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

Eve Whalen
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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
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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 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 (cf. 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 (cf. 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 (cf. 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 (cf.). 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 rommegrøt (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 harder 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


Secondary Sources


**Primary Sources**


Primary Source Recipe

Potetlefse: Potato Flatbreads
Darra Goldstein
Fire and Ice: Classic Nordic Cooking
2015


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.
Authentic traditions, interesting habits and behaviour of locals, attitude to the world and to tourists in Norway. The most complete travel
guide - Norway on OrangeSmile.com. The Norwegian society as a whole is composed of a group of quiet and hard-working
domestic folks. Therefore, mass festivities are rare even in the capital of the country. As an alternative, the inhabitants of the country
harmoniously and with pleasure are engaged in all kinds of winter sports. Specialized stores are full of buyers. Norwegians consider
themselves to be the most beautiful and effective, and their native language to be sweet music for a pampered hearing. The severe
Norwegian nature in their opinion is not just beautiful, but is like eighth Wonder of the world. In a variety of ways, Norwegians aim to
preserve rather than transform the local natural landscape. At the same time, they attempt to preserve the cultural traditions of the
locality through numerous folk museums and other specialized heritage organizations. While many older residences have straight
sidewalks and broad, open lawns, many newer houses are nestled into their own miniature woods of closely planted trees and
evergreen shrubs. The distinction between the built environment and the natural environment is often blurred as these two areas are
made to interpenetrate. Homes should be furnished to reflect the good taste of their owners, often with the clean simplicity of
Scandinavian design, using natural materials such as wood and wool. Food and Economy. This is due to an age-old tradition, especially
in the western part of the country. 7 â€“ Pinnekjøtt, â€“ Dried Lamb Ribs. Pinnekjøtt is normally served on Christmas eve as a
celebratory meal. Homemade fish balls are normally made with a combination of haddock and cod, cornflour, milk, and eggs. Speaking of the Norwegians and their love for bread, the packed lunch is another staple piece in the Norwegian diet. Whereas in other
countries it is common to visit the cafeteria at work or school or go out for lunch, Norwegians bring their lunch wrapped in waxed paper
or a lunch box. Matpakken is said to have originated in Oslo in the early 1930â€™s, when the chief of school health services realized
that children at school had to eat healthier. Norway traditional clothing VS modern Norwegian clothing. If we could get a couple of
centuries back in time, we would see Norwegians wearing a national costume of Norway called 'bunad'. Norway Christmas traditions.
Norwegian culture demands to start celebrating Christmas 4 weeks before the big day. Every Saturday up to December 25 locals light
up a beautiful four-candle candelabra with the traditional Advent candles. Interestingly, one of the most peculiar Norway culture facts is
that the citizens of this scenic region take their personal space very seriously. If you happen to use public transport during your Norway
vacation, you shouldn't take a seat right next to someone else, if there are any other options to choose from. Ever wondered about
Norwegian food traditions and what dishes to sample? Find out if Norwegian cuisine really is for you! When you consider the long,
cold winters, locals have needed to craft their methods, while the wildlife in Norway ensures that this is one of the number one
destinations to sample lamb, sheep and even game meats. Photo: Christian Roth Christensen / Visitnorway.com. About the Local Meats
and Game Meat in Norway. While many locals are quick to recommend smalahove, not every visitor wants to sample sheepâ€™s head which is a delicacy in certain pockets of Norway. On the other hand, Norwegian lamb is a huge favourite and this is
especially tender due to the wide expanses and clean pastures on which
We then discuss the impacts of colonization, and describe recent and ongoing Resilience and Resurgence in relation to ancestral foods and food practices, including firsthand experiences with renewing food traditions. These initiatives are often connected with language revitalization and cultural resurgence programs. Led by Indigenous communities, they are undertaken with support of academic, government, and other partners. In all, they have resulted in stronger, more vibrant cultures and generally healthier communities.

The story of religion in America is more than the narrative of those individual traditions that consciously migrated to the United States from various parts of the globe, be they Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox Christian, many varieties of Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and so forth. A new-found pride in Norwegian food traditions and ingredients has lead to a quiet culinary revolution in Norway, celebrating what is uniquely Norwegian in modern and untraditional ways. The change in attitude towards Norway’s food traditions has been formidable. The change in attitude towards Norway’s food traditions has been formidable in the past few years. Today we are celebrating what is uniquely Norwegian in modern and untraditional ways. When it comes to food and drink in Norway, a culinary revolution has quietly taken place in the last few years. In particular have both restaurants and ordinary kitchens seen a rise in local and organic food.