

## Kutztown Festival Gives Taste of Pennsylvania Dutch

With 25 years of experience, The Pennsylvania German Festival in Kutztown, Berks County, is one of the most famous festivals in Pennsylvania and the longest running of its kind. For nine days, at the end of June and the beginning of July, visitors to the festival enjoy the culture and traditions of the “Pennsylvania Dutch.” Although we’d heard about the festival before, we’d never been there, and on such a warm day, we were looking forward to some special food and entertainment.

At the entrance, we were given a brochure and map of the fair. Although it’s just as much fun to wander around the grounds discovering crafts and entertainment as you go, it is also quicker to be able to find at a glance what you are looking for-especially when your objective is Pennsylvania Dutch fried potatoes and birch beer.

After waiting in line for our potatoes, piled high in a red-and-white-striped cardboard container, and two tall glasses of birch beer, we picnicked on the grass next to a barn converted into a small gift shop while watching small children have their faces painted. We found the potatoes delicious and different. Forget French fries, home fries or any other kind of potato that may be the favorite; sliced thin, crispy circles somehow tasted so much better than any of these.

One of the most famous foods of the festival is the ox sandwich, prepared from one ox roasted each day of the festival. Although we passed on that opportunity, we were able to talk with some folks who were more daring. Wendy and John Grzelewski of Maplewood, NJ, had come to the festival with their two young children, Luke and Adam. One of the first food offerings they came upon was the ox sandwich, and they decided to have a taste. “It was...okay,” laughed Wendy, “like no meat I’ve had before.”

We wandered through the food stands for quite awhile, overwhelmed by all the choices. I sampled toasted almonds and apple butter. Perhaps some of the best food bargains of the festival are the all-you-can-eat dinners, where you can sample chicken, potpie, corn pie, schnitz and knepp (dried apple and dumpling), or ham. It is almost impossible to have a taste of the Pennsylvania Dutch culture without sampling the food.

After satisfying our appetites, we headed to the quilt barn. The quilt auction, held on the second Saturday of the festival, attracts buyers from all over North America who bid on 24 prize-winning quilts, most of which are made here in Berks County. The winning quilts remain on display for the remainder of the festival before being collected by their new owners. Hundreds and hundreds of quilts for sale hung on display. The prizewinners, with intricate stitching worthy of admiration, are displayed in breathtaking beauty. And just as we began to wonder how it was indeed possible to make such beautiful quilts, we came upon two women, sitting quietly in the midst of the entire hubbub, sewing complicated designs, piece by piece.

If that wasn’t enough quilting for the curious visitor, outside the barn was a stand where patrons of the festival could try their own hand at this traditional craft. As we watched, a girl in her early teens sewed a square, which would later be joined to form a community quilt made by people passing by.

The rest of the day was filled with browsing the many different stands with workers dressed in colorful costumes. It’s difficult to keep them all in mind, they are so numerous. It’s also not easy to keep track of the money you’re spending. We talked with several people who had already carried gifts and packages back to their cars and were returning for more. Our own pockets became lighter on the herbs and medical booth, where we could choose from little packets of seasonings, soaps, and jams, among other items. We also shopped stands containing Santa and gnome wood carvings, beeswax candles, ironwork and handmade kites.

The painters, carvers and other artists are situated among three different stages of live entertainment, and throughout the festival, we could see cloggers, folk dancers and singers, country bands and fiddlers.

The interaction that you can have with the craftspeople and artists is one of the best features of the festival. Here, visitors don’t just wander from booth to booth, looking at arts and crafts while sellers sit behind their tables reading a book, or otherwise occupied. Instead, the artisans are either demonstrating their craft or eager to explain it. For example, we chatter with a hex sign painter who was brushing the tiniest details on his latest creation, and feeling the heat in our faces from several feet away, we watched in fascination as glassblowers twirled and bent hot glass as if it were taffy. Woodworkers carve as you watch, and even the

entertainers stop to talk. Because the participants are all so enthusiastic about what they do, festivalgoers become that much more willing to buy.

On a practical level, the Kutztown festival is easy to move through. It's on flat ground with plenty of sitting places to rest under shady trees or to snack at picnic tables. The bathrooms are plentiful and clearly marked.

With offerings for every age group, the festival is an entertaining way to spend a summer afternoon. And if you're daring enough, you can always sample an ox sandwich!