A tour of food heritage in the Iowa Valley Scenic Byway Corridor

MATTHEW HELM
IOWA VALLEY RC&D
A Quick Word

This booklet was made possible through a collaboration between Iowa Valley RC&D, the Obermann Center for Advanced Studies at the University of Iowa, and the Iowa Valley Scenic Byway Board.

The interview process revealed that headcheese is a favorite in the Iowa River Valley, which was ... unexpected. You can experience this place-based, culinary treat at the Amana Meat Shop, located at 4523 F Street Amana, Iowa 52203.

Special thank you to Matthew Helm for capturing these stories during a global pandemic.

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About Matthew Helm

I am a PhD candidate in English at the University of Iowa, where I study 20th-21st century American literature. In the summer of 2020, I was selected for an internship with the Humanities for the Public Good Initiative through the Obermann Center for Advanced Studies. Iowa Valley RC&D was my host organization. Over the course of the summer, I interviewed community leaders across the Iowa Valley Scenic Byway corridor to discover stories about food. My findings are shared here in the hope of inspiring visitors and residents to celebrate and preserve their own traditions as well as those of others.

In Fall of 2017, I had the pleasure of taking Professor Doris Witt's graduate seminar 'Writers on Food.' The course challenged me to consider how food functions as a literary and cultural symbol, as well as what our relationship to taste can tell us about our humanity. Since then, I have written and delivered papers on the topic of food and culture and I served as executive editor of a special issue of the Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies titled "Reckoning with Appetite" (2019). Food traditions are important to me – as a student, teacher, scholar (and eater!). I am grateful for the opportunity to showcase Iowa food culture's unique place at the table.
About the Byway

The Iowa Valley Scenic Byway is a 77-mile-long route designated by the State of Iowa. It winds its way through the Iowa River Valley showcasing rich natural areas, agricultural lands, and strong traditions. The western end of this byway skirts Iowa’s only resident Native American community, the Meskwaki Settlement. The eastern end is home to the Amana Colonies, a national historic landmark that still offers unique, handcrafted wares and cultural festivals.

This scenic byway is one of 14 in Iowa. Each offers a unique set of experiences. To find out more about all of Iowa’s rural routes visit www.traveliowa.com.
This booklet examines the unique, yet intersecting, food cultures and histories found along the Iowa Valley Scenic Byway, a 77-mile-long route anchored to the east by the seven villages of the Amana Colonies and to the west by the Meskwaki Settlement. This booklet tells the story of Native food sovereignty and of transatlantic immigrant food traditions from Bohemia and Germany. It tells the story of the rise of industrial agriculture and of contemporary convenience culture. It tells the story of how, in spite of these advancements, people still hold onto the recipes their grandmothers taught them, and their grandmothers before them. It tells the story of how food made with your hands is just that much more satisfying. Sure, “we are what we eat.” But we are also the conversations we partake in, the knowledge we produce, and the communities we build when we come together to share a meal. What follows is just a sample – a taste, really – of what makes the Iowa Valley region so flavorful.

Tell me what you eat and I shall tell you what you are

Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin,
The Physiology of Taste (translated by M.F.K. Fisher)

Or, as we tend to say it, “you are what you eat.”
We are the same people. We are the ghosts who don’t go away. We are still here perpetuating this food culture.

— Jon Childers

Amana Colonies
Amana Colonies, Iowa County, Iowa (pop. 1,636)

The Communal Kitchen

Fleeing religious persecution in Germany, the Community of True Inspiration founded their first commune in Ebenezer, New York in 1842. By 1854, the Inspirationalists outgrew this tract of land and sought a new home out west. They settled near the Iowa River and by 1862 they had laid seven villages – the Amana Colonies were born.

Food was the pillar of communal life at Amana, and because of this, the kitchen house was always the first building erected in a new village. Throughout the seven villages, there were over 50 communal kitchens feeding 35-40 people up to five times a day. The kitchens employed ten women, including a kitchen boss (German: Küchenbaas) who oversaw daily operations.

The meals were an efficient and mostly silent affair, lasting about 15-20 minutes. The communal kitchens fed farmers who worked 10-12 hour days, so the goal of the food was function and nutrition.

"The food was homogenous. Everybody ate boiling beef; everybody ate creamed chicken. There was very little diversity at the time," explained Executive Director of the Amana Heritage Society Jon Childers. "Everything was utilitarian. Their lives were very plain and austere. There is supposed to be moderation in life, plain and simple and humble. And that is how we see our food. Nothing fancy. Just meat and potatoes."

However, the Inspirationists were allowed to indulge during special occasions, like holidays and weddings.

"There's a tradition to this day that if somebody gets married you still take cakes to the reception," Childers said. "When my wife and I got married we had over forty cakes!" Childers grew up in a communal kitchen that was converted into a home. He has been trying to "coax out" the deep food culture in Amana tied to communal living. While Amana is famous today for their family style restaurants, some of their dishes have become Americanized while other traditional foods have been excluded from the menu altogether. For a chicken schnitzel sandwich, head to the Ox Yoke Inn restaurant. But for creamy Amana spinach, look elsewhere.

"There have been a variety of attempts over the years to offer the old-fashioned food culture here," Childers said. "We are trying to do an honest to goodness, sustainable attempt at communal dinners."

Last year, the Amana Heritage Society purchased the Ruedy Home and Communal Kitchen Museum in Middle Amana, where they host communal meal reenactments complete with cottage cheese, pickled cold salads, and even head cheese from the Amana Meat Shop.

"Head cheese is one of those things that people don't know exists, and once they find out they get grossed out," Childers said. "Head cheese is pig tongue and pig head put into a casing. It is like bologna or olive loaf, where you can see all of the pieces of head and tongue. I started eating it again and that is all I eat all summer."

The emphasis at these reenactments is on the food tradition, and not on playing dress up.

"My goal is not to dress like people did 100 years ago and speak with an accent. It is strange to act like somebody else when I could just say my grandparents worked here, which they did," Childers said. "We are the same people. We are the ghosts who don't go away. We are still here perpetuating this food culture."

