

Minnesota Now (MPR) | Minnesota Now Minnesota Now - Lutefisk 01GMBSBDPCFBXTSWS130G6MNTW

CATHY WURZER: So are you planning your holiday menu yet? No matter what holidays you celebrate this time of year, there's probably a special dish that holds a lot of tradition for you. You have to have it, even if no one else likes it. Well, for many of you that dish is lutefisk. Our producer Britt Aamodt wanted to know how many people are still buying lutefisk for the holidays.

BRITT AAMODT: I grew up in Maryland where the holiday meal was something along the lines of turkey and stuffing. But my grandparents were from Minnesota. And when I moved here for college, I was introduced to their holiday meal of choice-- lutefisk. My grandma took offense that I'd never heard of lutefisk.

What's wrong with you people out there, she said, as if the entire country should have adopted the Norwegian fish tradition. My grandmother's generation is fading from memory, which gets me thinking, who's eating lutefisk now? And are new generations with diverse backgrounds taking it on as their own? So I'm asking Chris Dorff about lutefisk. He's the president of Olsen Fish Company, and it's among the largest producers of lutefisk in the world.

Welcome to *Minnesota Now*, Chris.

CHRIS DORFF: Thank you. Thank you for having me.

BRITT AAMODT: Sure. So just to start off, how many pounds of lutefisk do you think you'll be selling this year?

CHRIS DORFF: Well, we're still kind of regaining a little momentum we lost over COVID. But I would guess we're going to be in that 300,000 to 350,000-pound range for this year.

BRITT AAMODT: That sounds like a lot.

CHRIS DORFF: Yeah.

BRITT AAMODT: I understand you send it all over the continent. Where are some of the biggest lutefisk-eating markets?

CHRIS DORFF: Well, primarily the five-state area around Minnesota, with Wisconsin and Northern Iowa and Northern South Dakota. They're really the core market. That's where so many Scandinavians settled in the big migration.

The Prairie Provinces in Canada are popular, Montana, the state of Washington. And then, of course, now, there's so many transplants that are kind of scattered around the country. And we get to ship some to places like Southern California.

BRITT AAMODT: Yeah, pretty extensive. So when is lutefisk season for Olsen Fish Company?

CHRIS DORFF: We start soaking or getting our processing rolling in September. But really, the majority of sales happen really October through December. The earlier parts, they're generally around the harvest when a lot of the churches and lodges have their annual lutefisk dinners or suppers. Once you get more into December, it's really the people that are shopping at the stores that are taking it home for their family feasts and celebrations.

BRITT AAMODT: Do you double the amount of lutefisk you sell as the season progresses?

CHRIS DORFF: Yeah, for sure. Actually, I mean, October is a pretty big month. But then when November rolls around, it bumps up a notch. And by the time December rolls, I mean, we double our sales from November to December on lutefisk. And most of that is happening in the first three weeks of the month, too, because you got to get it out and get it produced and out to the stores in time for it to be available.

BRITT AAMODT: So you, personally, you've been at Olsen Fish Company for about 26 years?

CHRIS DORFF: Yep. Actually, we don't even measure it by years here. It actually goes by how many lutefisk seasons you've been through.

BRITT AAMODT: Really?

CHRIS DORFF: And this will be my 26 here that we're just finishing up.

BRITT AAMODT: Well, just for comparison, how much lutefisk would you have sold back then as compared to today?

CHRIS DORFF: So when I started, we were producing about, I would say, 500,000 pounds back in 1996. And we had two competitors in that day here in Minnesota. And one of them was processing maybe 150,000 pounds. And there was another one just north of here, kind of more in Central Minnesota, that was probably processing maybe 50,000 pounds.

Now, neither of them are around anymore. We still process some of the products with their brands. But if you combine it, that was about 700,000 of lutefisk in 1996. And now we're about half of that volume.

BRITT AAMODT: Does that mean that the tradition is dying out? Or do you think a new generation of foodies, perhaps, are picking up on it?

