

Good Gravy, It's Sour Beef Time SUN

Gingersnaps always seem to disappear from Baltimore supermarket shelves in the last days of October.

The vanishing cookies have nothing to do with an increase in snacking, or with Halloween. Crumbled gingersnaps are the preferred thickening ingredient in the beef gravy so liberally ladled over marinated sour beef and homemade potato dumplings at the tables of many a family in these parts this time of year.

It helps to have had a German grandmother, but anyone can enjoy this most unpretentious of Baltimore comfort foods.

Some Baltimore restaurants make a specialty of sour beef. And so do some church-basement chefs — the good women and men who stand behind the big gas ranges for hours at a time, dishing up soup bowl after soup bowl of beef, gravy and dumplings.

The annual sour beef dinner is a mainstay of churches in the Formstone districts of old Baltimore. But it does not necessarily dominate the local church-supper circuit. The oyster roasts, and the dinners of ham and fried oysters; fried chicken; crab; and spaghetti are far more numerous. Not everybody likes sour beef. And it is not a meal for a hot July evening.

Yet it has its loyalists. You occasionally read in an obituary that the deceased was an accomplished sour beef cook.

This is high praise in Baltimore's Sauerbraten Belt, the invisible area that wraps around Rosedale and Hamilton on the east, works its way through Highlandtown and Canton, jumps the harbor into Locust Point and South Baltimore, then spreads its aromatic way out Wilkens Avenue.

It may touch Howard County but never Columbia.

"I'm very proud of our gravy. It's smooth as velvet," says Grace E. Fader, former fellowship chairwoman of the United Evangelical Church in Canton. Those who know her



steaming, spice-redolent platters consider her the high priestess of sour beef in that Southeast Baltimore community.

Last week her congregation held its annual fall sour beef dinner. A number of the 1,400 people who faithfully attend limit themselves to a diet of saltines and water on the big day to prepare for the bountiful platters of sour beef, dumplings, slaw and lima beans in a thick tomato sauce. This a church dinner where you plan to arrive hungry and leave fed for the next week.

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Mrs. Fader supervises a brigade of volunteer cooks and waiters. At peak dinner hour, there's much banging and rattling in her church scullery as trays, pots and caldrons do battle duty.

Certainly not everyone in Baltimore salivates at a dish of beef that's been marinated with vinegar and spices for two or three days. Nor do they line up for potato dumplings and gingersnap gravy. In fact, a few people run away when the dish is brought out.

The trick is growing up with a grandmother who served this hearty meal on chilly

nights in late October and November. On those nights, the steam from the kitchen filled our house with the unmistakable odor of sour beef.

Even the most accomplished cooks — now as then — are not free of the inevitable comparisons: "This doesn't taste as good as last year's." Or, the most sour cut of all: "Yours isn't nearly as good as your mother's."

"Anybody can look up a sour beef recipe in a cookbook. But learning how to make it right is different. It all has to be understood," said Mrs. Fader, who was schooled in the dish's fine points by the women in her family. She draws heavily on church talent to make the coleslaw and the lima beans that accompany the meat and dumplings.

Sour beef lovers will never be confused with those who prefer a meal of bean sprouts, arugula and yogurt. Sour beef is heavy-duty stuff.

"We use 20 50-pound bags of potatoes and 1,050 pounds of beef. It hit it pretty close and I ran out nicely," Mrs. Fader said of last year's dinner.

The sour beef days are upon us. Some churches have already staged their suppers, but two fine meals are yet to come. Be advised there can be lines and waits for the food.

Hundreds of people traditionally show up for the annual sour beef dinner at Sacred Heart of Jesus Church, 3420 Foster Ave., Highlandtown. This year's event is from 1 p.m. to 6 p.m. Nov. 5 and 5 p.m. to 8 p.m. Nov. 6. Tickets are \$8 for adults, \$3 for children.

Members and friends of Christ Evangelical and Reformed Church, 1308 Beason St., Locust Point, are sponsoring a dinner from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Nov. 7 and 8. The cost is \$9.

Christ Evangelical is a small church, with a warm and welcoming congregation. The ladies and men here also serve other excellent suppers through the year. All are worth checking out, but take along a map of Baltimore if you go. Beason Street, in the very heart of the Sauerbraten Belt, can be hard to find.