

# GRIDDLE



# GURUS

LEFSE ENTHUSIASTS BRUCE AND KATHY ANDERSON WAHL '87 TURN THEIR PASSION FOR LEFSE INTO AN ANNUAL HOLIDAY EVENT THAT RECONNECTS OLES IN THE NATION'S CAPITAL.

BY ANNA PALMER '04



PHOTOS BY JAY L. CLENDENIN, POLARIS IMAGES

TRAYING DOWN MANITOU HILL, THE SMELLS OF lutefisk and Swedish meatballs wafting from the cafeteria, attending the annual Christmas Festival, and eating midnight breakfasts during finals are longtime holiday traditions for St. Olaf students each December.

For Bruce Wahl '87 and his wife, Kathy Anderson Wahl '87, nothing says "Christmas" more than lefse — a soft Norwegian flatbread made from potatoes, flour, butter, milk, salt and cream, rolled very thin and cooked on a hot, dry griddle. It can be served with smoked meats, honey, jam or cheeses. It's also delicious lathered with butter, rolled up and sprinkled with brown sugar and cinnamon. Oles can find it at the Christmas Festival evening smorgasbord or at a Syttende Mai breakfast each May 17.

"Both Kathy and I are mostly Norwegian," says Wahl, a math professor at Northern Virginia Community College in Alexandria, Virginia. "I learned to turn lefse on the grill as a small child and helped my mom make it every year. Between Thanksgiving and Christmas, eating lefse was so common in my house that I thought everyone did it."

*"We thought it would be fun to teach lefse-making to other Oles. It's a lost art."* — Katherine Hoyland Barnett '79

In 2004, the Wahls, along with St. Olaf alumni board member Katherine Hoyland Barnett '79, took their shared love of lefse and transformed it into a November event designed to reconnect alumni who live in the Washington, D.C., area. It served another purpose, too. "We thought it would be fun to teach lefse-making to other Oles," says Barnett. "It's a lost art."

The three secured the kitchen at the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in McLean, Virginia, but encountered the unexpected obstacle of not being able to find the proper cooking equipment. There weren't a lot of pastry boards with fitted cloth and lefse sticks to be found in the nation's capital.

When an anonymous alumnus donated money for the griddles and equipment, the Wahls and Barnett moved forward with their lefse fest. For the past two years, the event has drawn nearly two dozen alumni of all ages — first-time lefse makers and seasoned veterans — who lug pounds of cooked potatoes and flour to the church and fire up their grills.

Although most Oles come as longtime lefse eaters, few have been lefse makers — and accidents sometimes happen. Former English major Wendy Helgemo '91, a staff attorney for the National Indian Gaming Commission, and her friend Janet Erickson accidentally doubled the recipe and added flour to the boiled potatoes before coming to the church. "We are the remedial students," says Helgemo.

Alumni gathered in November 2005 at the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in McLean, Virginia, for the second annual "Lefse Fest." Top left: Sonja Shields '82, watches as her daughter Korin, 12, rolls lefse. Bottom left: Courtney Peterson '03 wields her dough-laden lefse stick. Center: Event organizers Kathy Anderson Wahl '87, Katherine Barnett '79 and Bruce Wahl '87 show off the finished product. Top right: Margie Goergen-Rood '72 and Pam Gahr '89 make lefse under the watchful eye of Bruce Wahl '87. Bottom right: Barb Meyer '72 samples a piece of her handmade lefse.

Newcomers struggle to roll out the dough to the desired thickness and to perfect their flipping techniques. While novices wait for veteran grillers to demonstrate how to roll lifeless mounds of potatoes into thin pancake-like rounds, those skilled in the art of lefse-making enjoy reminiscing about the first time they made lefse.

Just seeing a flat lefse round can spark warm memories, and tasting it is an even more transporting experience.

## POTATO LEFSE

### What you'll need:

Lefse grill or electric griddle  
Corrugated rolling pin  
Pastry cloth and board  
Dish towels

Large cooking pot  
Potato ricer  
Wooden lefse stick

### INGREDIENTS

2 lbs. (approx. 4 cups) Russet potatoes  
1/3 cup softened, unsalted butter  
1/2 cup heavy cream  
1 1/2 teaspoons salt  
2 cups unbleached all-purpose flour, plus extra for rolling



### PREPARING THE DOUGH

The potato lefse dough should be prepared and refrigerated at least 8 hours before using. Peel potatoes, remove any eyes and cut into evenly sized pieces. Place peeled and chopped potatoes in large pot; add water just to cover. Bring to a boil and cook until soft. Do not overcook; they will absorb too much water and the dough will be sticky. Drain completely, mash thoroughly or rice to avoid lumps.

Transfer mashed potatoes to a bowl. Stir in butter, cream and salt; mix well. Stop mixing just after all ingredients are incorporated; too much mixing will make the potato lefse tough. Add flour, work dough into a ball; if the dough is very sticky, add a little more flour.

### ROLL IT OUT AND GRILL IT

Preheat your lefse grill or electric griddle to 350°F. Lightly flour your work area and cloth-covered rolling pin. Cut one log of dough into 8 equal pieces. Flatten one piece of dough to a disk less than 1/4-inch thick. Gently roll out the dough, starting from the center of the disk and moving outward. Rotate the rolling direction a quarter turn on each stroke. Occasionally turn the dough over.

When the lefse grill or electric griddle is ready, slide the lefse turner beneath the dough, then sweep underneath to separate it from the pastry board. Position the turner under the middle of the rolled-out dough and gently lift it from the board onto the lefse grill; use the same technique when it's time to grill the other side.

Cook for 45 to 60 seconds or until lightly speckled with gold, but not brown; flip the lefse and grill the other side. When done, transfer into a folded dishtowel to cool; cover the lefse to keep it moist.

Lefse may be stored up to 2 weeks in the refrigerator. Stack it on a plate and wrap tightly in plastic; separate pieces of lefse with waxed paper if they stick together.

— Adapted from *Flatbreads and Flavors: A Baker's Atlas*, by Jeffery Alford and Naomi Duguid

"I love it, but it's a lot of work," says Christine Jensen '75, who has been making lefse for as long as she can remember. Her family's love of lefse runs so deep that each child received a new griddle upon leaving home.

That expertise is appreciated by neighboring lefse teams as Jensen skillfully demonstrates how to use a long, slender wooden stick to flip lefse.

"This event puts me in the Christmas spirit and slows me down from the hurried holiday rush," says Abigail Betts '02, a Norwegian major who works as a development assistant and database manager at the Norwood School in Bethesda, Maryland. "We may have nothing in common except our experiences as Oles. But it's a tie that binds." ■

Anna Palmer '04 is a Washington, D.C.-based journalist for *Legal Times*.

To participate in the November 2006 lefse event, contact Bruce Wahl at [bwahl@nvcc.edu](mailto:bwahl@nvcc.edu)