

## **SWEDISH AMERICAN (3208)**

### **Cross-reference: Danish, Norwegian, Scandinavian**

Nearly 4 million Americans reported Swedish ancestry in the 2000 census, 1.4% of the population. Swedish Americans have largely adopted mainstream American foodways, enjoying traditional dishes primarily in holiday seasons. This culinary assimilation was hastened by the remarkably high number of single young Swedish women who emigrated during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and worked as cooks in American households.

### **Background**

The earliest migration of Swedes to North America was in 1633, when 600 Swedish and Finnish settlers established the colony of New Sweden on the Delaware River. New Sweden, however, left no lasting effect upon the foodways of the New World: the settlement was unsuccessful in providing its own food and was conquered by and absorbed into the Dutch New Netherland colony to its north in 1655 and subsequently into the English colonies when New Netherland was surrendered to England in 1664.

A much more significant influx of Swedish immigrants occurred in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, beginning in 1840 and extending through 1920. During this period 1.3 million Swedes emigrated, roughly a quarter of the population of the entire country. This massive exodus from Sweden was made possible by the repeal in 1830 of a national law banning emigration. Though some Swedes left their homeland in search of religious or political freedom, the primary factor spurring emigration was a vast increase in

population: between 1750 and 1850 the population of Sweden nearly doubled. This growth was due to a sustained period of peace after decades of war, improvements in health care, including the practice of vaccination against smallpox beginning in 1801, and to the introduction of the potato into Sweden during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, which improved nutrition for the poorer classes. The expanded population could not be supported on the available farmland, nor was there sufficient employment for the rural poor who moved to Swedish cities. Famines in Sweden during the 1860s sharply increased the flow of departures, making the period of 1870-1900 the peak years for emigration to the U.S.

The early years of Swedish emigration saw primarily families traveling together, drawn by the possibility of acquiring cheap, fertile, and easily farmed land in the upper Midwest, much superior to the rocky land of provinces such as Småland in southeast Sweden, from which many of the immigrants originated. Later on single young men and women joined the stream of Swedes headed to the New World: the young men eager to find work as carpenters or in factories and the young women seeking positions as domestic servants. Emigrants arriving without families were likely to head to a city rather than to the countryside, settling particularly in the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, and in Chicago, which in 1900 had 150,000 Swedes, making it the second largest Swedish city in the world after Stockholm. In later migrations within the U.S., Swedish Americans moved south to Texas for ranch hand work and west to mines in Colorado and lumbering in the Pacific Northwest; others took advantage of newly available farmland in Nebraska and Kansas. In many of the areas of Swedish settlement Norwegians or Danes were also found, leading to intermarriage between Scandinavian groups and joking rivalries regarding the proper preparation of dishes such as lutefisk (see Holiday Feasts).

Newly arrived Swedes encountered relatively little resentment and hostility in the New World. As white Protestants, Swedes were already quite similar to mainstream American culture; furthermore even the poorer Swedish immigrants were literate, thanks to church schools preparing children for confirmation in the Swedish Lutheran Church. In contrast to German immigrants to the U.S, often associated with anarchism and other radical movements in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Swedes appeared unthreatening to the dominant social order. In other words, Swedes were viewed as welcome immigrants; Swedish women were particularly valued as domestic servants, and newspaper ads seeking a domestic cook sometimes specified that the candidate be Swedish.

In the history of Swedish-American foodways, the role of Swedish domestic cooks in America is significant. As documented in Lintelman 2009, working as a domestic servant was one of the few opportunities available for single poor women in Sweden; widespread discontent with work conditions there inspired many to undertake the long voyage to America where domestic positions were easily obtained for higher wages, less onerous work, more time off during the week, and without being bound to contracts of one or two years duration, as was common practice in Sweden. During the emigration period of 1880-1920 almost a quarter million of the Swedish passengers were single women. The young women seeking domestic positions typically worked for non-Swedish families in American towns or cities, cooking meals to their employers' preferences. These cooks could consult a bilingual cookbook marketed to Swedish servants which contained both American and Swedish recipes: *Svensk-amerikansk kokbok samt rådgifvare för svenskt tjenstefolk/Swedish-American book of cookery and*

*adviser for Swedish servants in America*. This volume was first published in 1882 and reprinted several times, most recently in 2012 as a curiosity. It presented recipes for purely American dishes such as Boston Brown Bread and *äppel paj* ‘apple pie’ as well as for Swedish classics such as *köttbullar* ‘meatballs’ and *pepparkakor* ‘ginger cookies’. The book also suggested menus for everything from simple seasonal suppers to grand dinners to a Swedish *smörgåsbord*.