At the Ruedy Kitchen, the food is the star of the show.

The Gardens

Peter Hoehnle, PhD, recalled how his grandmother would share with him lore from the kitchens.

"When they tried to switch my grandmother's assignment to another kitchen, her boss ran to the elder and said, 'you can't have her, she's too good of a cook!' – that was the highest compliment anyone could have made to her. She was 93, and she told us that story over and over again," Peter said.

Women in communal Amana were allowed to work in either the kitchen or in the gardens. The real competition happened in the gardens.

"I had a great aunt who was extremely competitive about her gardening even into her 80s," Hoehnle said. "If you beat her in anything she would write it off and just say, 'oh, well, I didn't plant that because I don't like it.'"

The Amana gardens have a worldwide reputation for producing and marketing the Ebenezer onion, the Easter egg radish, and the Mirabelle plum, among other fruits and vegetables. At the height of communal living, the gardens were huge, totaling close to 45 acres. The women who worked in the gardens were in their 40s-50s, and for many of them the garden was a source of pride.
"Our neighbor would always say, 'when I die, they'll find me in the garden,'" Peter explained. "My great grandmother gardened into her 90s. The greatest tragedy of her life was when she broke her hip and couldn't garden anymore."

Even after the communal era, gardening remained a vital aspect of Amana culture. School children would help harvest onions and cabbage would be picked to be made into sauerkraut and then stored in the church basement in Homestead. The smell proved to be a little too much for the churchgoers, but lucky for them, the sauerkraut barrels would be replaced with wine in the fall.

Hoehnle recited a bit of doggerel poetry that circulated in the newspapers at the time: "There is a spirit above and a spirit below. The spirit above is the spirit divine and the spirit below is the spirit of wine."

Amana is, in many ways, the Rhine Valley of Iowa.

"The landscape of Amana is an edible landscape, a working landscape," Peter said. "There were no shade trees, but there were nut trees and fruit trees. There were grapes growing on trellises. It must have been really something back in the day."

On April 11th, 1932, the communal kitchens officially closed their doors and communal life in Amana was over.

"There were all of these young people who were intelligent and talented and all they were ever going to do is what their grandparents did. The young people wanted more opportunities for themselves," Childers explained. "In addition, because of the Depression, the Amanas were reeling financially. Something had to change."

And change it did. The Amana Society was incorporated as a joint-stock company and young people had more personal freedom than ever before, especially when it came to what they ate.

"There was this rush to embrace the American way. To try something new and different," Hoehnle said. "One woman recalled trying canned pineapple for the first time. Now you were cooking for just your family. People traded new recipes in the newspapers. It was an exciting, unprecedented time."

Emilie Hoppe, author of Seasons of Plenty: Amana Communal Cooking (1994), interviewed women who had spent half of their lives in the communal kitchens and half of their lives cooking for their families at home. For many of these women, the Great Change was bittersweet.

"My grandmother, Elise Zuber, was 32 years old when the Great Change happened and she had never known anything but the communal way of life," Hoppe said. "She had mixed feelings about it because her husband was thrilled but she was worried about how she was going to cope because she enjoyed the kitchen house. I think eventually she was very happy because she loved having the freedom to travel with her husband."

The Great Change required an adjustment for everyone involved.

"These old communal recipes were made to feed thirty people, so they all had to be cut down for a family of four. All of these redone recipes ended up in this little black and white notebook called 'Amana Recipes,' which is what I call the Bible of Amana cooking," Hoppe explained.

Prior to the change, a village would try to grow at least 50,000 pounds of potatoes to get through the year. Villagers were warned that the change was coming and were told to plant gardens in their backyards to prepare.

"What happened is that people underplanted or they overplanted," Hoppe said. "The communal way of life has a lot of labor saving built into it. In some ways, the women worked much harder after the change than before. But the struggle was worth the personal freedom to travel, to make your own money, to live in their own houses. But it was a trade-off."

Many cooks told Emilie that their first meal at home was a disaster. And yet, it was also an opportunity to try new foods for the first time.

"One of the best sellers in the 1920s at general stores in Amana was gelatin. There were no refrigerators, so it was kind of dicey, but they all thought it was the cat's meow," Emilie said. "Quite a few families had foods you never would have received in an Amana Kitchen. Beef steak, canned pineapple, canned mandarin oranges, and Jell-O were on the menu for people's very first meals at home."

Even more changes would be coming to Amana soon enough.

George Foerstner grew up pulling ice from the Iowa River for the kitchen house where he ate in High Amana. In 1934, Foerstner would go on to establish the Electrical Equipment Co. in Middle Amana, which manufactured walk-in coolers. Later, the Amana Society acquired the business and it became Amana Refrigeration, Inc. In 1947, the company introduced the first side-by-side freezer-refrigeration unit.

"They promoted the name 'Amana' on the appliances, and they built on the Amana brand of fine craftsmanship," Hoppe said. "Now folks could freeze their vegetables from the garden as opposed to pickling and drying them, which is more labor and cost intensive."

In 1965, Raytheon purchased Amana Refrigeration, and in 1967, they introduced the Radarange, the first popular microwave designed for home use. Foerstner hired home
Economics majors from Iowa State to concoct microwave recipes.

“When you bought the microwave, you also got a 200-page recipe book,” Hoppe said. “They had to teach people how to use the Radarange because nobody knew what to do with the dam thing. The cookbook had beautiful color photos and old-fashioned recipes alongside new recipes like pineapple tidbits and weird appetizers.”

The Radarange became all the rage in Amana and all over the United States. Amana’s food history runs the gamut from traditional recipes with German roots to the development of modern-day appliances.

A Pious People Who Like to Party

Emilie thinks that Amana is successful at sharing their food culture with others because of their hospitality.

“You’re supposed to have your guard up around strangers, but you’re also supposed to feed them,” Emilie said. “If you come to an Amana person’s house you will not leave without at least getting a cup of coffee and a cookie. I think that is why we have found so much success with restaurants and all the festivals. We just like social events and food. We like sharing it. We are pious people who like to party.”

