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# Eero Aarnio

Over a beer and steak in an 18th-century coffee house, the celebrated Finnish chair designer takes a seat to talk sunsets, saunas and smoking his own salmon.

By *Sonia Zhuravlyova*

Photography *Carl Bergman*

"I like to eat as healthily as possible, usually chicken or fish, but when I want a good steak I come to Bemböle Coffeehouse in Espoo. This place is very old – older than the United States. It used to be so many different things: a farmhouse, a hospital, a barracks. They serve good, simple food. I don't often cook at home but a while back I read in a newspaper about a Finnish recipe that is 1,000 years old – it's salted lamb made in a wooden dish and I now know how to make that. It's so good; so special. I also salt and smoke my own salmon.

When I built my house in 1988, by a lake outside Helsinki, I also built a smoke sauna. This is the oldest type of sauna in Finland. I heat it to 120C. I swim in the lake and go back into the sauna and have a beer. It's a wonderful feeling. A carpenter friend built it for me out of pinewood. The evenings are so beautiful here. When the sun is setting the lake turns red and it's fantastic. I'm glad I'm not an architect though; it takes too long to make one thing. Creation must be like playing – it must be fun. But you don't have to give up on ergonomics or a comfortable experience to achieve something playful. Next I would like to design a small city car powered by the sun – but a really beautiful one that everybody wants. New cars are so ugly.

When I was young I did think about studying architecture and I particularly admire the work of Frank Gehry, Le Corbusier and Richard Meier. But for a special meal I would invite just friends and family. When it comes to a favourite food, one day it might be porridge, the next it's herring – it depends on my mood. Every food is great if you're feeling hungry.

I grew up in Helsinki in a working-class neighbourhood. We lived in a block of flats, which was heated by burning wood. I was the youngest of three brothers and it was my job to bring the logs upstairs to heat the apartment – that's why I'm still in great condition. Growing

## Profile:

Born in 1932, fêted Finnish designer Eero Aarnio is known for experimenting with plastic, organic forms and bright colours to create envelope-pushing furniture. His iconic designs include the Ball chair and the Bubble chair, which became synonymous with the pop culture of the 1960s (the Ball chair even appeared on the cover of *Playboy*). His Pastil chair won the American Industrial Design award in 1968. Aarnio's work can be seen at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, Moma in New York and the Vitra Design Museum in Weil am Rhein – as well as in his home, not far from Helsinki.

## Venue:

The timber building of Bemböle Coffeehouse dates back to the 1730s and its hand-carved wooden ceiling beams and stately hearth serve the residents of the city of Espoo to this day. It has variously been a farmhouse, a shoemaker's workshop and a school before becoming a coffeehouse in 1939.  
[bembolenkahvitupa.net](http://bembolenkahvitupa.net)

## To eat:

*Lehtipihvi* (leaf steak) and chips

## To drink:

*Kotikalja* (homemade beer)

up I remember always being hungry. It was the war and there was rationing. I remember going mushroom foraging with my mother and we ate a lot of potatoes. We even made 'coffee' from dandelion roots: we dried them in the oven and then ground them in a coffee mill. Everyone was doing this. I would dream about cake but it wasn't possible to have it: no eggs, no cream, no butter. We had two plots of land outside Helsinki, one to grow potatoes and one for my father's tobacco. We dried the tobacco in the attic and it was my job to roll his cigarettes.

I was always drawing. But I was also a photographer: in 1952, during the Olympics, there were many foreign photographers here who had large cameras – the photographs were of excellent quality. When they were leaving they sold their cameras and I bought one. I still have it. I also worked at an architect's office but then someone suggested I try the School of Applied Arts and I thought, 'Why not?'

I get up early, at about 5am, as it's a wonderful time to work. This morning I designed a table lamp and it's one of my best. In the 1960s, when I was visiting a boat factory, I saw plastic and fibreglass being used for the first time. I decided that it's a wonderful material because it made me feel free [to design]. It wasn't possible to do what I wanted to do using just metal or wood; plastic is free, like my imagination.

I have never used computers – young people today forget that they also have hands and brains. But I like 3D printing; it's an excellent tool for a designer. The see-through Bubble chair, which I designed in 1968, is like a giant soap bubble. It's a shape that can also be seen in nature. My original drawing for the Ball chair was so simple – just one line. When the idea is clear it takes just a few minutes. Although I became famous for the Ball chair I don't feel constrained by the design. New ideas are not a problem." — (M)



