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TASTE

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TASTE BUDS

CHEF LARRY JANES

Smorgasbord features delectable, hearty fare

My cookbook library is stacked with volumes of cookbooks and articles on just about everything. At my fingertips are recipes for classic French Onion Soup, German bratwurst, Greek Moussaka, Chinese egg rolls, Canadian beer cheese soup and Russian Borsht; as I research this story however, I find my library somewhat lackluster when it comes to Scandinavian cooking, especially Swedish fare.

My experiences with foods from the northern Baltic regions are about as sparse as the clothing touting by the Swedish Bikini team, whom by the way, I am still waiting to be visited by.

Culinary traditions

Yes, I have enjoyed a true Swedish Sorgasbord and have developed a taste for delectable Baltic herring. I have sampled enough aquavit to make even the largest room spin, but when it comes to true Swedish fare, my tastes are about as basic as the mock Swedish meatballs momma can toss together with some ground beef, ground pork and a couple of cans of Campbell's soup. Little did I realize that the Swedes are also known for the rich culinary traditions of well seasoned pates, luscious salads including rich potato salads, an abundance of cheeses, breads and exotic berries with enticing names like bliss and clouds.

Snuggled between Norway and Finland, Sweden's coast offers bountiful riches from the Baltic sea. The notable Baltic herring is a Swedish staple that is nothing short of delectable when marinated, smoked, creamed and even sweet and soured. Planked on some crispbreads their flavor has been known to rival expensive caviars. The more adventuresome will also delight in the Swedish eel so often served in aspic or a savory jelly.

But the true stars from the region are by far the trout and salmon. These fish rival the famed Norwegian versions and are nothing short of spectacular when smoked, baked or in the true Swedish tradition, pan fried.

Meat scarce

When it comes to beef, the Swedes know their meat. Meat is scarcer than fish throughout most of Scandinavia, especially in the northern regions where there is no land suitable for grazing.

Beef is considered a luxury with reindeer meat being more readily available than any other. Meatballs are considered a national favorite and are more delicate, soft, tender and well seasoned than any other. Cream sauces abound and no Swedish smorgasbord is complete without a pot of browned meatballs accompanied by crisp cabbages.

When it comes to desserts, Scandinavians certainly know how to put on a spread. As mentioned earlier, berries play an important role in Swedish cuisine. In addition to canning, the long hard winters necessitate the drying of fruits like apples, plums and pears.

Delectable desserts

Dessert pancakes, similar in composition to thick crepes are brimming with the likenesses of fruits and berries, but not to be outdone are the famed Swedish custards. Sinfully rich caramel custards are also enjoyed as are basic creams stuffed with fresh berries and loaded with calories. Pastries are not as prominent as cookies and are best left to the Danish but when prepared are usually well seasoned with almonds, cinnamon, cardamom and molasses.

Winter warm-ups

Ranking up there in popularity with herring, the Swedes are well known for their Gloggs and mummas. Not to be confused with mommas, mummas are blends of gin while Gloggs are ladened with wine, aquavit, sugar, spices and almonds. True Swedish gloggs are heated gently to incorporate the flavors of fruit and spices that are always well received on those long dark winter days and nights. The mummas are usually enjoyed during the short summer repast.

As grand as the smorgasbords, seafood and drinks are of Swedish heritage, nothing is more heralded than the coming of Christmas. Christmas is the feast of light and warmth, culminating after weeks of dark skies, gray clouds and snow.

Baking usually begins weeks in advance and when the great season arrives on Christmas Eve, the table is prepared for 12 days of feasting. Gingerbread houses are as common as wreaths beaconing the symbol of domestic happiness.

Sweden is the land of the Midnight Sun and deserves to be remembered as a nation rich in culinary heritage.

See recipes inside. To leave a message for Larry Janes, dial 953-2047 on a touchtone phone, mailbox 1886.

