Germans from Russia find similarities with food traditions of Argentina and Brazil

By Andrea Winkler Collin, Editor

For the past 15 years, Germans from Russia Heritage Collection and Prairie Public Broadcasting have collaborated on a number of projects that interpret the culture of the ethnic roots of almost half of North Dakota’s population.

Together they have produced 10 programs covering immigration history, food traditions, and memories of settling on the prairie of the Germans from Russia. For their eighth documentary, a team has traveled to South America to study immigration of Germans from Russia to Argentina and Brazil. The project, which began in 2010, is scheduled to be completed in 2015 and will premiere that summer at the North Dakota Heritage Center in Bismarck. This will be held in conjunction with the opening of new gallery exhibits and the national convention of the Germans from Russia Heritage Society July 15 to 19.

“We decided to take on this project when we realized that so little has been done about the Germans from Russia in South America,” says Michael Miller, the director of the Collection, which is part of the North Dakota State University Libraries in Fargo. He says the Germans from Russia first settled in South America in 1878, about six years after first arriving in Dakota Territory. Some settled in Paraguay and Bolivia, but they immigrated primarily to Brazil and Argentina, with more than two million Volga German descendants in Argentina today.
“We know so little about each other, even though many in North Dakota have relatives in South America with whom they have no contact,” he says.

While the interviews have covered many aspects of the heritage, food traditions have played a large part. Festivals are prominent, and they feature a lot of food, Miller says. “They are big on making food and getting the youth involved in celebrations and feasts.”

Last fall, they visited three Argentinian provinces, Entre Ríos, Buenos Aires and La Pampa. Because La Pampa, like the Dakotas, has many descendants from the Black Sea Germans, Miller says that area’s food traditions are similar. Entre Ríos has more Volga Germans, which in North America includes descendants living in Nebraska, Kansas and Colorado.

Some of the popular Germans from Russia food traditions the South Americans share with North Americans include fleischkeischle, which is a seasoned ground beef wrapped in dough and deep fried, and plachinda (or blachinda), a fruit filled turnover-style pastry. “Many of the breads were similar, too,” Miller says, “but I believe ours are better because of the higher quality wheat flour we have in the Dakotas.”

Bob Dambach, director of television for Prairie Public, is heading the project for Prairie Public. He, Miller and two videographers spent three weeks in Brazil last April and a month in Argentina last September and October. During each trip, they traveled more than 2,000 miles, visiting towns where Germans from Russia descendants lived, and interviewing them about the heritage of their families and how they are preserving their culture.

“The greatest challenge of this project has been juggling three languages in the interviews,” he says. “About half of them were conducted in German, 15 percent in English and
the rest in Spanish. So translating the German and Spanish accurately into English overdubs is taking a lot of time.”

He says Prairie Public considers it a unique opportunity to document worldwide the Germans from Russia culture.

“Before we produced the first documentary in 1999, very little had been done to record this history,” says Dambach. “Since then, all of the 10 projects we have produced in conjunction with the NDSU Libraries’ Germans from Russia Heritage Collection have been very well received. The interest in South America on this current documentary has been over the top.”

Both Miller and Dambach were impressed with how the landscape of Argentina is similar to the Dakotas, as well, with flat land, large cattle ranches and farms that grow wheat, soybeans, sunflowers and corn. “Except for an occasional palm tree, the drive from Buenos Aires to Parachas was just like traveling between Fargo and Grand Forks,” says Dambach.

Dave Grant films at the Volga German Festival in Urdinarrain, Argentina, which featured homemade sausage.

Victoria Teresa Grauberger of Buenos Aires, Argentina, prepares German-Russian dishes.

Food traditions more similar than different between Americas’ Germans from Russia

Because of her interest in the food from her heritage, retired educator Gwen Schock Cowherd launched a Facebook page last year called “Germans from Russia Foodways and Traditions.” “I launched it on a whim thinking it would be a fun way to share recipes,” she recalls. “I thought if I could get about 200 people to like the page then I would keep it up. Now, 11 months later, close to 6,500 people from all over the world have liked the page.”

Among those people from around the world are those of German from Russia descent living in South America, which has given her a perspective on the food traditions that are shared between North America and South America.

“Certain foods still resonate worldwide with German Russians, both those from the Volga and Black Sea areas, including sausage, kuchen, cabbage rolls, borscht, dough dishes and sauerkraut,” she says. “Black Sea descendants rave about a deep-fried dough-filled pocket of meat and cabbage called schlitzkraut. Volga’s call their dough-filled pockets bierocks or runzas and bake them instead of deep frying. Many foods are the same but are known by different names and may be prepared a bit differently.”

She has also found it interesting that roasted sunflower seeds are popular in South America, as they are with German Russians in America. She has also observed that community celebrations seem to be more popular in South America, however. For example, in Argentina, many celebrate a special holiday by having a community bake in a huge wood-fired oven where everyone brings a dish to roast. “Many German celebrations are held every summer in Argentina, and I don’t think that Americans have as many large celebrations.”

Through her work on the Facebook page, Cowherd has learned that many of the food dishes of the Volga and Black Sea German Russians worldwide are similar but are known by different names. “When I first started the page, I never knew if a recipe was Volga or Black Sea,” she says. “But now I usually know. For example, Black Sea kuchen most always has a cream filling and is made in a round pie pan. Volga kuchen usually is baked in an oblong pan, has a thicker crust and is topped with streusel. Kuchen fillings containing cheese were less common with the Volga than the Black Sea folks. The Volgas grew a berry called Schwartzbeeren which was used in pies and kuchens. They ate what they grew.”

Contact Cowherd at gwensc@peoplepc.com.
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