

From the Winnipeg Free Press:

Singing praises of farmer's sausage

Monday, 31 December 2007

By Bill Redekop

ALTONA -- All things have an end, goes an old German proverb. Except wurst. It has two ends. Badabing! Even so, there seems no end to the farmer's sausage and farmer's sausage makers in Manitoba.

Manitoba is the centre of the universe for the Mennonite-origin food. A recent foray into the Pembina Valley found no fewer than six different brands of the stuff on grocery shelves. There are at least another half dozen brands in Winnipeg and the rest of southern Manitoba. Yet farmer's sausage remains little more than a specialty food outside Mennonite circles.

"I love the stuff!" says Miriam Toews, whose award-winning novel, *A Complicated Kindness*, satirized life in a southern Manitoba Mennonite town. But Toews doesn't know why farmer's sausage hasn't come out of the closet into the mainstream diet either. "I've always wondered why kolbasa gets all the love and our humble little Mennonite meat gets bupkas," she said in an email exchange. "Maybe it's the name... Farmer sausage. Not sexy!! ... Farmer sausage sounds like maybe it's made out of farmers."

Pioneer Meats, just outside Altona, has been making virtually nothing but farmer's sausage for 40 years. It produces about one million pounds a year for sale within Manitoba. "It's us low-key Mennonites," Scott Penner, president of Pioneer Meats, said of farmer's sausage's relative anonymity. "We wait for someone else to sex it up." Well, how would you 'sex it up'? It's as straight-forward a food as there is. It's ground pork with a little salt and a little pepper, and smoked. That's very Mennonite. Going back in the religion's history, any strong spices were forbidden.

Farmer's sausage is lean. Pioneer's brand contains just 17 per cent fat.

Neither is there filler like flour or wheat crumbs that you find in many sausages. To prepare, you either fry it or boil it. For the latter, perforate a farmer's sausage ring with a fork, boil it for three to four minutes, then let stand in the water for another six minutes. Little blobs of fat leak out the fork holes like a running nose. Scrape that off.

Tourists have been known to pick up old suitcases from a thrift store and stuff them full of Manitoba-made farmer's sausage like it was contraband, before returning home, said Penner. "We have people who come by and load up anywhere from 500 to 2,000 pounds of farmer's sausage," said Penner. Someone from Leamington, Ont., picked up 2,000 pounds. There are many requests, too. "Every week we get requests from places like Utah, Washington D.C., British Columbia, Nova Scotia," he said. "Someone called from Chicago who has a friend with restaurants and they wanted to put it on the menu."

But Pioneer Meats has only provincial status, so it can't sell outside Manitoba's borders. To become federally inspected, it would have to build a larger building, which is a possibility in the future, Penner said. Eleanor Chornoboy, who has written books *Faspa -- A Snack of Mennonite Stories*, and *Snow Angels*, has converted some people to farmer's sausage, too. "I have a girlfriend who lives outside San Diego and if I don't bring her farmer's sausage when I visit, she gets very angry," she said.

Farmer's sausage only really started to hit the Winnipeg supermarket chains in the 1980s. Penner Foods, the independent chain founded by the late Jim Penner that was eventually bought up by Sobey's, put Pioneer Meats "on the map," said Pioneer founder Bernie Penner, Scott's father. After the Penner store on Henderson Highway stocked farmer's sausage in 1981, other supermarket chains followed within two to four years, said Bernie. Farmer's sausage has spread beyond just being a Mennonite dish, said Scott Penner. "It's a good seller in Gimli and there aren't too many Mennonites up there. It sells in Thompson, Flin Flon, Lynn Lake."

Some restaurants serve it, too, but you pretty much have to travel

through rural Manitoba. Bubba's Cafe in Carman, M.J.'s Kafe in Steinbach, Wilson's Grill in Morris and often the Chicken Chef in Winkler are some places that serve fried farmer's sausage. Even Mennonite communities like the Niagara Peninsula in Ontario don't seem to have a local farmer's sausage maker. Saskatchewan and Alberta have some local brands, and there are brands made out of Abbotsford, B.C., and in some Mennonite communities in the United States. But it's nothing compared to Manitoba.

The farmer's sausage name is derived from when Mennonite farmers would make the sausage after slaughtering a pig on their farm. Pioneer Meats, with 13 staff, makes a variety of farmer's sausages including double smoked, or with 33 per cent less salt, or a pork and beef mix. It also make farmer's sausage into hamburger patties and hotdogs for barbecuing.