes served at a privately held coffee table was based on a combination of the hostess' social standing in her community and her culinary ambitions. A hostess wanted to outdo her peers' servings with at least one additional cake, while the woman at the top of the local female hierarchy would sometimes serve fewer cakes, so as not to appear to be showing off their status. Widows and elderly women were exempt from the competitive aspect and could bake and serve as many or as few cakes as they wished.<sup>5</sup>

Plentiful cake servings at social gathering were practiced all over rural Denmark in the nineteenth century, with the most elaborate being found in Jutland. These gatherings, however, were usually held in connection with harvest feasts, baptisms, weddings, or funerals. One thing that made the Southern Jutlandic coffee tables unique among Danish gatherings, apart from their ritualistic structure, was that they were not contingent on these traditional reasons for celebration and could be held in public as well as in the privacy of the home. Food is a remarkable medium for creating and preserving national, cultural, or ethnic identity, and in the case of the food culture of Southern Jutland it was not only the Danish recipes themselves but the ways in which they were eaten.

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<sup>4</sup> Adriansen, *Det sønderjyske kaffebord*, 17.

<sup>5</sup> Adriansen, *Det sønderjyske kaffebord*, 25-26.

The coffee table gatherings were first and foremost a rural practice. The times and resources needed, especially the staggering amounts of eggs, cream, and butter, to make a full coffee table was in many ways not available to most city folk in the region, and the social rules that guided the practice were born out of the structure of farming communities.

It took considerable time and effort to prepare and host a coffee table. In November of 1924 a coffee table was to be held at the farm of Jacob Michelsen in Kolstrup. The occasion was a birthday celebration and thus only the closest adult family members were invited. The preparations for the gathering began a week before because of the sheer magnitude of cakes required. For this coffee table the number of different cakes appropriate for the occasion was deemed to be seventeen. The farm wife had the help of a “kokekone” named Meta Sørensen, and they would bake from early morning till late evening every day in order to bake enough cakes for the numerous rounds of cake servings.<sup>6</sup> A *kokekone* was usually a married woman from a small household or a spinster. She would come into other households and help with the cooking for large gatherings and parties and for a coffee table of this size, help was often needed. It is only with the revival of the tradition in later years that the distinction between town and country ways of hospitality has become blurred, and the coffee table is now seen as a regional heritage which belongs to everyone living in Southern Jutland.

## The ritual of the Coffee Table

Private coffee tables were only for adults and usually took place in the evening, a nod to their origins at the evening lecture in the *forsamlingshuse*. The ritual of the coffee table dictated that all servings follow a strict order and the way hostess and guests went about serving and eating were heavily ritualised. Since the Southern Jutlandic coffee tables began as potluck refreshments before lectures, the practice of serving the cakes in sets emerged as a solution to a logistical problem. By putting together cakes of similar types and letting the participants take several portions onto their plate in one helping, it was possible to limit the sending of cake trays around, thus ensuring that the lectures were not unduly disturbed, and the audience were well fed. A consequence of this practice was that the cake plates in coffee sets in Southern Jutland, as a standard, were made slightly larger than in other parts of Denmark and Germany.

A “full Southern Jutlandic coffee table” should have at least seven kinds of soft cake and seven kinds of dry cake. The rules of the coffee table dictated that the servings should progress from the soft over the creamy to the dry and hard biscuits.

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<sup>6</sup> Anne-Helene Michelsen, *Omkring Det Sønderjyske Kaffebord: med fortællinger, gamle juleskikke og opskrifter på godt bagværk* (Åbenrå: Anne-Helene Michelsen, 1986), 7-12.

When arriving at a private coffee table guests would be shown into *stadsstuen*, literally the fine living room, used only when having guests or on Sundays. Here they would be seated at a beautifully decked table and be served their first cup of coffee of the evening. The first serving would consist of generously buttered buns, sometimes called *stopkager* (“stop cakes”), because they would lay a good foundation for the rest of the evening and satisfy any immediate hunger. The halved buns were stacked on the tray with one half of the bun on top of the other, in such a way that the top half would end up with butter on both sides. This meant that each guest had to take a whole bun in order to avoid getting butter everywhere.

The next serving would consist of pastries such as *kringler* (a yeast dough rolled and filled with *remonce* or marzipan and sometimes raisins, knotted in a pretzel shape, baked, and then decorated with nuts and icing), sheet cakes of different kinds and sponge cakes.

Between the servings, the hostess would make sure that the coffee cups were refilled. In the privacy of a home, one could also add a little rum or brandy to the coffee and this option was available to both male and female participants. A separate system of signalling one’s preference for drink developed in the region. If one wanted plain coffee, the cup would be placed on the saucer the regular way. If one wanted coffee with spirits, the cup would be placed lying on its side on the saucer. If one had had enough coffee, the cup would be placed on the saucer upside down.<sup>7</sup>

The next serving of the coffee table involved tarts, cream cakes and the all-important layer cakes. Layer cakes were the crowning glory of the coffee table, and where the hostess really could show off her skill and creativity in decorating and combining flavours. When raising the number of cakes in a coffee table a farm wife would often add an extra layer cake. A local saying was that a good coffee table had “cakes right up to the ceiling.”<sup>8</sup>

The German author Siegfried Lenz experienced this practice first-hand in the 1960s. Lenz had bought a house on the island of Als and he and his wife were invited to participate in a coffee table at the farm of his new neighbours. The coffee table with all its trappings overwhelmed Lenz to such a degree that he later wrote a short story, published in 1981, detailing his experience. Here he describes the practice as “the great ritualistic cake war”<sup>9</sup> and begs the people of Southern Jutland to have mercy on foreign guests who don’t have the stamina and cultural ballast to take on the full coffee table experience without prior warning.

