

Heritage, family and fun at the Scandinavian Midsummer Festival

By DAN HAAG

From June 17 to 19, the Astoria Scandinavian Midsummer Festival will transform the Clatsop County Fairgrounds into a wonderland of Norwegian, Finnish, Danish and Swedish culture.

Now in its 49th year, the festival celebrates the Scandinavian cultural influence in Astoria and the surrounding area. It's also a big party showcasing the convivial spirit Scandinavians brought to the shores of the Columbia River, complete with authentic attire, a royal court, a beer garden, Vikings and food galore.

So welcome, or, as the Finns would say, tervetulo!

Preserving heritage

With nearly 50 years under its belt, the festival's main mission is the preservation of the Scandinavian culture and heritage of the North Coast. While the North Coast has been influenced significantly by a variety of immigrant groups over the years, a large portion came from Scandinavia. Their descendants continue to reside here.

"We have a very strong Scandinavian community here, and people are passionate about sharing those traditions," says Janet Bowler, entertainment coordinator for the festival.

Not being Scandinavian doesn't mean you can't enjoy the proceedings. Bowler sees the festival as an educational opportunity for those unfamiliar with that part of the world. "People should think of it as a chance to experience Scandinavian culture without buying a round-trip ticket to Europe," she says.

Saara Matthews, a former festival junior Miss Finland and Scandinavian dancer, feels the event evolves with its surroundings. "I think it's changed as Astoria has," she says. "Originally, it was very much rooted in the strong local Scandinavian and Finnish population of our area. We still draw on

that local crowd but get a lot of other visitors since Astoria has become such a popular place."

'A cultural oasis'

Organizing three days of dancing, performances and games is no small task: There are 16 different groups in multiple venues providing a weekend's worth of entertainment for hundreds of festival-goers.

Bowler points to the beer garden as a hub of fun and entertainment. Hosted by the Astor Street Opry Company, the venue hums, and Bowler says it's often standing-room only. "It's great spot to stop and relax if you're tired of dancing," she says.

A particular point of pride for Bowler is the three musical trios performing at this year's festival: one each from Sweden, Denmark and Finland. Each is comprised of professional, classically trained musicians who have garnered multiple accolades: The Danish group has received the European equivalent of 18 Grammy awards.

The Royal Court is a big piece of the cultural puzzle.

Every year, the various Scandinavian lodges of Astoria pick a high-school-aged girl to represent their heritage. These young women then spend the majority of the year visiting with the community and promoting the festival.

Abbie Johnson, Junior Miss Norway in 2003 and both Miss Norway and Miss Scandinavia in 2014, feels the Royal Court is a vital element of the festival.

"Being Miss Scandinavia is an incredible opportunity to represent the entire Scandinavian community as a whole," she says, adding that many princesses have followed in their mother or sister or aunt's footsteps, even wearing the same authentic costumes passed down through their families.

Attendees are noticing the effort put into carrying off a well-rounded event, as evidenced by comments made



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PHOTO BY JOSHUA BESSEX
Joanne Petersen Imamura was Miss Denmark in 1972.



of the dishes honor people who helped the festival.

"Many of the recipes are based on people who are no longer with us but worked very hard on the festival," she says. "They used their own recipes with a pinch of this and some of that, nothing written down. This is a way of preserving these things."

Picking a favorite dish is one of the harder choices of the weekend, with four different lodges offering a variety of foods. And that's not even taking into account the full meals, such as the beef dinner put on by the Olney Grange.

Matthews says repeat festival-goers use the opportunity to stock up on favorite dishes. "I know I have a check list of foods I try to eat," she says. "Sometimes I'm disappointed at the end when I know I missed something and it will be another year before I have a chance."

Be warned: Bowler says that modern clothing and traditional costumes alike start feeling a little tight after three days of partaking. "They might fit really well at the beginning of the weekend, but I think our waistbands are pushing the limit at the end," she says.

PHOTOS BY JOSHUA BESSEX

Above: Torch bearers will lead the way to the bonfire Friday night. **Left:** Festival goers dance during the Queen's Ball at last year's Scandinavian Midsummer Festival.

'Working together'

How does a small-town festival stay relevant for 49 years?

"This festival requires all of your senses," Johnson says. "You can taste the food, listen to traditional music, look at the beautiful Scandinavian costumes, and feel the heritage."

While great entertainment and delicious food are huge selling points, the festival is deeply rooted in a sense of ancestral and communal pride.

That extends to passing on pride in such things as family recipes and traditional costumes.

"The passion for preserving Scandinavian heritage is passed from generation to generation, especially in this community," Bowler says.

Matthews agrees, adding that the festival also serves as a reunion of sorts, a place to visit with friends and family not seen since the previous year.

Johnson, born in 1996, has attended every festival since, while Matthews began attending at age 5.

Mostly, it's a time to celebrate a connection to the past and the future of a close-knit community.

"It's about people working hard to put on an event and hoping everyone has a good time," Matthews says. "It's all volunteer work and working together. I think this is carried over from the immigrants who moved here."



2016 Astoria Scandinavian Midsummer Festival Court
Miss Scandinavia 2015
Meisha Boettcher

Meisha is the daughter of Gary and Ingrid Boettcher. She is a senior and the valedictorian at Knappa High School. She plans to attend Western Oregon University and get her bachelor's degree in criminal justice to become a police officer. She works as a tour guide at High Life Adventures and volunteers at the Clatsop County District Attorney's Office. She will finish her reign as Miss Scandinavia 2015 during the Scandinavian Midsummer Festival Coronation, when she will crown Miss Scandinavia 2016.



