



Food Days 2026: Connections that keep the Food System growing

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Five years of Food Days

This was the fifth time Food Days was held in Seinäjoki, co-organized by the Ruralia Institute at the University of Helsinki, Into Seinäjoki and SEAMK. The location was Rytmikorjaamo, and this year we were altogether 200 people representing 10 nationalities. Put next year's edition in your calendar already: 28th to 30th September 2027, right here in the Food Province of Finland!

Where people and ideas meet

From my point of view, the goal of Food Days is to showcase the work done in and for the food system in South Ostrobothnia and beyond. By inviting speakers, panellists and participants from the organisers' wider networks, we make serendipitous encounters possible in a stimulating environment. This cross-pollination of people, organisations and ideas is not only practically useful, but also great fun! I was pleased to see repeat visitors at the event, and for my part I had several exchanges with people I would never have thought to contact on my own.

But first: food!

I look at the event from the point of view of a project professional and, by extension, ask how we can develop the region further. But the first word in the event name is the most important: FOOD! We started the event week with a get-together dinner at our teaching restaurant Prikka. My colleague Elisa Ylinen and her hospitality management students had conjured up a buffet of local, seasonal delicacies for our guests to nibble on. We also had a fun quiz with the participants on South Ostrobothnian food traditions. I was even challenged on the spot to reformulate a regional classic, “limppisoppa” (dumpling soup), as a gluten-free version. Let’s see if we can manage it for next year! Food was also on offer at the event itself, with local producers showing their wares and specialities at Local Food Market by Food Province of Finland: [Fifth Flavour](#), [Korvalaanen](#), [Hunaja Hetki](#), [Nमितुपा](#) and [Kavee](#). Local Food Market was organised by [KYLIS](#) and [Innovative and Agile Food Province](#) -projects.

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The value of the network

I’m not going to go through all the fantastic presentations and panels at the event. You will have to come yourself next time to hear the good bits that also happen in the informal parts of the programme: at dinners, on study visits and over coffee. But I do want to share my takeaways from one point repeatedly emphasised by several speakers: networks and connections. In my work, I want to put the capabilities we have at [SEAMK Food Labs](#) to better use for other food-system actors, with particular emphasis on our region’s food enterprises of all sizes. But we are not the only ones here to help. The event’s co-organisers, our respective and complementary connections, and the ad hoc network formed at the event itself all have something to offer!

Trust grows through repeated contact

When you want to add a new food to your diet, you have to try it a few times before you know whether you take to it. First impressions are important, but not enough: repeated exposure changes the palate, and new flavours become accepted alongside familiar ones. Similarly, we as RDI actors in the food system need repeated contact with the stakeholders we work with. Through that contact, a zone of trust can be built. With trust, we can share our challenges and lessons learnt and move forward together. In my specialisation, food-process digitalisation, I have examples from the [SS4AF network](#) of what could work and whom to ask. We are also very happy to help SMEs navigate new regulations and standards that they might not have time to familiarise themselves with nor should they need to do it alone. For example, several support actors are already set up to help SMEs understand the [Packaging and Packaging Waste Regulation \(PPWR\)](#), and much of this advice is available without money changing hands directly. If, for example, we in SEAMK’s Pappa

project cannot help, we are very happy to find the right contact in our network.



Group photo, l-r: Hugo Pol, Frank de Boeff, Simon Maas, Derk Oorburg, Markus Ojala. New and old friends at Food Days! (Source: Into Seinäjoki).

Could we build a network of our own?

On connections and networks, the example of Hansalim from South Korea piqued my interest. Through the SS4AF partnership and the SIXFOLD project, I've spent some time thinking about how to manage and nurture networks. Hansalim's example of a federated, equality-focused cooperative around food, agriculture and culture touches on some of the same points. In my personal life, I left X and moved to the Fediverse: federated social media powered by the ActivityPub protocol. In short, it lets you choose a server and still communicate with people on other servers. On X, you are always on X's servers; in the Fediverse, you can choose, move or even build your own. In that sense, it is more like email: you can send messages to people outside your own @ domain. One useful feature is public verification of your profile. If you can add a specific, unique piece of code to your domain, for example, www.myownsite.com, you can display a verification mark showing that you control both the website and the profile. If I had a profile called Markus Food Days and access to the code of fooddays.fi, for example, the profile could display that verified link. This has benefits over paying a platform for the privilege while retaining more control over your digital presence. Could we move beyond simply connecting on LinkedIn and build something of our own together? Mind you, this need not be "either/or", but "yes, and". It might also offer a way to build a digital network outside Facebook groups. Currently, for example, REKO works through a platform that is outside the hands of its moderators, participants and SMEs, and it works well enough. But the platform owner can pull the plug at any time, so a

backup might be wise.

The mycelium beneath the network

When we started SIXFOLD, we received training in co-creative methods at the first kick-off and built models of what a network of Food Living Labs could look like. We got castles, parks and houses, but the one that stayed with me was the analogy of mycelium and fungi. The network should work like a cross-connected mycelial web, mostly out of sight. Projects, activities and Living Labs are the visible mushrooms on the forest floor, but they are only the part we can see. The mycelium is what makes the whole system work and grow. It also makes it possible to weather bad conditions, only to spring up again stronger. The connections made at Food Days add another layer that complements the existing ones. New links strengthen the network and create connections between nodes of people, organisations and ideas. These constellations, in turn, create new configurations that help sustain the layered web.

Let's keep the network growing

If these ideas connect with your work, please reach out. Whether you are a food company, researcher, developer, policymaker or simply curious about what is happening in the food system, there is room in the network for new conversations and collaborations. And if you want to experience the encounters, ideas and food for yourself, join us in Seinäjoki for the next Food Days on 28–30 September 2027. Put it in your calendar and come help us grow the next layer of the network.

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SIXFOLD project: This article reflects experiences gained through SIXFOLD, a Horizon Europe project developing and connecting Food Living Labs within the Smart Sensors 4 Agri-food partnership.

InAFQual – Interreg Aurora: The article also relates to InAFQual, an Interreg Aurora project advancing accessible AI, TinyML and spectral-imaging solutions for food-quality control, particularly for small and medium-sized food companies in Arctic regions.

Further reading

- [Food Days Seinäjoki 2026](#) event overview, programme and organisers.
- [SEAMK Food Labs](#) services, facilities and collaboration opportunities for food-sector companies.
- [SIXFOLD Horizon EU project](#) aims, Living Lab network and project information.
- [European Commission FAQ on the Packaging and Packaging Waste Regulation](#) practical guidance on PPWR.
- [W3C ActivityPub Recommendation](#) the technical standard behind federated social networking.
- [eRural Resilience](#) digital capabilities and e-bio-business support for rural SMEs and their support organisations.

- Better Food Packaging and Packaging Solutions (PAPPA) practical support for food SMEs responding to packaging regulation and sustainability requirements.
- Innovative and Agile Food Province strengthens the agility, collaboration and innovation capacity of South Ostrobothnia's food sector.
- KYLIS – Added Value to Agriculture through Development and Cooperation supports agricultural and food-sector actors in creating added value through practical development and cooperation.
- InAFQual affordable AI, TinyML and spectral-imaging solutions for food-quality control in Arctic SMEs.

Note on the use of AI

Generative AI was used to support the drafting, language revision and structuring of this article. The author reviewed, edited and takes responsibility for the final content.