

The Swede Life

Distinctive food, architecture and people throughout Door County attract visitors eager for a taste of Scandinavian heritage.

—By Gigi Ragland, Photography by Tim Evans

The scenes and flavors of Door County provide visitors with a glimpse of Scandinavian culture.





Boil master Earl Jones, above and at left, entertains hungry guests at the Old Post Office restaurant.

More than a century ago, townsfolk awaiting the return of their fishermen huddled around *fjrs*—giant bonfires perched on the coastal cliff overlooking Lake Michigan. Lighting *fjrs* to guide loved ones home was one of many festive Scandinavian traditions that found its way to the shores of Door County.

Today, the ways of the Swedes, Norwegians, Finns, Danes and Icelanders who settled here attract vacationers of all stripes curious about the endearing heritage and culture found throughout the 75-mile-long peninsula.

The Boil

The enormous *fjrs* of yore evolved from navigational beacon to an efficient means of cooking the returning fishermen’s catch. The large, black kettles filled with boiling water and onions, potatoes and fish now represent an iconic part of visits to Door County. But, today’s “fish boils” entertain as much as they sate appetites.

Earl Jones presides as boil master at the Old Post Office Restaurant in Ephraim, where he entertains the crowd more like a circus ringmaster than a chef. As he regales diners before the main event, mesmerized spectators watch flames flicker beneath a large kettle. Children eye Jones curiously as he tosses chunks of fresh Lake Michigan whitefish into the pot. Circling the kettle, he peppers the crowd with jokes while explaining the process. “Why are fish so smart?” he asks. “Because they stay in schools!”

Some in the audience chuckle, others groan. Smoke from the crackling logs under the pot catches in the lake breeze. “Get your cameras ready folks,” Jones warns before quickly dousing the fire with kerosene. A great burst of flames erupts, and the kettle boils over amid oohs and aahs. This process removes residual fish oil that collects from cooking, he explains. Jones lifts the basket of perfectly cooked fish from the water and whisks it away to the dining room.

Building on Heritage

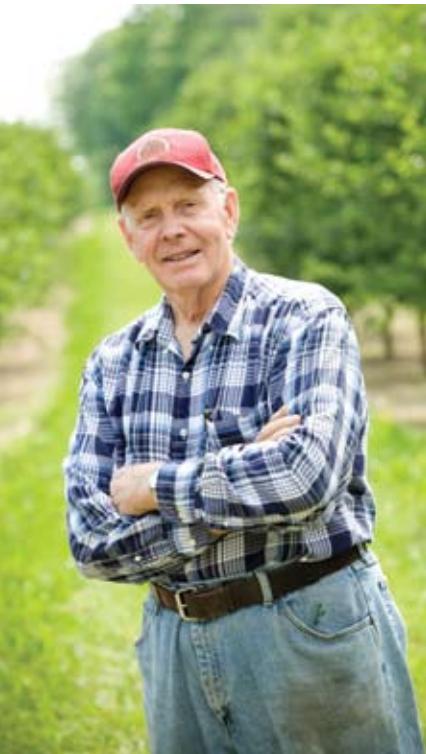
Like many of Ephraim’s buildings, the Old Post Office Restaurant projects the Old World charm and personality of a bygone era.

Five historical structures known as The Ephraim Village Museums preserve the architecture of the region and portray early settler life. Exhibits at the Anderson Barn tell the story of early Ephraim and the families that founded the colony in 1853. A stroll across Water Street brings visitors to the Anderson Store Museum—complete with penny candy—and the Anderson Dock & Warehouse, built in 1858. The present-day warehouse’s fascinating boat name graffiti that covers its exterior attracts almost as much attention as the views of Eagle Harbor.

Across the storied strait that links Lake Michigan and Green Bay—ominously dubbed Death’s Door—Viking traditions remain in the architecture of Washington Island’s Stavkirke (“Church of Staves”). Local craftsmen built the

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(Clockwise, from below) Dale Seaquist, Door County cherry pie, Solbjorg's Norwegian Giftware.



chapel without nails in tribute to their seafaring Icelandic and Norwegian heritage. Adornments combine pagan and Christian symbols present during medieval times, such as the intricately carved dragon heads that watch over the island like guards on a Viking ship.

This same craftsmanship can be found in the Stavkirke at the Bailey's Harbor Björklunden vid Sjön (Norwegian for "Birch Forest by the Water"), a 425-acre estate on the Lake Michigan shore. The Boynton Chapel mimics a Stavkirke modeled after a church in Lillehammer, Norway, that boasts similar architecture.

Settling In

Scandinavians came to the peninsula in the mid-19th century in search of prosperity. Many continue to thrive in Door County and its surrounding islands. Norwegians settled in Ephraim, Swedes originally settled in Sister Bay, and Washington Island off the top of the peninsula is the oldest Icelandic settlement in the United States.

"The settlers saw that they could make a living doing the same things that they did in Norway, such as fishing, logging and farming," says Sue Antonsen-Daubner, a local resident with Norwegian roots who runs The Sister Bay Café and Solbjorg's Norwegian Giftware with her husband. She adds with a laugh, "although if I were a farmer, I think I would have continued on where the soil was a little better."

Actually, Door County's rocky soil and climate proved to be a good match for certain types of fruit, especially the region's renowned Montmorency cherries.

Dale Seaquist remembers planting his first cherry orchard in 1949. "The field was so unbelievably stony. I planted everything by hand," he explains. Seaquist's brawny hands bear the signature wear and tear from working the land; sun stained, leathery and worn. "In those days, everything was done by hand," says Seaquist in his distinctive Swedish accent. His father was the first in his family to plant orchards here more than a century ago, and since then, five generations of Seaquists have planted and tended orchards in Sister Bay.

A Taste of Sweden

Cinnamon perfumes the air at Grandma's Swedish Bakery. It is early morning and hungry folks line up to buy Cardamom coffee cake, Swedish limpa bread and made-from-scratch cinnamon rolls. "It's real Swedish dough," emphasizes Jewel Peterson Ouradnik, who operates the family business at the Wagon Trail Resort and Vacation Homes in Rowley's Bay.

Her mother, Alice Peterson, started the bakery to make limpa bread for the restaurant using her own family recipes. "Mom wasn't going to offer her restaurant customers store-bought bread," adds Ouradnik. A staple in Swedish households, limpa is a rye bread with hints of orange marmalade, brown sugar and molasses. The crunch of caraway and anise seeds delivers a pleasant, piquant mouthful of flavor.

For sweeter Swedish flavors—and one of the best photo ops a tourist could ever snap—visitors make a pilgrimage to Al Johnson's Swedish Restaurant and Butik. The Swedish log cabin sports a thick grass roof where goats nibble and graze as children pose for pictures. The restaurant's thin, crepe-like Swedish pancakes drowned in purple lingonberry syrup co-star with the livestock.

A lingering walk through the restaurant's gift shop reveals authentic treats such as jars of lingonberries, brightly hand-painted Dala horses, Swedish costume dolls and trolls. On their way out the door, visitors might even be tempted to extend a parting *Tack, Adjö!* (Swedish for "Thank you, goodbye"). ☺

Cinnamon scents often fill Gigi Ragland's home, but it can't compare to Grandma's Swedish Bakery.
