

Dispatches from Sweden: What Is Fika?

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Today I write from Sodermalm, Stockholm, where I've just enjoyed fika with Samuel Ivarsson at [the Café Rival](#). He's the manager of this beautiful café attached to the Hotel Rival, the five-star hotel owned by Benny Andersson, member of ABBA and co-composer of musicals such as *Mama Mia!* While Samuel and I are drinking coffee, we're discussing coffee – and the meaning of 'fika.' Throughout my past week in Stockholm, I've seen dozens of signs outside of cafes beckoning me to come inside for 'Swedish fika.'



But “to fika” is not the same thing as just “drinking coffee.” And the word “fika” cannot be translated literally into English – and several Swedes have told me that this is intentional. Fika is used as both a noun and a verb: so, one can “have fika,” or one can participate in the action of “fika” – my preferred usage in light of my own Swedish heritage.

Fika has a long history in Sweden, and I'm delighted to learn the tradition is alive and well. But while the ritual is broad enough to include many different interpretations, it is neither a 'coffee break', nor 'afternoon tea.' And it's even institutionalized at jobs ranging from the military to teaching, often including two breaks during each work day for fika with one's colleagues!

In Sweden, the ritual includes a hot drink (usually coffee) and something sweet. In the morning, this may include a luscious cardamom bun with its scent of cinnamon and vanilla. (Try a recipe from [Del's Cooking Twist](#) if you want to try this at home.)

This afternoon, Samuel's and my fika includes homemade pastries from the Café Rival bakery and Fair Trade espresso from Arvid Nordquist, one of Sweden's classic coffee roasters.



Our espresso is brewed by expert barista Richard Nilsson, who has worked in the café for six years. Between the steady stream of customers looking for a late lunch or a drink, he joins our discussion about the definition and meaning of fika. As I describe the features of a typical “coffee break” from my past office jobs in the U.S., I can't help but smile as Richard shakes his head disapprovingly. To have fika doesn't mean one stands drinking coffee in an office kitchen as an extension of a work meeting, or that one stands alone outside one's office building. Fika lingers because it means pleasurable conversation with others.



Perhaps most of all, fika is an experience – one that, as Samuel tells me, has “everything to do with the meaning of life – to enjoy, to slow down, to feel comfortable, to talk or gossip” – especially with one's family and friends. To him, “fika means happy times.”

Certainly all the Nordic countries rank consistently at the top of ten of the happiest countries on earth, according to the [annual World Happiness Report](#).

Could it be something as simple as having fika contributes to Swedish joy?

After my welcome to the Café Rival, my answer is a definitive Yes!

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Tack så mycket till Sean Naughton, Rival Hotel concierge & [the Stockholm Tourist](#).