Emilie likens food to “connective tissue” because it links us to our past and to our future.

“When I eat something I prepared that I know my grandmother loved I think of her. When I serve that meal to my kids and tell them that their grandmother loved it, I am telling a story about their grandmother. Food is the link that binds us,” Hoppe said. “Food binds us in community celebration. It is the thing that we all gather around and share. When you share food you start talking about who prepared it and where it came from. These stories are so important in maintaining a sense of community.”

These days, the Amana Meat Shop & Smokehouse sells ham, bratwurst, and beef all over the United States.

“When they send a ham to Boston or Los Angeles or Seattle, they include a little brochure about Amana,” Emilie said. “Every ham is a part of who we are. It is a recipe that has been with us since 1856 and that is just remarkable. When they see the Amana ham they partake in a tradition, a connection is made.”
I remember the Italian prisoners marching down highway six to get to Marengo, each of them carried a gallon jug in each hand — one of red wine and one of white wine. I guess you could say they had it made.

— Don Misel
Marengo is a Corny Place

Marengo has been labeled a “bedroom community” because many residents commute to nearby cities like Cedar Rapids or Iowa City to work before returning home to their families to rest. Unlike other towns along the Iowa Valley Scenic Byway, it does not boast of a distinct ethnic food tradition. However, with its many tillable acres of clay loam, Marengo provides sustenance in the form of sweet corn to the entire nation.

Marilyn Rodgers of the Iowa County Historical Society cites two reasons for Marengo’s “hodge podge” of ethnic identities.

“Marengo is a melting pot, and this can be traced back to two major factors,” Rodgers said. “First, the railroad went through here, making it a place for people to come on and off. We are also right by Highway 6, which is transcontinental. Second, we are right in the middle of this wonderful farm country.”

Marengo, according to Marilyn, is a “corny place” – literally. Easy access to the railroad and the highway made it the perfect location to ship produce across the United States. So, while Marengo does not lay claim to any specific ethnic origin, it does represent the quintessential Iowa corn town.

In 1903, William J. Sayers opened the Marengo Canning Company. At that time, there were 400 acres of sweet corn and farmers were paid $4,000 to have their corn canned and sold to New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and other eastern markets. The canning company hired area workers seasonally for three or four weeks to process the corn and can it, and labels for companies like Dole and Del Monte were applied later. In 1911, the cannery burned down. Subsequently, a new factory was erected and by 1922 over 1,000 acres of sweet corn were raised annually, with 3 million cans processed each year.

The Process it Took to Get to You

Marengo is still a “corny place,” even though farming has changed drastically since the early twentieth century. Rodgers reflected, “You do not have the little independent farms you used to have. But it is still farm land. And it remains that way even though Pioneer has moved out of here and the canning factory shut down.”

Iowa continues to grow the most corn in the United States, although only less than one percent of that is sweet corn. The rest is used to make fuel, animal feed, and processed foods.

The story of the Marengo Canning Company is also the story of the industrialization of food. “Industrial food,” defined by activist Michael Pollan, “is food for which you need an investigative journalist to tell you where it came from.” We have become abstract from the reality of what we eat.

Marilyn remembers a time when this was not the case, “We raised much of our food in the garden and orchard and canned the fruit. We raised chickens and had our own eggs, butchered hogs, we had beef. You lived off of what you raised. All of those things are real to me.”
If there is any silver lining to the coronavirus pandemic, Marilyn hopes that it brings us closer to the reality of what we eat, “I hope it brings back a piece of what has been lost. Maybe people will start to grow their own food and use their hands. We have lost the background for how food became so you can eat it, where it came from, and the process it took to get it to you.”

Every year, the Historical Society sells pecans as a fundraiser at the local general store. When Marilyn went to the store to check on them, the clerk told her that there was only one bag left. Maybe, she thought, people are learning to bake and cook again.

The canning factory is gone, but Iowa remains the number one purveyor of corn. And Marengo is home to a uniquely Iowan story – one that challenges us to take a moment before our next meal to consider how our food ended up on our plate.
We’re Belgians, and this game ain’t played without a beer in your hand.

— Doug DeBrower
Work hard, play hard – that is the philosophy of the Victor-area Belgian community.

Doug DeBrower, a Victor native who can trace his Belgian ancestry back to the 15th century, has played a game called Rolle Bolle since he was a child. In addition to food traditions and a strong work ethic, his ancestors brought with them 5 - 8 lbs. wooden bolles made from lignum vitae – a wood so strong and dense and water resistant that its other applications included ship and submarine bearings and marine chronometers.

"As kids, we played our hardest at Rolle Bolle on the weekends because if we got beat we would have to go home and make hay. We knew we wouldn't have to go home if we kept on playing," Doug said. "Back then, we would play clear until dark."

Today the game is played with rubber bolles on a flat court with two stakes placed about 30-feet apart. Teams of three compete to score points by getting their bolles closest to the stakes. The bolles are rolled down the alley, but can also be "shot" in an effort to knock the other team's bolles away.

At the time of this publication there are only two people identified in the United States who make bolles for purchase, one in Minnesota and one in Illinois. Doug still has his grandpa's 120-year-old wooden bolle from Belgium. He also has a rubber bolle that he purchased in 1956 for $14. Bolles are heavy, wheel-like, and tapered to one side which causes them to roll elliptically.

"Some people are good at rolling the bolle so that it comes close to the stake. Others are good at rolling the bolle hard and knocking the other bolles away from the stake," Doug said. "It is a very, very fun game. But it is also terribly frustrating."

The players meet at the outdoor Rolle Bolle court in Victor when the weather is nice, and at the indoor, carpeted court at B's Sports Bar & Grill in the winter. Doug's son plays competitively and placed second in the world. But in Victor, the purpose of the game is old-fashioned fun and friendly competition. A game of Rolle Bolle can be played for quarters, or even better, for a bottle of homemade Belgian beer.

"We're Belgians, and this game ain't played without a beer in your hand," DeBrower quipped.

Homemade Beer

Doug's family beer recipe goes back at least 100 years.

