

PRESERVING TRADITIONS THROUGH NOODLES

TEXAS WENDISH HERITAGE SOCIETY

By Kristi Willis

Photography by Pauline Stevens



From left: Zelda (Schautschick) Richards, Hattie (Mitschke) Schautschick and Carolyn (Schautschick) Bamsch

Early on Monday and Wednesday mornings, in the converted century-old schoolhouse at the Texas Wendish Heritage Society, three women cheerfully toil away in the kitchen making batch after batch of the delicate, yellow egg noodles that are a cornerstone of their food culture. The Wends are a Slavic sect from Lusatia, now part of eastern Germany, who immigrated to Central Texas in 1854 to escape persecution by the Prussians. The settlers formed a community near Giddings where they could speak their own language and practice their Lutheran faith. It's the work of the society to preserve Wendish culture through a museum and programs funded, in part, by the sale of those distinctive handcrafted noodles (over 7,000 pounds of noodles were sold in 2011).

Hattie Schautschick, the lead on this team, started making noodles with the Heritage Society in 1992, and has been eating the noodles her entire life. "We always made noodles growing up and always had noodles on Sunday...fried chicken and noodles," Schautschick remembers. "My mother hung the noodles over her quilting frame to dry them, and then she would have us all help cut. We had to cut, because that is how you learned."

In the society's kitchen, Schautschick relies on a pasta machine to help produce the 200 pounds of noodles they make each week. She carefully feeds the dough made of flour, eggs and a touch of salt into the pasta machine, then snips each strand by hand as the machine extrudes the thin noodles. Zelda

Richards, Schautschick's daughter, and Carolyn Bamsch lay the cut noodles on a frame, then gingerly place the frames in a converted baker's rack to dry for two days—being careful to leave space between the frames so that the noodles can breathe.



The noodle makers have the process down to a well-timed waltz—whirling from the drying racks to cracking eggs before the dough runs out. “We are so in sync that we are ready to go before the next person is ready,” says Bamsch. The work is tiring, but was recently made easier by the purchase of the new pasta machine. “I finally have a sitting-down job!” says Schautschick. “When we used the old machine, I was up and down and was always worried I’d fall backward. With the new machine, I can sit in a chair to cut the noodles and it fits perfectly.”



On Wednesdays, the noodle makers return to weigh and package the noodles into one-pound bags that are sold at the Texas Wendish Heritage Museum and several small groceries and bakeries in the towns surrounding Giddings. The noodles also appear on the menu at area benefits like the volunteer fire department barbecue, the St. Paul Lutheran Church picnic in Serbin, the annual Texas Wendish Fest and as part of a traditional Wendish meal served to tour groups at the museum.

On this day, a congregation member from Redeemer Lutheran Church in Austin arrives to pick up noodles for a celebration for their pastor. She asks for advice on how to cook the noodles noting, “My husband will be sad if I mess up his noodles.”



Schautschick explains her favorite preparation: “You have to get the water or broth to a rolling boil, add a stick of butter then put your noodles in and let them cook for three to four minutes. Cut the burner off, put foil over it, put the lid on there and forget about it. If you don’t take the lid off, they stay nice.”

“Don’t use Knorr’s bouillon; it doesn’t dissolve,” adds Richards. “If you don’t have stock, use base. Just remember: bring the water to a rolling boil, then add the butter, then add the base.”

According to these noodle experts, the finished noodles should be tender and moist—having soaked up the broth and butter in the pot. The short, string-size noodles don’t fall apart in liquid, which make them easy to cook and ideal for soups.



As the noodle-making trio discusses preparation techniques, a lively debate erupts about the proper garnish for the noodles. Schautschick uses fresh parsley—but only fresh, not dried. Jan Slack, the museum director, says that her family puts nutmeg on their noodles—drawing perplexed looks from the other women. “I’ve never made the noodles with nutmeg and neither did my mom or grandmother,” Schautschick gently notes. Slack politely acquiesces that it was probably a non-Wendish relative who added the spice.

The intense pride in the room is almost palpable. “When my grandchildren come to the house, all they want is noodles,” says Bamsch. “When our granddaughter was little,” adds Slack, “she loved the noodles so much that she ate them with a spoon...then ate them off of her shirt...then lifted her shirt and ate them off of her belly.”

Raucous laughter fills the air as the noodle makers slowly drift back to work.

TRADITIONAL WENDISH NOODLES

Courtesy of the Texas Wendish Heritage Society

5 c. broth (chicken or beef) or water

1 stick butter

½ lb. Wendish noodles

Chopped parsley, to garnish (optional)

Bring the broth or water to a rolling boil, add the butter and then the noodles. Cook for 10 minutes. Add chopped parsley, if using, and serve. (Alternatively, cook the noodles for 3 to 4 minutes, turn off the heat, cover with foil and a lid and let sit for several minutes before serving.)

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