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# «Achtung, die Linden blühen!»

## Severin Jann, Blanka Dominika Major, Valentin Ribi

«Just follow the scent of the trees» would be the advice of an experienced collector. Although it seems to be common knowledge that the linden trees make the air of Zurich smell sweet each June, we don't really know which fragrance we are looking for exactly. We carry a ladder on our shoulder and search for a tree in full bloom, with branches low enough so we can easily reach them. Out of the many linden species, it has to be a winter or a summer linden in particular to make the fragrant tea out of the dried blossoms. Just behind Bahnhof Oerlikon we find a whole alley of them, we set up the ladder and start our collection. The picking takes a lot of patience, each blossom is taken off carefully, one by one slowly filling up our paper bags. Meanwhile people pass us hastily on the way from the train station to the shopping centre down the street.<sup>(A)</sup>

The tea made out of their blossoms is not only a seemingly simple example of our food system, but also poses the question of what a city is and who has the right to make use of it. The food system is an interconnected network that is multi-scalar and globalized. Centralization and consolidation have led to lines of production that determine how, when and where certain foods are available and produced. Relying on standardization, these lines commodified blossoms for tea to the product «Bio Lindenblütentee» coming in 20 convenient two-chamber bags at 1.5g, available all year around. As consumers we stand at the end of that line. According to the geographer David Harvey, these threads of the food system can be followed to study material processes of social reproduction.<sup>(1)</sup> For us, the performative act of picking serves as a way to engage with the tea: tracing back a network and a history in space and time reveals a tangible reality of places. At the same time, picking and gleaning can re-evaluate the understanding of the existing structures in the city and make them visible. Zurich's linden trees show that the identity and the everyday reality of a place are strongly related to the interaction with food.

Decades ago the collective picking of linden blossoms used to be a common practice in Zurich—families collected them in their free time, teachers and pastors gathered volunteers for the work of picking to have the valuable tea for the community.<sup>(2) (B)</sup> Until the 80s, every June the daily newspapers were filled with the call to collect. «Soon the scent of linden blossoms, that most wonderful of all summer blossom scents, will permeate our city. Equipped with ladders, with baskets

and crates, the pickers will set out to collect the linden blossoms from the trees standing on public ground, and this may be done without special permission from the Gartenbauamt» wrote the «Neue Zürcher Nachrichten» on June 4, 1948.<sup>(3)</sup> Ladders could even be borrowed from the Stadtgärtnerei made available for this magic moment of the year. Nothing should go to waste, also mentioning the blossoms' economic value: «[...] it is time to point out to all owners of linden trees that dried linden blossoms are a valuable article of commerce». <sup>(4)</sup> The trees and the knowledge around them were part of the shared public realm and the city, even in its most unexpected forms, was considered productive.

The ladder, which we use for picking that day, we brought ourselves. The Stadtgärtnerei stopped lending ladders in the 1980s due to liability and security provisions and maybe also because the value of the blossoms and the will to pick decreased among the inhabitants of Zurich.<sup>(5)</sup> During our harvesting, we met only one other person picking linden blossoms. She told us that for her it was a ritual at the beginning of each summer. She was around 50 years old and stowed the linden blossoms with skillful hands in a small paper bag that she always carried around in her handbag, in case she found the right tree at the right time.

While some people look forward to the June bloom to come, car owners curse that time for bringing down sticky honeydew on the glossy surface of their cars. It is mistaken for dirt, while the blossoms used to provide Zurich's signature tea, the taste that meant home and brought the joy of summer back to the long months of winter. Taste and scent can trigger memories of childhood, the safety of days gone by and ultimately the feeling of comfort. Originating in old French «conforten» or «conforter» it means to solace, to help or even to strengthen.<sup>(6)</sup> The various significations are applicable to a simple cup of linden tea which turns it to «comfort food» in this sense.