For most young Swedish women in America the period of domestic service was a limited one, ceasing when they married and established their own families. It may be noted that a secondary factor prompting young women to emigrate was the decreased number of single young men remaining in Sweden. American life presented more opportunities to meet potential husbands at a dance, picnic, or other social activity sponsored by Swedish churches and social organizations, to which Swedish domestic servants were free to go on their Sundays and Thursday afternoons off. From the point of view of single Swedish men in the U.S, Swedish women working as domestic servants were desirable marriage partners, sophisticated in the ways of mainstream American culture and skilled in household management and cooking. It is probable that many of the American dishes which the young Swedish cooks had prepared for their employers were incorporated into their repertoire of home cooking once they married and had children. Traditional Swedish foodways fit into the general Northern European pattern upon which mainstream American cuisine is based (stereotypically “meat-and-potatoes” meals); the specific experience of young Swedish women in domestic American service hastened the assimilation of Swedish-American cookery into mainstream American patterns.

## Foodstuffs

Ingredients for Swedish-American and traditional Swedish cooking may be found in specialty shops in cities with significant Swedish populations (e.g. Ingebretsen's in Minneapolis, Scandinavian Specialties in Seattle, or Erickson's Delicatessen in Chicago) or nationwide in the food market department of Ikea stores. Many Swedish ingredients and dishes are similar or identical to Norwegian or Danish foodstuffs.

Traditional Swedish food, originating in a land with long winters, is characterized by many preserved ingredients, including pickled herring (*inlagd sill*), salmon cured with salt, sugar, and dill (*gravlax*) or smoked salmon, cured sprats (*ansjovis*), and dried cod which receives a soaking in lye as part of its reconstitution before cooking (*lutfisk*). A range of sausages is also made, including potato sausage (*potatiskorv*), with potato added to the pork of the sausage mixture, small pork and veal sausages known as *prinskorv*, a pork and beef summer sausage known as Göteborg sausage, and *falukorv*, similar to American ring bologna. Condiments for sausages may include mustard (*senap*) and horseradish (*pepparrot*).

Dairy products are also prominent in Swedish and Swedish-American cooking, with butter used as a spread on bread, as the fat for sauteing, and in baked sweets. Sauces are frequently based upon cream or sour cream. A favorite cheese is *bondost* 'farmer's cheese', a firm, mild cow's milk cheese sometimes flavored with cumin or caraway.

A range of breads are found including light and dark rye bread, also *limpa*, slightly sweet and flavored with anise and sometimes orange peel, soft flat potato bread called *lefsa*, and crisp cracker-like bread called *knäckebröd*.

Potatoes are a ubiquitous element, appearing as accompaniment to most meals as well as a key ingredient in *potatiskorv* and *lefsa*, mentioned above. The distilled beverage *akvavit* is often made from potatoes (grain may also be used). Other important root vegetables include rutabagas and beets. In general vegetables typical of Swedish and Swedish-American cuisine are ones that can be stored for long periods during the winter, such as cabbage (*kål*) and brown beans (*bruna bönor*).

Fruit (often preserved or dried) is also prominent in the cuisine, appearing not only in desserts and in beverages (including the mulled wine *glögg*) but also as a condiment to the savory main course of a meal (especially lingonberries), or – in the case of fruit soup (*fruktsoppa*) – as the main course itself.

Characteristic flavors and ingredients in the Swedish baking tradition include cardamom, almonds and almond paste, and pearl sugar as decoration. Allspice is used in making sausages and headcheese (*sylta*). Other characteristically Swedish flavorings are cumin and caraway, often used to flavor *akvavit*.

Swedes and Swedish Americans are devoted coffee drinkers and typically take their coffee black. A mid-morning or mid-afternoon coffee break (*fika*) is common, with a pastry or slice of coffeecake accompanying the beverage. An old-fashioned method of preparing coffee still found in some Swedish American communities is “egg coffee,” where a beaten whole raw egg (and optionally the eggshell as well) is combined with ground coffee before adding the mixture to boiling water. The egg serves to clarify the brewed coffee and reduce acidity.

## **Preparation**

In general Swedish Americans in the immigration period conformed to typical gender roles in the preparation of dishes and foodstuffs. The women of the family cooked everyday meals and baked coffeecakes and holiday sweets, while men operated butcher shops or did the butchering on farms. In the early days of rural settlement some foods required communal efforts. For example, Lintelman describes rural women coming together to prepare *julost* (Christmas cheese). Nowadays a woman known to be a skilled baker might be hired by a neighbor to prepare the elaborate dessert *kranskaka* (multi-layered baked rings flavored with almond paste forming a cone about 18 inches high).

