

Preserving fish and old traditions: Norwegian foodways and their adaptations in America

Eve Whalen

Summer 2020

Research Methods for Applied Food Studies

Author's Biography

Eve Whalen is a baker from northern New York. She is studying for her Applied Food Studies degree at the Culinary Institute of America

Background Essay

Preserving fish and old traditions: Norwegian foodways and their adaptations in America

Lutefisk and lefse are the tastes of home for Norwegian Americans and are reminders of their history and culture. Lutefisk is fish that has been dried, soaked in water and lye, and is character characterized by its strong odor and jelly-like texture. Lefse is a flatbread made with water, flour, and sometimes potatoes, that is often served at family meals and holiday celebrations. Norwegian food traditions are among those that have withstood the test of time and are valued by Norwegians around the world. Though some traditions have adapted and evolved, especially as Norwegians immigrated to the United States, original traditions have served as a unifying force and have fostered ethnic identity.

The Vikings that were prevalent between AD 700 and AD 1000 have been accredited with establishing many food-related traditions in Norway. The notion of dinner being a social event is one tradition, and another is the concept of the smorgasbord or a buffet of a variety of items. Legends state that Vikings would bring back food items from their voyages but would never bring enough for everyone to have a full serving. Thus, upon their return, people would only get a small taste of each food. This custom has carried over into today and smorgasbords are typically enjoyed during celebrations and holidays. Modern smorgasbords are likely to include a variety of fish, cold sliced meats, cheeses, vegetables, salads, breads, and meatballs, or meat cakes. They may also have desserts such as fresh fruit, cold fruit soup, or rice pudding (Munsen 11). Ultimately, the continuation of Viking customs such as these displays a sense of pride in their history as well as a source of Norwegian identity.

While Norwegians may adhere to traditional food practices occasionally, many people have shifted away from the food of their ancestors in favor of more modern, simple, and quickly prepared foods. Many foods that were once widely consumed, such as porridge or *lutefisk*, are now primarily consumed during holidays (Notaker 266). Moreover, foods that were once thought of as “exotic,” such as pizza or certain fruits and vegetables, are more common and have gained popularity due to the globalization and industrialization of food (Notaker 259).

The landscape, climate, and natural resources have shaped the way people obtain and prepare their food in Norway. For example, only three percent of the land is arable land and the country experiences large fluctuations in daylight and temperatures (Munsen 7). As a result, people rely more heavily on the sea for their food, making fish a key ingredient in Norwegian cuisine. Before refrigeration, fish was preserved by drying, salting, curing, pickling, and smoking so it could be eaten during the winter months (Munsen 10). Lutefisk is one of the most commonly preserved fish dishes that is widely consumed. While many of the preservation practices are still used today, they are no longer essential for survival, and it is more common for people to buy fresh fish and bake it. In addition to fish, certain agricultural products are central to Norwegian cuisine because they can withstand the harsh growing and living conditions. These products include hardy grains such as wheat, oats, barley, and rye (all of which can be used to make bread), as well as sheep, goats, pigs, dairy cattle, potatoes, carrots, cauliflower, peas, and rutabagas. These ingredients can be featured in nearly every meal and have been eaten in Norway for centuries (Munsen 10).

Though there are regional differences in food habits throughout Norway given the varying topography and resources available, there are some foodways that are found around the country. One being that Norwegians structure their days so they have three to four meals: breakfast, lunch, and dinner, as well as snacks throughout the day. Another being that for nearly

all meals and snacks, bread is a prominent food item, especially coarse-grain brown bread, dark rye bread, white bread, and wheat biscuits (c.f. Holm et al.) For breakfast, open sandwiches with toppings such as fish, cheese, meat, and jam are widely eaten (Notaker 259). Similar open sandwiches are also eaten for a cold lunch. Many people will opt to wrap their sandwiches and take them with them to work or school, which is a ritual known as *matpakke* (Amilien 180). Dinner, which is primarily eaten between the hours of 4:00 pm and 7:00 pm, is often the most substantial meal of the day. This is because it is viewed as a socially important meal. This idea harkens back to the time of the Vikings because dinner tables were considered a significant meeting place (Amilien 182). Today, warm meals involving boiled potatoes, minced meat, meatballs, fish, vegetables, and bread are served. Therefore, there are certain meals and staple ingredients that are essential to the food culture of Norway.

