

SAVORING SCANDINAVIA



AS NORDIC
FEST MARKS
50 YEARS,
DECORAH'S
CULINARY
TRADITIONS
CONTINUE
TO SHINE.

BY RENEE BRINCKS

*Photos courtesy of Vesterheim
Norwegian-American Museum*

For three days each July, downtown Decorah closes its streets to vehicles and food booths fill the city's parking spots. Experienced folk artists play music, perform traditional dances, carve wood, forge knives and paint intricate designs during rosemaling demonstrations. Scandinavian flags fly outside local businesses, and windows all over town display gnome-like Norwegian nisse figures that greet guests with signs proclaiming, "Velkommen."

Welcome to Nordic Fest, Decorah's annual celebration of Scandinavian culture. The lively gathering turns 50 this summer, marking the occasion with the street music, sporting events, parade floats, fireworks and art displays that have drawn more than 1.5 million guests since the event's 1967 debut. While cultural entertainment is a major highlight of the annual gathering, the Nordic Fest food program earns high marks, as well.

"There are so many festivals where you can get a deep-fried Oreo or a corn dog, but you don't see a lot of places with the unique, traditional foods you see here. Honoring the town's Norwegian culinary traditions is really important," says Ashley Klocke, a Decorah optometrist and the 2016 Nordic Fest food chair.

Klocke coordinates several community dinners and approximately 15 food booths serving Scandinavian favorites during the three-day festival. Between 15 and 150 volunteers staff each booth, donating their time to prepare and distribute traditional treats while raising money for school groups and nonprofit organizations. In 2015, for example, students and parents involved with Decorah's Nordic Dancers raised money by selling 14,484 homemade cookies. At another booth, volunteers sold more than 3,500 crispy, sugar-dusted rosettes.

In addition to organizing the food booths, Klocke cooks up fare for the annual Nordic Fest lutefisk-eating contest. Participants compete to slurp down bowls of the gummy dried fish prepared with lye; once they're done, the true champions don empty bowls on their heads like a crown.

"I have an uncle who is a strong Norwegian and he taught me the proper way to make lutefisk. I don't mind a bowl or two, but I wouldn't want to eat a roaster full of it," Klocke laughs.

She does, however, savor a bowl of rømmegrøt each day of the festival. The creamy, buttery porridge is served with sugar and cinnamon. Lingonberry ice cream is another popular Nordic Fest treat, as is varme pølse. Last year, festival attendees ate approximately 6,000 of the small, lefse-wrapped sausages.

Lefse itself remains one of the most in-demand Nordic Fest foods. Made with riced potatoes, butter, cream and flour, the traditional flatbread looks a little like a tortilla. Fans line up for rounds shaped with special rolling pins and baked on lefse grills. From there, it's off to the toppings table, where most people swipe some butter across the dough and sprinkle cinnamon, sugar or brown sugar on top. After rolling or folding up the round, it's time to enjoy.

And, enjoy they do: Nordic Fest attendees purchase more than 7,000 rounds of lefse each year, reports Klocke. The lefse booth alone goes through 60 to 70 pounds of

butter during the three-day event. Thanks to a crew of volunteer demonstrators, curious audiences can watch the lefse-making process from start to finish.

One of those lefse demonstrators is Jo Olson of Ruby's Restaurant & Catering, a family-owned Decorah institution. She is one of the Decorah chefs, shopkeepers, educators and neighbors committed to keeping Norwegian culinary traditions alive year-round.

Widely known for its fluffy, fresh-baked Ronnie's World Famous Rolls ("I sell 300 to 500 of those cinnamon rolls a week," says Olson), Ruby's also serves an ambitious menu of Norwegian classics: Norwegian meatballs, salmon patties, lutefisk, rømmegrøt and lefse, along with Norwegian rye bread, Norwegian tomato jam, kringle (soft, doughy pastry twists), rosettes, sandbakkels (shortbread-style cookies baked in molds) and more.

"We make all of this right here, and it's all served year-round," says Olson, who spent six months perfecting the restaurant's lefse recipe. In the years since, she's sold and shipped rounds to clients all over the country. Customers can also purchase a variety of jams and jellies in the restaurant, including the especially popular Norwegian tomato marmalade. The slightly sweet combination is crafted with spices, lemon, sugar and a hint of vinegar.

"With the lutefisk, we also serve toasted Norwegian rye bread and we give customers some of that jam. Ninety percent of the time, they'll ask if they can buy the jam – and they can," says Olson. "This is a pizza and sandwich nation anymore, but people still love the traditional Norwegian foods."

A few doors down, at Ace Kitchen Place, Julie Spilde caters home cooks with an assortment of Scandinavian kitchen items. Lefse bakers will find potato ricers, rolling pins, grills and tools to flip lefse rounds. The store carries sandbakkeltins, pans for æbleskiver (pancake-like spheres) and heart-shaped waffle presses, plus rosette irons and shaped forms for making kransekake (Scandinavian stacked-ring cake). In addition to recipe books, aprons and hot pads, there are pre-made mixes for lefse, kransekake and rosettes, too.

Spilde had long carried basic heritage cookware at the family's Ace Hardware store, but when she moved the housewares to a separate location, she expanded the selection.

"It seems like kind of a requirement to being in business in Decorah," she says.

Local cooks stop in throughout the year to replace worn out lefse board covers, waffle irons and the like. Lately, Spilde has also seen an uptick in the number of couples adding Scandinavian culinary supplies to their wedding registries. During Nordic Fest and over the December holiday season, the store draws many out-of-town shoppers searching for Scandinavian culinary tools.

"A lot of people are here to visit family, and they're deciding to keep those old traditions alive. We all have a lot of fun going through what they need and explaining how everything works," says Spilde.