"I make the beer out of white corn and it takes 28 days before the yeast is all used up," Doug explained. "The last time I made the beer it had 13% alcohol content, which is pretty high. I was not satisfied with that, so I went and got two fifths of Everclear and dumped it in there and stirred it around."

After grinding the corn, DeBrower adds three oranges, three lemons, and the yeast, with an additional 2 ½ cups of sugar to the mixture every day.

"We had fun in the basement bottling it, we would take the first glug glug glug out of the bottle and then cap it. It is a crystal clear, just powerful, sweet beer," Doug said. "My wife told me not to make it anymore. But I did threaten to make it one more time this year because people asked me about it."

Doug's family has a storied history of homebrewed alcohol going back to the days of prohibition.

"My dad's half-brothers came to America and decided to make money quickly by hauling hooch in their brand-new car. They got stopped by the police outside of Belle Plaine. They jumped out and took off running. They nabbed my dad and it cost my grandpa $700 to get him out of jail," Doug said. "In order to keep the brothers out of jail, they had to give up the new car and move out of state. They went to Illinois, which is where they lived out the rest of their lives."

Blood Sausage

As hotdogs and beer are to baseball, so blood sausage (or "blutwurst") and beer are to Rolle Bolle. Every year, Doug gets together with his extended family to make upwards of 900 links of blood sausage to be distributed throughout Victor and the surrounding area.

"It became so popular because we were the only ones who made it. When people saw three to four cars parked in front of my place they knew what was going on, and all of the sudden the old Belgians in town would start calling and placing their orders," Doug said. "Making blood sausage is a six-person operation that takes half a day, and everyone knows their assigned role. Doug's specialty is tying the links using a "secret old Belgian" method. The beef blood comes from the local meat locker, along with the pig intestines for the casing.

The recipe calls for 45-50 pounds of onions. Lard and panko bread crumbs are added to the mixture to thicken it. Doug rigged a drill with a butter paddle to stir the concoction and to keep it from settling. Then, he samples it to make sure that the seasoning is just right—salt, pepper, and Grandpa DeBrower's secret ingredient, cloves.

"Man, do the cloves give it the flavor," Doug said. "It makes us feel good that we still make it and people in town still like it. There might be other places that sell it in Canada, but it is nothing like ours."
Once the mixture is finished, the casing stuffed, and the links tied, then it is time to boil the sausage.

“You don't want the water to be too hot because it will blow the casing, which is a mess. But those Belgians, they waste nothing, so if that were to happen they’d put carrots into the water and turn it into a vegetable soup,” DeBrower said. “We stick a pin into the casing and if blood comes out we leave it to boil a little longer. After they are cooked, I shrink wrap them and freeze them, so they last.”

The blood sausage will “bloom” into a dark red after boiling. While some people like to eat their blood sausage on a saltine cracker with horseradish, Doug prefers to fry his.

“I fry mine with eggs. They have a lot of grease in them because of the backfat and lard, and they get black and crisp,” Doug said. “We will eat blood sausage for four days in a row, but it is so full of iron that you will shit black. It really is a healthy food.”

Doug holds on to his mother’s cookbook so he can look back at other memorable Belgian dishes.

“Every recipe my aunt has in here has beer in it,” DeBrower laughed.

But Doug’s fondest memories are of headcheese, a perennial along the Iowa Valley Scenic Byway.

“The headcheese is so damn good. You sit down with a cracker and saltines and a little bit of horseradish and you can’t back away from eating,” Doug said. “You can put it in a bread pan and slice it and put it in a sandwich. My mother did that all the time. I’d walk home from country school and mom would have it out there for us and we would help ourselves to an afterschool snack.”

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**Rolle Bolle on the Menu**

Doug thinks that if a nearby restaurant added a “Rolle Bolle Burger” to their menu it might attract new customers and potential new Rolle Bolle players to Victor.

“I have been testing recipes,” Doug said. “For the ‘Rolle Bolle Burger,’ you take an onion ring and fill it with cheese and hamburger and take some bacon and wrap it around.”

At its height of popularity in the 1960s, 130 players would play Rolle Bolle every Saturday. These days, participation is less and DeBrower hopes to get more people invested.

“A lot of things I do that are Belgian are going to be gone when I’m gone,” Doug said. “We have to get the kids started. If they can carry that interest right on through, they will keep with it. You can see it in their eyes, they just glow.”
There’s a lot of comradery when we make horseradish. It is a great excuse to come together and shoot the bull for a day.

— Jim Schwab
Cry Like You’ve Never Cried Before

Belle Plaine, Benton County, Iowa (pop. 2,443)

Belle Plaine has three major ethnic groups that settled there, the Belgians, the Bohemians, and the Germans. President of the Belle Plaine Historical Society Mitch Malcolm claims German ancestry. He remembers enjoying schnitzel for dinner and stollen bread baked with apples and cinnamon for dessert at local restaurants. He also recalls avoiding his great aunt’s oyster casserole on Thanksgiving.

But one pungent condiment from his childhood left a lasting impact on his taste buds: horseradish.

“I was in high school and I remember I went out to the country to help this older lady with picking and skinning and making horseradish,” Mitch said. “You gotta do it at least once. If you think cutting onions is bad, you do not want to touch your eyes, nose, or mouth when making that stuff because you will cry like you’ve never cried before!”

The horseradish is a spicy root that must be scraped and cleaned before being ground up three to four times and then jarred with a little bit of vinegar. Mitch recommended not going too overboard when serving horseradish to avoid the spice-factor, “Horseradish is really hot, so you don’t add very much to a meal. But if you have roast beef and a little bit of fresh horseradish it is very good. You just have to use it sparingly.”

Belle Plaine has a history of pickling, jarring, and preserving food in the home that stretches back to the 1880s. But what to wash it all down with? Alcohol of course! All three ethnic groups brought with them the knowledge of how to brew beer and spirits.

“I was cleaning out my grandparent’s garage and found the whole mechanism for making spirits,” Mitch laughed. “They were like, ‘maybe we should put this away and not have it out on the street’ – they still remembered prohibition, you see.”

