



LARRY C. PRICE: SUNSTAFF PHOTOS

Magic chef: *Emma Essel, 87, shows her version of the perfect dumpling in the kitchen of the United Evangelical Church in Canton. About 1,400 people will partake of the church's sour beef supper this week.*

Sweet taste of sour beef

■ **Supper:** *The unlikely dish that features beef marinated in vinegar served with a gravy thickened with gingersnaps is a favorite for church dinners.*

By JACQUES KELLY
SUN STAFF

For those whose fine-dining ideal involves folding chairs, crockery bowls and noisy acoustics, there is nothing like the bountiful fare of a warm church hall on sour beef supper night.

Their idea of bliss is an evening heavy on the gingersnap gravy and homemade potato dumplings, along with a seat at a communal table filled with happy and satisfied eaters.

"I come to these dinners because the food is so good and I meet so many nice people," said Sarah McCardell, a North Baltimore resident who scans the sidewalks for church supper signs. She also checks the local listings in papers such as the *Catholic*



Busy Robert Armstrong, pastor of United Evangelical Church, oversees the dumpling making in the kitchen of his church in Canton. Preparation for the sour beef dinner, which continues today, began a week ago.

Review.

Churches schedule sour beef dinners only once a year because of their labor-intensive requirements — boiling potatoes for the dumplings, a lengthy marinade for the meat and the trick of perfect, no-lump gravy. Crab cake, ham, spaghetti or oyster suppers are more commonplace.

"I'm very proud of our gra-

vy. It's smooth as velvet," said Grace E. Fader, a longtime member of the United Evangelical Church, at Dillon Street and East Avenue in Canton, where the sour beef supper opened yesterday.

An all-volunteer kitchen normally feeds about 1,400 people for the annual event, which continues today as long as the steaming bowls of

grandmotherly fare hold out. They'll go through 1,000 pounds each of potatoes and beef before it's over.

This event and as others like it attract a dedicated and hungry band of church members, their friends and people who want the kind of traditional supper they had as children, not the Caesar-chicken salad cuisine that so many restaurants feature today.

Perhaps the mileage record holder for church-supper attending goes to Charles Biddison, a retired Cockeysville bill collector who puts 200 to 300 miles a week on his car searching for the obscure but tasty church-hall dinners he savors.

"Where can you go for a dinner [See 5]



Lots of dough: Emma Essel rolls the pastry to make dumplings for her church's sour beef dinner. Looking on is Robert Armstrong, pastor of United Evangelical Church.

The sweet taste of sour beef

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that's really worth eating for \$9 or \$14?" asked Biddison, who loves a good sour beef supper but also smacks his lips at Southern Maryland's stuffed ham and oyster church suppers.

"The trick is to get on the church mailing lists," Biddison advises.

Yesterday afternoon, Olga DeBloom, who is in charge of the supper staff at United Evangelical Church in Canton, supervised a brigade of volunteer cooks, waiters and dumpling boilers. At peak dinner hour, her church scullery

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Grace E. Fader, member of the United Evangelical Church

banged and rattled as trays, pots and caldrons did heavy duty.

"I wouldn't call this the recipe we had in Germany," said the Berlin-born DeBloom. "It's the taste and the way people like it in Baltimore. The gravy is a little thicker."

The preparations for her church's sour beef supper began

Oct. 16, when a group of volunteers started browning flour. Then they tied spices in gauze bags for the delicate marinade that imparts its distinctive taste to the beef.

Certainly not everyone in Baltimore salivates over 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 the gingersnap gravy — the marinated beef gravy thickened with crumbled gingersnaps. But for those who have a taste for this dish, there is nothing quite like a meal that can't be obtained easily.

"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 Fader, who learned to make the dish from the women in her family. She also draws heavily on church talent to produce the vinegary slaw and a house specialty, butter beans served in a thick tomato sauce.

"You can talk about the gravy or the dumplings that make one of these dinners so good," said Mildred "Mutz" Surdel, a volunteer at the Canton church. "But the secret is the warmth of the people who work these things."

Where to dine

The other sour beef church dinners this year include:

United Evangelical Church, Dillon Street and East Avenue, 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. and 4 p.m. to 7 p.m. today.

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