

A tin of surströmming fermented herring is considered the world's smelliest food, and is essentially illegal outside Sweden. We head to the Baltic coast to see how it's produced

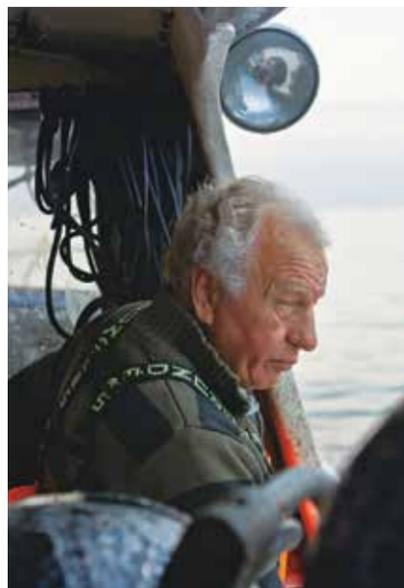
Words Toby Skinner
Photos Erik Olsson

The world's smelliest catch





This page
We went out at 2.30am with fishermen Hans Soderlund (centre) and Pontus Berg, which involved shaking out the herring nets and winching them from the boat into boxes
Opposite
Baltic herring getting processed at the Gösta Hannells Fisksalteri



If you look up surströmming on YouTube, three videos on the first page contain “vomit alerts”. In one, the three frat boy hosts of American channel Wreckless Eating all puke ostentatiously after simply sniffing an opened can of Sweden’s famous fermented herring. In a video for the UK’s more taciturn *Daily Telegraph* newspaper, the suited journalist dry retches as his cameraman looks on bemused, wearing a gas mask. “It smells of rotting dog faeces” is one of his more flattering verdicts on the odour.

A much-quoted 2002 study in Japan found that a newly opened can of surströmming is the most putrid food smell on the planet. The Baltic Sea herring, which has been a staple of Northern Swedish cuisine since the 16th century, keeps on fermenting once it’s tinned, so much so the tin bulges from all the pungent acids at work. It’s banned by most airlines as an explosion risk, and is effectively illegal outside Sweden.

Yet more than 800,000 cans are sold every year in Sweden, especially around the Surströmmingspremiären (Surströmming Premiere) on the third Thursday of August, when the year’s new batch hits the shelves. Across the country, and especially in the north and the Stockholm area, Swedes hold surströmming parties, serving tiny slivers of the fermented fish on tunnbröd bread with potato, onions and sour cream. The only dispute is whether it should be eaten with snaps, lager or – as the purists claim – cold milk.

It’s mid-May, and I’ve come to Skagshamn, on the north end of Sweden’s Høga Kusten (The High Coast), to go fishing for herring and to see it processed at the Gösta Hannells Fisksalteri, one of the world’s largest surströmming salting houses, which is best known for producing the iconic Röda Ulven (Red Wolf) brand since 1946.