A lot of people continue to jar their own horseradish and brew their own beer. After all these years, the desire to make artisanal, handcrafted food and drink has not left the Belle Plaine area.

Handmade Horseradish and Sauerkraut

Twice a year, once in the spring and once in the fall, for the last thirty years, Jim Schwab and twenty of his friends participate in an all-day horseradish party.

“It’s a one-day deal. We dig the horseradish up and we cut the tops off and start cleaning them. Then we bring it out to twenty guys in a circle with peelers,” Schwab explained. “By noon we start grinding it up into five-gallon batches. Then we take the batches back inside and people start putting them in jars. It’s a huge process and everyone knows their jobs.”

The only ingredients you add to horseradish are vinegar and water. But, Schwab admitted, he does not know the exact proportions, “We always have one guy who does the mixing and he gets it to perfection. Nobody else fools with it. When he is done with a batch, he hands us each a Ritz Cracker and we try it.”

Jim and his friends produce 300 jars of horseradish in one sitting. They distribute the jars at church and to the surrounding Belle Plaine community. Even Jim’s grandson gets in on the fun.

“It bothers his sinuses, so he doesn’t like to eat it, but he loves to be a part of the process,” Schwab said. “This horseradish is coarse ground. It is not like the pasty liquid you get in the store.”

Jim recommended mixing ketchup with horseradish and adding it to fish, meat, and even a pulled pork sandwich – but, really, it goes with just about anything.

For Schwab, making sauerkraut is a solo affair. He uses an old sauerkraut cutter to slice the cabbage into thin pieces. For every seven heads of cabbage he adds half a cup of salt and then uses a potato masher to pack it down tight. He weighs the mixture down with a plate and a couple quarts of water so that the sauerkraut can sit in its own juices.

As is often true, homemade is so much better than store bought. “I think when you buy it from the store they put a lot of preservatives in it,” Jim said. “I sometimes use caraway seeds for flavor and sometimes I don’t. I’ve made sweet sauerkraut and sour sauerkraut, but everybody prefers the sour so that’s what I stick with.”

Sauerkraut goes best with pork chops to bring out the flavor of the meat. In addition to sauerkraut, Jim makes his own salsa and dill pickles. But Jim looks forward to the biannual horseradish party the most.

“There’s a lot of comradery when we do it, and we are always bringing in somebody new. Friends come from all over to do it – Cedar Rapids, Waterloo, Oskaloosa” he said. “It is a great excuse to come together and shoot the bull for a day.”

The horseradish always tastes best when harvested during months that have an “r” in their name, or so Belle Plaine tradition says. Good thing September is just around the corner.
My grandnieces now help me make the kolaches for our festival. Traditions get handed down through the generations through stories. History comes alive when you have a story.

— Ardene Cross

Clutier
Making Something Out of Nothing

Egg, water, flour, and a pinch of salt – most Czech cuisine starts off with these same basic ingredients. The Bohemian food tradition is one of frugality, patience, and ingenuity. Or, as Clutier native Gerry Kopriva characterized it, of "making a little bit of something out of nothing."

Gerry remembers going with his grandmother to visit his Great Grandma and Grandpa Kalina and having soup that was only broth: "I said, 'Grandma, there's nothing in it!' – she just shushed me to be quiet." Waste not, want not remains the number one rule of the Czech kitchen.

In 1870, Gerry's great, great grandfather, a baker named Heinrich Kopriva, died in Prague, leaving behind a wife Klara and two children Bessie and Joseph. With the Austrian-Hungarian war in full swing, Gerry's great-great grandma decided to take her children and her sixteen-year old nephew Vaclav Novotny to America. She would remarry and settle west of Clutier, about a mile-and-a-half away from the Saint Wenceslaus country church (built in 1900) and adjoining Saint Vaclav Cemetery.

Some of Gerry's favorite memories of the church involve "food and fellowship," bespeaking an enduring food tradition that stretches over one hundred years and across the Atlantic Ocean – bred from necessity, hardship, resourcefulness, and familial love. For Gerry, nothing is more emblematic of the power of food to unite a family than Christmas Eve supper. He said, "The special meal was always Christmas Eve. Everybody was there at grandma's and that was a huge deal. Grandma would start cooking the day before and we would help set the table. There's a tradition that Grandpa had, before the meal started, where you looked under your plate to find a dollar bill. We always had oyster stew for the Christmas Eve meal."

The Goose and Duck

Nothing went to waste. Take for example the goose, a once a year treat usually served for Ardene's childhood Christmas dinners. The grease from the goose would be used to make sugar cookies.

"Oh, we looked forward to those cookies," Ardene said, "They were so good." For Thanksgiving it was the duck. The bird was roasted in the oven and enjoyed with fruit dressing and grape pie. The feathers from the duck would be carefully collected and made into a special brush to make the most emblematic Czech pastry – the kolache.

Kolaches

Kolaches are a round pastry made with sweet dough often filled with fruit, although the most popular kind in Clutier are made with a poppy seed filling. Nowadays, bakers use canned poppy seed filling, but the traditional Czech kitchen includes a poppy seed grinder. According to Clutier native Ardene Cross, grinding poppyseeds was always the kid's job.

It takes a lot of practice to get good at making kolaches. "It is kind of art," Ardene said. "It is a matter of how you handle the dough and they must be baked at a high temperature. Kolaches are a day's job."

And, of course, there is the goose feather brush. "When you take the kolaches from the oven you have to put some oil on them. You always use the feather brush so that you do not squish the dough. My mom always used a feather brush — that is as important as the poppy seed grinder in the Bohemian kitchen," Ardene said.

Gerry has some clever advice for those who have a hard time perfecting the recipe: "When you get frustrated making kolaches grab the dandelion wine and hope for company so you can have another one!"

Sorghum

Ardene remembers making sorghum – a sweet syrup derived from the juices of the green sorghum cane – with her family, an event that took all day.

