

## Searching for ethnic food on the Northern Plains

By Tom Isern, professor of history at North Dakota State University, Fargo

The crossover of foodways from an ethnic culture into mainstream society is highly selective. Certain foods are selected by entrepreneurs and by the popular culture to cross the cultural line, whereas the main body of ethnic foodways remains confined to the original group.

It's a mystery to me, for instance, just who decided the taco should become the Mexican fast food of American pop culture. If you go back to the early 1900s in towns on the plains, it wasn't the taco Anglos wanted, it was the tamale. In every town that had a population of Mexican immigrants--mostly railroad section hands--you find some old guy operating a tamale wagon, wheeling it downtown daily from the colonia (Mexican neighborhood).

From Italian cuisine American society selected pizza. Key figures in that selection were the Carney boys of Wichita, Kansas, founders of Pizza Hut.

In Nebraska, Runza drive-ins of America have attempted to introduce the Runza to American pop culture. The Runza, also known as the Bierock, is a baked bun stuffed with cabbage, meat, and onions, one of those portable ethnic foods. It's a German-Russian item most commonly associated with the Volga Germans. Although Runza restaurants are prospering on the central plains, and Runzas are served at Husker games in Lincoln, this is an ethnic specialty that hasn't yet broken out of its region.

Most Germans from Russia on the northern plains are not Volga Germans, but rather Black Sea Germans, and they have their own characteristic foods. None of these have crossed over into mainstream American pop culture, but three of them have reached the threshold of regional recognition. These are Knoephla soup (spelling varies), Fleischkuechle (again, spelling varies) and Kuchen. I don't know just why these three items have emerged as signatures of German-Russian cuisine, but they are the ones that appear frequently on cafe menus and are known to non-German-Russians.

Knoephla soup is a variant of cream-of-potato soup that has fluffy dumplings floating around in it. This is the ultimate comfort food of the German-Russian heartland in the Dakotas. Fleischkuechle are patties and fried in fat. These are a main dish. Kuchen look like pies, but they aren't. The crust is a yeast dough, and the filling is a cheesy custard with some kind of fruit in it. Prune is traditional; I like rhubarb.

These three foods are, of course, firmly grounded in the traditional cookery of Germans from Russia. Users of the World Wide Web can explore references and recipes via Mike Miller's "Culture, Customs, & Foodways" site at NDSU. Those who prefer print sources can consult two wonderful publications of the Germans from Russia Heritage Society: "Food and Folklore" and "Food and Customs: Recipes of the Black Sea Germans."

Today I'm interested in how these foods are offered to the public, German-Russian and otherwise, by cafes. The Fleischkuechle situation in particular has me worried. I know of no cafe that makes its own; all seem to be serving the manufactured, shrink-wrapped, frozen kind. Knoephla soup is the real thing, though. That of Kroll's Kitchen in Bismarck is probably the best-known, but there are lots of wonderful variations in lots of cafes. As for kuchen--now you're talking. My favorite is still that of the Prairie Oasis, in Cleveland, N.D.

All right, the floor is open for nomination. Where can you get a real Fleischkuechle? Where is the best Knoephla soup in all the land? And where can we find the finest Kuchen you ever put a fork into (or snatched up in your fingers)?

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