

Book review

Norma Jost Voth, *Mennonite Foods and Folkways from South Russia, Volume I*. (Intercourse: Good Books, 1990), 480 pp. \$24.95. Reviewed by Fran Loewen.

I am Swiss/German and so did not learn to know the foods in this cookbook at my mother's or grandmother's table. Church dinners, Bethel College in Kansas, and finally marrying a Loewen heightened my taste for *Zwieback*, *Mooss*, and *Varenikje*. Norma Jost Voth's *Mennonite Foods and Folkways From South Russia, Volume I* is more than a traditional ethnic cookbook. It is also a history brought to life with personal stories.

The book first introduces Mennonites and describes the Russian migration. The body of the book contains hundreds of recipes for breads, pancakes, fritters, meat dishes, soups, pickles, and peppernuts. Besides recipes, there are maps, drawings, songs, poems and numerous color photographs to enhance the beauty of this volume. A Low German pronunciation guide may be found in the back with a list of readings and sources and an index.

The introduction includes two maps that illustrate the Russian Mennonite sojourn. From its origins in the Netherlands, the group went west to West Prussia (present-day Poland), then to South Russia and finally to North American. Such a tradition of migrations has blessed these Mennonites with a unique and rich cultural heritage.

In the section entitled "The Story of Russian Mennonite Foods" the author identifies each stage of the journey and recounts the "traditional" food that Mennonites adopted or adapted there. From the Dutch tradition of the early 1600s may have come *Zwieback* (double or twice baked buns), *Portselkje* (New Year's fritters) and peppernuts (nut-sized spice cookies).

Mennonites added other foods when they left Holland beginning in the sixteenth century and started draining the Vistula Delta swamps in West Prussia. Pork and other foods rich in fat became part of their diets here. The potato, not cultivated until the 1770s, also became a common staple. Because the drained swamps turned into rich meadows, dairy farming became common. Milk soups and fruit soups called *Mooss* were added to the diet.

The eighteenth-century move to Russia gave Mennonite *Borscht* (soup), *Varenikje* (cheese or fruit-filled dumplings) and brined foods. Breads, such as Easter *Pashka* (tall, round ceremonial bread) and *Rollkuchen* (fried bread), also became part of the tradition. After the Russia years, the author follows groups that settled in North and South America or stayed in Russia to face hard years of revolution, famine and

collectivism.

Many traditional recipes were not written down. The author visited nursing homes from Kansas to Manitoba to preserve the recipes and oral histories. With the recipes came stories of schooldays and Christmas and Easter celebrations. People talked about the golden years of prosperity before the revolution and the starvation years that followed. These stories set this cookbook apart and make it also a cultural history.

Voth divides the body of the book into traditional cookbook style with sections on various kinds of foods. For example, she devotes 22 pages to *Zwieback*, including the following subtypes: Wedding Reception *Zwieback*, *Sett Zwieback* (sweetened *Zwieback* that were so rich they were eaten without butter), *Einback*, and *Reeschkje* (toasted *Zwieback*). Voth cites the opinion of historian Cornelius Krahn that "*Zwieback* may be the only Mennonite food dating back to the time of the Reformation and the times of Menno Simons." Krahn discovered a *Tweebakmarkt* Street in Leeuwarden, the Netherlands to support his theory. Also in this section are stories of the bags of toasted *Zwieback* that saved some from starvation on the train trips out of Russia in the 1920s. Finally, those of us who have trouble with "lazy *Zwieback*" (tops that slide or lean) will appreciate the section "Mastering the Art of Making Good *Zwieback*," in which experienced bakers offer their advice.

Pages of stories and recipes also sprinkle the section on peppernuts. Among the stories is an account of the Christmas miracle at a Berlin refugee camp in 1945. The daily diet there was a bowl of soup and a ration of bread. Peter Dyck, who directed the distribution of Mennonite Central Committee supplies to the camp, struck a deal with a local baker. In exchange for American flour, the baker allowed camp women to use his ovens from midnight until 4:00 a.m. in the days before Christmas. "In a few short nights they transformed flour from Manitoba and Kansas, dried eggs, a little bit of sugar and lard into peppernuts—enough to fill more than a thousand little sacks!"

We all have memories we associate with foods. For me, there is usually a visualized place or a person associated with the memory. Norma Jost Voth creates the images to enhance the recipes in her book. I can now picture the daily cooking routine that was part of the rhythm of these women's lives. I can "see" the bread resting in the dough trough and smell the stinky cheese drying on top of the doorsill. Children are playing a game on a numbered board, using peppernuts for playing pieces until they are eaten and the game is over. Men and boys are butchering a hog nearby. Though many of these "old recipes" are time-consuming compared to how we cook today, this book encourages us to remember both the food and the stories so that we can tell them to our children and grandchildren. *Mennonite Foods and Folkways From South Russia* is a wonderful tool for stirring our Mennonite memories.

Fran Loewen is a member of the First Mennonite Church, Reedley.

