

Volga German Food Customs

by Michael C. Gross

Probably the most sought-after folkway of the Volga Germans is the delightful, hearty German cuisine. Its narrow range of foodstuffs demanded an intuitive cook. The recipes have retained many original ingredients because there were no better ways to obtain the fullest flavor and nutrition. Most of the dishes appear today under various names and descriptions. However they may be named or described, they are still approached with reverence by the descendents of the original settlers who brought this great cuisine to the plains of Kansas.

One hundred years of living in Russia had served to modify the food habits of the Germans. At first they had considered Russian food unappetizing and craved the butter, eggs, and meat enjoyed in their old country. Through necessity they accepted Russian foods while retaining as many of the German seasonings and methods of preparation as possible. Common dishes were cabbage and meat soup, clabbered milk or soured cream, potatoes, bread, cheese, butter, and eggs.

When they came to America, there was little pleasure for the early settlers. Their lives consisted of work from dawn until dusk. This necessitated everyone eating what and when they could. The fact that every iota of foodstuffs, what little there was, had to be stretched in order to feed a lot of hard-working people was the principal factor in the uniqueness of Volga German cuisine. Because I obtained my information by working around the problem of "if we had it to eat," it is obvious that the "hard times" tempered what we now call "that good old German cooking." Grandmother tells of when her parents rigidly enforced frugality so much that even when the season was right and food and money a little more plentiful, wastage of any sort was considered a serious sin. When an animal was butchered, everything was used: the meat, the entrails for sausage casing, the hide for leather, the hooves for wursts and various gelatin salads, and the hair for stuffing pillows, mattresses, or even a home-made doll for one of the children.

The Volga German appreciated a good meal after a hard day of making ends meet in the early days of Kansas. He relished the most basic foods as though they were delicacies. In the earliest years of the settlements it was extremely difficult to obtain some of the spices, meats, and vegetables that had been eaten in the old country.

The Volga German settlers' cookery is marked by regional variation. They came from different parts of the Volga area of Russia, and during the century in Russia each part developed distinctive foods. Their recipes have been diffused regionally into folk-cultural provinces, such as the Schoenchen area, Victoria area, Pfeifer area, Catherine area, etc. The cookery complex, including attitudes, meal systems, and eating habits in the settlers' society, is largely dependant on the cultural areas of origin and on intermarriages. Because of the variations involved when two people from different communities married, many of the decendants developed their own unique cookery.

Many recipes since the original settlement have been diffused into our present culture. One reason for the survival of the old cuisine would without a doubt be the robust flavor and nutritional quality of the dishes prepared. Unlike us today, the settlers had no vitamin supplements to their diets. They relied solely on a balanced meal whenever possible.

My ancestry holds the family unit the center of all activity. With a family clan of eight families of from three to seven children each, a lot of people had to secure an abundance of food when money was short. Much happiness came from seeing each other sitting together at the dinner table, all with admiration for each one's contribution to the reverent thanks-giving of food and togetherness.¹ There was an effort to make that very basic event of life one that was always looked forward to, no matter what the occasion. Holidays, weddings, or any other special occasion by tradition demanded more elaboration in the feast.

For instance, the gesture of offering food in procession is a favorite form of devotion with the people of my family and adds dignity and solemnity to a number of feasts celebrated throughout the year. Food is considered the most solemn offer of friendship and respect on any occasion good or bad. Food is always looked upon as the final result of many long hard days of toil and devotion to the security of the family. The actual amount of food or the time and energy that went into it are seldom considered in the gesture itself. The offer also brings wide-open opportunity to express the desire to excel and always show your best.²

On any day, no matter how hard it was to get food, the cook of the house was busy preparing a meal. The most basic of all staple diets

Vonfeldt, Mr. and Mrs. A.J. First-generation German-Russian-Americans. Age 78 and 74 respectively. *Personal Interview*. Gorham, Kansas, September, 1975.

Consensus interview of Agatha, Vickie, Robert, Gustav, Stephen, Dennis, Gervaise Vonfeldt. *Personal Interview* taken at Annual Family Reunion in Gorham, Kansas, June 6, 1978.

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was handled with utmost care, for cooking was the favorite way for a woman to express her concern for her family's welfare, to maintain a happy household and orderly life.¹ The dinner table is the one meeting place in the home where everyone is together in the same place at the same time, which is thus the most cherished.

On a typical day Mother and Dad would be the first up in the morning. Dad would go out and get wood for the stove and oven while Mother collected everything she needed to prepare breakfast. The oldest residing son would collect eggs in the chicken house and by that time everyone else, except the very young, would begin with their morning chores before breakfast. Breakfast usually consisted of bacon, eggs, potatoes, bread, and butter. If recently a holiday had been celebrated, there might be some leftover dawgen, or maultaschen, liverwurst, or pastries of sort. When everyone ate their fill, the youngsters would be off to school while Dad and the oldest children went to work and Mother stayed behind with the very young. Mother kept the household in order and readied things for lunch and supper.

