A Taste of Tradition
by Rose Marie Gueldner

Another fascinating foray into GR culinary adventures...

Sunflowers

“As one peculiarity, I would like to mention that the Black Sea Germans in the Dakotas eat sunflower seeds and thus you can often recognize a Black Sea German’s house in the Dakotas by the sunflowers in the garden.”

As every Black Sea German genealogist learns, Richard Sallet began his research while working with the Dakota Freie Press, a German language newspaper which was widely read by our ancestors from the late 1800s until its demise in the 1950s. Sallet’s work culminated in a book, Russian-German Settlements in the United States.

But when and how did our ancestors acquire their peculiarity? Were they the first or only people to eat sunflower seeds? When did sunflowers (Helianthus genus) move from the garden to the field? Does the relationship of sunflowers and German Russians continue?

Sunflowers Travel to Europe

The sunflower seeds the 16th century conquistadors distributed upon return home made the plant an ornamental across Western Europe. Van Gogh painted them in the south of France. Peter the Great tucked some into his luggage before returning to Russia from Holland. Gogol noted the shade they provided when describing leisure summers in Little Russia.

In Bashtans on the steppe, German colonists planted sunflowers adjacent to the fence, sheltering the tall plant from the wind. Height (Memories of Black Sea Germans) noted the popularity of sunflower seeds among residents (“sold on all street corners and in the villages”) and attributed the “amazing skill in separating the sweet kernel from the small shells” to a “nervous restlessness in their teeth.” An accompanying footnote explains that the “roasted seeds were frequently and profusely chewed (“gekneffert”) by young and old during the long winter months, and became widely known as “Russian peanuts.”

Sunflowers Return to America

With seeds gathered from gardens and fields, tucked into hems, pockets, and satchels, German Russian emigrants returned the enhanced sunflower to its native land in the late 19th century.

Chroniclers, most notably Marzolf (That’s the Way It Once Was), commented on the German Russian use of sunflowers. “When German Russians got together for Gemmenschaft (fellowship) . . . women went to the Stube [living room] for Weibergeschwetz (women’s talk) . . . with husbands in the kitchen leaning a chair against wainscoting and began to kieferen, spitting shells on floor.” Kieferen, Marzolf explained, implied chewing like a squirrel or gopher. The only additions descendants of pioneers would add is the practice of snacking on seeds in the front yard on summery Sunday afternoons — providing seeds remained from the winter indulgence — and incurring the wrath of the school teacher when a pile of hulls was discovered in or near a student desk.
Once planted, the sunflowers needed no attention, but were monitored closely as they matured. The heads needed to be removed when the seeds ripened but before they fell out and before marauding birds seriously reduced the crop. Harvesting, often in September, involved further drying the heads by storing them in a warm, dry place (a tool shed or attic) or atop a low roof. Seeds, extracted by knocking on the back of a dried head or scraping its face, were stored in discarded pillowcases or other cloth bags. A final step, roasting a pan of seeds (gerösteten Sonnenblumenkerne) in the waning heat of an oven and adding a dash of salt, was completed just prior to offering the treat to visitors and family members.

The sunflower seeds our ancestors brought with them were far different than those that had been chauffeured to Europe in the 16th century. Scientists at the Russian Research Institute at Yekaterinodar ("Catherine’s Gift," later renamed Krasnodar) near the Black Sea engineered cultivars that not only were taller with bigger heads, but had a much higher oil content than parent plants. Fasting regulations in the Orthodox Church were directly responsible for the research. Realizing that the sunflower was not on the Church’s list of prohibited Lenten foods — a compilation drawn up centuries before knowledge of the sunflower — the populace created a demand that resulted in fields of vibrant yellow and green. For almost two-thirds of the Church’s calendar year, animal fats (pork lard, poultry fat, bovine butter) were forbidden. Sunflower oil was not. Soon Russian sunflower oil refineries sprung up across the countryside. Predictably, most oil pressing plants (Ölmühlen) in German colonies were located in Catholic villages.

North American seed companies obtained sunflower seeds from German Russian immigrants, and by the 1880s were offering seeds for the “Mammoth Russian” plant in catalogs, a variety that was sold until the 1970s.

