



Krazy Finnish supermarkets

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By Therese Catanzariti, Crikey's Scandinavian correspondent

How much do you know about grocery shopping in Finland? Find out all you need to know about Finnish Supermarkets, Hypermarkets and the annual "hullut paivat" or "crazy days" here:

When I first arrived in Oulu, I looked around for a bakery. There is none. In the whole city-of-120,000-Oulu there is no retail bakery. Or butcher. Or fruit and vegetable grocer. There is just the supermarket.

Supermarkets can tell you a lot about a place. English supermarkets have rows of biscuits. Portuguese supermarkets have rows of salami and sausage. US supermarkets have rows of frozen foods. But what does it tell you about a place if supermarkets are all there is?

We shop at the K chain. Just as Tesco and Coles may use the "metro" tag for its smaller stores, the K chain has the K system - K for the corner store, KK for a suburban store, KKK for a supermarket in the city, and K city market for the hypermarket outside the city centre. But it's still quite disconcerting when you drive into Oulu and see a huge KKK sign in flashing lights in the main street.

There's also Euromarket and the S chain, notably Prisma with the pyramid shapes built into the building. The hypermarkets are usually grouped together on the same site. This makes it easy to dash in and out and price check, particularly as all Finnish price tags must indicate the price per item and the price per kilo. But people don't. People shop at one or the other. Oulu locals say centrists shop at Prisma and socialists shop at Euromarket. Prisma and Euromarket started as political co-operatives and even though they have recapitalised, restructured and re-organised, the allegiances remain.

There's also the more modern form of allegiance, the loyalty card. We shop at the K chain because we have a K plussa card (and we haven't figured out how to get a Prisma loyalty card). The loyalty card is the last bastion of the local, a more sophisticated form of one menu for locals and a more expensive menu for tourists. No-one tells you about the loyalty card. It is one of the final stages of the expat journey, distinguishing the "just visiting" expat from the long term "bought an apartment" expat.

Then there are the outsiders, the European chains. Spar. And [Lidl](#), usually on the outskirts of town. Lidl is cheap. But there has to be something wrong with the "invisible hand" when eggplants are EUR6 (around A\$10) a kilo and fully imported German stollen is EUR1 for a kilo cake.

And the wild card out-lier, [Keskinen](#). Keskinen is in Tuuri (pop 500), around 300km from Helsinki, in the middle of nowhere, off any major highways and off any major roads. Keskinen is a discount hypermarket "village shop". With 9600 square metres selling space. Which has the second largest turn-over of any store in Finland, nearly 150 million euros in 2004.

And then, separate and apart, and in an entirely different league is [Stockmann](#). Stockmann is the DJ's, Harvey Nicks and Barneys of Finland, the place to buy panetone, filo pastry and balsamic vinegar. Oulu long-term expats measure time as before Stockmann opened and after Stockman opened. The Stockmann tour de force is the cheese counter, where the cheese doesn't come prepacked.

An annual Stockman ritual is the "hullut paivat" (crazy days). It's a bizarre mix of sale, clearance and red-light specials. It's four days, on otherwise ordinary days, in an otherwise ordinary month, not associated with any particular religious festivals, any particular season, or any particular accounting period. Inside, it's like a mardi gras festival - the store is full of bright yellow banners and bright yellow ghosts and sales assistants wearing bright yellow t-shirts or other bright yellow costumes. Check out some pictures [here](#).

Random goods are massively reduced. Some are regularly stocked, some are just brought in for the sale. The goods range from toothbrushes, bottles of herbs, Toblerone blocks, the local newspaper, Burberry jackets, Finnair flights to Dublin, Raymond Weil watches and cars. Yes, cars.

The crazy sale twist is that different goods are on sale on different days. You get the catalogue on day 1, check out what you want and wait. But not all the sale items are in the catalogue. All sorts of things could go on sale. On Day 2. Or Day 3. Or Day 4.

It's addictive. You have to go every day to check out what's there. The place is packed.

And it has impressive logistics. This year Samsung 21" televisions were on sale. On Friday. I went in Thursday to check them out. They're not there. They're not physically in the shop until Friday. Every night after closing new stock is delivered and put out ready for the next day.

Do you reckon foreigners find the Sydney January sales strange?

European retailers are having a rough time this year. [Karstadt Quelle](#) in Germany and [Carrefour](#) in France have appointed new heads after disappointing results. [Tesco](#) has the largest market share in the UK but is facing slowing domestic sales growth. [Wal Mart](#) is coming - they have already got [ASDA](#) in the UK fighting it out with Sainsbury for second place after Tesco. Eastern Europe is getting crowded with Carrefour, Tesco and Lidl. It will be interesting to see how the Finnish supermarket dynamic develops. Finland is a small supermarket market, so it's not attractive - yet.

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