

EXTRA



Far left: Al Rohman, left, and Jeff Johnson tend pots of boiling lutefisk at the recent lutefisk supper at Faith Lutheran Church in Spicer.

Left: A 50-pound box of raw lutefisk is ready to be cooked at Faith Lutheran Church in Spicer.

Traditional Norwegian dish draws crowds at church suppers

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Spicer

With one hand holding a heavy stoneware plate, Joel Piepenburg uses the other hand to scoop up chunks of white, boiled lutefisk.

When he's done, there is barely a speck of plate showing under the heap of fish.

Next — faced with the choice of pouring melted butter or white sauce on top — Piepenburg opts to smother his lutefisk in sauce and tops that off with a little drizzle of butter.

He skips the mashed potatoes, meatballs and corn that's part of the buffet. He can get that stuff at home, he said.

He's here for the lutefisk.

"It's kind of a family tradition," said Piepenburg, of Sunburg. "I like the flavor. I like the taste."

Welcome to the annual lutefisk supper at Faith Lutheran Church in Spicer. It's one of many lutefisk suppers held in Minnesota, especially during October and November.

Vinje Lutheran Church in Willmar maintains their tradition of hosting a lutefisk supper on Election Day. This year, that's Nov. 5, starting at 3 p.m.

Dwindling numbers

Meals featuring the famed Norwegian fish are dwindling, especially in rural Minnesota where the number of small churches that had traditionally hosted lutefisk suppers is also dwindling.

The number of old-timers who actually like lutefisk may also be dwindling.

At Faith Lutheran the event is a fundraiser for youth activities, which gets kids involved.

It's hoped that while serving lefse and pouring milk for guests, the youth will also take a taste of lutefisk.

"They may be the eaters of the future," said Jeff Johnson, who wears an apron and chef's hat proclaiming him as the lutefisk chef at Faith Lutheran.

Johnson spends most of his time in the church's garage where a team of volunteers opens up several 50-pound boxes of lutefisk from Olsen's Fish Company of Minneapolis.

They drop the pieces of reconstituted, lye-soaked cod fillets into pots of boiling water, filling the garage with clouds of steam saturated with the fragrance of lutefisk.

After about six minutes of being boiled the fish is drained, put in serving dishes, covered and whisked across the yard, through the church kitchen and to the buffet line.

"It's just perfectly and delicately made for every good, strong Scandinavian and those others that like fine fish as well," said Johnson, who's pretty good at laying on a nice thick layer of a Fargo-style Norwegian lilt.

Johnson said the reason there are fewer lutefisk suppers now than in the past is because people just haven't tried it.

"There are a lot less individuals that think it tastes good. That's just because they haven't had an opportunity to try it," he said. "So we keep our ticket prices low so that they have an opportunity to come and visit, try the meatballs, try a little fish, enjoy the tradition."

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See video at wctrib.com



Photos by Carolyn Lange / West Central Tribune

Dave Spears, left, holds a serving pan as Jeff Johnson pours hot, cooked lutefisk into it.



Above: Jeff Johnson, left, pours a kettle of hot, cooked lutefisk into a serving dish held by Jim Munsell during the lutefisk supper last month at Faith Lutheran Church in Spicer.

Left: Don Johnson was one of many volunteers helping to serve lutefisk at the recent lutefisk supper at Faith Lutheran Church in Spicer.



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