"It starts out with planting the cane and harvesting it. We used my grandfather's press that he got in the early 1900s. You put the cane through the press to make the juice. Then the juice is strained four times before putting it in the vats over an open fire. It would take all day to cook and skim off the impurities. Skimming is a must because that is what makes it good. It was only finished when Uncle Joe said so and you did not argue with him," Ardene said.

Ardene would stack four or five rolling pancakes on her plate then pour sorghum on the top. Sorghum would drip from the first pancake to the next one on the plate. Not a drop of sorghum was wasted. Nowadays, you can buy sorghum at the store, but Ardene insists that the syrup tastes the best when it is made at home.

"If you have 100 gallons of juice you may get ten gallons of sorghum from it. But that is what makes homemade sorghum so good. I'm proud my family brought it back to life in this area, for a while anyway," Ardene said.
Dumplings

Gerry and Ardene both have a love for Czech dumplings. Gerry takes his with sauerkraut and gravy, while Ardene remembers the plum dumplings fondly.

“Every backyard had bohemian plum trees. You would make the dumplings and we kept the seeds still inside. We would spit the seeds on the table so you could remember how many dumplings you ate,” Ardene said.

Sharing Food, Sharing Stories

Ardene Cross did not know her grandparents, but her mother made sure to tell her why they came to America: “My grandparents came over because they wanted to be warm in the winter and to have food that they could eat. They were what I would call patriotic Americans. My grandma loved to be in America. They were seeking a better life than what they had in Bohemia,” Ardene said.

The tenth of twelve children, Ardene’s mother became the chief telephone operator in Clutier. It was a 24/7, 365-days per year job. At seven years old, Ardene learned how to operate the switchboard. Her favorite duty was performing the “general rings” in the morning, informing everyone on the party line about new produce available in the surrounding towns. But there were rumors that the dial phone was on its way to America, and soon enough, progress came to Clutier. In 1966 Ardene’s mom hung up her headpiece for the last time – technology had taken her job.

Ardene’s mom decided to open a restaurant. At first, she thought that she was just going to run a coffee shop, but pretty soon she was cooking entire meals and getting up at four in the morning to kick off her baking schedule.

“Her bakery was the draw, people came from Waterloo and Cedar Rapids to eat her food,” Ardene recalled. “She made cinnamon rolls and kolaches and pies. Every day she would have a special, like meatloaf with potatoes and a drink.”

With more women entering the workforce than ever before, male farmers needed a place to eat. The restaurant burned down in 2000, but Ardene hopes that rumors of a new Czech restaurant coming to downtown Clutier will come true and liven up the main street.

Despite the rise of a popular food culture that prioritizes convenience over technique, Ardene Cross believes that, in Clutier at least, many Czech food traditions have persisted.

“Sure, you just go along with progress,” Ardene conceded. “But these traditions are a part of my life and my son’s life and my grandnieces and nephews. You do not get flour in a material bag anymore. More food is bought rather than made at home. But when you get down to it, it is kind of still the same.”

Ardene looks back on the hours she spent in the kitchen with her mom as a kind of storytelling.

“I caught on by watching my mom and trying to do what she did. My mom also talked a lot about her mom. She was very good at making sure I knew why her mom came to America. My grandnieces have helped make the kolaches for our festival. Traditions get handed down through the generations through stories. History comes alive when you have a story.”

Food Traditions

Every year, Clutier hosts a Bohemian Plum Festival Band Concert. Besides the Czech specialties, which she loves, one of Ardene’s favorite dishes from this event has been the Indian tacos.

“The vendor asks you about your choice of toppings. Then they make your piece of frybread. It has only a few ingredients and is fried one at a time,” Ardene said, “that’s what makes it good. It’s made right in front of you.”

Ardene thinks that food can be a space for cross cultural connection, a chance to share something that you are proud of with someone else.

“The frybread for the Meskwaki is like what kolaches are for the Czech people,” she said. “I try to make the frybread myself every once in a while ... but it just never tastes the same.”
My favorite part about running a restaurant is that I love to talk to people. I have made some really good friends from El Charro.

- Leonel Garcia
According to the American Immigration Council, six percent of Iowans were born in another country. Of that percentage, the top country of origin is Mexico. Leonel Garcia – owner and operator of El Charro Bar and Grill in Toledo, Iowa – has lived in Iowa for six years.

“A friend of mine asked if I wanted to be a part of a restaurant,” Leo said. “Most of my friends own a Mexican restaurant. It is kind of a tradition in my hometown in Mexico.”

Leo is from Degollado, a small town known for its tequila production. Leo has friends who have opened Mexican restaurants in Iowa – Marshalltown, Cedar Rapids, and Waterloo – and across the United States – South Carolina, North Carolina, and Alabama.

“I went to visit some friends recently in Richmond, Virginia,” Garcia said. “They opened a Mexican restaurant and a Japanese restaurant, too. They’re pretty smart guys!”

Operating a restaurant is first and foremost about making good business decisions. Leo knows his audience well — white Americans who want to eat Mexican dishes that they are familiar with.

“The food I grew up with is completely different from the food we sell at El Charro. We sell Mexican food for white people,” Leo explained. “For example, I don’t like the rice that we sell here. I like it the way we do it at home. We tried to do it the homestyle way here and people did not care for it! So we changed it back to the way it was.”

Leo’s favorite traditional Mexican dish from Degollado is pozole, and his wife still makes it for him at home.

“We grew up eating pozole,” Leo said. “It is a corn soup with chicken that you eat out of a bowl lined with tamales. We would eat it on the holidays.”

Leo admits that his customers would probably enjoy pozole too, but they like to stick to the foods that they know. The most popular orders at El Charro are the fajitas and margaritas. Some customers travel from hours away to enjoy a pineapple fajita, which consists of grilled meat and vegetables served inside a juicy pineapple cut in half.

While El Charro might not make traditional Mexican food, it does specialize in traditional Mexican restaurant food, which involves its own kind of skill and preparation.

“The guys in the kitchen start at nine in the morning,” Leo said. “We do everything fresh. They make the chips, the salsa, and the guacamole every day.”

