

Gutes Essen: Good Eating in German-Russian Country

A PBS documentary and companion recipe book



Photos courtesy of Germans from Russia Heritage Collection, North Dakota State University Libraries, Fargo. www.ndsu.edu/grhc.

Mary Ann Lehr stretching strudels dough during filming.

By Annie Bennett, Co-Editor

Most North Dakotans have likely tried cheese buttons, pickled beets or fleischkuekle. In the state's German-Russian Country, identified as Emmons, Logan and McIntosh counties, it is believed this good food equals a good life. The *Gutes Essen: Good Eating in German-Russian Country* documentary highlights just that, food from recipes that have stood the test of time.

Filming

Michael Miller, director and bibliographer at the Germans from Russia Heritage Collection (GRHC), and Bob Dambach, director of television at Prairie Public Broadcasting, both in Fargo, developed the idea of a documentary and cookbook in cooperation with the Tri-County Tourism Alliance, an organization within German-Russian Country dedicated to preserving and promoting the Germans from Russia heritage and culture.

The documentary was filmed in the summer and fall of 2016. "We knew it would need to be people who would be comfortable speaking with a camera and crew in their kitchen," says Carmen Rath-Wald, Tri-County Tourism Alliance president. "The sizes of the kitchens

Laverna Kaseman slicing beet root.

were a consideration for the camera work. We know our counties well and could pick out cooks in each county who had a variety of specialties."

The documentary was filmed in 10 different kitchens, as well as churches, cafes, bakeries and meat markets in the area.

Rath-Wald enjoyed filming and has many wonderful memories. "It was amazing to be in Carolyn Sperle's kitchen," she says. "She was 100 years old at the time of the filming and just a delight to visit with. Carolyn passed away in August, and we are so glad she did get to see the documentary."



Carolyn Sperle with a pot of borscht soup.

The Food

Mary Ann (Werre) Lehr, a retired schoolteacher living in Lehr, is featured in the documentary making sauerkraut and sausage strudels. The recipe came from Lehr's grandmother, who came to the United States in 1911. "I have been making strudels since I was old enough to stand at the end of the table and watch my mother do her miracle," recalls Lehr. "I must have been around nine or 10 when I actually got to help make it. I couldn't wait to try my hand."





Mary Anne Lehr's Strudels Recipe

- 4 cups flour**
- 1 tsp. salt**
- 1 tsp. baking powder**
- 1 egg**
- Warm water to soften the dough**
- Sauerkraut**
- Sausage (chopped)**

Mix the salt and baking powder. Make a hole in the middle of these two ingredients and add the egg and warm water. Mix and then knead by hand until the dough is satiny. Let the dough rest for one-and-a-half hours with a bowl over the top.

Separate the dough into three sections and roll each section out until it is size of a pie plate. Brush with hot oil and let the dough rest for one-and-a-half hours.

Stretch the dough very thin. "Mom would stretch each piece the size of the table," says Lehr. Start at the edges, also from beneath. Fill it evenly with sauerkraut and sausage. Toss lightly from each side until you have a long "rope." Then cut in 3 to 4-inch pieces.

Cover the bottom of a large pan with lard and cover with cubed potatoes and onion. Place strudels on top. Fill pan with cream and water until covered up to three-quarters of the way up the strudels. Steam at medium heat for 40 minutes. "I like to fry them a little towards the end," says Lehr.

Serve with fried chicken or pork roast and lots of gravy, as well as in season garden lettuce with cream.

While mixing the dough, Lehr says she always uses a Betty Crocker spoon that came with a cake mix in the 1950s, because it is very sturdy and "doesn't give." As Lehr rolls out the dough, she talks about memories of her parents, who were married in 1924, and her mother's influence on her baking. Lehr has many of her mother's pots, pans and other kitchen utensils, including her rolling pin, which is the only rolling pin she owns. "The handle of the rolling pin broke off long ago, and my father had to whittle a new handle for it," says Lehr.

After the dough "rests," Lehr stretches it thin enough, she says, a person could read a newspaper through it. "Stretch, stretch, stretch, thin, thin, thin, tough, tough, tough," she adds.

She reminisces of her childhood, recalling her family "never buying less than 100 pounds of flour at a time, and never less than 200 pounds in the winter."

Lehr again lets the dough rest for one-and-a-half hours. "I am not sure if it is a wives' tale or not, but the dough works better when it is rested."

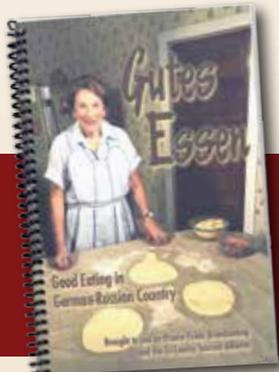
She enjoys making strudels, even though it takes an entire morning. "I make it often, as everyone enjoys it," Lehr says.

As she mixes the filling in her mother's bowl, embossed with little girls watering flowers around the rim, she says she always uses Wishek sausage in her strudel. "It has a distinct flavor that you can find in no other sausage."

The sausage is made in Wishek, approximately 11 miles west of Lehr, at Stan's Supervalu, the town's local grocery store. Stan's Super Valu is known throughout the country for its famous sausage. The store currently makes around 4,000 lbs. a week and ships it to any state in the U.S., excluding Alaska and Hawaii.

The Cookbook

The *Gutes Essen: Good Eating in German-Russian Country* 104-page cookbook includes basic German-Russian dishes gathered from interviews done in the Tri-Country



area, as well as recipes from *Ewiger Saat-Everlasting Yeast*, a food culture book by Sue Kaseman Balcom.

Balcom also put the *Gutes Essen: Good Eating in German-Russian Country* cookbook together, which is the fourth book produced by the Tri-County Tourism Alliance. The cookbook retails for \$19.95 plus tax and is available at many local retailers.

In the new year, the DVD will be available for purchase, following the second Prairie Public (PPTV) membership drive in December. "PPTV will release the project to its affiliates across the country, making it available to more than 250 stations," says Rath Wald.

***Gutes Essen: Good Eating in German-Russian Country* is available at the following retailers:**

- **Ashley** – Ashley Arts Council
- **Napoleon** – NDSU Extension Office
- **Wishek** – The Western Shop
- **Linton** – Emmons County Record
- **Bismarck/Mandan** – North Dakota State Historical Society gift store
- **Jamestown** – RSVP Dakota Store
- **Fargo** – GRHC at NDSU