Food is a crucial aspect of Norwegian holidays and celebrations and is often treated as a rite of passage in many families (Notaker 265). Christmas, in particular, is one of the most prominent holidays in which food and old customs are highlighted. Weeks before the day itself, people prepare by brewing a special Christmas beer called *juleøl* and baking sweetbreads (such as *julekake*), buns, cakes, and seven traditional types of cookies (Notaker 265). On Christmas Eve, December 24, the main holiday festivities commence, and people gather with their friends and family to celebrate. For the Christmas Eve dinner, the menu is often determined by geographical location. For instance, people in the coastal and northern areas eat cod, halibut, or lutefisk, while people in the eastern regions eat pork, ribs, sausages, and patties, and people in the western regions eat salted lamb ribs (Notaker 266). Regardless of location, many families will include porridge or rice puddings, one of the oldest food dishes in Norway, in their Christmas Eve feasts as a tribute to previous foodways (Munsen 12; Notaker 266). The main meal on Christmas day is typically served in the late afternoon, is smorgasbord-style, and includes foods such as ham, herring in tomato sauce, sausages, pork patties, salads, and desserts (Munsen 12). According to Notaker, Christmas is the climax of the winter season because it is a great social event involving a plethora of foods (266).

Norwegians were among the earliest immigrant groups who traveled to the United States in pursuit of the American dream (Barton 133). Lovoll argues that the great migration of Norwegians to the United States in the nineteenth century paralleled the conquests and explorations that occurred during the Viking Age (1). Moreover, he argues that Norwegian immigrants were prideful of the fact that they were following in the footsteps of their ancestors as they made their way west (Lovoll 1, Olson 42). At the beginning of the nineteenth century, immigration from Norway to the United States was slow but gained momentum by the mid-nineteenth century as many began settling in midwestern states such as Minnesota and Wisconsin (c.f. Christianson, Lovoll 7, Kraig 319). Between 1825 and 1920, approximately one million Norwegians settled in America (“Scandinavian – The Norwegians – Immigration”). Many immigrants were in search of religious freedom, personal advancement, and opportunities to improve economic and material standing (c.f. Stortroen and Stortroen, Lovoll 11-14, Flom 35). Additionally, “America fever” struck many people in the nineteenth century when communications improved and many Norwegians who had settled in America wrote of the new land and the successes they were witnessing, specifically in the Midwest (Lovoll 14, “Scandinavian – The Norwegians – Immigration”). For instance, Stortroen and Stortroen write about the fertility of the land, the milder climate, the animals, the cost of living, customs, and their experiences living in Minnesota. Thus, accounts such as these inspired many Norwegians to make the journey across the Atlantic and begin new lives.

According to Stokker, Norwegian immigrants have brought “cultural cargo” with them as they have traveled to the United States throughout the years (c.f.). As a result, many

Norwegian Americans have strived to maintain their Norwegian heritage through private celebrations in the home or through public festivals (c.f. Christianson). Traditions surrounding food and holidays, such as Christmas are among those that have been maintained to the present day. Scholars have claimed that examining the Christmas traditions of Norwegian Americans can provide insight regarding the “evolution, preservation, and assimilation,” of Norwegian culture in the United States (Risley 53). In other words, these traditions highlight the dilemma faced by Norwegian Americans in the twentieth century: assimilate into American society or maintain their Norwegian heritage. This dilemma resulted in the blending of cultures and the incorporation of new practices. For example, in addition to eating foods such as lutefisk, lefse, and rømmegrøt (sour cream porridge), people began incorporating Christmas trees and Santa into their celebrations (Stokker xvi, Kvideland 271). Preserving old traditions was a way for Norwegian immigrants to strengthen their sense of group identity, honor their heritage, and assimilate into American society.

For Norwegians and Norwegian Americans alike, bread is a food product that is widely consumed and is a major indicator of culture and a source of ethnic identity. Lefse is one bread, in particular, that is highly cherished by those with Norwegian heritage. Lefse is a griddle-baked flatbread that was originally made with just flour and water but has since been expanded upon to include ingredients such as butter, milk, heavy cream, sugar, salt, and potatoes (Goldstein 40). Typically, lefse is made with hardier flours, such as wheat, rye, or barley flour, as those were dominant flour types in Norway (Munsen 10, Goldstein 38). However, modern adaptations of lefse recipes have included other flours such as all-purpose flour (c.f. Anders and Anders, “Lefse”). Traditional preparation methods also included the use of a grooved rolling pin to prevent lefse dough from sticking when transferring it to the griddle. This flatbread is very versatile because it can be made to be soft and chewy or thin and crispy. Additionally, it can be eaten just plain or be wrapped around fish or a hot, which is considered to be a treat (Goldstein 40). In Norway, lefse is often bought from bakeries rather than made at home, but in the United States, Norwegian Americans will make them at home during the holidays to honor their heritage (Notaker 260, Kraig 319).

