

011009 Going to the grocery store

Here in Copenhagen, dining out is expensive so I cook most every dinner and bring my lunch with me to university each day (sandwiches on rye, of course!). In Lyngby, there are several grocery store chains as well as smaller mom and pop type places that are more expensive than the chains and do not offer as good a variety. The chain stores are small, maybe 1000 square meters or 10000 square feet. (On a side note, I am totally loving studying here in the land of the metric system. Having to deal with the stupid pound mass vs pound force of the English system was awful. You had to deal with slugs, mugs, dixie bells and other crazy units to convert from mass to weight.) There are maybe seven main chains with few free standing stores and mostly stores in the store fronts in town. There are also several grocery stores in the Store Center which is the mall in Lyngby. I mostly shop at grocery stores called Føtex, Irma and Netto because they have the best prices. I usually shop at all three because they offer different deals. Irma and Føtex are very similar, but Irma has the best produce. The third store, Netto is a student's paradise due to its low prices.

Netto is owned by the shipping company, Maersk which actually also owns Føtex. A Danish friend explained to me that the quality of the goods that Netto sells may not be as good as the other stores, but the quality is always consistent whereas the quality the more expensive stores may vary from excellent to poor at any given week. Some of the produce at Netto may leave a little to be desired, but they have great deals on other things. For instance, I can buy a big packet of digestive biscuits at Netto that is twice the size of the ones in the other stores, but one third of the cost. I can also find the identical lunch meat packets or other prepackaged food items at Netto for several Krone less. So, on my shopping expedition, I go to Irma and Føtex first since they are next to each other in the mall to check out the deals that they have and then finally to Netto to finish up my shopping.

No matter which grocery store you go into, the basic layout is the same. You enter the shopping area through an electronic gate at waist level which swings open for you to let you in, but prevents people from exiting from the entrance. The aisles and the arrangement of goods are much the same as at smaller grocery stores in the US. However, the number of similar products produced by different manufacturers is less than in the US. Meats are kept in open freezers that are waist high and you reach down into. The larger stores also sell clothing or electronics.

Kellogg is a big seller of corn flakes which are a popular student food. I instead opt for Mussli which is delicious. You can find a wide assortment of jellies, pasta, cookies and meat. Pretty much what you would expect to find in a grocery store. Some stores also have salsa or other ethnic foods, but not a wide selection. You need to go to the ethnic grocery stores in town to find a better selection. The widest selection of any item is by far in the candy section. There are lots of gummy candies and chocolate. Mmmm. Particularly popular is the black licorice which is a taste experience all in its own. The Danish love this stuff. What separates it from the licorice in the US is that it is salty. The taste is truly unique. There is also black licorice that is in hard, crystal form that you can

buy from the drug store for medical purposes. I will have to try it at some point. But, the Danes have been shocked at the idea of the strawberry flavored licorice that we all know.

The cheese selection at the grocery stores is also quite prodigious. However, I have not yet deciphered the packaging of the cheese. I believe that they are sold by fat content, but I am not sure. Anyway, the high price of meat and cheese has led me to exclude them from my diet, other than lunch meat. Basically, a grocery stores in Denmark are just normal grocery stores with shelves full of products which have labels that you can not read.

All of the stores except Netto offer sales. Tove gets a stack of circulars in her mailbox each Saturday. For example, you can find 10 bananas for 20 Kr. However, this is not like the stores in the US where you could buy 5 bananas for 10 Kr. I tried that once and the cashier was nice and explained that I certainly wanted to go back to get 10 bananas total since each banana cost 3.5 Kr. each if you did not buy 10. The same applies for deals for example on orange juice (appelsin juice) where you might see 2 boxes for 30 Kr. Therefore, in order to take advantage of deals, you must be willing to stock up.

Once you have filled your hand held basket (for the most part, no shopping carts), you head up to the register. The register is similar to the US where you have a belt that you put the items on and the cashier moves them forward. Be certain to place the plastic strip between your purchases and that of other patrons. I have not quite figured out the rule of whether each person should put it down before your purchases or after. However, having gotten in trouble in the past, I make sure that I put the strips down before and after my goods.

Your goods make their way to the cashier and he or she begins to ring them up. The belt leads to a flat area where you are to bag your groceries using a plastic bag that you can buy, or your backpack. There is a divider which the cashier can move which will send the purchased items to either the left or the right side of the counter. You then move to start bagging your goods as the cashier finishes. Once the total is arrived at, in some stores there is a little metal tray at the end of the counter, but within reach of the cashier where you put your money if you are paying by cash. In other stores, you walk back to the cashier to pay. In either case, your change and receipt will go back into the metal tray, never into your hands. Once you pay, you must rush to bag everything since the flow of patrons is quick and someone else will need to take your spot soon.

From there, you just walk out of the store to your bike where you either put your food on the metal rack over your back tire, or you swing your backpack onto your back. And, you can have this adventure every day but Sunday when all of the stores are closed. The hours of the grocery stores are longer than most any other business. On weekdays they are open from 9 til 8. Saturday from 8 til 5. Mom and pop stores can have longer hours due to rules that if your store earns less than a certain amount, you can be open longer. You can tell the stores owned by Muslims because they set their fruit outside of the store. The Danes never do this unless they just sell fruit outdoors from a stand.

There are also special stores in the mall or in town where you can buy just meat or cheese or baked goods. Mmmm, vienerbrød. Gas stations also have food marts, just like in the US. But, if you are studying on campus after 7PM when the last of the cafes closes, you are out of luck if you are looking to buy food other than at a restaurant after a 15 minute bike ride to Lyngby. Coffee too is not to be found at night. There is also a lack of vending machines on campus, so no sodas for those late night efforts to study. You really need to plan ahead and stock up before you go to school.

Transportation

The bus and subway system here is great and you can get to pretty much wherever you want to go by a combination of the two. Bus stops are clearly marked and there is a time table at the bus stop to tell you when the next bus is coming (they are always on time). Similarly at the train station, there are overhead indicators to tell you which train will arrive next and when down to the fraction of a minute. The maps for both systems are easy to read and handy. The trains run from about 5 o'clock in the morning until a little after midnight, depending on the route. Some stop earlier than others, but these are the express trains. The busses run a little later, but not much.

Friday night I went out clubbing with most of the international student body. One of the clubs in town was offering a special for international students from all of the universities in town and so we all went. What was really neat was that there were a lot of the students who don't usually go out. I was with one of my Pakistani friends during my first week of school when he set foot into a bar for the first time in his life. (running a bar is probably not a profitable occupation in a Muslim country). Anyway, people such as my Pakistani friend went to the club on Friday to see people and to have a great time. The club was just a cornucopia of different languages, but of course English was the unifying one. Whew.

Anyway, I left the club long after the subway had stopped and so I caught one of the night busses. These are busses that start in downtown Copenhagen and head out to the suburbs according to precise schedules. They are very expensive, but the only way home if you don't have your bike or you don't want to be out until the sun comes up and the normal busses start. But, even the night busses stop running sometime after 3 AM.

Since the transportation system is so good in Copenhagen, the city has been having weekends when they ban all cars from the city limits. The exception are tourists who are getting to their hotels. Could you imagine a city in the US trying this? But, the good transportation system and the myriad of bikes mean that there are very few traffic jams anywhere in the Copenhagen area during the week. The highways run smoothly and everyone just goes. Mostly, I think because of the bikes and the high cost of cars. Otherwise, for every bike on the road, there would be a car and that would be one big traffic jam!

Have a great week!

Jeff

Coming next: Dining with the Danes!

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