Individuals looking for more in-depth Scandinavian cooking instruction can head down Water Street to Vesterheim. The Norwegian-American museum's culinary classes cover the basics of making lefse, kransekake, soups, flatbreads and a selection of traditional holiday cookies. Past workshops have also explored Norwegian cheese making, beer brewing and presenting an old-fashioned Scandinavian Christmas buffet. While some culinary students are local, many come from around the Midwest and beyond to take part.

Vesterheim Education Specialist Darlene Fossum-Martin teaches several of the museum's food courses. The Spring Grove, Minn., native comes from a Norwegian family and grew up helping her grandmother prepare traditional recipes. She also lived in Norway for several years, studying the country's culinary history and cooking with local families.

Fossum-Martin feels lucky to have learned about cooking directly from her grandparents, and from residents who employed these techniques as a way of life. She sees many workshop participants looking to recreate traditions that have been lost over time.

"There is a stage of life when people start wanting to connect with their past. A lot of my students over the years have been in their 30s," says Fossum-Martin. "They want to pick up these traditions that they grew up with but never learned. They want to share these foods with their families. They hope that their kids will not forget."

Sometimes, keeping these techniques alive involves adapting them to the modern table. When Fossum-Martin's Norwegian ancestors arrived in the United States, for example, they prepared trout using the same techniques they had used to cook herring in their home country.

In a small way, the practice helped them maintain ties to the communities they left.

"Everybody connects over food. It's so important that we can sit around the table and tell our stories and make connections... Looking at your food habits and your traditions is one way of knowing who you are and who you came from," says Fossum-Martin. "Some people say we'll forget these techniques, but I think it's becoming more important to hold on."

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RECIPES

These recipes are included in "Our Favorites Through the Years," a cookbook available at the Vesterheim museum bookstore or online at Vesterheim.org.

Lefse

Recipe by John Glesne



4 cups riced potatoes (about 8 potatoes; Idaho Russets are preferred by many.)

1 teaspoon salt

¼ cup whipping cream

4 tablespoon margarine or butter

2 cups flour

1. Boil potatoes, with skin on, 15 to 20 minutes.
2. Drain off water peel and rice potatoes twice, when still warm.
3. Add butter, whipping cream, salt and mix well.
4. Cool for 1 hour in the refrigerator or overnight on the counter.
5. When ready to roll, mix flour into potato mixture.
6. Form into a log or patties.
6. Rub flour into a cloth-covered board.
7. Cut off ca. 1/3 cup of dough. Using a cloth-covered rolling pin, roll thin, from center to outside, turning every second or third time. Remember to lift rolling pin before you get to edges.
8. Bake on hot lefse griddle (400 – 500 degrees). Turn when bubbly on top, turning twice.
9. Remove from griddle; fold into fourths and let cool between two cotton dishtowels that have an inner lining of plastic wrap. The plastic wrap helps to steam the lefse and keep it soft.
10. When cool, open up completely and refold. Wrap in plastic wrap, bag and refrigerate or freeze.

Recipe makes 12 to 14 lefse.

Rømmegrøt

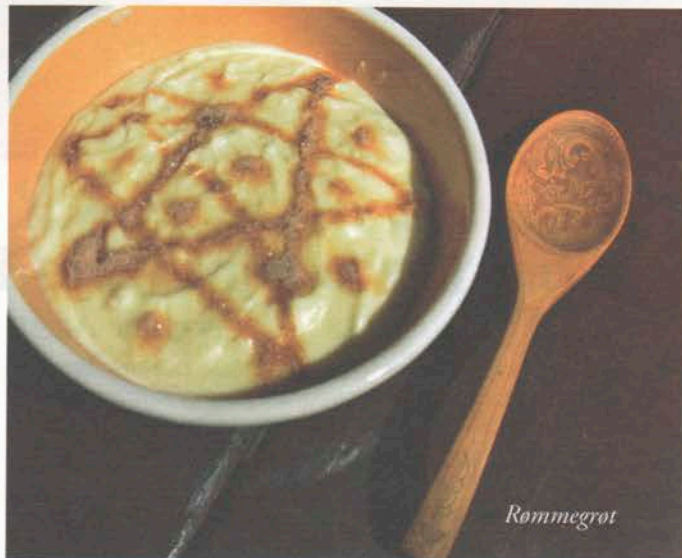
Recipe by Agnes Forde

1 quart milk
1 cup half & half
1 cup butter
¾ cup flour
½ cup sugar

1. Heat milk and half & half, stirring often to prevent scorching.
2. In a heavy pan, melt butter and add flour; cook about 5 minutes, stirring constantly with a wire whisk.
3. Pour in milk and half & half and cook, stirring frequently until mixture bubbles and thickens.
4. Stir in sugar.
5. Pour into bowl and pour ¼ cup melted butter on top. Sprinkle with sugar and cinnamon.

Makes about ten 8 oz. servings.

*Rømmegrøt may be kept warm and served from a Crock-Pot on low heat. It may be refrigerated and reheated in a microwave. If frozen, thaw completely, before you reheat it.



Sweet Soup (also known as Fruit Soup)

Recipe by Donna Bergan

8- to 10-ounce package large sago or pearl tapioca
4 ounces dried apricots, chopped
15 ounces golden raisins
Juice and sliced rind of 1 lemon
20-ounce jar Welch's grape juice (purple)

1. In 1 ½ quarts of water, soak sago, apricots, and prunes overnight.
2. The next day, in a heavy kettle, combine all ingredients and cook slowly until sago is clear and fruit is tender. Stir almost constantly, as it scorches very easily.
3. If necessary, or desired, thin with additional grape or apple juice.
4. Serve warm or cold. Makes ¾ of a gallon.