Ultimately, Norwegian foodways have been influenced by the climate, geography, history, and cultural habits of the country. Though it is difficult to pinpoint Norwegian cuisine due to its dynamic character and global influences, many can agree that certain foods are crucial elements of Norwegian diets such as bread, fish, meats, and potatoes. Additionally, many Norwegians believe that dinner and holidays are significant social gatherings, resulting in food being a major aspect of daily rituals and celebrations. Many of these foodways and traditions were brought with Norwegian immigrants who traveled to the United States in pursuit of freedom and personal advancement throughout the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries. Lefse is one bread in particular that has maintained cultural significance in both Norway and the United States and is still widely consumed today. Thus, food culture is a source of pride and ethnic identity for Norwegians and Norwegian Americans alike.

References

General Sources

Amilien, Virginie. "The Rise of Restaurants in Norway in the Twentieth Century." *Eating Out in Europe: Picnics, Gourmet Dining and Snacks since the Late Eighteenth Century*. Ed. Marc Jacobs and Peter Scholliers . Oxford: Berg, 2003. 179–194. Bloomsbury Food Library. Web. 13 Jul. 2020. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350044838.ch-011>>.

Flom, Geoge Tobias. *History of Norwegian Immigration to the United States: from the Earliest Beginning Down to the Year 1848*. Forgotten Books, 2015.

Holm, L. , Lauridsen, D.S. , Gronow, J. , Kahma, N. , Kjærnes, U. , Lund, T.B. , Mäkelä, J. , & Niva, M. (2019). *The Food We Eat. In J. Gronow & L. Holm (Ed.). Everyday Eating in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden: A Comparative Study of Meal Patterns 1997–2012* (pp. 15–32). London: Bloomsbury Academic. Retrieved July 8, 2020, from <http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350080454.ch-002>

Kilpinen, Jon T. "Leading Ethnic or Ancestry Group, 2012." *U.S. Census Bureau*, ValpoScholar, 2014.

Kraig, B. (2011). United States: The Midwest. In K. Albala (Ed.). *Food Cultures of the World Encyclopedia: The Americas* (pp. 313–324). Santa Barbara: © ABC-Clio Inc. Retrieved July 12, 2020, from

<https://www.bloomsburyfoodlibrary.com/encyclopedia-chapter?docid=b-9781474208666&tocid=b-9781474208666-004550>

Notaker, Henry. "Norway." *Food Cultures of the World Encyclopedia: Europe*. Ed. Ken Albala . Santa Barbara: © ABC-Clio Inc, 2011. 259–270. Bloomsbury Food Library. Web. 12 Jul. 2020. <<https://www.bloomsburyfoodlibrary.com/encyclopedia-chapter?docid=b-9781474208680&tocid=b-9781474208680-003445>>.

"Scandinavian – The Norwegians - Immigration...- Classroom Presentation: Teacher Resources - Library of Congress." *Scandinavian - The Norwegians - Immigration...- Classroom Presentation | Teacher Resources - Library of Congress*, www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/immigration/scandinavian3.html.

United States. Department of Homeland Security. 2018 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics, 2019.

Secondary Sources

Barton, H. A. "The Promise Fulfilled: A Portrait of Norwegian Americans Today." *Scandinavian Studies*, vol. 80, no. 1, 2008, pp. 132-135. ProQuest, <https://search-proquest-com.ciachef.idm.oclc.org/docview/215676236?accountid=40999>.

Christianson, J. R. "The Promise Fulfilled: A Portrait of Norwegian Americans Today." *Journal of American Ethnic History*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2000, pp. 112-114. ProQuest, <https://search-proquest-com.ciachef.idm.oclc.org/docview/216452805?accountid=40999>.

Kvideland, Reimund. "Keeping Christmas: Yuletide Traditions in Norway and the New Land." *Folklore*, vol. 113, no. 2, 2002, pp. 270-272. ProQuest, <https://search-proquest-com.ciachef.idm.oclc.org/docview/202699658?accountid=40999>.

Lovoll, Odd S. "A Norwegian-American Society Comes into Being." *The Promise of America: A History of the Norwegian-American People*. New edition, Revised ed., University of Minnesota Press, 1999, pp. 43–73. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctttt0mc.6. Accessed 18 July 2020.

Olson, Daron W. "Norwegian-American Historians and the Creation of an Ethnic Identity." *Scandinavian Studies*, vol. 79, no. 1, 2007, pp. 41–56. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/40920727. Accessed 18 July 2020."

