

Schmeckfest: An Experience in Communal Hospitality

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Hospitality takes a distinctive form every spring in Freeman, a town of about 1,300 in southeastern South Dakota. For 60 years, residents of this small rural community have gathered in late March or early April to welcome guests – friends and neighbors and visitors from across the nation and beyond – to sit around tables covered with red- and-white-checked tablecloths and share a meal rooted in the ethnic traditions of the community.

Schmeckfest, which blends the German “schmeck” (taste) and “fest” (festival), is a word created by a group of enterprising women from the community in 1959 to promote a one-day celebration. Today, it describes a unique dining experience that attracts about 1,000 people a night to enjoy foods steeped in Germans-from-Russia Mennonite and Hutterite traditions going back to Europe and Russia five centuries ago. This effort in communal hospitality generates major financial gifts to support the mission of Freeman Academy, a private school affiliated with the Mennonite Church. But a serendipity of this six-decade-old exercise in hosting visitors is the positive impact on the members of the Freeman community itself.

We tend to focus on hospitality as the act of offering something to those who we serve. But the Schmeckfest experience reveals that communal hospitality also offers an enriching experience for those who serve side by side. The very act of sharing in the effort to be hospitable as a group – becoming a welcoming community to our guests – enables, encourages and requires us to be hospitable to each other as well.

While Schmeckfest, at its core, is a project that benefits Freeman Academy, the volunteers – about 250 each day – who enable this annual ritual of communal hospitality reflect the diversity of the larger Freeman community. They attend Mennonite, Lutheran, Reformed and Catholic churches. They are graduates of private and public schools in surrounding communities. They are elementary students, teenagers, parents, grandparents and great-grandparents. They are farmers and small business owners and factory workers and doctors. Schmeckfest has in fact evolved into a community-wide cultural event that crosses religious lines and includes historical presentations, as well as craft and

food displays and demonstrations (for example, sausage-making and basket-weaving).

Thanks to an invitation to be part of this annual event, members of the entire Freeman community work together, cogs in an intense, concerted, focused effort commonly referred to as “the Schmeckfest machine.” In many cases, this is the only time each year these people interact in such a close and deliberate way. But in the hours they spend together, offering hospitality to Schmeckfest guests, they create, nurture and strengthen personal relationships as well.

This volunteer-based, shared effort to host visitors on this scale creates a unique social dynamic within the community. Schmeckfest brings people of diverse backgrounds, interests and loyalties together on an annual basis in a way that would otherwise be difficult, if not impossible. Without a discipline as clearly defined, structured and successful as Schmeckfest, it’s unlikely Freeman would enjoy the sense of community and purpose that has helped bolster social vitality and encourage support for other community projects ranging from health care to education to economic development.

One of the remarkable aspects of the impact Schmeckfest has had on the Freeman community is just how organic it is. Schmeckfest was not launched as an exercise in community dynamics or as mechanism to foster more cohesive relationships. Rather, it was simply an invitation to the community from a small group of women to share a meal.

Schmeckfest began as a one-day celebration of the tenth anniversary of the Freeman Junior College Women’s Auxiliary. The organization held its first meeting in March 1949 on the campus of the small private junior college and academy that had been established in Freeman by Mennonites in 1900, about 25 years after they arrived on the plains of Dakota Territory. The women, who had limited opportunity in the school’s leadership at the time, created an organization to support the mission of the school. That included fundraising projects to generate money for campus improvements and to bolster the school’s Christian educational efforts.



The women decided to capitalize on the growing appeal of smorgasbords in that era and the distinctive ethnic foods found within the membership of the organization. They invited the community to this “tasting festival” to commemorate their tenth anniversary in the basement dining hall in Pioneer Hall, the school’s gym and auditorium, on the school campus on March 13, 1959. The menu reflected three distinct ethnic groups in the school’s Mennonite constituency that traced their roots to 16th century Europe: Hutterites, Low German Mennonites and Swiss Amish.