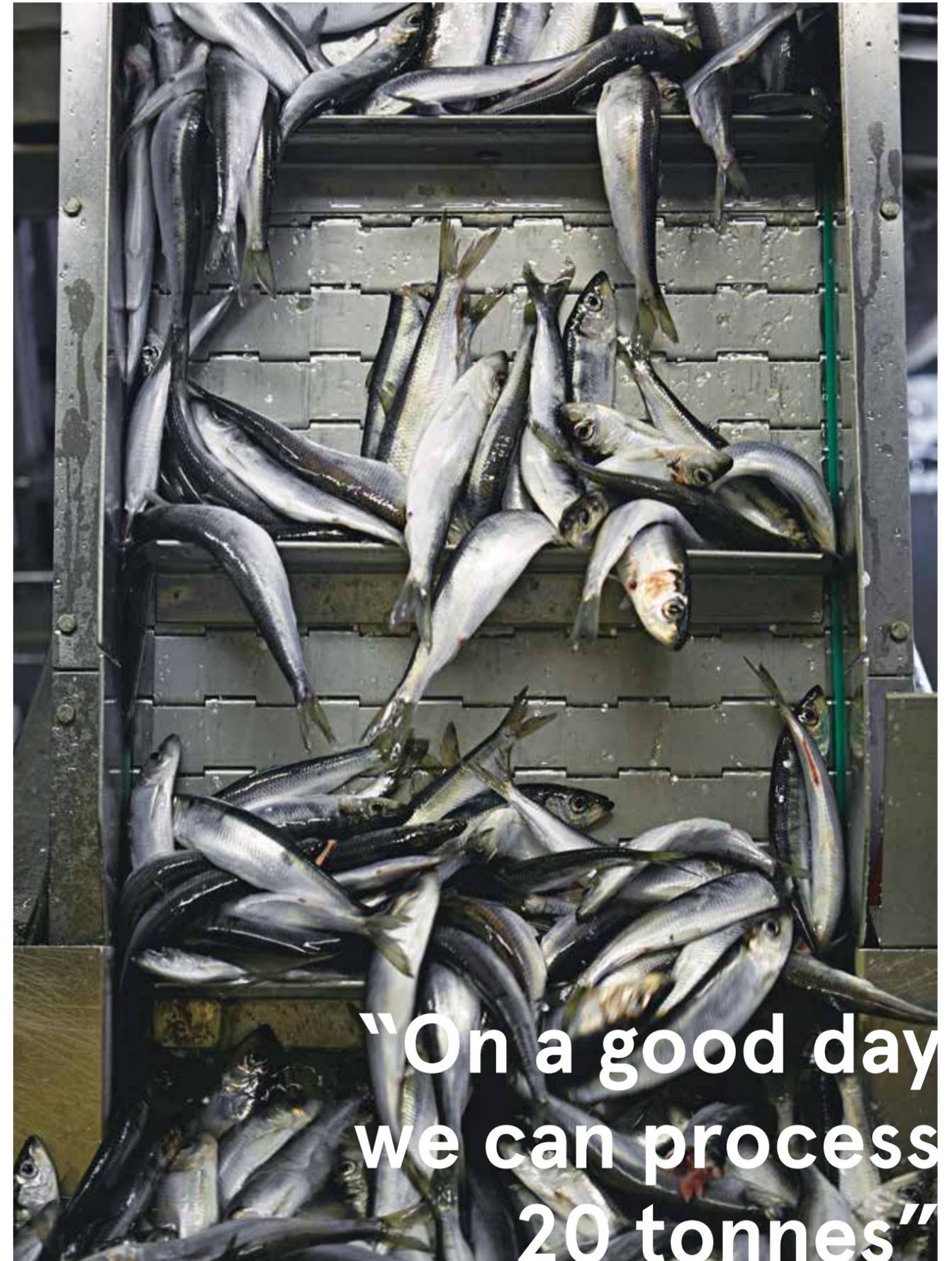
Baltic herring, which is smaller and less fatty than the common Atlantic herring, spawns off the coast of northern Sweden for just a few weeks between late April and mid-May.

It’s 2.30am, and I’ve had a fitful two hours sleep in an Umeå hostel, 90 minutes’ drive away, when I meet fishermen Pontus Berg and Hans Soderlund in the half-light by the deserted dock next to the salting house.

While Berg is only in his second year fishing for herring, Soderlund has been doing this for two decades – according to the younger man, he’s “a master; he just knows where the fish will be.”

As we head out to sea, with the rising Arctic sun turning the sky a pinky orange at around 3am, Berg explains their trade. Soderlund doesn’t speak much English, but laughs a lot and plies us with super-strength coffee. The pair are essentially freelancers, selling their catch for around SEK10/kilogram to the salting house, which can ferment around 110 tonnes of herring a year. Around seven boats go out in the area, competing for their share of the catch.

“On a good day, we can pull in four tonnes,” Berg explains. “But it’s the near the end of the spawning period now, and the catch is likely to be lighter. We’re almost done for the year.” »



“On a good day we can process 20 tonnes”





With herring their focus for just a few weeks of the year, and the water freezing in the winter, the fishermen have to be resourceful. In the summer, they sell salmon and other fish direct from the boat; in the winter, Berg does odd jobs while Soderlund used to work at Skellefteå airport, north of Umeå.

