



On the Lamb

Wellsboro’s “Rabbie Burns” Birthday Dinner Celebration

By Patricia Brown Davis

“Eatin, drinkin, an cleanin needs but a beginnin.” -*Old Scottish proverb*

Sometimes we all need “a beginnin.” One came in the form of a recently retired and relocated New Jersey lawyer of Polish descent, who lived in a town full of Scottish descendents and sometimes officiated and dined in one of their local restaurants at a traditional dinner praising Robert Burns. (This is the same guy—Jim Tutak—who let his hair, beard, and moustache grow for a year in his own labeled “Scalp a Lawyer” Rotary project to raise money for Wellsboro’s annual Foster Children’s Christmas Party.)

If you know what a Robert Burns dinner is, you may already be hooked. If not,

and you attend, you may run into that possibility. And, if you miss one, you’ll have to wait until another year rolls around.

Robert Burns (1759-1796), the most famous Scottish bard—publicly voted in Scotland in 2009 as “The Greatest Scot Ever”—has been praised by convocations of fun-loving enthusiasts of poetry for years in honor of his birthday, January 25.

So, what is a “Rabbie Burns” dinner—one that is celebrated all over the world and in Scotland more than the Scots’ own national holiday? Traditionally, participants meet for a meal. The evening starts with a general welcome and announcements, followed with the “Selkirk Grace.” At this point, the sounds of a Highland piper—dressed in full regalia—are heard, and he

and the chef burst through a door bringing the centerpiece of the evening meal, the haggis, on a platter, often to the tune of “Scotland the Brave.” At the end of the reading of Burns’ poem, “Address to a Haggis,” the chef cuts the casing, allowing steam to burst forth.

While haggis and “neeps and tatties”—turnips and potatoes—are often traditional offerings, a regular menu is also included, closer to participants’ palates. And, of course, a toast of an excellent single malt whiskey is offered—but not required—by passing the “quaich” (a small shallow vessel) to those who have not experienced a Burns dinner.

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Lest the word “haggis” turn you off, it tastes much better than it sounds. Parts of a lamb are minced with onion, oatmeal, suet, spices and salt, mixed with stock and simmered in a casing for three hours. Traditionally, the Scots used a sheep’s stomach for the casing, but today in the United States it is commercially prepared in a casing under the scrutiny of the Food and Drug Administration. Its consistency on a plate looks much like loosely prepared sausage. It’s not consumed on a daily basis, even in Scotland, but more for festive and traditional occasions.

Often entertainment is included, and those doing the planning set the tone. Last year’s dinner in Wellsboro, begun by Tutak at Timeless Destination, requested all participants bring a poem to be shared—one by Burns or another poet, lyrics of a song, or an original of their own. Poetic offerings ranged from four-line originals, lyrics read or sung, humorous to heavy, and a bit of poetic prose, with much laughter squeezed between the words.

Some dinners with a large number of



Piping in the Haggis at Wellsboro’s Timeless Destination in 2010.

participants hire entertainment for the evening. Wellsboro’s included *Ciro Lopinto & Friends*, a small Celtic combo, including hammered dulcimer and other folk instruments playing during mealtime.

A committee in Wellsboro, headed by Tutak, is making plans for Sunday, January 29, 3 p.m. at Wellsboro’s Moose Lodge. They are only serving forty dinners, so make reservations sooner than later. Attendants should bring a short poem. For more

information contact Jim Tutak at legaltak@ptd.net or phone: 570-723-5049.

January tends to be long, cold, and dark. Fun-filled events like this go a long way to warm a winter’s evening, a willing heart, and an adventurous tummy. 🍷

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