

Pork and sauerkraut are a New Year's tradition at Leola Fire Company

BY SUZANNE KEENE

LEOLA — The distinctive aroma of pork and sauerkraut wafts from a bubbling pot on the stove, inviting inquisitive hands to lift the lid and peek inside to see how long until dinner is ready. In the living room beyond, the family huddles around the television, erupting in sporadic cries as they cheer for their favorite football team.

While many people enjoy these traditional New Year's customs at home, many Lancaster County

folks go to the Leola Fire Company for their pork and sauerkraut. And, while they're stuffing themselves on homemade sauerkraut and all the fixings, they are preparing themselves for a prosperous year.

The tradition of eating pork and sauerkraut on New Year's Day stems from the belief that eating this meal offers protection against trouble in the coming year.

By 11 a.m. on New Year's Day the line begins to form outside the fire hall, and by 6:30 p.m. around



Barrels of sauerkraut await the New Year's Day feast. Here, Eugene Rodgers, left, and Andy Burger check on the supply.



Leola resident Ralph Arment holds an armload of homemade sauerkraut that he will take home to enjoy later.

2,000 customers will have eaten their fill of pork and sauerkraut. While they wait in line, they can watch the football games on television, munch on pretzels, and sip coffee and orange drink.

Eugene Rodgers, the fire company volunteer who initiated the project 18 years ago, says few people have to wait in line more than 45 minutes. The busiest time is between noon and 3 p.m.

Rodgers said he proposed the all-you-can-eat pork and sauerkraut dinner as a fund-raiser that would not interfere with any other fund drives in the community. The first year, volunteers served about 325 customers who paid \$1.50 for their dinner. Since that time, Rodgers has watched the lines grow longer every year. Last year, when New Year's fell on a weekend, the fire company served 2,138 people.

The family style meal includes sauerkraut, real (not instant) mashed potatoes, a choice of pork or all-beef weiners, rolls, apple butter, applesauce, carrots and celery, a beverage, dinner mints and homemade cake for dessert. The cost of the all-you-can-eat meal is \$5. Take-outs are \$4.50, and children under 12 eat for \$2.

Rodgers says he thinks the fund-raiser has been so successful because the price of the meal is a little lower than at most restaurants, considering the \$5 admission includes a beverage and dessert.

And, because fire companies have a reputation for serving good food, people flock to their meals. "Most people know they can go to a volunteer fire company and get a good meal," Rodgers notes.

To make sure that they don't run short on food, Leola Fire Company volunteers shred 8 tons (about 6,000 head) of cabbage, roast 1,500 pounds of pork and peel and mash 2,000 pounds of potatoes, which are donated by a local farmer.

In its advertising for the event, the fire company boasts that it never runs out of food. To test the veracity of this statement, one year a couple from York County came to eat at 5:30. Sure enough, Rodgers reports, they stuffed themselves with pork and sauerkraut and have been coming back for more every year.

People come from all over Lancaster County and surrounding counties to enjoy the feast. Rodgers says that for years, a Wilmington, Del. couple came up for the day just to eat pork and sauerkraut.

The preparation for the annual fund-raiser begins in September,



Eugene Rodgers, the fire company volunteer who initiated the pork and sauerkraut fund-raiser, shows the pizza oven that is used to bake the sauerkraut.

when about 18 volunteers meet at the fire hall to make the sauerkraut from locally grown cabbage. Now the cabbages are cored and shredded by machine, but for the first several years of the event, all the shredding was done manually.

Once shredded, the cabbage is put into 37 50-gallon barrels, stomped with mashers, and seasoned with salt. Then, the barrels are sealed and placed in the walk-in refrigerator, where they remain until New Year's.

Only four barrels of sauerkraut are needed for the actual dinner. The rest of it is sold raw in two-quart containers.

On Friday night, the volunteers join forces to roast the 1,500 pounds of pork for 10 hours in a huge steamer. This year, for the first time, the fire company has its own steamer, which was made from a donated 300-gallon milk tank.

When the meat is thoroughly

done and literally falling off the bone, it's taken from the steamer with a large scoop and cut into serving size pieces. Rodgers says he seldom has trouble finding people to pick the remaining pork from the bones, since the volunteers can't resist sampling the succulent meat while they work.

Then, on New Year's Eve, more volunteers converge on the fire hall to bake the sauerkraut. The volunteers put the sauerkraut and juices from the roast pork into huge pans, and pop them into a donated pizza oven to bake for two and a half hours.

On the day of the dinner, usually about 75 people from the fire company and the community meet at the fire hall to make the final meal preparations and to serve the feast.

"A lot of townspeople have off that day and it's their way of

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Leola Fire Company volunteer Andy Burger demonstrates how the cabbage is stomped before the barrels are sealed and it is left to age.