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On May 1, we received an unexpected gift in the form of Finland’s most enthusiastically celebrated holiday, Vappu. I know of nothing like it in the States. Perhaps it’s because the coming of spring this far north is truly something to celebrate.

Thankfully, some friends of ours – Shannon and Kalle, who can be seen in the picture below – gave us the heads up, and invited us to join them at Kaivopuisto park, where the celebration is most densely concentrated. There, many thousands gather to eat and drink sparkling wine, sometimes in prodigious quantities.

Most Finns wear a white graduation cap (see the picture below), and great pride is taken in the stains on one’s cap, for behind every stain there is a story, and lots of stains signifies many great and enthusiastically celebrated Vappus. I met one fellow whom I had to ask, “Was your cap really originally white?” “Yes”, he replied with a smile.

Vappu is most enthusiastically celebrated by university students, who can be spotted by their bright white caps and full-body jump suits. The jump suits are similar to those worn by mechanics, only they are typically more brightly colored and are covered with patches signifying the wearer’s course of study, extra-curricular interests, etc. I asked a fellow why they wear such ugly suits, and he said, “The suit allows one to, when tired, simply lie on the ground where you are standing and sleep.” Thus the inconvenience of having to go to your home is avoided during the serious student’s multi-day Vappu binge.

It is natural to compare Vappu with St. Patrick’s Day in my home town of Butte, Montana. Certainly, the gathering of a large number of people whose primary goal is to get drunk is shared by both celebrations. However, for Vappu there is an equally large, or even larger, contingent of people that just want to welcome spring, have some sparkling wine and good food, and enjoy family and friends. This is a great idea!

Jen talks with Shannon amidst the revelers in Helsinki’s Kaivopuisto park, while Kalle reclines.
Elli eats a donut and intently checks out the scene. Nice hair, eh?
Enjoying a rare blue-sky-spring-day in Helsinki’s Kaivopuisto park on Vappu.

After a few hours at Kaivopuisto, we went out to Suomenlinna Island for a second picnic. The idea was to go somewhere quieter and with fewer drunk people – as you might expect, the number increases as the day goes on. We were tired and it was hard to find the motivation, but we went and it was great fun. We met a number of new, fine folks. At the end of the day, we were very grateful for one of our finest days of the year.