

A Beginner's Guide to Grocery Shopping in Finland

by Laura Luoto

In general, food in Finland is more expensive than in other European countries, but mostly it is of very high quality. Finnish supermarkets often bake their own bread and have their own line of products which are cheaper. For the HOK-Elanto chain (Prisma stores, S-Markets) it's Rainbow, for the K-Market chain Pirkka and for Suomen Lähikauppa chain (Valintatalo stores, Siwas and Euromarkets) it's Euroshopper. There's also Lidl, which is German grocery store chain that sells considerably cheaper products than other stores.

Ethical signs

If you want to favour environmentally friendly products, look for the Swan sign (Joutsenmerkki) on the packaging. It looks like this:



It's purpose is to help consumers make environment conscious choices as well as urge companies to produce more goods and services in a way that supports sustainable development. It poses strict criteria for products and it's a very respected environment sign.



The Fair trade sign is the same here as everywhere else in the world. It's found on products that support developing countries and sustainability. Fair trade products can be found among regular products.

For locally produced goods or services, look for the key flag sign (avainlippu-tunnus).



Overview of basic products

Dairy (Maitotuotteet)

It may be fair to say the Finland has the most versatile dairy products in the world. First of all, there's milk (maito), sour milk (piimä), yogurt (jogurtti), viili (a kind of yogurt) and ice cream (jäätelö), but then there're also low-fat (kevyt, vähärasvainen), non-fat (rasvaton) and low-lactose (vähälaktoosinen, HYLA) and non-lactose (laktoositon) versions of these.

Sour milk is basically milk gone bad. It tastes tart and is thicker than regular milk. It's also good for one's stomach, because it has more lactic acid bacteria than milk but no lactose.

Viili is a kind of ropy yogurt, which tastes sour. Like sour milk, it's also very good for your metabolism. It's quite common to eat it with fruit or jam.



There is a wide range of cheese (juusto) varieties available in Finnish grocery stores. There are also low-fat versions of most of them. The percentage of fat in the cheese is written on the packaging. Cottage cheese (raejuusto) is very commonly used in salads. Also a Finnish speciality leipäjuusto (direct translation: bread cheese) is traditionally eaten as a desert with berries.

The name comes from its bread-like appearance – it still tastes like cheese! (See picture!)



Bread (Leipä)

Rye (ruis) is probably the most popular bread ingredient in Finland. It is also quite cheap and very good for your metabolism as it has a lot of fibre. However, it may take a while to get used to as it is quite hard to digest. One of the cheapest types of rye bread is crisp bread (näkkileipä). Limppu is a traditional kind of

sweet rye bread served mostly at Christmas and Easter time.

Plain white bread is quite scarce in Finland. We prefer whole wheat and pretty much every kind of bread you'll encounter will have at least 3 different types of wheat in it. If it's white bread you want, I suggest ranskanleipä (direct translation: French bread, see picture)) or white toast.

Alcohol (alkoholi)

The state-owned Alko store has the monopoly of selling hard liquor. Ciders, beers and wine coolers can be purchased from a regular grocery store. It's important to note that you need to be at least 20 years old in order to buy spirits (väkevät) – that is to say, distilled beverages with more than 20 % alcohol.

It is also very important to observe the recycling system in Finland. There are recycling points for cans and bottles near the entrance of every grocery store. You get a small deposit (0,15 € for cans, 0,10 – 0,40 € for bottles) if the can/bottle is intact when it's recycled. Crumpled cans or broken bottles are no good. Plastic bottles need to have the cork on them.

It is basically forbidden by law to drink alcohol in public, but everyone does it, especially on Vappu (the first of May celebration). However, if you drink alcohol or smoke in public transportation, the conductor, driver or security guard has the right to throw you out.

Also, a piece of friendly advice: liquor in Estonia is a lot cheaper than in Finland.

Vegetables (vihannekset) and root vegetables (juurekset)

When buying vegetables it's naturally best to avoid imported ones as they're not of such good quality compared to local ones. You'll see the country of origin of each vegetable (and fruit, as well) above the price.

Root vegetables are very popular in Finland and are vital in many traditional foods such as stews (mainly because they can be stored for a very long time). "Root" is the underground part of the vegetable. Carrots (porkkana) probably everyone is familiar with but here's a list of the most common root vegetables found in Finland that you may not have heard of before. They are all grown locally.



Rutabaga (Lanttua)

- mild taste
- good for soups and stews

Beetroot (Punajuuri)



- juicy, good for stews and soups
- includes lots of iron

Celeriac (Juurselleri /Mukulaselleri)



- used in soups and stews as flavouring
- tastes like celeriac

Parsnip (Palsternakka)



- tastes a little stronger than carrots, colour lighter than carrots
- mainly for stews

Turnip (Nauris)



- for soups and stews

Radish (Retiisi)



- lots of different varieties
- entire plant edible
- bulb usually eaten raw
- good for salads

Special diets

The cheapest way to replace meat is to use textured vegetable protein (soijarouhe). It's even a lot cheaper than meat and carries roughly the same amount of protein. It should be found in basic grocery stores in the organic foods section or in the area with flours and such. It doesn't have a lot of taste in itself, so one can season it however one likes. Typically the protein is soaked in water before being fried.

There's an area behind the Hakaniemi hall at the beginning of Hämeentie (near Hakaniemi metro station) where a lot of oriental food shops are located. You can buy pretty much anything you could if you were in India or China. The prices shouldn't be too high, either.

If it's organic food (luomu, luonnonmukainen) you're interested in, some big grocery stores have a special section for it. Also an organic version can be found in milk, yoghurt, and vegetables. Naturally, it will cost a little more than regular food. There is also an organic grocery store Ruohonjuuri (grass root) in Kamppi, next to Aussie Bar and across from the shopping centre's western entrance.

For people with celiac disease, there are products without gluten spread among normal products.