

Dreisbach-Dresbach Family

Association Newsletter

January 2023©

2023

Happy New Year

What's for dinner on New Year's Day? If you are Pennsylvania Dutch or live in areas of Ohio or West Virginia that were settled by people moving from Pennsylvania in the 1700's and early 1800's - or if you are of more recent German extraction - then the answer probably is PORK AND SAUERKRAUT (and mashed potatoes of course)! Wait, some of you may answer "Hog maw" (filled pig's stomach) and a few might say "dumplings" instead of mashed potatoes, and those are all perfectly good main courses for New Year's Day but the long-standing tradition is to eat pork and sauerkraut with potatoes (mashed or otherwise).



New Year's Day feast of pork and sauerkraut

<https://www.thefedupfoodie.com/country-style-pork-spare-ribs-sauerkraut/>

History of a Culinary Tradition: Pork and sauerkraut to welcome in the new year is a tradition that is hundreds of years old. It is a German tradition, or at least a Germanic tradition which is also found in the lands that border present day Germany. It is based on *the pig!* And on the hope and need to bring good luck in the coming year.

Pigs, and therefore pork, are considered 'lucky' in many parts of the world, partly because they root in the ground with their snouts, always moving earth forward as they root for good things to eat. This reminds people of moving forward into the new year where you will be able to root for, and hopefully find, good things. Pigs are a sign of prosperity and in the middle ages and late middle ages owning pigs signified upward mobility. The first known record of the surname "Dreisbach", was used by Georg Dreisbach/Treisbach who is listed in the "Schweineregister" in the Wittgenstein Archives. In 1606 he had a dwelling and a barn (a single, combined structure), 11 full grown pigs and 2 young pigs. He was not a poor serf working land belonging to someone else (although he certainly must have helped to work the Duke's lands and farms), but he was a prosperous man with not one or two, but with eleven full grown pigs! This Georg had at least two sons, Johan - who gave rise to the Simon Dreisbach line, and Daniel - who was the progenitor of the Martin line. So having *pork* and sauerkraut not only tastes good but honors our first known Dreisbach ancestor!

There are other reasons, more practical ones for the pork and sauerkraut tradition on New Year's Day chief among them being that pigs were slaughtered in late fall or early winter when they were at their fattest and before it became hard to sustain them during the lean times of winter. Every bit of the pig was used. Without refrigeration, smoking, salting and curing with salt, sugar and spices were the methods used to preserve meat. Some meat was cooked right after slaughter which more or less coincided with Christmas and with the arrival of the New Year. A shoulder of pork could be kept cold in a clay pot submerged in icy spring water for several weeks to be roasted on the festive day.

Sauerkraut too, was the product of a fairly recent harvest. Cabbage can tolerate cold and would have been harvested after the first light frost. The frost may have frozen or slightly damaged the outer leaves of the cabbage, but never mind, this did not matter because very soon after picking, the cabbages were shredded and packed into crocks with salt, then kept in a cool place as the leaves fermented and turned into sauerkraut. By New Year's Day, the sauerkraut was ready to be eaten and was, in fact, at its prime, still retaining a hint of freshness and not yet deeply sour and limp.

Put the two together - a shoulder of pork that needs cooking and a crock of pickled cabbage waiting to be eaten and you have the makings of a tradition. Before the arrival of potatoes in the middle 1600's, pork and sauerkraut was eaten with dark bread and perhaps dumplings. By the time our Dreisbach ancestors sailed across the Atlantic, potatoes were part of their diet.

One potato cut into bits, each bit containing one or two "eyes", became a potato plant when planted, and each potato plant could have as many as five or 10 potatoes. Potatoes soon became a staple food of the Pennsylvania Dutch (and of the Germans who remained in what is now Germany).

Types of sauerkraut: Sauerkraut can contain things in addition to cabbage. Carrots and red beets can be shredded and added to the cabbage leaves to produce different flavors of sauerkraut. Sauerkraut can be cooked in several ways as well. It can be stewed as it comes from the crock. Or drained and fried in lots of butter. Or peeled apples and/or chopped onion can be added while the sauerkraut is cooking. Some people add black pepper corns and/or juniper berries or dill seeds or caraway seeds. Beer or white wine can be added if liquid is needed. It is not unheard of to add brown sugar (although purists scoff at this). However nobody adds all, or nearly all of this - just one or two of the variants listed above.

