

MILWAUKEE MAGAZINE CITY GUIDE JUNE 1999

The Gathering

In praise of Fins and Fridays.

There is no night more sweet or full of promise than a Friday in Milwaukee.

The work week is over, the weekend not yet begun—we are like kids sprung from the last day of school. Across the city in taverns, church halls and restaurants we gather, lines forming where the air is thick with the scent of battered fish meeting hot oil.

We sit, peruse the crowd, have a golden lager and absorb the heady buzz of friends and families, talking, laughing, waiting. Then it comes, golden, piled high on plates with bowls of French fries, mounds of slaw and marbled rye. We eat, forks and fingers revealing the white, delicate steaming flakes. We drink, the beer swilling inside our mouth, putting out the fire with perfect chemistry.

Consider our rare good fortune: Except for rumors of scattered fish fries in other nearby states, there are few Friday fish fries as we know them outside of Wisconsin. Why, we wonder, are we so fortunate? The custom's origins are stubbornly mysterious. It all starts, of course, with the Catholic Church's tradition of meatless Fridays, an ancient reference to the day of Jesus' death. But there are many areas around the country just as Catholic with nothing like our Friday fish fries - not in Boston, not in New York. Nah, it's a German custom, locals crow - the beer, the *gemütlichkeit!* But nearly half of our German immigrants were Lutheran, and Germans in Ohio or Pennsylvania know no such sweet delights.

Some say the custom arose after Prohibition, when taverns offered something extra to draw families to the bars. Others trace it back to the rowdy French Canadian trappers of the 1700s who turned to fishing as the fur trade started to collapse.

Milwaukee's Friday night fish fry may best be seen as a happy accident of history, a providential blending of cultures through time and proximity to Lake Michigan and its once abundant perch.

But perhaps it is that historic link to church, to community that gives this decidedly local event its distinctive good-vibe feel. A gathering of like-minded people feeding their flock while fueling their causes—as with Serb Hall's St. Sava Cathedral volunteers or the free-thinking tumblers at old Turner Hall.

The truth is, fish fries are both secular and sacred, our ritual celebration in the company of those who prize tradition and food as we do. A shared experience that says: it's Friday in Milwaukee and we're blessed.