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Linnea Dunne asserts her moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

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WHAT IS LAGOM?

– on Vikings, balance and semi-skimmed milk



In 1996, Sweden got itself a new nickname. Author Jonas Gardell called it “the country of semi-skimmed milk”, a moniker the Swedes took to heart and have been using ever since. In his standup show, the author described a country that celebrates balance and puts fairness on a pedestal, where consensus is king and everyone mucks in. He depicted a nation that loves white walls and functional design, and that deems semi-skimmed milk just perfect – not too skinny, not too fat. He characterized a country that is *lagom*.

Lagom has no equivalent in the English language, but it loosely means “not too little, not too much, but just enough”. It’s widely believed that the word comes from the Viking term *laget om* – literally “around the team” – and derives from the custom of passing a horn of mead around and ensuring there was just enough for everyone to get a sip. But while the anecdote may hit the nail on the head, the true etymology of the word points to an old form of the word *lag*, a common sense type of “law”.

The law of *lagom*

So what’s the law of *lagom*? At its simplest, the word describes something that’s “just enough” or “just right” – like the right amount of milk in your coffee or the perfect pressure of a massage. Beyond the material world it becomes far more sophisticated, implying that the balancing act has reached perfection, and relying on a range of social codes. *Lagom* is accepting an invitation to spend the weekend at a friend’s house, but bringing your own bed sheets because it’s fair to share the burden of laundry. It’s having the right to stay at home with a sick child – pay intact – but never abusing that right.



Lagom is buying a practical car – even if it’s not the most visually pleasing of vehicles. It’s painting just one feature wall in your lounge and leaving the rest white, because doing the entire room would be too much. It’s wearing bright-red lipstick, but leaving the rest of your makeup perfectly understated. *Lagom* is having a burger but opting out of the fries, because moderation is a virtue; it’s whipping up a brand-new dinner dish using nothing except leftovers, because waste is a mortal sin.

Putting the law into practice

Postcard Sweden presents spacious rooms of minimalist décor sleek enough to promote a sense of calm in just one look. *Lagom* is a great deal about that space – about decluttering and simplifying, erasing prejudice and paving the way for honesty. In the bigger picture, the balance of *lagom* goes way beyond emotional wellbeing and interior design to become all about belonging and shared responsibility – not just fitting in, but being part of a greater entity. It’s about relationships with your neighbours, looking after communal spaces and paying taxes that fund study groups (see page 122) and heavily subsidized culture schools (institutions for music and cultural tuition).

Recently described by the World Economic Forum as beating other countries at just about everything, Sweden has developed an enviable welfare state with generous parental packages and exceptionally low levels of corruption. In that regard, this country of semi-skimmed milk is the product of a skilful balancing act – protecting its people yet setting them free, together.



“With its loathing of waste and insistence on fairness, *lagom* is a crucial ingredient in Sweden’s recipe for success.”

THE BENEFITS OF LAGOM

#1: Physical space

Moderate, conscious consumption makes decluttering easier, and your home becomes a more peaceful place. With minimal Scandinavian design to boot, you may never want to leave the house.

#2: Mental space

When you learn to take a step back and stop your mind spiralling, you can live life in a more authentic and focused way – embracing and coping with good and bad experiences, and being fully present both at work and at home.

#3: Improved finances

As you become increasingly conscious not only of your personal needs but also those of the planet, you’ll be likely to consume less while also learning to look after and be thrifty with your resources.

#4: A sense of belonging

From improved relationships with your neighbours to trust in society’s collective and shared responsibilities, a *lagom* attitude can help you feel part of something bigger and provide a sense of purpose.

Key to a clarified life

You may be forgiven for thinking that *lagom* sounds exhausting, what with requiring a well-designed home, eating healthily, exercising, spending time with your friends, family and neighbours, achieving at work, being able to handle a spectrum of emotions yet feel contented most of the time and being constantly mindful of the environment while you’re at it. But actually, *lagom* is all about making the good life less complicated.

The *lagom* approach of saying “stop” when you’ve had enough, but refusing to accept a sloppy solution for the sake of keeping things sweet means that getting things right is so much easier. And when we all muck in and deal with the really important stuff, everybody wins.

When I look at Sweden now, I don’t see anyone sneering at ambition or shutting down debate. Instead I see huge numbers of people who care about getting things right; a place efficient enough to provide the space to breathe. With its loathing of waste and insistence on fairness, *lagom* is a crucial ingredient in Sweden’s recipe for success. Be it through freedom from clutter and material obsession or liberation from unnecessary hours at your desk, *lagom* can elevate the meaning of quality of life – without stress, without squander, but with the clarity of an eccentric gay comedian who found a way to fit in with the country of semi-skimmed milk.

INTRODUCING FIKA

– because it's good for business and everybody loves free cinnamon buns



Few things aid the honouring of regular breaks and downtime like *fika*, the coffee break elevated to new heights by the Swedes. While *fika* is a constant in all parts of Swedish society, its importance in the working world cannot be overstated.

More than just a coffee break

Fika is an institution in itself, which we'll return to in the next chapter (see page 40), but in the context of work, it serves a number of very *lagom* functions. If there's a practice in place that makes a proper 10am break acceptable, surely that can only be a good thing? If, in addition, it means that people don't just take their eyes off their screen for 15 minutes or more but also end up chatting to each other, catching up about industry news or the challenges of the afternoon's client pitch, it can take both the office culture and the company output to the next level. Note the differences between *fika* and elevenses. More than just topping up your coffee, *fika* is about an exchange, a connection; about unplugging from the task at hand and being present with your colleagues in true *lagom* style.

