

Searching for a Sámi in New York City

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PETRA VALENTOVÁ/FEDERICA PAOLETTI

In her search for a Sámi, artist Petra Valentová met with 12 men she found through an online personal ad.

Searching for the elusive perfect mate in a big city can be a quixotic quest. Especially in the hands of Petra Valentová, a Czech artist who lives and works in New York.

What do we look for when we look for a date? What sorts of negotiations are we prepared to make? How do we search, and why? In an effort to answer these questions, Valentová invited a dozen men on dates and asked each to provide her with a recipe that somehow reflected his heritage. The result is *Searching for a Sámi/Cookbook*, released in Czech and English last month by Jitro. Title notwithstanding, the book is as much a personal and sociological study as a collection of recipes.

The project's genesis dates to 2003, when Valentová went to New York as a Fulbright scholar. Single and living alone, she soon found out many of her 30-and-over female friends were in the same boat.

"I had never experienced that before," she recalled via e-mail from Finland, where she is preparing an installation of her work. "This sort of fatal feeling that you're constantly surrounded by people but unable to connect with them." Finding a partner, she says, began to feel almost impossible.

Around the same time, Valentová – whose art often revolves around the themes of identity, memory and her own personal history – began to take special interest in the Sami, a people indigenous people to Scandinavia and parts of Russia, with whom she'd become obsessed during an ice-fishing expedition to Finland.

She found out that there are about 30,000 people of Sami ancestry living in North America. How many of them were in New York? How could she track them down?



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Each date provided Valentová with a recipe that reflected his heritage.

"Using simple logic, I decided to fuse the process of searching for a man with that of searching for a Sami," Valentová writes in the introduction to her book. "The Sami and the man of my dreams became one object of desire."

Valentová posted a notice on a popular online classified-advertising site, specifically seeking a man of Sami descent. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, she got plenty of responses from men who didn't know anything about the Sámi. (Sample responses: "emotionally available"; "avid gym-goer"; "not Sámi but ... from Norway" "normal guy who likes to have fun".)

She met with 12 of them. From each man, she requested a recipe – sometimes directly, sometimes circuitously so as to reveal as little about her project as possible. Something that reflected his background or heritage.

"I wanted to them to share something with me," she wrote. "I wanted to know what they like."

She decided to use recipes, she said in the interview, because they are universal, part of everyone's experience. "It's something even my grandmothers could use," she said. "I realized that food is the centre of families and meetings – when you go on a date, you usually end up in a restaurant or in a bar – and it can also be a source of conflicts."

Thus, her meeting with each man came to be represented by a single dish, cooked by Valentová and her friends, according to the recipe provided.

In the book, Valentová illustrates each date with a pair of photographs, printed on facing pages. The first is of herself and the potential partner; the second shows the meal that resulted from the meeting, each food photo depicting a different stage of consumption. The photos are introduced by the man's e-mail response to Valentová's ad and the recipe he provided.

While some of the meals look mouth-watering (it's a motley collection, ranging from potato salad to sauerbraten to pan-seared wild bass), others seem downright unappetizing. In some photos the dish has been reduced to the leftover scraps remained smeared on the plate when the dinner was over.

The aim is to reflect Valentová's different perception of each man. "Our culture has made food into a fetish – a celebrity. We're always seeing touched-up photographs of food in glossy magazines. I wanted to depict the food a little bit like sex in a very primitive and real way," she said. "You cook the food, eat it, and then there are leftovers. For me, food serves as a parallel to a relationship. It's not always ideal and beautiful. It's organic and complicated."



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Valentová eventually found her Sámi, but he wasn't her man.

The first section of the book – the recipe part – ends with her final date, where she meets her ideal partner, as stipulated by her conditions: a man of Sámi descent. Appropriately, he provided Valentová with a dessert recipe – lingonberries with cream sauce.

Judging from the delicate presentation of cream and berries in the appealingly lit photograph, he must have made a pretty good impression. But while Valentová found "her Sámi", he wasn't "her man". "Just because we set certain criteria doesn't necessarily mean that this is what we want," she noted.

But rather than marking a dead end, Valentová's Sámi, and the stories and experiences he shared with her, served as a launching pad for a new quest: seeking knowledge about the Sámi as a people.

The second part of her book picks up on this theme, with an extensive section on the history of the Sámi, and concludes with a fictitious journey from New York to Anchorage, Alaska. There seems little doubt that for Valentová, this will turn into yet another starting point.