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<sup>7</sup> Rasmus Hansen, *Minder og Dagbogsblade fra 1848, 1849, 1850* (Odense: R. Nielsens Forlag, 1875), 109-110.

<sup>8</sup> Adriansen, *Det sønderjyske kaffebord*, 25.

<sup>9</sup> Siegfried Lenz, *Sønderjysk kaffebord*, trans. Jacob Jonia (Højbjerg: Forlaget Hovedland, 2007), 19.

An important part of the ritual of the coffee table was the practice of *nøderi*. This practice involved the hostess's ever-increasing insistence on an additional piece of cake or another cup of coffee. This developed in a somewhat theatrical way where guests would decline the offer of more cake several times before accepting. It was seen as such an important part of hosting guests in the region that girls from other parts of Denmark who married into Southern Jutlandic families were taught how to *nøde* in the correct way.<sup>10</sup>

After the layer cakes came biscuits and there had to be several kinds. A popular kind was *gode råd*, literally "good advices," which were plate sized, paper-thin crispy biscuits made with a special kind of waffle iron that gave the finished biscuits beautiful ornamental decorations on the surface. Traditionally the very last item served at the Southern Jutlandic coffee table would be a little flat biscuit with a small meringue on top. This biscuit was called *ingenting* ("nothing"), and the logic behind the name was that one can always find a bit of appetite and room in the stomach for nothing.

## The Mythical Coffee Table

The Southern Jutlandic coffee table's role as a symbol, albeit a discrete one, of Danishness and cultural resilience was reinforced during the First World War where the region was subjected to the harsh rationing and severe austerity measures imposed by the German government. Eggs, butter, and flour, among other things, were rationed. Sugar could only be bought on the black market, and the most used sweetener in this period was beet syrup.<sup>11</sup>

During this period the coffee tables primarily took place in the privacy of the home with only the immediate community and close family attending. The servings became smaller, the cakes more humble and the coffee was made out of anything from dried peas to barley and rye. But the practice was kept up, and the social aspect became more important as a way of reaffirming the cultural and national ties between Denmark and the people of Southern Jutland.

The competitive part of the coffee table practice did not diminish. On the contrary, when faced with the challenge of baking without many of the usual ingredients, the farm wives became even more inventive. In Nordborg on Als a woman rose to local fame because of her cake made with turnips and potatoes, that tasted not that bad.<sup>12</sup> That was high praise indeed, since it was part of the pageant of

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<sup>10</sup> Adriansen, *Det sønderjyske kaffebord*, 22-23.

<sup>11</sup> Inge Adriansen, "Hold brødet helligt og anvend hver lille bid brød til menneskefødei: Om kostskikke i Sønderjylland under Første Verdenskrig," in *Dansk madhistorie: Mad i krig og krise*, ed. Irene Hellvik (Auning: Dansk Landbrugsmuseum, 2014), 73-81.

<sup>12</sup> Adriansen, *Det sønderjyske kaffebord*, 19.

the coffee table, that the guests were sparse with their praise and pretended to be unimpressed. Other women made do with rusks dipped in milk and fried in fat,<sup>13</sup> or bread with a thick layer of illegal butter,<sup>14</sup> made from extra milk that was not reported to the authorities. In one family living near Dybbøl, this treat was aptly named “shut up.”<sup>15</sup>

The Reunification celebrations in 1920 saw both public and private coffee tables being held all over the repatriated region, and it is clear from the memoirs of people present at those celebrations that the coffee table now had gained such importance for the Danish inhabitants of the region that it was unthinkable not to mark such an event with the most important Southern Jutlandic expression of Danish cultural identity. At a celebration in Haderslev on 10 February 1920, one guest later remembered that “how often had one not earlier sat at the shared Danish coffee tables in the foreign days, but never to a gathering such as this, with such a profound background and of such a serious nature as this.”<sup>16</sup>

Inge Adriansen described the coffee table and its place in the rural communities of the region as a third sacrament. The description derives from a story of a Bishop Olesen in Ribe, who is credited with saying that the people of Southern Jutland “had three sacraments: baptism, communion, and the coffee table.”<sup>17</sup> This notion of the coffee table as something almost holy and ritualistic was not just prevalent in the region. From about 1900 it became possible to invite teachers from Denmark, primarily from the Danish folk high schools. The Danish folk high schools emerged in the middle of the nineteenth century and were the brainchild of theologian, writer and philosopher Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig. The schools intended to bring enlightenment and a democratic understanding of society to rural communities where education was sparse. Subjects such as language, history, philosophy, and politics were taught, but there were no formal exams. A stay at a folk high school was meant to be an amusing time of exploring knowledge with one’s peers before going back to the farm. The teachers that came to Southern Jutland to give lectures would bring tales of the legendary coffee tables and hospitality that they had experienced back to Denmark. This reinforced the idea of the Danish minded