### **Everyday meals**

A traditional Swedish-American dinner might feature pea soup with ham, or cabbage rolls (*kåldolmar*), or potato dumplings filled with onion and bacon or pork (*kroppkakor*). Another dish featuring potatoes is Jansson's temptation (*Janssons frestelse*), potatoes baked with sprats (*ansjovis* in Swedish), onions, and cream. The well-known dish of Swedish meatballs (*köttbullar*) consists of small pork and beef meatballs served with a cream sauce. Potatoes and lingonberries are traditional accompaniments. Another traditional dish is brown beans (*bruna bönor*), cooked with vinegar and brown sugar.

In Sweden, pancakes (*pannkakor*) are similar to French crepes and are served either as a dessert or in savory versions as part of supper (e.g. after pea soup). Pancakes are not a breakfast item in Sweden. In the U.S. crepe-like pancakes are sometimes found on the dessert menus of Swedish restaurants but this is not the norm. Instead, most Swedish Americans have adopted the mainstream American classification of pancakes as a breakfast food. Swedish pancakes in an American context are, moreover, not

necessarily crepe-like: the term sometimes refers to small thin pancakes, also known as “silver dollar pancakes.”

Many Swedish Americans faithfully carry on the Swedish *fika* tradition of coffee plus a pastry for midmorning or midafternoon breaks. An enticing variety of sweet baked goods may be found at Swedish-American bakeries or produced by home cooks, including coffeecakes in rings or braids, often flavored with cardamom, cinnamon, or saffron and garnished with almonds; cinnamon buns, almond tortes, butter cookies, or cookies with almonds or other nuts. Shrove Tuesday is marked by special cream filled buns known as *semlor*.

### **Holiday feasts**

Though many Swedish Americans have assimilated almost completely to mainstream American foodways during the majority of the year, Christmas is a time when ethnic food traditions are remembered and practiced.

For Swedes the Christmas season may be said to begin in earnest with St. Lucia Day on December 13; traditionally the eldest daughter in a family wears a crown of candles and serves the parents a breakfast of coffee and *lussekatter* buns. The buns (literally ‘Lucia cats’) are sweet saffron buns twisted into figure eights or other shapes and dotted with currants.

The Swedish smörgåsbord buffet of traditional dishes may occur for festive occasions anytime during the year, but at Christmas time an especially elaborate smorgasbord known as a *julbord* (Christmas table) is common during the weeks preceding Christmas Day. A *julbord* may be offered by a Swedish restaurant, by a



church or other organization, or by a family for Christmas Eve dinner. The number of dishes can vary, but in a lavish spread a first course would consist of various types of herring, gravlax or smoked salmon with mustard sauce, hardboiled eggs and cold salads; a second round consists of ham and other cold meats, preparations such as headcheese (*sylta*), cheese and bread; finally hot dishes such as Swedish meatballs, sausages, lutfisk, red cabbage, and Janssons Temptation are enjoyed. Holiday cookies and other sweets (see below) are traditional desserts as is rice pudding: the guest who receives the almond hidden in the rice pudding will have good luck during the year. Beer and aquavit are traditional beverages for the *julbord*; the mulled wine *glögg* is also a favorite Christmastime drink.

Lutfisk, preserved cod, is part of many Swedish Americans' Christmas traditions, even if they forgo the extravagant *julbord* for a simpler Christmas Eve dinner. To prepare lutfisk the dried fish is first soaked in water for three days, then in a mixture of lye and water for another three days, and then soaked in water again for four days to remove the lye, changing the water every day. Soaking in lye results in the fish having a gelatinous texture, much prized by aficionados. Lutfisk evokes strong emotions both for and against: many Swedish Americans eagerly seek out chances to eat it while others find it repulsive.

Special lutfisk dinners are often sponsored by Scandinavian churches and social clubs in the upper Midwest as fundraisers during the Christmas season or even as early as mid-October. These social occasions may be seen as adaptations of the traditional *julbord*. Though these dinners are more likely nowadays to be organized by Norwegian institutions, Swedes participate as well. Besides lutfisk (*lutefisk* in Norwegian, the form

more widely known in the U.S.) other traditional foods may be served such as salmon, Swedish meatballs, Swedish sausage, ham, mashed or boiled potatoes, rutabagas, lefsa, rice pudding, and homemade Christmas cookies. The joking rivalry between Norwegians and Swedes is perpetuated through these dinners. Norwegian Americans eat their lutefisk with butter while Swedes are thought to prefer dressing the fish with a sauce.

