

Pennsylvania German traditions garner abundance for the New Year

by Sarajane Williams

In between watching the Mummers Day Parade on television, having a second helping of pork and sauerkraut and taking a snooze, have you ever wondered about the origins of our local New Year's Day traditions?

The 18th-century German settlers of Macungie brought old world customs along with them to the new world. Their habits and beliefs were largely based on spiritual practices, societal traditions, astrology and practicality. As farmers prepared for winter at the end of harvest season, seeds were gathered, corn was shucked, apple butter was cooked, herbs, apples and nuts were dried, potatoes were stored in a ground cellar and sauerkraut was packed in a large, covered stoneware crock or a tub called a 'shtenner.'

Quite a few cabbage heads were required to make enough sauerkraut to fill the shtenner. Mammy would shred the cabbage by pushing it along a wooden board with a central opening that had a blade mounted diagonally over it. Then the slaw was layered with salt and pressed and submerged into its brine, in the shtenner. Children were sometimes put to work by stomping the kraut with their little feet, instead of bruising the slaw with a heavy wooden pestle. It would take six to eight weeks until the kraut would be ready to eat, just in time for the new year and for the rest of the winter. Fermentation was a perfect way to preserve vegetables, at a time when refrigeration did not yet exist.

While Mammy was making sauerkraut, Pappy was chopping wood and assuring that the animals in the barn would have enough food for the long winter ahead. Harvest season was also a time when hogs were slaughtered to provide meat for the larder. It was believed that hogs should only be slaughtered under a full moon or else the meat would shrink or be ruined. The pork was served fresh, made into sausages or preserved for a longer duration by salting and smoking it as ham or bacon.

After the shortest day of the year and Christmas had passed, the farmers would eagerly look forward to the longer, warmer days of spring. But in the mean time, the winter was largely a time for mending, tending, repairing and quiet reflection. The visualization of a new year, filled with the promise of prosperity, good health and abundance was something to celebrate.

On New Year's day, just after the strike of midnight it was customary for a small group of boys or men to travel through the snow, from one farm house to another, chanting house blessings or extolling salutations in the form of rhyming poems or good wishes for the new year ahead. The "wünsching (wishing) party" would recite the greeting under the bedroom window of the head of the household. Then after receiving permission, the wünschers would fire a volley from their guns. By that time, the honored family gathered in the kitchen to invite the wünschers inside for a treat of cider, apples, homemade candy, or hot mince pie or cake, that had been spiked with brandy or rum. It was considered an affront to not have your house visited by the wünschers. Later, in the 19th century, brass bands replaced the wünschers and monetary gifts were often given to the band to support their efforts. And so, the custom of going out in crowds to send best wishes and to hear the band play on New Year's eve continues to present day.

After the early morning revelry, came the time for celebrating the beginning of the New Year with family and friends, and all of the associated symbolism and tastiness of some of the best comfort foods

that could be found. It was believed that if the sun shone on New Year's Day, there would be plenty of fish and wild fowl available throughout the year. The custom of eating pork had originated in the forests of Germany, Austria and Sweden, where wild boar hunts were traditionally conducted on new Year's Day. A plump pig, because of its plentiful fat content, represented abundance and prosperity. It also symbolized progress, facing challenges and looking ahead, because a pig's snout always roots forward. In contrast, the Christmas goose or turkey, which buries the past by scratching backward, would have been served at the close of the old year. The darker, fattier cuts of pork, like pork shoulder and sauerkraut in its brine, stewed for up to 12 hours, provided a delectable pairing.

Cabbage leaves are said to represent paper money, therefore a wish at the beginning of the meal, for as much goodness and money as the number of shreds of cabbage in the bowl of sauerkraut, were thought to bring good fortune, blessings and wealth in the new year. The long strands of sauerkraut also symbolized a long life. Some cooks added just a little salt and pepper to the stew pot, while others added a pinch of caraway seeds, grated apples, applesauce or cider, and maybe a little brown sugar.

A plate of mashed potatoes, the dietary staple which symbolized love and vitality, then formed the foundation and well to hold the mound of golden shreds, brine and tender chunks of pork. Some cooks preferred to use sausage, but it was mouth-watering, in any case.

Apple butter or apple sauce, usually eaten on shwarts bröd (dark rye bread), was also served with the meal, to neutralize the grease that had been rendered from the meat.

Maybe our ancestors were right about sauerkraut bringing good fortune. Unpasteurized sauerkraut is not only delicious, but it is also very nutritious. This superfood has been found to be a good source of vitamins A, B, C, and K, it can help to lower cholesterol levels, promote digestive health, it has anti-inflammatory properties and can help ward off viruses like the common cold, fight intestinal infections and can possibly combat some cancers.

The tradition of serving pork and sauerkraut on New Year's day still provides comfort and gathers family and friends. Our traditions warm the heart and soul, and can provide a new outlook for the year and a special kind of richness that money just can't buy.

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