The *fika* startup

Getting your workplace to adopt a proper *fika* culture might be a challenge, but start small and you'll be able to reap many of the benefits. Ask your desk neighbour along for your morning trip to the kitchen or coffee machine, or offer to make them tea. The next time you need a face-to-face chat with a colleague, suggest meeting in the staff room or canteen. If you feel ambitious, volunteer to get a Friday *fika* routine happening. I can't see too many people kicking up a storm over being fed cinnamon buns before heading home for *fredagsmys* (see page 24).



CELEBRATE LIKE A SWEDE

– with homemade, seasonal treats



DID YOU KNOW?

Swedes consume approximately 20 million *semlor*, or Lenten buns, every year.

With *lördagsgodis* and *fika* in mind, it comes as no surprise that Swedes know how to celebrate. Think of it as the balancing out of all that healthy, wholegrain bread they've had; as the perfectly considered way to mark life's big events, not by endless consumption of ready-made foods but by making use of nature's gifts and the local culinary heritage. Much like the New Nordic Cuisine pioneers and their talk of seasonal cooking (see page 52), Swedish food traditions are very often linked to the seasons and specific festivities.



STRAWBERRY MERINGUE CAKE

My mother's strawberry meringue cake will always take me right back to my childhood birthdays, but this Swedish classic works just as well for a midsummer celebration or any summery party or *fika*.

Serves: 10–12

For the sponge cake:

sunflower oil, for oiling
3 egg yolks
150g (5½oz) caster sugar
1 tablespoon vanilla sugar*
75ml (5 tablespoons) milk
50g (1¾oz) butter, melted and cooled
150g (5½oz) plain flour
2 teaspoons baking powder

For the meringue:

4 egg whites
150g (5½oz) caster sugar
65g (2¼oz) blanched almonds, chopped

For the filling and topping:

400ml (14fl oz) double or whipping cream
400g (14oz) strawberries, hulled and sliced

Preheat the oven to 180°C (350°F), Gas Mark 4. Line two 20cm (8 inch) round cake tins with baking parchment and lightly brush with oil.

For the sponge, whisk the egg yolks, caster sugar and vanilla sugar (or vanilla extract) together in a large bowl until fluffy and pale in colour. Then whisk in the milk and cooled melted butter. Sift the flour and baking powder together into the bowl, then gently fold into the whisked mixture. Spread the batter out evenly in the prepared tins.

For the meringue, in a separate large, super-clean, grease-free bowl, whisk the egg whites until they form firm peaks, then whisk in the sugar until the mixture is thick and glossy, which will result in a nicely chewy meringue. Spread the meringue mixture across the cake batter and sprinkle with the chopped almonds. Bake for 20 minutes until golden. Let the cakes cool in the tins, then remove and peel off the lining paper.

Lightly whip the cream with a whisk until it forms soft peaks. Place one cake half on a plate and top with just over half the cream and half the sliced strawberries. Top with the other cake half and add the remaining cream and strawberries.

*Vanilla sugar is commonly used in baking in northern Europe, but you can substitute it here with a few drops of vanilla extract.



STORAGE, BABY

– create a sense of space



TOP TIP

To save floor space and make cleaning quick and easy, use your walls for storage. Think sleek shelving units, magnetic knife and key holders and wall-mounted shoe storage.

DID YOU KNOW?

The iconic String shelves (pictured left) came about when Swedish publisher Bonnier launched a competition in 1949 to provide Swedes with a practical shelving system to enable them to buy more books. Nisse Strinning's design won and has since become a timeless Swedish design classic.

It's no coincidence that one of the most famous pieces of furniture by renowned Swedish design brand Svenskt Tenn is a cabinet with 19 drawers, Josef Frank's Cabinet 881; that one of the longest-standing items by flat-pack giant IKEA is the Billy bookcase; and that one of the most sought-after items on Swedish second-hand furniture sites is String shelves (see below left). Swedish design is known for minimalism and clean lines, and storage and decluttering are crucial components of the sleek look.

Open surfaces provide a sense of space, not just in the literal sense but for your mind, too. From wall-to-wall bookshelves to clever under-stair storage units, Swedes really know how to declutter the *lagom* way. This means providing perfect displays for plants, flea market finds and favourite books while keeping tables and other surfaces clear, simultaneously making sure you stow away cables, keys and other items that are easily left lying around to immediately cancel out your best minimalist efforts.



FREEDOM & FLEXIBILITY

– the benefits of a lightweight attitude to material possessions

THREE BENEFITS OF A LIGHTWEIGHT LIFESTYLE

#1. It's habitual, almost like a reprogramming of the brain to rid it of the patterns formed by consumer society. Much like you're probably more likely to crave carrots than cake after a run, a good decluttering session will make shopping seem less appealing.

#2. You'll have more space when all that stuff is gone, which subsequently saves you time as you'll find what you're looking for more easily – and cleaning will be a breeze. Moreover, a peaceful space contributes to a peaceful mind, so you might experience a boost in creativity.

#3. Most people keen on elimination and minimalism swear by the mind's tendency to focus more on experiences than material possessions once the majority of the clutter is gone. To many people, this mindfulness provides a potent sense of freedom – one no money can buy.

A conscious, *lagom* approach to consumption is good not just for the environment but for our bank balances, too. But there's another level to the non-material ways, linked to a freedom from the pressures of consumer society, and it has sparked an entire movement of "sell everything" enthusiasts who get rid of their possessions, leave their homes and hit the road in search for adventure, freedom and inner peace.

Slightly less extreme but just as keen on scaling down are the minimalists, heralding an elimination method. These people often own nothing more than what can fit in a backpack, "just enough" possessions, including a very basic wardrobe as well as whatever hygienic products and digital gadgets they need. A minimalist experiment went viral on Facebook recently, encouraging people to challenge their friends to a month of arithmetically progressive cleansing, getting rid of one item on day one, two on day two and so on until a total of 469 things had been chucked.