CHRIS DORFF: It's hard to say. I mean, I know for a fact that the hardcore people that grew up with that tradition and really embraced the ritual of it that they're either aged and elderly and not eating as much as they used to or a lot of people, unfortunately, have passed on. We certainly live in a melting pot.

And so there's a more diverse ethnic group out there now. But I feel like that there will still be a lot of people that'll continue to want to learn and try and maybe observe the things that their parents or their in-laws had tried to do. So we'll still be around making lutefisk for a long, long time.

BRITT AAMODT: When you describe lutefisk to somebody who's never had it, how would you describe it?

CHRIS DORFF: The lutefisk, to me, doesn't have that much flavor. I mean, it's really what you put on it. If you're soaking it in melted butter or cream sauce or crumbling some bacon on it, a little salt and pepper, to me that's the majority of the flavor to it. Everybody always makes a big fuss about the smell. And the finished product, the lutefisk does-- even cooking it doesn't smell as bad as it did 30, 40 years ago.

It's a lot more sanitary process all the way through. The fish, when it's cooked right, you should be able to flake it away with forks. It's definitely a little softer texture than if you would buy a fillet of cod at a grocery store. But when it's cooked right-- and I think too many people have experienced fish that's been overcooked that does turn out to be kind of mushy or gelatinous.

BRITT AAMODT: So you buy the dried cod from Norway?

CHRIS DORFF: Yep. That's correct. We import, like, a full semi-trailer container full of dried cod fillets. Yeah, we'll bring a container in that takes about five or six weeks for it to get here, and that's really our raw material for making the lutefisk.

BRITT AAMODT: And what do you do at Olsen to prepare it for customers?

CHRIS DORFF: Well, it's really a whole series of vats. You're basically taking this dried product that you need to reconstitute. And by putting it in water, that's really the start of the process. When it's dried, it's preserved indefinitely. As long as you keep it dry and keep it away from pests and whatnot, it'll be preserved forever.

So once you add water, though, then the clock starts ticking. And this is why the lye or the caustic soda or sodium hydroxide, it's one of the agents that's used to A, help the fish soak up more water and fluff up. But it also helps raise the pH up so while it's soaking, it will extend the shelf life more than it would be just a fresh fillet of cod.

And it's a food-grade caustic soda that's designed to be used for food. And you're stirring it every day to make sure everything's getting evenly treated. It's about a 13-day process to start from the raw material to get a nice fluffy fillet of fresh lutefisk.

BRITT AAMODT:How do you make room for, ultimately, 350,000 pounds of fish during the holiday season?

CHRIS DORFF: Well, the building, if you drive by here in November, I swear it's like a cartoon, that we must be, like, bulging at the seams because we're so stocked full of stuff. And that happens for about three months. We find a way.

We've had to get creative with having some of our partners that sell us packaging and things like that, that they warehouse some of it so we can get it more week by week or every other week, and just have to be creative for a few months out of the year. So, yes, we're here, and we operate 12 months out of the year because we make pickled herring too, and that's more of a year-round deal. But we certainly have a lot more space those other months of the year.

BRITT AAMODT:Key question.

CHRIS DORFF: Yes?

BRITT AAMODT:Do you enjoy lutefisk during the holidays?

CHRIS DORFF: It depends on how you define enjoy. I enjoy the fruits of selling that much of it. I'll eat some of it. But lutefisk wouldn't be one of my top choices.

BRITT AAMODT:All right. Well, thank you so much, Chris, for sharing your story about the Olsen Fish Company and lutefisk and the Minnesota lutefisk holiday tradition.

CHRIS DORFF: Yeah, you betcha.

CATHY Chris Dorff is President of Olsen Fish Company in Minnesota, one of the largest lutefisk producers in the world.

WURZER: You can check out their recipe for Norwegian lutefisk tacos at their website, olsenfish-- and that is Olsen with an E-- S-E-N-- dot com. And by the way, if you have a dish on your holiday table that is full of tradition, I want to hear about it. I want to see it. Email us at minnesotanow@mpr.org, and please include a photo, or post a photo on Instagram and tag MPR News.