Risley, Kristin A. "Christmas in Our Western Home: The Cultural Work of a Norwegian-American Christmas Annual." *American Periodicals*, vol. 13, 2003, pp. 50–83. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/20771156. Accessed 18 July 2020.

Stokker, Kathleen. *Keeping Christmas: Yuletide Traditions in Norway and the New Land*. Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2000.

Primary Sources

Anders Braathen, Anders Overgaard. "Norwegian Lefse." *Bon Appetit*, *Bon Appétit*, 13 Nov. 2014, www.bonappetit.com/recipe/norwegian-lefse.

Goldstein, Darra. *Fire and Ice: Classic Nordic Cooking* [A Cookbook]. Ten Speed Press, 2015. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=941291&site=ehost-live.

Munsen, Sylvia. *Cooking the Norwegian Way: Revised and Expanded to Include New Low-fat and Vegetarian Recipes*. Minneapolis, Lerner Publications Company, 2002.

https://books.google.com/books?id=RRWmSZwqMLkC&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false

Stortroen Anders Jensen and Ole Jensen Stortroen. "Norwegian Immigrant Letters." *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*, vol. 15, no. 3, 1932, pp. 356–369. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/4630881. Accessed 13 July 2020.

"Lefse." *King Arthur Baking*, 2015, www.kingarthurbaking.com/recipes/lefse-recipe.

Primary Source Recipe

Potetlefse: Potato Flatbreads

Darra Goldstein

Fire and Ice: Classic Nordic Cooking
2015

Goldstein, Darra. *Fire and Ice: Classic Nordic Cooking* [A Cookbook]. Ten Speed Press, 2015. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=941291&site=ehost-live.

Recipe

Makes 4 breads, serving 2 to 4

1 large russet potato, peeled
1 tablespoon butter, at room temperature
2 tablespoons whole milk
¼ teaspoon salt
½ cup barley flour

Bring a medium pot of salted water to a boil. Add the potato and cook until tender, 25 to 30 minutes. Drain and mash while hot.

In a bowl, combine the potato, butter, milk, and salt, beating well with a wooden spoon to eliminate any lumps. Stir in the flour until well incorporated. The dough will be firm. Knead it briefly in the bowl till smooth, then cover and refrigerate for at least 2 hours or up to 2 days.

When you're ready to cook the *lefse*, preheat an ungreased griddle or large cast-iron pan over medium-high heat. Divide the dough into 4 pieces. Work with one piece at a time, keeping the others refrigerated. Transfer the piece of dough to a floured surface. Generously flour a rolling pin and use gentle taps to roll the dough out as thinly as possible into a round that's about 8 inches wide. Do not press down on the dough as you roll, or it will come apart. It's a good idea to loosen the dough frequently from the surface by running a spatula under it. Keep both the work surface and the rolling pin well floured to make sure the dough doesn't stick.

Now comes the tricky part. Slide a metal baking peel or broad spatula under the dough round and carefully slide it onto the preheated griddle. Cook, flipping once, until the *lefse* is flecked with brown, about 6 minutes on each side. Immediately wrap the *lefse* in a dish towel so that it remains soft. Roll out and cook the remaining dough. Serve hot.

Background explanation

I believe that this recipe serves as a good representation of the evolution of Norwegian foodways and how some Norwegian traditions have been preserved while others have been modernized. For instance, one aspect of this recipe that I believe is reflective of traditional foodways is the use of barley flour. Barley is a grain that is grown throughout Norway because it can withstand the harsh northern growing conditions. It is often milled into flour and is a characteristic ingredient in many Norwegian breads and baked goods. Therefore, I believe that

the use of barley flour in this recipe displays how certain ingredients are still significant to Norwegian cuisine.

I believe that the ingredients, equipment, and techniques utilized in this recipe exhibit the modernization of lefse. For example, early lefse recipes only called for flour and water. Today, however, recipes have been adapted to include other popular Norwegian ingredients, such as potatoes, milk, and butter. These enriched recipes seem to appear more frequently in modern cookbooks, magazines, and baking websites. Thus, it is likely that these are the types of lefse that are more commonly consumed by both Norwegians and Norwegian Americans.

Additionally, specialized rolling pins and tools were often used to shape and prepare lefse traditionally. Many modern iterations of lefse, including this one, do not require any special equipment and simply use regular rolling pins and griddles. I think this adaptation not only reflects the modernization of this bread but also is an attempt to make this bread accessible to more people. In other words, by including equipment that many people own, it is likely that more people will attempt to make this bread. Thus, this allows more Norwegians and Norwegian Americans to connect with their culture and establish an ethnic identity.