Lunch was usually a very casual affair that most often consisted of snacking on a sandwich of leftover beef, tomatoes, lettuce, catsup, milk or coffee. There were usually warmed up leftovers or a quick casserole made from them. This meal was usually kept simple because of the amount of food needed for supper.

When everyone returned home for the evening, the chores were handled first while preparation for supper was nearing completion. This was the largest meal of the day, and everyone would remain together longer to talk afterward. Members of the family would be scampering about getting cleaned up for supper. Everyone would gather around a table set with beef, fowl, or fish, and various kinds of vegetables and salads. The beef was bought or bartered for, while the fowl was usually chicken which the family raised. Dad was a great fisherman and always had some catfish from the creek.

Many times these basic staple foods were not prepared by themselves. Instead, much more zest was added to the meal when it was prepared the old German way. Even the most basic of foods in our family diet was usually given a particular taste that was favored by our ancestors. This German food flavor is obtained by the use of such ingredients as sour cream, vinegar, onions, mustard, pepper, yeast, allspice, salt, and a variety of mixed pickling spices. It is noted that all these ingredients, though seldom used all at once, have characteristic qualities of retaining their flavors. Grandmother tells of when not only the

¹Second-generation German-Russian American, Age 50, Personal Interview, Hays, Kansas

flavor qualities of the ingredients were considered but also their cooking compatability and preservative qualities. She often prepared various stews and fruits and vegetables for canning. It is important that the food retain the nutrition and personally favored taste as it did when prepared. Also, conventional canning and preserving methods were not yet practiced in the early days. Only the most natural and effective traditionally proven methods were employed. Grandmother did not want to take even the smallest chance that someone might get sick from bad food. Moreover, there was a note of pride involved in doing something the way the old folks used to do.⁴

My own parents did not have to cook for their family out of the same hardships. When their generation was maturing, they ate those old German foods because of their practical values and because that was the way Grandmother knew best how to cook. However, when hard times became more relaxed at the end of the Depression, many women were more relaxed in their responsibilities. The transportation of food by rail and truck in bulk made it possible to buy food as cheap as you could grow it, in terms of energy.

There are a variety of meals and snacks that have special taste appeal to me. Except for a few elaborations here and there, the old ideas and values still remain. I think perhaps the older generations are a bit prouder of their heritage than we in later 20th century. The facts of life still remain to dominate subsistence, and the old German "waste-not" continues to feed its people.

Many of us who are descendants of the Volga Germans hope to see a rebirth of the cookery of this great and strong ancestry. Folk cookery has preserved some of the old methods of food preparation. The most popular methods are pickling, souring, drying, and smoking. The real pleasure of eating German cooking must be experienced to be thoroughly enjoyed and appreciated.

Most German dishes demand care and a certain unexplainable knack of knowing how to obtain just the right taste. I have eaten many German foods taken from the same basic recipes by several different cooks and have discovered that each preparation claims its own particular difference in taste.

We all have our personal favorites, just as our ancestors had theirs. One of mine is sour soup, or German wedding soup as it is also known. This is a dish that requires preparing a good number of times before the right taste is attained. There are a number of ways of preparing this dish, but the way my grandmother fixes it is still my fa-

⁴Vonfeldt
Vonfeldt

vorite. The ingredients are the same as used by her mother in the early days:

- 2 lbs of boiling beef
- ½ cup of mixed pickling spices (this is a combination of spices with emphasis on the favored taste)
- 2 medium sized onions
- 8 medium sized potatoes
- ½ cup (or more to taste) of vinegar
- 2 cups sour cream (not commercial because natural soured cream clabbers smoother)
- Butterballs. They are made as follows:
 - 7 cups bread crumbs
 - ½ t. of salt
 - ½ t. of allspice
 - 1 to 1-¼ sticks of softened butter
 - 5 eggs

These ingredients are all mixed well together at once in a large mixing bowl. When the mixture is consistent, form marble-sized portions. These butterballs may be placed in containers and frozen for convenient use.

Place the pickling spices onto a square of cloth and tie securely into a pouch. Place the beef and the pouch of spices in about 6 cups of water and cook just until the meat is tender. Remove the meat, cut into bite-sized pieces, and place back into the broth. Add enough water to make back up to 6 cups of broth. Chop onions and potatoes and cook in the broth until nearly done. Add the butterballs and continue cooking until they are done. This may require frequent checking of the tenderness of the butterballs while cooking. They should be fairly firm. Now add the vinegar and stir in well. Next, while stirring, add the sour cream slowly. Continue cooking without stirring and watch the mixture until it starts to clabber. Remove from heat and serve. More vinegar may be added at the table to taste.

This is undoubtedly my favorite food. Not only is it delicious, but it contains all the basic nutritional staple foods as well. I may add that the favored meat used in this soup is beef heart. It seems to make a better beef-tasting broth. This recipe is not limited in its ingredients. Many vegetables may be used in addition to the ones suggested.