Holiday treats: *Henrik Mader, 4, "Star Boy," samples a gingerbread man and helps Inger Graf, "the Lucia," prepare a tray of Swedish holiday treats and coffee. St. Lucia Day is observed on Dec. 13.*

STEPHEN CANTRELL/ STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

SWEDISH CHRISTMAS

Cooks preserve homeland traditions

■ **Celebrate the holidays Swedish style beginning with St. Lucia Day on Dec. 13 with gingerbread cookies and a glass of Julglogg.**

BY KEELY WYGONIK
STAFF WRITER

On the darkest, longest day of the year — Dec. 13, Swedes celebrate St. Lucia Day. Usually one of the younger girls in the household is chosen to be "the Lucia." Dressed in white, with a crown of candles on her head, she serves coffee and buns, preferably early in the morning.

"It's a way to brighten the day. After Dec. 13 the days will start to get longer. The Lucia wakes people by singing special songs," say the women who belong to the gourmet cooking club of SWEA — Swedish Women's Educationnl Association International Inc. "It's a national holiday celebrated all over Sweden."

Holiday traditions

Boys aren't excluded from Swedish Christmas traditions. Dressed in long white shirts with high, cone-shaped paper hats, the star boys sing Christmas songs. According to custom, they carry a star and are followed by the figure of Judas whose job it is to be funny and beg for money.

Originally, the star boys belonged to the celebration of Twelfth Night, and the legends around the birth of Jesus and the coming of the Wise Men. The star was the Star of Bethlehem — young people in different areas of Sweden dressed up and went round begging food and aquavit for a Twelfth Night Party.

Swedish national holidays, and traditions like St. Lucia Day are celebrated in the United States by members of SWEA. Unlike immigrants before them, members of SWEA who live in the metro Detroit area including Bloomfield Hills, Farmington Hills, Livonia, Rochester, Troy, Westland and Redford, have one foot in the United States, and one in Sweden.

"The members in our group didn't leave Sweden because they had to. Some came here because of job transfers, and will go back to Sweden. With airplanes, fax machines and telephones we can have contact with the old country, said Tottie Samuels of West Bloomfield, president of the SWEA Michigan chapter, and a member of the gourmet cooking club.

To be a member of SWEA, you have to speak Swedish. Some of the women in the group have been in the U.S. for less than a year. They came here because of job transfers, and will return to Sweden one day.

Others like Samuels and Inger Graf, who owns Graf's Pastry Kitchen in Farmington Hills with her husband, Peter, have lived here for over 20 years.

Although they're here for different reasons, and maybe for a short time, the women share SWEA's objectives which include preservation of Swedish language, culture and traditions.

Founded in Los Angeles in 1979, SWEA has chapters throughout the U.S., Europe and Asia. A portion of membership fees are allocated to a scholarship fund. Locally, SWEA helps various groups including Lekotek in Redford which helps children with special needs who need special kinds of toys. A portion of the proceeds from SWEA's Christmas Bazaar noon to 5 p.m. Saturday, Nov. 21, at Savior Lutheran Church, 5631 N. Adams in Bloomfield Hills, will benefit the scholarship fund, and Lekotek. For information, call 626-7822.

Admission is $1, and there will be lots of Swedish goodies both imported and homemade for sale. They'll have several kinds of imported mustard and Pommac, a non-alcoholic sparkling fruit flavored beverage.

In preparation for the event, the women have been busy baking dream cookies, ginger snaps, almond tarts, Lucia buns.

Cooking club

The cooking club is just one of the special interest groups within SWEA. There is also a children's group. There are only eight people in the cooking club, more would like to belong, and are on a waiting list.

Every six to eight weeks, the women get together and plan a gourmet dinner. "If you like the eat, you like to cook," the women said, adding that planning and cooking is half the fun. Tasks are delegated — two people make appetizers, two work on the main course, someone brings wine, another sets the table. The cost per person works out to $10 to $16, and the women say they don't scrimp.

"We start eating at 5 p.m. and it's midnight before we finish," said Kristina Larsson. Other club members include Ebba Cedergren, Gunilla Skogfeldt, Inger Lindqvist, Barbro Lundberg, and Lena Dahlgren.

We met recently at Samuels house to take the photo for this story, and talk about Swedish food, and Christmas traditions. Greta Mader, Henrik's grandma was there too.

These women take cooking seriously. Some even bring their appliances with them. This summer they had fun making ice cream with the machine Larsson brought from Sweden. In Sweden they made their own bread, and hardly ever went out to eat. "It's just too expensive."