It takes a lot of work to run a restaurant, especially in the midst of a global pandemic.

“The restaurant next door, they just closed, and they have been there for fifteen years,” Leo said. “It is very hard to be in the restaurant business. Especially with this virus around.”

El Charro has a set of dedicated customers who come three to four times a week, but Leo is not sure if he will stay in the food industry.

“My favorite part about running a restaurant is that I love to talk to people. I have made some really good friends from El Charro,” Leo said. “But I do not think I will stay in restaurants. It is too much of a headache.”

With two children and another on the way, Leo hopes to get into real estate investment. The future is uncertain, but he looks forward to raising his family in Tama County, Iowa.
Toledo, Tama County, Iowa (pop. 2,141)

I Pass My Recipes Down

From the first Friday in May until the last Friday in October, the Toledo Farmers Market is held from 5-7 pm in the Courthouse Square. Kristi Sienknecht has brought her traditional Czech pastries and breads to the farmers market since 1989, making 2020 her 31st year participating.

Kristi makes yeast breads like kolaches, cinnamon bread, rollicky, pecan rolls and kuchen, along with cookies, bars, and pies. The baking starts at 4:30 am Friday morning, every Friday of the market.

"And then I just go all day," Kristi explained. "I have two ovens going at once. Everything is pretty much timed down to a system. I have an order in which I bake everything so that it all gets done. That way I know what I need to prepare and put on the pan and how much time it is going to take."

Kristi learned to bake from her mom.

"I grew up watching her and watching my grandma," Kristi said. "When you are little you don't pay as much attention, but the older you get you realize how important it is. My grandma used to make strudel and I never really watched her because I wasn't interested in baking then and now I really wish I would have."

Kristi has passed on her knowledge of baking to her own daughters.

"When we first started the market my daughters went with me and they helped and they can bake everything I bake," she said. "There aren't that many bakers in the younger generation and it could become a lost art if people don't pick up on it. I pass my recipes down to my children, and they can pass them down to theirs. But we don't share them with just anybody — some things we have to keep in the family."

Kristi's daughter Devin Mattingly is already following in her footsteps. Devin bakes kuchen — a 12-inch round, twisted pastry — for the people she and her husband work with at Mattingly's Pumpkin Patch.

"My mom always baked, and it is something I can do while I stay home with my three sons," Devin said. "My favorite flavor of kolache is poppy seed. I think you have to grow up eating it in order to like it. Somebody my dad knew was eating it and he just could not get it down. It is an acquired taste, something you had to grow up with."

Devin does not think of her childhood meals as traditional Czech cuisine, she just thinks of them as food.

"My mom and dad both have Czech family heritage so the food we ate was always Czech. It does not seem traditional because you're in it," Devin reflected. "I like the Czech taste, but I can't say my three boys do. They do not like sauerkraut like I do. But they eat dumplings! Who doesn't like dumplings?"
We are farmers, we are hunters, and we are gatherers.

—Johnathan Buffalo
Living in Iowa is a game of survival, one that the Meskwaki people have played for thousands of years.

“The object of the game, even today, is to survive the winter. Iowa can get very cold, but our environment needs the big freeze to be healthy in the spring,” explained Johnathan Buffalo, Historic Preservation Director for the Meskwaki Nation. “If you do not gather enough food, you will starve. But it is also a very enjoyable environment. Then again, we have been living here the longest, so we are used to it.”

The key to survival in Iowa is understanding the four seasons.

“Just when you get tired of summer and cannot bear another hot day the season changes and you are happy. When you are tired of the fall and just wish winter would come, it comes. Then winter comes and just when you are about to go crazy, the spring comes again. Over and over,” Johnathan said. “Our food culture is geared towards this rhythm.”

Traditionally, the Meskwaki were farmers, hunters, and gatherers, depending on the season.

“Before he left us, our creator told us, ‘I am giving you food – corn, squash, and beans – that you can plant, and if you take care of them, they will take care of you. Then there are foods that are free to all and all you have to do is go and pick them. The animals that you hunt you must take care of so that you do not over kill them,” Buffalo explained. “We are farmers, we are hunters, and we are gatherers.”

The Meskwaki diet is optimized for survival, and this includes a prohibition on consuming fellow predators.

“We eat geese, ducks, and chickens, but we do not eat eagles, hawks, or owls. We do not eat mountain lions or grizzlies,” Buffalo said. “We made an ancient deal with the predators when we used to be able to speak to animals: if you do not kill us and eat us we will not kill you and eat you. This ancient deal is about respect, predator to predator.”

According to Johnathan, Meskwaki identity is deeply connected to a venerable food culture and history.

“We are Meskwaki because we eat certain foods. Any tribe has a dominant food,” Buffalo said. “In all of us Indians there is a gene that has known the taste of mastodon and other extinct megafauna. It is in our nature to be prepared, to show resilience.”

The Story of One Tooth

As a part of his job as Historical Preservation Director, Johnathan helps determine the disposition of cultural items, including Native American human remains. Often, he works alongside a state archaeologist to find out which tribe the remains belong to.

“During the isotope test, the archaeologist will drill a hole into the tooth to find out what water the person drank and what food they ate as a child to help us narrow down where they are from. Nowadays, this would not work because we eat food from all over the world,” Buffalo explained. “But for the ancient ones it works because their diets were more local.”

Johnathan decided to perform an experiment with his own wisdom tooth. “We pretended that this tooth did not belong to me. What would we find out about this person?” Buffalo wondered. “The results came back. My water is from the northern Iowa, southern Wisconsin, and southern Minnesota aquifer. In theory, the tribes that we would reach out to about this tooth would be the Sac and Fox, the Sioux, Iowa, and Ho-Chunk. But the most interesting part about this child is that he ate a lot of corn, a lot of beans, a lot of squash, and animals that ate grass.”

The results of the isotope test on Johnathan’s tooth tell the story of the traditional Meskwaki diet prior to the 1960s. Johnathan was a part of one of the last generations to eat the Meskwaki way, undisturbed by outside influence. Johnathan believes that Meskwaki foodways changed because of transformations to Iowa’s environment.