This dish was originally used as a processional food offering to the new bride and groom at their wedding feast. In my own generation I remember when sour soup was prepared in 5-15 gallon quantities in cast-iron pots over a large fire in the yard. It seems like the more you made, the better it tasted.

Another favorite is called dawgen. It is a spicy, tasty way of making potato pancakes in sauce. This was many times prepared with roast beef, hamburger, or fish, and is prepared as follows:

6 cups of grated potatoes (squeezed dry)

¼ cup grated onions

4 eggs

1 t. salt

¼ t. pepper

½-2 cups sour cream (again it is preferable to use natural sour cream)

Start by placing the grated potatoes in a cloth bag and squeeze out the liquid until the potatoes are quite dry. Save the liquid and let the starch settle while mixing together the potatoes, onions, eggs, salt, pepper, and enough milk to make a consistency similar to pancake batter. Pour the potato liquid off the starch and add the starch to the potato mixture. Pour into a buttered pan so the mixture is 1½ inches deep in the pan. Bake for 1 hour in a 350° pre-heated oven. (When automatic temperature cooking was not available, the heat was calculated as about normal for most baking purposes.) Pour the sour cream over the baked potato mixture for the last 15 to 20 minutes of baking. When cooking time is completed, remove from heat and serve hot.

Desserts were of course a favorite but were seldom eaten right after a meal. In our family, we saved the dessert until we were comfortable and could enjoy it. There was one food, however, that was a desert and sometimes eaten as a complete lunch. It is called maultaschen (pockets) and is a kind of fruit pastry smothered in sweet cream. The favored fruit used was schwarzenbeeren, or blackberries or lonberries as they are called now. They are a fast-growing, abundant-bearing plant that is found in most gardens in Ellis County and are also found along the river banks.

To make schwarzenbeeren maultaschen assemble the following ingredients:

2 cups flour

1 t. salt

1 cup sugar

1 quart of berries

½ cup butter

1 cup sweet cream

1 cup browned-in-butter bread crumbs

1 egg

Mix the flour, salt, and egg with water to make a stiff dough. Roll out to ⅛ inch thickness. Mix the berries, sugar, and a little flour. Place a tablespoon of berries on center of dough cut into squares.

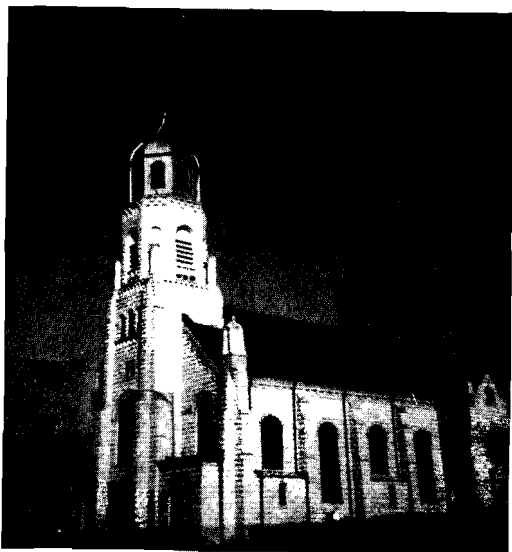
Pinch corners of dough squares together over berries to make a pocket. Boil these pouches in salt water for 10 to 15 minutes, then drain. Pour the cream and butter over the pockets and top with buttered crumbs. (Cottage cheese may also be seasoned and used in the pockets.)

At times, labeshka, a fried bread, was served as a snack before night or as a part of lunch or breakfast. This is a very simple snack that can be made from any white bread dough recipe. Mix together the bread dough and let it rise as for making bread. Pinch balls of dough and stretch them over the hand into thin circles. Place in hot oil or shortening and brown on both sides. (Have oil or shortening at least 2 inches deep in the pan.) Remove the fried bread and drain well on towels. Serve hot with honey, syrup, cinnamon, or sweet cream.

This last treat was usually in competition for popularity with rahm noodles (cream noodles). Rahm noodles are made by using the recipe for any biscuit dough. Additional ingredients are cream, sugar, and cinnamon.

Make the biscuit dough and form into rolls about 2 inches long and the thickness of your thumb. Place side by side (barely touching) in a buttered baking dish. Pour sweet cream over it all to cover the rolls. Sprinkle lightly with sugar and cinnamon and bake in 350° oven until biscuits are lightly browned and cream is nearly all absorbed by the dough. Serve them hot.

The selection of foods presented is not large, but it represents the simplicity and wholesomeness of whatever we had to eat. Most genuine old dishes are definitely considered delicacies because of a particular sour German food taste that not many seem to agree on. I can remember sitting at the table listening to everyone debating on the contents of a particular food item, and always coming to the conclusion that it surely will be a good eating experience no matter what it is.



St. Joseph's Church, Hays.



St. Joseph's Church, Liebenthal.