

# Proud Country Plays To Tune Of Iconic Composer Frolicking Through Finland

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Finns have got their priorities straight. First comes love of nature (60% of Finland is forested; much of the rest is water: Think birch-pine-lake, birch-pine-lake.) National pride is a strong second. After centuries of rule by Sweden and Russia, Finland won independence in 1917.

Finnish composer (and icon) Jean Sibelius went crazy over both. The master composed "Finlandia" -- more revered than the national anthem -- inspired by his tramps through Aulanko forest and built his home across the water from it, aside Lake Tuusula, amid fellow artists sick of foreign rule. On the eve of his 150th birthday anniversary, visitors can follow the trail of the composer's life, starting with a trek along the forest's well-tended paths, where birdsong inspired his melodies.

Sibelius was raised by a cash-strapped widow in nearby Hammeelinna, where his statue anchors the town park and his birth home is open for inspection. Visitors can hear his melodies on the very piano upon which he composed as they inspect manuscripts and photographs. Ainola, his long-time home on Lake Tuusula -- named for his wife, Aino -- also welcomes visitors. It stands exactly as the composer designed it: green-tiled stove (he equated green with the

happy sound of F Major), ash-trays for his unending cigars, paintings from admirers, the sauna Aino herself designed, the garden she planted to feed the six daughters she home-schooled. Aside it, the couple's shared grave is still shrouded with bouquets: JEAN SIBELIUS in mighty letters, Aino's name in tiny print.

This Renaissance woman, who dedicated her life to him, at last gets her due in nearby Jarvenpaa's Art Museum: a first-ever exhibit of her own life story: her needlework, the music she played (but never was allowed to when he was home), a novel she wrote, family photos. At the town's Flying Mitten Knitting Café (think kaffeeklatsch with knitting needles bobbing), a kit with her own designs is offered.

It's a short bike ride through fields and birch-pine-lakeside forests to Krapi Estate, converted from a cowshed to a cozy countryside hotel, with a dedicated Sibelius room and Sibelius menu of his favorite foods: sausages, herring, tomato-rhubarb salad, cabbage rolls. But first, a glorious hour **(Continued on page 6B)** in the lakeside smoke sauna before summoning courage to leap into the frigid water.

Then it's off to Helsinki and Hotel Kamp for a cocktail in the lounge where the composer himself had lounged, smoking cigars and sipping schnapps for a week at a time, leaving Aino home with the kids. The luxe

hotel anchors the showpiece Esplanadi, a classy boulevard lined with the iconic shops of Finnish home and fashion: Marimekko fabrics, Iittala crystal, Arabia china -- bisected by a festive, parklike median where all Helsinki strolls and suns, and people -- watching is a contact sport. Dine there aside the bandstand at Kappeli, offering another Sibelius menu starring his favorite creamy salmon soup bobbing with potatoes.

Esplanadi reaches its climax at the lively harbor on the Baltic, blooming with market stalls (knitwear, stylish leather, reindeer everything) and ferries churning to the green islands that festoon the bay. There, at City Hall, another Sibelius exhibit presents "the man behind the music:" Listen to recordings of the composer speaking, discover him, in photos, bouncing grandkids on his knee. An inland park anchors the city's Sibelius Memorial, a cluster of steel pipes that aroused admirers' wrath back in the day (What? No statue?) and now serves as photo op for countless tourists.

Finlandia, Helsinki's sleek concert hall, may be named for his most famous composition, but another Finnish bold name gets credit for its many visitors, and that is architect Alvar Aalto, whose streamlined furniture is also sold at his shop, Artek, along the Esplanadi. Another "star-architect" who left his imprint on the city is Eliel Saarinen, who later moved to

Evanston and worked on designs for the Chicago lakefront. His design for the Helsinki Central Railroad Station of 1910 is a jaw-dropping symbol of Finland's National Romantic style (think Art Nouveau's sexy curves embellished with motifs from nature — bears, pine cone, etc.).

He also designed the city's National Museum, a treasury of well-told history from the Stone Age on through the Swedish rulers (golden throne); medieval church carvings honoring St. Knut among other hallowed Nordics; homespun artifacts from lowly farmers, including gaily-painted horse collars and ironing boards; the birchbark knapsacks of far-northern tribes.

Design seems embedded in this people's DNA. The Design Museum proffers evidence, organized decade by decade, via everything from Nokia phones and Fiskars scissors to Iittala crystal and Merimekko placemats for Finnair. Wander upstairs to the Archaeology of Fashion display — more clean lines and bold colors on outfits from past to present. (Jackie Kennedy put Merimekko on

the U.S. map by buying nine outfits. In its lodestone shop on Esplanadi, folks still clamor to dress themselves and every inch of their homes.) And the style-forward leadership continues; pick up a walking map of the Design District to explore the indie boutiques of today's up-and-comers.

Then proceed to the nearest table, for the same creative spirit lights the kitchens of many a Helsinki restaurant. Sure, Copenhagen snags credit for the New Nordic food movement of the moment, but these more modest Finns display the same relish for forward gastronomy based on native products fused in creative ways. At Olo, on the waterfront, boasting a Michelin star does not equate with patrician preening. Guests dine in jeans on affordable four-course menus that segue from carrot in its many forms (liquid poured over crunchy, translucent slices, etc.) to cabbage wrapping pork and barley, to local pike with cukes and spring potatoes in pea stock, on to Apple Jack ice cream with gooseberry and spruce shoots.

Yes, spruce. Spruce sprouts

again at Nokka, housed in a former seaside warehouse, mingling with asparagus and mushrooms, followed by Finnish beef with goat cheese, black currant sauce, beet chunks and more spruce. Local fish comes partnered with nettles and smoked perch roe, while the birch sorbet is sided with elderberry-flower granite.

Spis, named Restaurant of the Year, just as informal, presents even more intricate plates: a trio of turnip, malt and kohlrabi, then cabbage: sweet-sour red, pickled sauerkraut; salmon with salad of carrot and parsley root; an intermezzo sorbet of spruce tips and pollen; then chicken on pickled hempseed and, ta-da, rhubarb with ice cream.

Enough? You crave classic granny fare? Try Kuu Kuu, voted Best Helsinki Menu, offering salmon soup and meatballs with lingonberries and whipped potatoes. Or classic Café Ekberg, where a warm salmon sandwich comes topped with a fried egg. A new Finnair flight from Helsinki to Chicago makes the journey all the easier. For information, see [www.visitfinland.com](http://www.visitfinland.com).