**Sunflowers Today**

That? Oh, that’s a volunteer.” More interested in “flowers,” as growers call them, the farmer’s attention was on a field of compact, huge sunny heads stretching to the horizon. I, however, was intrigued by the short, spindly plant growing along the dusty gravel road. This throwback was probably similar to the wild ones Lewis and Clark documented in their 1805 journal as they traversed present-day Montana and similar to the ones used by Native American tribes for both food and oil as far back as 3000 BCE. The roadside volunteer bore little resemblance to the farmer’s flowers but they share characteristics, including a pleasing solar image face which never fails to give instant pleasure to passersby. Heliotropism, the much-repeated phrase that sunflowers rotate with the sun is not entirely accurate. During the growing cycle, heads tilt during the day to follow the sun, but once blooming commences in late summer, heads remain facing the morning sun until, brown with age and heavy with seeds, their work complete, they bow toward the earth.

Wild sunflower plants are between 2 and 4 feet tall with slender stalks branching from a central stem and host several flower heads (up to 2 inches in diameter) that produce tiny seeds. Considered a weedy plant, wild sunflowers, which resemble daisies, are found in open areas, especially along roads and fences. Like their cultivated cousins, they have a central disk surrounded by bright yellow ray petals.

In contrast, today’s cultivated sunflower grows between 9 and 12 feet tall and its massive head (12-inch diameter) weighs up to ten pounds. To harvest and hold a standard fully grown, unripe sunflower you will
need a ladder and both hands. Rather than a single flower, you are actually holding a bouquet of hundreds of tiny flowers (disk florets) arranged in a logarithmic spiral. Each will mature into a sunflower seed — actually a dried fruit called achene — enclosed in a hull. If the hulls are black when ripe, you are holding a head of the oil seed variety; if they are zebra-striped, they are confectionary seeds.

Oil seeds are sent to mills to be pressed into one of the world’s most popular and healthy culinary oils. Confectionary seeds are packaged for the consumer for out-of-hand eating and baking and are sold to the food service industry which re-sells them to the food industry (bakeries turn out sunflower seed laden loaves, restaurants offer them at salad bars, recreational suppliers add them to energy bars and trail mixes, pet food companies sell them as bird seed, and food manufacturers whip the oil into margarine). Not to be left out is the residue after oil extraction that becomes an important high-protein feed for livestock and the discarded hulls which become biomass fuel or herbicide. After millennia of selection for tall plants with huge heads, modern cultivars, dwarf plants with medium-sized heads, which slightly reduce the amount of seed and stalk, are increasingly favored because they are easier to harvest.

Sunflower Oil
Containers of sunflower oil lined grocery and pantry shelves across Europe after World War II, but because it was not competitive with the less expensive canola, corn, and soy oils, it was not available in the US. That all changed in the 1990s because of potato chips and French fries. The fast food industry was pleased with the availability and taste of soy oil used for potato chips and French fries, but with pressure from the government and consumers to reduce the use of the trans-fat-filled, partially hydrogenated soy oil, the industry was in a pickle. They needed a healthy, inexpensive replacement oil, one like soy oil that wouldn’t “go bad” with high heat and repeated use. Scientists at the US Department of Agriculture’s Sunflower Research Unit in Fargo had the answer: a Soviet-bred sunflower variety with high levels of healthy oil (monosaturated) and no nasty trans fats. Today, the flowers in the fields of farmers, German Russians and others, are predominately this type. Check the label on bags of potato chips, ready-to-eat popcorn, and tortilla chips at your local market and you’ll find that these food companies also use sunflower oil. The switch by commercial food makers brought the price down and inexpensive sunflower cooking oil became readily available on US supermarket shelves.

Sunflower Growers
Despite increased yields and millions of acres of US farmland planted in sunflowers (the Dakotas, Kansas, and Nebraska are major producers), the nation is not among the world’s top producing countries: The US ranks 11th on a list of 70 producing countries with Ukraine, the Russian Federation, Argentina, China, Romania, and Turkey holding top honors. Originally
some of the US sunflower harvest was exported, but that came to a halt because of commercial and home use after the introduction of the new hybrid.

The peculiarity that Sallet called a marker for Black Sea German farms, garden-growing sunflowers, is a rare site these days. In their place are forest-like fields of towering plants with massive heads filled with seeds engineered for oil instead of meal.

Because of the Romanovs, both Germans and sunflowers made Russia home during a crucial period of the country’s development. Sunflowers, despite their showy appearance, proved to be hardy, versatile, adaptive, and productive — characteristics that also describe our German Russian ancestors who, despite their humble appearance and demeanor, played a role in the plant’s popularity and propagation. From our ancestor’s use of sunflower seeds as snacks, descendants now grow the plant not only as a source of food and culinary oil, but for the benefit of humans, animals, and the environment.