JXTRA





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

THE ALLURE OF LUTEFISK

Traditional Norwegian dish draws crowds at church suppers

By Carolyn Lange clange@wctrib.com

ith 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 isS 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.



Carolyn Lange / West Central Tribune

Al Lidbeck of Bird Island dishes up lutefisk at the annual lutefisk supper, held in mid-October at Faith Lutheran Church in Spicer. Lidbeck said he travels to Spicer each year because the church hosts the "best" lutefisk supper in the region.

LUTEFISK

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Lutefisk sales

Chris Dorff, president of Olsen Fish Company, is the major provider of lutefisk in the upper Midwest, especially after he purchased Mike's Fish & Seafood of Glenwood in

Dorff sells about a halfmillion pounds of lutefisk every year. He said that's significantly less than 20 years ago but the volume has "remained pretty steady over the past few years.

The biggest drop has been in grocery store sales, but he said of the list of churches he used to provide lutefisk to in the past, many are not doing it now. He said even churches that draw large crowds are still buying less lutefisk because people are taking smaller helpings of lutefisk and

opting, instead, for more meatballs.

In the past it would take 500 pounds of lutefisk to feed 500 people, Dorff said. Now it takes about 300 pounds.

But Dorff said the allure of lutefisk is strong.

"People will travel," he said. "It's amazing how far people will go when they know there's a good one (lutefisk supper)."

Johnson said lutefisk is the star of the show at the annual church suppers, but it's about more than just eating fish. "Mainly it's a way for people to get together. We keep the tradition alive, (that) is the idea," he said.

Dorff said the company will keep selling lutefisk.

"This historical company will keep making it as long as there's three or more people out there buying it," he said.

Who knows, there could

be a revival around the corner.

Lee Byberg, who was born in Norway and lived there into his teen years before moving to Minnesota, said the first time he ate lutefisk was in Willmar. "And I just love it now," he said.

During recent trips back to Norway with his wife, Nancy, Byberg said lutefisk is getting trendy back in the old country and is served in traditional ways and new ways — including using it instead of taco meat and serving it with bacon.

"It's considered high class again," said Byberg as he dished up a plate of the fish at the Faith Lutheran Church supper.

"In the old days it was poor man's food," he said. "But now it's back in style, big time. History has a way of coming back, so the generations discover that old stuff was actually nice."

TRAGEDY

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"I remember seeing this black blob above me. I put my arm up and boom, I was in that boat like I weighed an ounce," said Dahlberg. His uncle happened to have the largest boat kept on the lake but he was still risking his life to venture out in the waves and dark alone, with no life jacket or flashlight either.

Miller hoisted father and son from the water, and boated them to the hunting camp. Dahlberg crawled up the hill to their car, started it and passed out, the door left open. His father crawled out of the boat, put his head on shore and collapsed unconscious.

Miller sped to the Ernie and Etta Bowles house on the south shore to reach a phone and summon help. There, two New London men, Del Haverly and Charlie Dahl, were having their ducks cleaned. They hopped in their vehicle to retrieve the two victims of hypothermia and get them home.

Dahlberg said his father was so frozen he was unable to even move his

arm. He rode home with it sticking out of the

men's car. At the house, a State Patrol trooper stuck a thermometer in Dahlberg's mouth and the mercury did not budge. An ambulance ride brought father and son to Rice Memorial Hospital in Willmar, where they recovered under warm blankets while being fed broth and hot cocoa.

Kandiyohi County Sheriff's Deputy George Couleur learned from Dahlberg at the hospital where Miller had gone into the water in relation to the boat. At 11:15 p.m., his body was recovered in eight feet of water, according to a West Central Tribune news

The tragedy affected many. Miller was a husband and father and well-liked and wellknown. He had helped manage the Sears store in Willmar, served on the City Council and for three terms as mayor. He was active in a wide range of

civic organizations. Dahlberg said the blinds they had in the boat had floated away, but they learned later they were found submerged before reaching shore. He said

he had thought of trying to grab one and floating

with it. A .50-caliber machine gun box that he used to store his ammunition and duck calls and other goods floated to shore, and was found sometime later with just an inch of it sticking above the water. That same box survived a fire several years ago that destroyed the family's home.

Dahlberg said he has decided it will serve someday as his cremation

Father and son returned to hunt ducks on the lake the next year. Dahlberg continues to hunt waterfowl on the lake to this day, but he does so in a boat 6 feet wide and 18 feet long. It can't be tipped, he said.

Of course, there's no going on the water without life jackets.

And yes, he knows there are still rescues performed on the lake. It was just a few years ago that his son, Michael, pulled in a couple of guys who were standing atop their sunken boat. One of the victims had been able to call Michael and give him his location just as his water-soaked mobile phone died.

AIM hosts Town Hall forum



Above: Advocacy & Inclusion Matter (AIM) hosted a Town Hall forum Oct. 17 at Vinje Lutheran Church. AlM's People First members shared their insights about community issues and disability services in Kandiyohi County to local representatives, including state Rep. Dave Baker, above from right at the back table, Willmar City Council member Fernardo Alvarado, Spicer Mayor Denny Baker and Kandiyohi County Commissioner Corky Berg.

At right: Robert Gilland of Spicer addresses the forum.

Submitted photos



Share your milestone in the **West Central Tribune**

Every Saturday, the West Central Tribune's "Milestones" section shares with readers the news of family "Milestones," such as engagements, weddings, anniversaries, birthdays, reunions, new babies and more.

Publication fees are \$30 for wedding and engagements, and \$25 for all other "Milestones" announce-

To submit your Milestone news go to modulist.news and click on "Get Started."

For more information call 1-866-910-9009. The deadline is noon Wednesday.



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LOCATION: Cornerstone Coffee inside Skylark Mall

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9:30-11:30 am CST on Wednesday, Nov. 13th DATE/TIME:

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