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<sup>13</sup> Karen M. Michelsen, Lene Bilde Freisig and Birthe Merete Jessen, *De glemte kager: En kulturhistorisk bagebog fra Museum Sønderjylland – Jacob Michelsens Gård* (Aabenraa: Karen Michelsen og Anne-Helene Michelsen Fond af 25. okt. 1995, 2018), 24.

<sup>14</sup> Home churning and butchering were forbidden by the authorities.

Adriansen, “Hold brødet helligt og anvend hver lille bid brød til menneskeføde,” 73-74.

<sup>15</sup> Adriansen, *Det sønderjyske kaffebord*, 20.

<sup>16</sup> Nicolai Svendsen and Svend Thorsen, *Tiende Februar: Livsbilleder fra Sønderjylland i Genforeningsåret 1920* (København: G. E. C. Gads Forlag, 1939), 67-68.

<sup>17</sup> Adriansen, *Det sønderjyske kaffebord*, 5.

inhabitants of Southern Jutland as champions of Danish virtues and the coffee tables attained an almost mythical status in the rest of Denmark.<sup>18</sup>

The coffee table became, in some instances, the linchpin holding people together and affirming their common bond as a Danish minded community in a place where being too Danish could bring repercussions from the authorities down upon them. In the years after the Reunification, the coffee tables were used to reaffirm the bond between Southern Jutland and the rest of Denmark, and celebrating that the practice could now be performed out in the open with no limitations as to the songs that were sung or the political discussions that arose between the many cakes and multiple cups of coffee.

## Decline and Reinvention of the Coffee Table

The Second World War and the German occupation of Denmark from 1940 to 1945 created a new national trauma that spanned the entirety of Denmark, and this trauma was very much connected to food. Food and the lack of necessary ingredients permeates wartime writings and memories, and food rationing had a huge impact on later attitudes towards food. The saying “never again an April 9<sup>th</sup>,” the day of the German invasion in 1940, also extended to food and food security.

During the 1950s Danish agriculture was modernized and made more efficient with the help of funds from the American Marshall Plan. This led to bigger farms but with less people involved in the running of them, and this in turn slowly changed the social fabric of rural life. Communal gatherings on the farms became fewer and they moved into the space of the *forsamlingshus*. Ironically, back to where the Southern Jutlandic coffee tradition originated, but without the abundance of cakes and coffee. Instead, the menu followed the almost universal dinner party menu with an entrée, a main course, a single dessert, and lastly, coffee, served perhaps with a biscuit or two.

Changes in Danish food culture and new views on healthy food also meant that the extravagant number of cakes became unpopular, and the traditional Danish recipes received competition from international culinary influences. In her memoirs, gathered by the Museum of Southern Jutland, shopkeeper Marie Danielsen from Sønderborg laments the deterioration of the coffee table servings.<sup>19</sup>

Many thought it was more refined to serve sandwiches and tea! And then later serve up lemon mousse and wine before we leave for the night. Today the coffee table is gone. No one wants to bake anymore, and people must not eat anything

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<sup>18</sup> Adriansen, *Det sønderjyske kaffebord*, 16-18.

<sup>19</sup> Adriansen, *Det sønderjyske kaffebord*, 26.



fattening, and they buy either pastries or cake – only one of them – and then only two kind of shop bought biscuits – and one cannot overindulge in that.

The rise of New Nordic Kitchen and the rediscovering of regional specialities that followed in its wake, helped pave the way for a new version of the Southern Jutlandic coffee table, a version that aimed to connect the memories of the past and the rituals of the gathering with modern and often lighter versions of the traditional cakes. This coffee table is as much for the locals as it is for the tourist. Southern Jutland has been very successful in branding their region and their coffee tables as a worthy culinary destination. Visitors to the region are invited to take part in coffee tables arranged by patisseries and hotels, and there enjoy the culinary delights and specialties of the region.

In the book *Smagen er Sønderjylland* (“The Taste is Southern Jutland”) from 2017 the authors devote an entire chapter to the coffee table and a modern interpretation of it with very elaborate cake and chocolate creations. But even in this modern version the past is not very far away as shown in the accompanying text:<sup>20</sup>

We all have a memory of a cake or a story, that has been told around the coffee table. It was exactly that, which we could and were allowed to do before the Reunification and during the war. Gathering by the cakes and the coffee ...

For the people of Southern Jutland, the memory of a shared trauma lurks under the laden cake trays. A reminder of a time when the sharing of cakes had a deeper meaning.

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<sup>20</sup> Rikke Buthler, Mette Christine Schulz, Palle Sørensen, and Jesper Rais, *Smagen er Sønderjylland* (Odde: Rais&Buthler, 2017), 49.