After around 40 minutes, we come to the first of two nets the fishermen laid yesterday. The nets are 180m long and 4m high, and are invisible to the herring, which swim straight into them. It takes around 10 minutes to winch in the thousands of Cuban cigar-sized fish, thrashing around as gulls squawk and circle overhead.

After repeating the process with another net, the most time-consuming part of the process is shaking out the nets. A machine at the stern of the boat jerks up and down, sending fish flying around the place as Berg and Soderlund reel in the nets by hand. At one point, I'm trying to have a nap in the front of the boat when a herring travels 5m through the air and hits me in the face.

At the end of the process, which takes almost an hour, the entire floor of the back section of the boat is carpeted with fish. Berg reckons they've reeled in just under a tonne, a satisfactory if unspectacular haul.

We get back to the dock at around 7am, where we have ham and brunost sandwiches on the boat with what must be the tenth coffee of the morning. Afterwards, Soderlund uses a forklift to lower a huge net to the side of the boat as Berg opens a hatch and flushes the fish into the net with a hose. The fish are then released from the nets into large boxes, ready to be processed.

A little after 8am, the Gösta Hannells Fisksalteri slowly kicks into gear. Essentially it's a giant shed filled with machinery, unused tins and hundreds of plastic barrels filled with salt water and fermenting herring. From the moment fish are delivered in boxes to the moment they leave in tins ready for the customer, every part of the process happens here. From late April to mid-May, they get the herring fermenting into large saltwater barrels; in June and July, a small army of casual workers comes and puts the fish in the mostly iconic red and yellow tins, ready to be sent around Sweden.

It all begins with the rhythmic whirr of machines. From the boxes, the herring are dumped into saltwater pools and sucked up onto a conveyor belt. The three workers manning the machines all wear beanies and earphones, and bounce around to what I'll later learn is mostly heavy metal and hip hop. With my stomach fragile from lack of sleep and bouncing around on a boat, the smell is nauseating.

The workers' main job is to keep the process running smoothly and to discard disfigured fish (around 3-4 per cent have been stood on, or their stomachs have exploded). The herring that pass muster are neatly and swiftly decapitated, with their bodies going one way and their bloodied heads heading another to be spat out into a huge, macabre bin. The bodies that pass the tests will go into another huge bin before being put in smaller saltwater barrels to start the fermenting process. »



This page / Johan Berlin (centre) oversees a team processing the herring, from quality control to putting them in barrels for fermentation / Opposite / Decapitated bodies ready to be put in barrels



“Surströmming is part of the fabric of the local area”



From top to bottom: The fillets simply ferment in salt water; vintage versions of the iconic red and yellow Röda Ulven tins; fishermen deliver boxes of fish to the salting house throughout the day



Up in the office, I meet factory manager Johan Berlin. He started here 12 years ago as a summer worker, putting the surströmming in tins in June and July, but has been manager for two years now, overseeing the whole operation.

He tells me that on a good day the salting house might process up to 20 tonnes of herring, with the eight-til-five day extended if there are more fish. And while he's got used to the smell – “it's worse in June and July, when the herring have had some time to ferment” – he says the best thing about the job is working for an iconic brand. “Surströmming is part of the fabric of the local area,” he says, pointing out that the world's only surströmming museum is just up the road in Skeppsmalen. “There's a lot of history bound up in this. It's partly why a lot of local people want to work here.”

Berlin works here year-round, managing distribution when the summer frenzy ends, but the rest of the workers do other things – Johan's brother Linus, who's one of the seven other workers on shift today, is a hockey coach, while others work as everything from welders to PAs.

And while surströmming is still more popular than most vomiting TV hosts might believe, it's not a growth industry. While most the workers are males in their early twenties, Lena Larson has worked on and off in the office here since 1963. “Back then, there were 16 in the office,” she says. “We'd produce up to half a million tins a year, whereas now we produce around 200,000.” With more than a half-century of working around surströmming, Larson's nose and taste buds have done some adjusting. “I think it smells lovely,” she says, without a hint of irony. The issue, says Berlin, is

the way people eat the dish today. “There's an older generation who still eat it as a staple dish, but they're getting fewer,” he says. “We sell most of the tins in August.” As recently as the early 1990s, Gösta Hannells produced 400,000 tins a year, a number that has halved.