The women of the Auxiliary brought together their respectively unique foods with the expectation of serving about 400 that cool March evening. More than 1,000 people showed up, however, quickly overwhelming the women who quickly saw the foods they brought disappear as guests continued to appear, patiently standing in a line that spilled from the basement up the staircase and outside, extending nearly the length of Pioneer Hall.

Many called this initial effort in communal hospitality “a disaster.” Half of the guests left with some measure of disappointment when they discovered the foods they had hoped to sample were gone.

But the wide appeal of the event, coupled with the realization that this could be a successful ongoing fundraising event, prompted the women of the Auxiliary to mount a second Schmeckfest in March of the following year. There was one notable change; the 1960 version included meals on both Thursday and Friday with ample preparation for both nights. Things went much smoother for everyone in year two. Emboldened by the positive response, the women of the Auxiliary made Schmeckfest an annual local tradition of communal hospitality that evolved and grew in the years and decades that followed.



In 2018, the 60th annual Schmeckfest was held on four nights – Friday and Saturday on two consecutive weekends. Incremental transitions and expansion over the course of six decades has transformed a basic meal to a multi-faceted four-day event that also includes historical and musical presentations, demonstrations of culinary and artisan skills, and a full-stage community theater musical production. Two days became three in 1973 and the festival became a two-weekend affair in 2005. An estimated 5,000 people now converge on the campus during the four days of Schmeckfest.

Thanks to Schmeckfest, the Auxiliary has contributed nearly \$4.5 million to support the mission of the school, which today operates as Freeman Academy,

a grade 1-12 program offering faith-based education with a strong emphasis on the arts. The junior college closed at the end of the 1986 school year when the constituency concluded that operating a small college in a small rural community was no longer feasible.

The benefits to the school are obvious. Without the support from the Auxiliary thanks to Schmeckfest, it's unlikely Freeman Academy could sustain its program.

The festival has also offered a positive experience for those who make the trek from their respective homes, whether it's from their homes in Freeman or 1,000 miles away. Schmeckfest has been aptly described as a "homecoming." Indeed, many families and friends gather to share the Schmeckfest experience in the same way they do at Christmas, Thanksgiving or Easter. Friends often bring friends to share the experience rooted in the basic hospitality of sharing a meal.

The positive impact on the guests who converge on the campus to enjoy Schmeckfest is reflected in the comments offered by Jack Marsh, a civic leader and retired journalist living in Sioux Falls, South Dakota's largest city located an hour east of Freeman. Marsh and his wife, Betty, have attended Schmeckfest for 12 consecutive years. In March 2018, he offered this on his Facebook page:

"Multiple generations of families with roots in rural southeastern South Dakota return each year in a remarkable show of community spirit, preparing a smorgasbord of German foods, performing a Broadway musical, and conducting informative lectures and demonstrations, all for the benefit of historic Freeman Academy. There may be no place in the nation that does a better job modeling the values of openness, decency, volunteerism and teamwork that ultimately strengthen families, encourage new relationships, build friendships and improve society as a whole."

This massive effort in communal hospitality that typically includes 250 volunteers each day, has generated cooperation, common purpose and community building that would be hard – if not impossible – to replicate in any other way. Everyone who wants to be part of that is welcome – and essential to the success of Schmeckfest. The festival is rooted in ethnic foods, but hospitality takes many forms extending well beyond the kitchen and dining hall. From alumni helping direct guests to their parking spots to students holding doors open, to kitchen workers frying potatoes, to families demonstrating how to make poppy

seed rolls, to actors playing roles on stage, to a tech crew building sets, everyone gets a chance to share their gifts and talents in a shared effort to make the Schmeckfest experience comfortable, enjoyable and satisfying.

Schmeckfest has instilled and strengthened community pride and a sense of common purpose. It has nurtured cooperation and helped maintain cultural and historical traditions. It has fostered relationships; friendships and romantic relationships can be traced directly to the Schmeckfest experience. It has created a positive community dynamic that transcends the two-weekend project of communal hospitality.