In the current times of industrialized food production, cheap sugar and supermarkets, hardly anyone would still describe linden tea as comfort food. The nostalgic dimension of place and linked memories got lost and the comforting effect of eating is rather understood on a physical than psychological level. Eating foods with a high fat or sugar content triggers chemical reactions in our bodies that make us feel happy for a short time.<sup>(7)</sup>

A



A The act of picking: on a ladder with a paper bag, Zurich, 2021. Image: authors

B



B The act of picking: on a ladder with a paper bag, Zurich, 1970. Image: Kurt Schollenberger

But there is a new development: with increasing health awareness, consumers are starting to reject this type of satisfaction. Supermarkets are trying to sell us food that is not only good for our bodies but also our environment. Comforting wallet, conscience and climate at the same time while offering «Feel good for 1 Franc!»<sup>(8)</sup> With a similar promise, also organically produced linden blossom tea can be bought cheaply at Migros. The consumer rating online is high, but as a review points out that even the organic label cannot fully replace the memory of summer: «until now, this is the best tasting linden blossom tea I have found. But I continue to search, because I remember it to be a little more intense and softer.»<sup>(9)</sup>

In contrast to our self-collected blossoms, the purchased tea from the supermarket down the street has traveled a long distance until it reaches the shelves. When we start tracing back the small boxes of tea the next place we arrive at is the Migros distribution centre located at Pfingstweidstrasse in Zurich. The boxed tea bags arrive there on pallets after a 5-hour truck-ride from Grettstadt, Southern Germany. There, they were stored in a big box: a high-bay warehouse of the Ostfriesische Tee Gesellschaft, built in 2016. The OTG is part of the Laurens Spethmann Holding with annual sales of 660 Million Euro that specializes in the trade and production of tea. The company sells various own brands but also produces for third-party labels like Migros.<sup>(10)</sup> The processing of tea takes place next door at the Kräuterhaus Wild, which is part of the holding. There the linden blossoms, first portioned into tea bags, are packed into the small cardboard boxes.

Grettstadt is a village with little more than 4,200 inhabitants. The tea business adds a few thousand square meters of generic factory buildings to the place consisting of an old centre surrounded by single family homes. Incidentally, the major attraction is still a 250-year-old pyramid-shaped linden tree in the middle of the village. With its former meaning as both a «Tanzlinde» and a «Gerichtslinde» it marked the centre of the community both spatially and symbolically.<sup>(11)</sup>

In Grettstadt we lose track of the raw material. Where the linden blossoms have their origins is difficult to say, even for the company itself.<sup>(12)</sup> The origins of the shredded blossoms in the teabags are generalized by Migros as «Europe» or «Asia». The countries of origin

vary from Hungary, Slovakia or Romania as the harvest changes from season to season while the quality has to stay at the same level. These places merely share their large forests with linden trees—and labour is cheap. Under these conditions the price can stay low, although the blossoms are still picked by hand in forests or groves. Whole blossoms can also be bought at Migros for a much higher price, then coming from France where the act of picking linden blossoms is celebrated as a cultural practice involving folk/traditional costumes and pride. In the supermarket these differences, the collectors and the places remain invisible and we are left with the little green box consistently filled with content. The tea has turned into a commodity, the boxes that sit upon the supermarket shelves are «mute» and their origin remains abstract.<sup>(13)</sup>

Standing on the ladder just behind Bahnhof Oerlikon, surrounded by the honeyed smell that now is irreversibly connected with the linden tree, the act of picking blossoms seems to «unmute» the commodity Harvey is referring to and turn it into food and ultimately even comfort food again. Similarly the abstract box in the supermarket turns into a container for a whole story, simultaneously taking us to Oerlikon and to Grettstadt, mentally bridging the two places.

Before we set out to pick blossoms, we never noticed how many linden trees there actually are in the city. By abandoning the act of picking, the trees were rendered invisible. To the same extent the labour disappeared to an unknown place. A practice like picking can shift the perception of the tree from a decorative city tree to a productive living entity: the seemingly banal act of drinking tea can then be a way to reclaim the city and its shared resources. A productive or even edible city might then no longer be about balcony gardens and raised beds in cargo boxes but encompass a much wider presence of plants that already inhabit the city.<sup>(14)</sup> Going to the supermarket is comfortable, while picking blossoms, drying them and drinking the tea can be comforting on a very different level. Engaging with what already exists in our city, appreciating its scents and growth, might enable us to see beyond mere objects and intervene in the spatial reality of consumption. In the case of Zurich all we might need is a ladder, a paper bag and the will to follow that familiar sweet scent wherever it takes you.