A Taste of SWEDEN

Christmas celebrations begin with the lighting of the first Advent candle the fourth Sunday before Christmas. St. Lucia Day is celebrated on Dec. 13, and Christmas presents are opened on Dec. 24.

On Christmas Eve, families enjoy an array of food — hot and cold dishes, laid out on the Christmas table. It lasts for days, and in Sweden, families go from house to house visiting, and enjoying foods from the Christmas table.

"At Christmastime we do a lot with gingerbread," said Samuels. "The heart is the most common shape. People use them as decorations in their homes."

Spices which distinguish Swedish baked goods from others include, cardamom, saffron which is used in yeast breads, allspice, ginger and cloves.

Fish is plentiful in Sweden. Baltic herring is one they can't get here and miss. You'll see a lot of sausages on the Christmas table and lutefish in a mustard sauce.

In Sweden, the women used to pick cloudberries for desserts, now they have to rely on friends to get them from import shops in Chicago and Toronto. "You find out where you can get things," said Samuels.

See recipes inside.

Savor sumptuous fruit flavors all winter

FOCUS ON WINE

ELEANOR & RAY HEALD

Although the fruit industry has developed cold-storage preserving techniques, there's nothing like the taste of tree-ripened fruit. It's a taste associated with summer and recalled throughout winter.

Thanks to a centuries-old technique, these flavors are available in liquid form year-round in spirits bottlings known collectively as eau de vie.

Translated as "water of life," eau de vie is a generic French term for brandy or spirits.

Exact origins of alcohol distillation are unknown, but a 13th century French alchemist Arnaud de Villeneuve is given the credit for first describing it in detail.

Today, many regions of the world make brandy by distilling wine or by distilling grape pomace (remains after the grapes have been pressed), or distilling fruits after the completion of fermentation.

Eau de vie, as discussed in this column, will refer to fruit brandy, usually a clear, unoaked spirit carrying the intense aromas of fermented fruit from which it is distilled.

The most well-known eau de vie is produced from the Williams pear, a relative of the U.S. Bartlett pear. France and Switzerland produce the greatest quantities of this eau de vie, simply labeled Poire Williams, but a small, quality production is beginning to make its appearance from California and Oregon. In addition to the Williams pear, eau de vie is traditionally produced from plums, cherries, raspberries, elderberries, apricots and quince.

Kirsh or Kirschwasser (cherry brandy) is produced from a wild black cherry indigenous to the Rhine Valley. Due to the meanderings of this great river, Kirsch is produced in three countries — Switzerland, the headwaters of the Rhine; France in the Alsace region, along the Rhine's western banks; and the Black Forest region of Germany to the east.

Important elements of production are strictly followed in the creation of the world's finest eau de vie. Fruit, picked at the peak of ripeness is carefully prepared for the month to 10-weeks-long fermentation, and only free-run juice is distilled. The Williams pear is slightly crushed to open the fruit. Stone fruits and berries are fermented whole.

After fermentation completes, the fruit wine is doubly distilled as soon as possible. To preserve the fruit aromas and flavors, it is most important that the distillate be chilled quickly.

To our taste, some of the most interesting eaux de vie come from the Swiss producer Etter and make a stunning after-dinner companion strikingly enhancing any meal.

Etter's eaux de vie are exclusively imported to the United States by Birmingham's Robert Denton & Co. Ltd. and sold through the Elite Spirits division. Denton also distributes the internationally recognized artisan bottlings from Clear Creek Distillery in Portland, Ore. In addition to standard eau de vie, Clear Creek produces an Apple brandy that is smoother, more complex and flavorful than most Calvados.

Etter's artistic packaging is unrivaled. Handblown bottles with suspended handblown fruit in the middle are produced by renowned Swiss glass artist Peter Schreiber. They are collector's items, and if you're looking for an unusual gift presentation, search no further. They are available in all fine wine and spirits shops in the area. Approximate cost is $191.33.

See FRUIT, 2B

Stunning spirits: *Etter's eaux de vie is packaged in handblown bottles with suspended handblown fruit in the middle produced by glass artist Peter Schreiber.*

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