Announcements of a Norwegian-hosted event may thus include an admonition such as “Swede alert: bring your own cream sauce.”

Christmas is also the season for extensive baking. Home bakers turn out a variety of Christmas cookies, above all *pepparkakor*, ginger cookies, as well as the deep fried *fattigmann*, spritz butter cookies made with a cookie press, *sandbakkels*, shortbread cookies pressed into small tart molds, and the delicate *krumkake*, made with a special iron and rolled into cylinders. Another traditional treat is *julkaka*, a sweet Christmas bread flavored with cardamom and studded with dried fruits and raisins:

## **Recipe**

*Julkaka* (Christmas bread)

For one round loaf:

1 package dry yeast

¼ c warm water

1 c milk

¼ c butter

¼ c sugar

1 t salt

1-1½ t ground cardamom, to taste

1 egg, beaten

3 ½-4 c flour

1 c dried fruit and/or raisins

Glaze: 1 egg, beaten

Pearl sugar or granulated sugar for sprinkling on top

*Instructions:*

Scald the milk and melt the butter in it. Let cool to lukewarm.

In a mixing bowl, dissolve the yeast in the warm water and let stand a few minutes until bubbles appear. Add all ingredients except flour and raisins/fruit and mix well. Add flour a cup at a time, beating thoroughly after each addition, until the dough forms a soft ball.

Turn dough out onto a floured board and knead for about 10 minutes. Knead in the raisins or fruits, form the dough into a ball, and let rise in a greased bowl covered with a clean kitchen towel until doubled in size.

Punch down the dough, form it into a round loaf for baking, and let rise again on a greased baking sheet until doubled in size.

Preheat the oven to 375°F. Brush the beaten egg over the loaf to glaze, then sprinkle the loaf with sugar. Bake for 30 minutes or until the loaf sounds hollow when tapped on the bottom.

### **Place in American culture**

For mainstream America outside of areas with a large Swedish population, the most well known aspects of Swedish-American foodways are the smorgasbord, Swedish meatballs, and Swedish pancakes. [The Swedish furniture company, IKEA, established in selected cities around the US since the 1980s??, has introduced Swedish food to mainstream Americans through the restaurants in their stores.---worth adding? ]

### **Noted restaurants and chefs**

In the mid-twentieth century smorgasbord restaurants offering traditional Swedish dishes could be found in some cities, for example Little Sweden in San Francisco (1950s-1970s), or the Sweden House chain with locations in the Midwest and Florida (1940s-1970s). These days, however, the label “smorgasbord” is likely to refer to an all-you-can-eat buffet of traditional American style dishes, with no connection to Swedish cookery. To find Swedish food in the U.S. nowadays the most accessible source is the Ikea chain of furniture stores, which features a restaurant in each of its dozens of U.S. locations. Ikea’s menu is limited but always includes a platter of Swedish meatballs served with potatoes and lingonberries. Moreover, Ikea stores also host special culinary events, such as a festival of crayfish prepared Swedish style in mid-August.

Cities and towns with substantial Swedish American population are likely to have at least one restaurant featuring traditional Swedish food, e.g. Broder in Portland, Oregon, Fika, the café at the American Swedish Institute in Minneapolis, or Tre Kronor in Chicago, which offers a *julbord* during the entire month of December. There are now also restaurants such as The Bachelor Farmer in Minneapolis and Pläj in San Francisco incorporating traditional Swedish ingredients into new, creative dishes. The high-end Aquavit in New York offers classic Swedish dishes such as gravlax and Swedish meatballs on its lunch menu, while its dinner menu experiments with novel interpretations of modern Nordic cuisine.

Marcus Samuelsson, the Ethiopian-born Swedish celebrity chef and cookbook author, was formerly the executive chef of Aquavit in New York City and remains a part owner of the restaurant; he also is involved with the restaurant Norda in Gothenburg, and the American restaurant Red Rooster in Harlem, New York. On public television, Swedish chef Tina Nordström has introduced her Swedish version of New Scandinavian cuisine to an American audience.

### **Further reading**

Kaplan, Anne R., Marjorie A. Hoover, Willard B. Moore. *Minnesota ethnic food book*. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1986.

Lintelman, Joy K. *I go to America: Swedish American women and the life of Mina Anderson*. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2009.

*The Swedish-American cookbook.* [Reprint of *Swedish-American book of cookery and adviser for Swedish servants in America*, by Carl Grimsköld, 1882] New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2012.

*Amy Dahlstrom*