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MAINS EstoEtno Fine Bakery

Open-faced Estonian dark rye sandwich

By Beth McKibben · Rough Draft Atlanta, 3/12/2025

Ingredients

- [ ] 300 grams (10-11 oz) farmer's cheese (salted or plain)
- [ ] 150 grams (5 oz) zucchini, shredded
- [ ] 100 grams (3.5 oz) sour cream
- [ ] 2 tbsp or more fresh dill and parsley (chopped)
- [ ] 1 tsp of dried chives
- [ ] Pinch of oregano (fresh or dried)
- [ ] Caraway seeds (optional)
- [ ] Salt and pepper to taste
- [ ] Tomatoes and/or colorful mini peppers
- [ ] Estonian dark rye bread (100-percent rye sourdough)

Directions

1. Mix farmer's cheese, zucchini, and sour cream in a bowl and season with herbs, salt, and pepper.
2. Slice the rye bread and arrange the slices on a baking sheet.
3. Spread the farmer's cheese mixture on bread slices and decorate with thinly sliced tomatoes and peppers.
4. Bake the sandwiches at 395 F for 15-20 minutes.
5. Decorate with more fresh herbs and serve warm or at room temperature.

> Pro tips from D'Souza: Read the label. Some farmer's cheeses come with and without salt added. Make sure to adjust the recipe accordingly. Add an egg to the cheese mixture if it turns out too runny, or add more sour cream to create a lighter mixture if it seems too dense.

> Yields 8-10 slices

The story

This week, Tiina D'Souza of EstoEtno Fine Bakery shared her recipe for a warm open-faced Estonian dark rye bread (black bread) sandwich topped with farmer's cheese and herbs.

"No real Estonian can live without their rye bread," D'Souza explained.

The small northern European country set along the Baltic Sea and the Gulf of Finland counts Finland, Sweden, Latvia, and Russia as border neighbors. Dishes and ingredients shared between these countries abound. But one dish is quintessentially Estonian: dark rye bread, referred to as "leib" or "black bread."

Rye has grown in abundance in Estonia for more than a thousand years. In the Middle Ages, the country became the capital of rye production in Europe. Positioned along key trading routes and boasting strategic ports and several hundred islands, Estonia would change hands multiple times over the centuries before formally declaring independence from the Soviet Union in 1991.

Today, Estonia's culinary identity is inherently tied to rye. No meal is complete in Estonia without the presence of rye bread at the table.

This long-fermented (up to 24 hours), laboriously kneaded, nutrient-rich sourdough is nearly black in color, featuring a dense, tight crumb and crisp crust when baked. It can come with or without seeds.

Placed upon a cutting board, the squat appearance of an Estonian rye loaf resembles that of banana bread or a pound cake. It takes practice and patience to make, with coveted family recipes passed down from one generation to the next.

When D'Souza moved to Atlanta from Tallinn – Estonia's capital on the Baltic Sea – she set out in search of rye bread for her table. In her native Estonian city, dark rye bread is often dense and seedy, perfect for toasting, made sturdy enough for topping with a bounty of ingredients or sliced thick for dipping in hearty soups and stews.

D'Souza learned, however, that the US makes rye bread from wheat flour with some rye flour added for taste.

Already an avid baker, and tired of flying loaves of rye bread back and forth from Estonia to Atlanta, D'Souza founded EstoEtno Fine Bakery in 2017. Today, she sells her Estonian rye and sourdough breads, along with sweet and savory tarts, cookies, and squares of fruited sheet cake, at farmers' markets throughout metro Atlanta. People can also order D'Souza's Estonian breads and baked goods online for pick-up.

"Eating 100-percent rye (black) bread is a new experience for many here in Atlanta, and I get asked a lot how to serve it," D'Souza said. An open-faced sandwich she created years ago, topped with farmer's cheese and leftover vegetables and herbs, proved the easiest introduction.

Farmer's cheese (pressed, unripened cheese similar to cottage cheese but with a firmer and drier texture) is key to the sandwich, D'Souza said, and a staple used in many Estonian dishes and desserts. She suggests using either Lifeway Farmer Cheese from Sprouts or Friendship Farmer Cheese (kosher) found at Buford Highway Farmers Market and Your DeKalb Farmers Market.

"The recipe is very Estonian: quick, simple, and flavored with lots of herbs, but possible flavor combinations are endless," said D'Souza. "Given quantities are flexible, it makes the recipe perfect to change up and make your own."

Here's how Tiina D'Souza makes her **open-faced Estonian dark rye sandwich**.

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