“While the settlement is basically the same, the environment around us has changed. The marshes are gone, so there went the potato. The woodlands have been cut down,” Johnathan said. “Iowa is one of the most transformed states in the union. When you drive through you see rolling hills, corn, beans – it looks really nice. But this is a false environment.”

The Iowa River is significantly polluted, to the point where the Meskwaki no longer use it for fishing or swimming. In addition, changes to the surrounding farmland has cut off access to gathered foods like milkweed, walnuts, berries, and the white lily potato.

“From the 1850s to the 1900s, we knew the farmers around the settlement. They would allow us to camp on their land. We would cut the willows down and hunt animals that would dam up their streams so they could not farm. In a way, we were doing a service for them,” Buffalo said. “But then those farmers started dying off and we were denied access to those areas.”

Even though the environment surrounding the settlement has undergone drastic changes, some Meskwaki food traditions remain consistent.
**Frybread**

In the 18th century, the Meskwaki traded with French colonists for coffee, dried pork, and flour in a sack.

"At first, it is always free. After that, you had to give something," Johnathan said. "Eventually our women started learning how to cook with flour and one of the products of that is frybread. Meskwaki frybread is not like any other tribe's frybread – it is better. "I guess every tribe says that. But I am not bragging or exaggerating, it is just a fact."

Today, many folks along the Iowa Valley Scenic Byway consider Meskwaki frybread something of a delicacy. However, in the early 1900s, the U.S. government tried to eradicate frybread as a part of their so-called "civilizing" mission.

"The government told us to quit making frybread and they gave us stoves and tried to teach us how to bake bread instead because they said frying bread was a savage, primitive way of making bread," Buffalo said. "They were against open fire cooking. Nowadays, people just make frybread on the stove."

A popular dish that uses Meskwaki frybread is the Indian taco.

"Apparently it started in Chicago. There was an Indian family around the corner that was selling frybread. On the other corner was a Mexican family who sold tacos. They had to deliver their orders, so these two boys ran around the corner and bumped into each other and – voila! – the Indian taco was born," Buffalo laughed. "I do not know if that's true but that's what they say."

**Powwow**

The Meskwaki Annual Powwow is a four-day event to celebrate the end of the summer, with origins in the "Green Corn Dance," an annual ceremony that took place during the harvesting of crops.

Mary Young Bear, conservator and community outreach coordinator for the Meskwaki Historic Preservation Department, runs a food stand with her family at the Powwow.

"The Powwow is where we can share openly our traditional food," Mary said. "Our people, we really like our food. But I suppose that's true of everybody."

Mary's favorite Meskwaki dish is milkweed, which she remembers harvesting with her family outside of Denver, Colorado before moving to Iowa in 1979.

"We used to go pick them, clean them, process them and freeze them. We would even eat them while we were working on them," Young Bear said. "I would describe them as sort of like collard greens. My family cooked milkweed with bacon or ham. We put a little bit of flour in the mixture to thicken it up."

For the Meskwaki, the act of eating has a spiritual component.

"We believe that everything we eat has a spirit. The water, the ground, all of the plants. We do not just go out and take it. We believe you have to make some kind of prayer before you extract food so that there is an exchange," Mary said. "When you hunt, you're going to take their body. When we die our bodies go into the ground and we nourish their body, theoretically. So, eating is not just about taking without giving anything in return."

**Food Sovereignty**

The Meskwaki Food Sovereignty Initiative and Red Earth Gardens promote local and indigenous foodways, emphasizing a sustainable and healing relationship with the earth.

"Red Earth Gardens worked very hard to become registered as organic," Mary said. "They sell their produce locally and to people on the settlement who have diabetes so that they can have fresh produce in their diets. Recently, they expanded to have chickens too. I am very proud of them and how far they have come. The garden itself is very beautiful and well maintained, and the people working there have been there for many years."

For Johnathan Buffalo, food sovereignty means freedom.

"That is what I think it means – to be free, to be self-sufficient. You should not depend on the grocery store. You should be able to survive with the food you have for at least three months," Buffalo said. "Meskwakis are always waiting for everything to go to hell, and this is how we survived 500 years of white people. That does not mean that we do not have white friends, just that we are always prepared."

Meskwaki food history serves as a reminder that eating three times a day – breakfast, lunch, and dinner – is a modern concept.

"The Meskwaki way of eating is that they would eat a big breakfast in the morning and then there would be no lunch. They would start cooking in the evening and ate when they were hungry," Buffalo explained. "I am not saying we are against the grocery store, or against white people's food. Our grandkids like cereal. I like hamburgers and pizza. But food sovereignty means you are prepared for times of scarcity."

**The Lotus**

The symbol for the Iowa Valley Scenic Byway is the white lily. To the west, the Meskwaki cultivated the lotus to eat. To the east, the Amana Colonies would plant the lilies to attract
“The Meskwaki Settlement and the Amana Colonies are the anchor communities of the Byway, one on each end,” Peter Hoehnle, PhD, said. “The white lotus became a cultural symbol in Amana. People would read about it in the paper and would show up to watch them bloom. The Meskwaki would slice the tubers and dry them as a winter food source.” The communities along the Iowa Valley Scenic Byway are bound together by their food customs, traditions, and histories.

When someone from the Meskwaki Settlement passes away, every year the tribe hosts a Ghost Dinner in that person’s memory where they serve their favorite foods. Hoehnle recalls how Suzanne, Johnathan’s wife, would travel to Amana to buy headcheese, a departed individual’s best-loved snack.

“It was hilarious because Suzanne had this whole routine of asking me about the headcheese,” Hoehnle reminisced. She would ask, ‘Is it fresh? I swear one time I looked at the slice and saw an entire pig’s snout!’”

Food unites us in our common humanity, while at the same time allowing us to bask in our cultural differences.
Resources Consulted


Bugos, Claire. "The Myths of the Thanksgiving Story and the Lasting Damage They Imbue."


Thank you to Ron Ginter Photography for use of the Water Lily at the Amana Lily Lake photo on page 49