



November 12, 2013

# In Sweden, the Fika Experience

By YAEL AVERBUCH

Coffee is a way of life in Sweden. It is not simply a beverage you grab to go, or something used for a jolt in the morning. Coffee is an experience.

Particular aspects of Swedish culture have made me aware of how inherently American I am. I am never satisfied — always looking to do more or find methods to do things better. In many ways, this is a wonderful quality and has been the backbone for my career. But I've learned to couple this with a bit of Swedish mentality, which also can be extremely beneficial. I have learned this through coffee.

What I've come to enjoy about Swedes is that there is rarely any rush or agenda behind their coffee drinking. A coffee is taken (as they say) after every meal and is often included in the price of the meal. Most Swedes drink their coffee black, or with a touch of milk and/or sugar. It is not convoluted by cream, excessive sweetener or flavoring.

This experience is similarly wholesome — typically not marred by any planned purpose or urgency of any sort. As an American, I had been accustomed to getting coffee to boost my energy during a day packed with activities. Or sometimes I would plan to meet over coffee to discuss business or catch up with friends. In Sweden, I've come to relish the art of what is called *fika*. **Fika, as a noun**, refers to the combination of coffee and usually some sort of sweet snack. But *fika*, as a verb, is the act of partaking in a Swedish social institution.

My soccer career has been nothing short of a roller-coaster ride. Because I am so heavily invested, every success or momentary failure can wreak havoc on my mind and spirit. I have learned in some ways to thrive on the tumult, but in other ways the upheaval takes a huge toll. The *fika* experience is a time of stillness amid my roller-coaster ride. I used to go sit in a coffee shop to write, or check things off from my to-do list. But the true nature of the *fika* is to enjoy time and company with no plan or purpose. To *fika* is not to *do*, but simply to *be*.

At times, living abroad was tough. It can be excruciatingly lonely to uproot your life and settle in a new place. In addition, the second half of our season at **Kopparbergs/Goteborg** was difficult, to say the least. We had a number of disappointing performances, a team wracked with injuries and illness, and our coach (Torbjorn Nilsson, who is highly respected and who coached at the club for six years) announced his intention to quit with a few games left.

I recently arrived home from Sweden with a day to spare before being thrown into yet another emotionally turbulent environment: camp with the U.S. women's national team. The life of a professional soccer player does include ample free time, but I realize more and more that the

mind is never at rest. When I'm off the field, I often replay training or game situations again and again or visualize future ones.

These situations have led me to appreciate some things I typically might overlook in a more comfortable situation or when everything is running smoothly. I have learned to thoroughly enjoy the company of good people, for no other reason than to enrich my life and feel the joy of their companionship. I have learned to shut off my inner drive and personal angst temporarily. And I have learned, over a cup of coffee, for even a brief time to stop *doing* and to enjoy just *being*.

*Yael Averbuch, a native of Montclair, N.J., recently completed her contract with Kopparbergs/Goteborg in Sweden and is in the pool of U.S. national team players. She is currently a free agent seeking a new club.*