PORK AND SAUERKRAUT RECIPE: This is the recipe my father handed down to me from his mother and she must have gotten it from her mother. In our family - it was my father who did the "big" cooking, things like pork and sauerkraut, turkey, and stuffed pig's stomach. There are many variations and many different ways to cook this dish and they're all good but this is the one my Dreisbach family enjoyed for many years and that I continue to make.

- 1 pork shoulder
- 2 to 3 large glass jars of sauerkraut (or better yet, about 2 pounds of fresh sauerkraut if you can get it)
- 1 large onion, peeled and chopped
- 1 large apple, peeled, cored and chopped (or 1 cup applesauce)
- 5 or 6 juniper berries (my father never added this but I like it)
- salt and pepper
- 2 cups beer or water (sometimes my father used beer, sometimes water)
- 4 Tbsps butter cut into chunks

Heat the oven to 350F. Rub the pork shoulder with salt and pepper. Fry about 5 minutes on each side - until nicely browned, in combination of butter and oil. Remove pork and place in casserole dish with a lid (or in Dutch Oven).

Sauté the chopped onion until translucent in the same pan you used for the pork. Add the chopped apple (or applesauce) to the pan and add 1cup of liquid (preferably beer but could be water or chicken stock) and simmer for a few minutes. Drain the sauerkraut. (You can rinse it if you like a less sour taste, but we never did)

Add sauerkraut to the onion, apple mixture and stir. Put the chunks of butter in the bottom of the casserole or Dutch Oven. Add ½ of the sauerkraut mix to the pan. Put the pork shoulder on top. Add remaining sauerkraut mix on top of the pork and add the remaining 1 cup of liquid. COVER and put in 350F oven for about two hours. After one hour, check that there is sufficient liquid, add as needed. Before serving, break up the pork into portion sized chunks or smaller. Serve with mashed potatoes and lots of butter.



Pennsylvania Rifle by John Dreisbach, gunsmith (1762-1823 son of Martin Dreisbach) Mifflinburg, PA.

Shooting in the New Year, Another Pennsylvania Dutch Tradition:

I have to say that in my many years living in the Pennsylvania Dutch Country and with Pennsylvania Dutch relatives living in Berks and Lancaster Counties, I never encountered this tradition! That said, it IS a New Year's Day Tradition that our ancestors were familiar with and took part in.

The tradition has its roots in pre-Christian areas that are now Germany. At the time of the longest night, people made noise to scare off evil spirits. The definition of 'the longest night' was flexible ... and applies to the two weeks on either side of the winter solstice. In the middle ages, when the use of a calendar became common, this form of celebrating was linked to the passage of the old year and welcoming in the new year - basically still a celebration of the solstice.

Gunpowder - a very necessary part of Shooting in the New Year, was invented in China and made its way to Europe and Germany in the 1200's or before. By the 1300's German alchemists had devised a way to make reliable gun powder that could be used in weapons. In the middle 1500's the musket was invented and became the weapon of choice for armies of petty rulers as well as the large armies of European countries¹. The Dukes of Wittgenstein were no exception and each had a small militia of armed men. A widespread tradition developed of soldiers going out at midnight and "shooting in the New Year" by firing their rifles at the sky. Over the years this developed into a midnight display of fireworks - an event we are all still familiar with. And what does this have to do with Dreisbachs? Well, probably not too much although there is one thin line of reasoning allowing us to make a possible, if not entirely probable, connection.

In the 1730's Simon Dreisbach Sr's brother, Hermanus (better known as Manus), enlisted in the Duke's militia for a 4 year term of service. We do not know how he spent these years and whether or not he was among those men trained to use a weapon but, with a lot of caveats, he may have been one of those militia men who was issued a gun during his period of service and, if so, no doubt helped to "Shoot in the New Year". (I warned you it was a tenuous thread.)

If we move along to the time when Simon and Martin Dreisbach lived in Pennsylvania (and later, for some of Martin's descendants, in Ohio), the probability of a Dreisbach taking his gun to Shoot in the New Year becomes much more probable - if still totally undocumented. But we can imagine the Dreisbach/Dresbach men gathering at a local tavern to quench their thirst and then go outside and with a lot of merriment and noise, welcome the new year by shooting it in. Later, on New Year's Day, there was another Pennsylvania Dutch custom of shooting guns in the orchard in the hope of scaring off the devil and ensuring a bumper crop of fruit in the coming year. So.....

To members and friends of the Dreisbach-Dresbach Family Association.

HAPPY NEW YEAR and WELCOME 2023!

¹ <https://www.thecollector.com/first-guns/>