Still, the salting house is doing fine. As Berlin stirs a bloodied barrel of fish, he tells me they're very close to reaching their quota for the year. Things will soon wind down, with the small crew of semi-skilled workers being replaced by around 20 15-to-18 year olds for the tinning. »



More smelly food



Durian

The only non-fermented item on the list (pictured above), the durian fruit is known for its custard-y texture and noxious rotten smell, which is so bad it's banned in a number of South East Asian countries. You can get it in Bangkok, though.



Hákarl

This Icelandic delicacy involves fermenting and drying rotten shark (fresh shark meat can be poisonous) for months, with the dead shark releasing a build-up of pungent ammonia. A similar process is used on Korean skate fish, or hongeo.



Kiviak

This Greenland delicacy involves wrapping small seabirds (auk) in sealskin, burying the mix and leaving it to ferment. When it is dug up, the inside of the bird is almost liquid and is sucked out after breaking off the head. It smells.



Stinky tofu

It's made by bathing fresh tofu in a brine of fermented milk, meat, vegetables and, on occasion, seafood, for so long that maggots take hold.



Vieux-Boulogne cheese

University of London experts found this to be the stinkiest cheese in the world. The raw milk cheese is dipped in beer during production, which causes a frenzied enzyme reaction during fermentation.

Meet the brands



Røda Ulva & Prima

Røda Ulva (Red Wolf) is the brand-leader for surströmming, and is easily recognisable for its iconic red and yellow tins. The brand was bought in 1946 by Gosta Hannells, which also produces Prima.



Oskars

Oskar Söderström first started fermenting herring in 1954 and marketed his yellow and red tins under his first name from 1966, on the advice of a local journalist.



Kallax & Ulvöprinsen

Like Røda Ulven, Kallax has been produced since the 1940s, while classic brand Ulvöprinsen (from 1932) was revived in 2011, using a recipe from the late 19th century.



The last thing to do, then, is to eat the stuff. The crew, led by Larson, set up an appealing spread on a table outside, with cans of Norrlands Guld beer as an accompaniment. Berlin scurries off to open a few tins. It's a crisp day with a slight wind, and yet a second after the tin opener punctures the lid, the smell hits my nostrils hard. People have claimed to smell newly opened tins from 100m away, and it's just



Clockwise from top: The smell is intense as soon as the tin is pierced; Toby Skinner's sloppily made surströmming on tunnbröd

about believable. It's not pleasant – the “zombie of the sea” smells, well, rotten. Used diapers are often invoked as a similar smell, and though that seems a little unfair I'm too tired to come up with a better olfactory description.

Still, everyone says it tastes better than it smells – and that the American TV hosts are idiots for simply eating chunks straight from the tin. While most tins come with the fish pre-filleted, I naively opt for a tin of un-filleted fish, and do a terrible, messy job of skirting around the bones, hoping no one's watching (they are). Hence I have minimal slivers of fish on the tunnbröd with the peeled boiled potatoes, onions and sour creams. Still, the flavour shoots through, and it's hard to describe if not entirely unpleasant – like a mix of strong cheese and fish, with an enigmatic, slightly metallic flavour. Most importantly, my fragile stomach is up to it, even if a gulp of beer goes down a treat.

One part I do like is the roe, which you only get in a few female pieces of fish, making eating surströmming a little like a lucky dip. Unlike the enigmatic flavour of the fish, the roe somehow still tastes like pure sea – it's incredibly salty, but pops in your mouth.

Unsurprisingly, everyone around the table loves surströmming. “People don't normally love it straight away,” says Berlin, “but after a while you somehow get it. Anyone can eat normal herring, but this is one of a kind.” I won't be eating this every day but, sitting in the sun in Arctic Sweden, I think I could just about get it. I'm ready for the Surströmmingspremiären. 🍷 salteriet.se



Norwegian flies to Umeå from Stockholm and Alicante. Book flights, a hotel and a rental car at norwegian.com