

Late October means sour beef dinner season

It's always during the last weeks in October when ginger snaps disappear from the shelves of Baltimore supermarkets.

The cookies are not being bought for snacks.

Instead, they're a preferred ingredient in the sour beef gravy so liberally ladled over marinated beef and homemade potato dumplings at the tables of many a family with German roots.

"I'm very proud of our gravy. It's smooth as velvet," said Grace E. Fader, fellowship chairperson at United Evangelical Church at East Avenue and Dillon Street.

To those familiar with Fader's steaming platters of sour beef and dumplings, redolent with spices, she's the high priestess of sour beef in Canton in Southeast Baltimore.

Last week, the congregation staged its annual fall dinner. Some 1,400 people feasted on platters of sour beef, dumplings, slaw and lima beans in a thick tomato sauce.

"I came home tired and beat," Fader said the day after she'd supervised a brigade of volunteer cooks and waiters.

At the peak of the dinner hour, the banging and rattling of trays, pots and caldrons could be heard from the church scullery.

Certainly not everyone in Baltimore salivates at a dish of beef that's been marinated in vinegar and spices for two or three days.

Nor do a lot of Baltimoreans line up for potato dumplings and ginger snap gravy — the marinated beef gravy thickened with crumbled ginger snaps.

In fact, some people run the other way when the dish is put before them.

But the dish is heavenly for those who grew up with a grandmother who immigrated from Germany or Austria and who served this meal on chilly nights in late October and November, when the steam from the kitchen filled the house with an unmistakable odor.

"Anybody can look up a sour beef recipe in a cookbook. But learning how to make it right is different," said Fader, who learned to make the dish from other women in her family. "It all has to be understood."

She also draws heavily on church



LJ ZIN/STAFF PHOTO

A brigade of volunteer cooks prepared the annual sour beef and dumpling dinner for United Evangelical Church.



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talent to make the slaw and the lima beans.

Lovers of sour beef will never be confused with those who prefer a diet of lettuce, tofu and reduced-calorie salad dressing.

"We used 20 50-pound bags of potatoes and 1,050 pounds of beef. It hit it pretty close and I ran out nicely," Fader said.

Why do some Baltimoreans cherish an invitation to a sour beef dinner?

At the turn of this century, one in four people here spoke German as their mother tongue. That's reason enough why local restaurants, seeking to develop a faithful clientele, promote the dish on their menus.

And because the dish requires days of preparation — and that special skill to make and boil a potato dumpling — it cannot be turned out on 30 minutes' notice.

People mark their calendars for Fader's church dinner. There's an official program, with patrons and sponsors. If it's an election year, the spotlessly clean church hall is visited by political hopefuls.

To miss campaigning at a sour

beef dinner is an act of political suicide in some parts of Baltimore.

"There have been times when we had so many people I had to close the door," Fader said.

The sour beef dinner will never have as many followers as an oyster and-bull roast or crab feast, but it remains a close cousin to these neighborhood events.

And like the oyster roasts, there is also the question of how much to eat.

"Years and years ago, we gave our diners four dumplings instead of three. But today, people are satisfied with three," Fader said.

If you're up for a sour beef dinner, this is the high point of the season. Here's a listing of some dinners.

Tonight and Thursday, Zion Lutheran Church, near City Hall Plaza and the city's oldest German congregation, holds its meal in the church basement at Holliday Street near Lexington Street. Dinner tonight lasts until 7 p.m.; lunch tomorrow is from 11:30 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Christ Evangelical and Reformed Church, Beason and Decatur streets in Locust Point (South Baltimore near Fort McHenry), holds its dinner Nov. 2 from 11:30 a.m. to 7 p.m. and Nov. 3 from 11:30 a.m. until the food runs out. Some sour beef fanciers consider this to be one of the best events of its kind.

Sacred Heart of Jesus Roman Catholic Church, 3420 Foster Ave. in Highlandtown, holds its dinner Nov. 7 from 1 to 6 p.m. and Nov. 8 from 5 to 8 p.m.

Beginning tomorrow, Jacques Kelly's column will appear Monday, Tuesday and Thursday in *The Evening Sun*.