Junior Court Chaperone
Susan Jackson



Senior Court Chaperone
Bev Hoofnagle

2016 Astoria Scandinavian Midsummer Festival Court

Susan and her husband have three children: Devin, Wyatt and Reanna, who was Miss Denmark in 2013. Susan is the daughter of Bev Hoofnagle, who is the Senior Court Chaperone. She has been in the Viking Nordic Dancers for over 30 years.

Bev has been involved in the Scandinavian Midsummer Festival and the Viking Nordic Dancers since 1983. She and her husband, Dave, have three children; their daughter, Susan, is the Junior Court Chaperone.



2016 Astoria Scandinavian Midsummer Festival Senior Court
Senior Miss Sweden
Megan Sweet

Megan's parents are Chad and Denele Sweet of Seaside. She is a junior at Seaside High School, where she is involved in the symphonic band. She also played soccer, participated in track and has been involved in 4-H. She is a dance teacher and an Encore Dance elite gymnast. She has enjoyed her time on the Scandinavian Court meeting new people and has become close friends with the other girls on the court.



2016 Astoria Scandinavian Midsummer Festival Senior Court
Senior Miss Norway
Megan McCall DeVos

Megan is the daughter of Jonathan and Michelle DeVos. She is a senior at Astoria High School, where she is the head captain of the AHS Dance Team, team president of Business Leaders of Tomorrow and junior leader of the 4-H group Black Sheep. She also works for Kids Care. In the fall she will attend Western Oregon University, majoring in business management and dancing on the university's dance team. When she was a child, Megan would help her Papa make lutefisk — but she's never had a desire to eat it!



2016 Astoria Scandinavian Midsummer Festival Senior Court
Senior Miss Finland
Kaisa Israel

Kaisa is the daughter of Kent and Brittany Israel of Astoria and Linda Israel. She is a junior at Astoria High School and is on the varsity basketball team and equestrian team. She also competes and shows at the Clatsop County Fair, showing her horse and swine. She has traveled to Finland to visit her grandparents and loved being able to see them. She would love to be able to go see them again.



2016 Astoria Scandinavian Midsummer Festival Senior Court
Senior Miss Denmark
Kaitlyn Landwehr

Kaitlyn is the daughter of Keith and Mindy Landwehr. She is a junior at Knappa High School, where she is class president, plays volleyball and basketball, and is on the equestrian team. She has been involved with the Scandinavian Midsummer Festival her entire life; she was once Junior Miss Denmark. She will graduate in 2017. Kaitlyn plans to attend college and receive an educational degree in art and eventually become a high school art teacher.



2016 Astoria Scandinavian Midsummer Festival Court
Crown Bearer
Luke Patterson

Luke is the son of Kelley and Melissa Patterson. He has two brothers, Zachary and Kellan, and a twin sister, Delaney, who was Junior Miss Iceland last year. Luke enjoys playing football and basketball. He is also in the second year of 4-H, where he will be showing rabbits and a market lamb. He likes to hunt, fish and hike with his family.



2016 Astoria Scandinavian Midsummer Festival Junior Court
Junior Miss Iceland
Ava Dawn Thornton

Ava is the daughter of Ryker and Missy Thornton. Ava is in third grade, and she enjoys soccer, basketball, baseball and ballet. She loves animals and loves playing with her dog, time with friends, singing, acting, rollerskating and swimming. Her mother was Junior Miss Iceland in 1982, and Ava is excited to follow in her footsteps.



2016 Astoria Scandinavian Midsummer Festival Junior Court
Junior Miss Sweden
Sienna Barnes

Sienna is the daughter of Kristen Sodervick, Eric Lane and Adam Barnes; her grandparents are Nancy Lane, Bob Lane, Scott McMullen, Phyllis Mattix and Paula Harvey. Sienna is in third grade. She is a member of the Viking Nordic Dancers and also enjoys gymnastics and rollerblading. This year she has enjoyed learning about her heritage.



2016 Astoria Scandinavian Midsummer Festival Junior Court
Junior Miss Norway
Hailey Svensen

Hailey is the daughter of Adam and Melissa Svensen; her grandparents are David and Judy Nygaard and Tom and Jackie Svensen. Her great-grandparents are Martin and the late Doris Nygaard, Ron and the late Anita Angberg and Dorothy Nadon. Her younger sister is Kilee Svensen. Hailey is a first grader, and her activities include dance, tumbling, soccer and baseball. Her mother was Junior Miss Norway in 1991, and her grandmother Judy Nygaard was Miss Scandinavia in 1973.



2016 Astoria Scandinavian Midsummer Festival Junior Court
Junior Miss Finland
Lillian Helligso

Lily is the daughter of Ryan and Brandi Helligso; her grandparents are Larry and Deanna Helligso, Roxanne Fluhrer and the late Dale McGinnis. She is in second grade and is active in dance at Maddox Dance Studio in ballet, tap, hip-hop and acrobatics; she has performed in "The Nutcracker" as well as the Missoula Children's Theater. Lily is also a Brownie Girl Scout and enjoys reading and writing stories in her free time.



2016 Astoria Scandinavian Midsummer Festival Junior Court
Junior Miss Denmark
Ashley Lacy

Ashley is the daughter of Mark and Kathryn Lacy, and she has five brothers and sisters. Ashley is in third grade and enjoys playing basketball, dancing with the Viking Nordic Dancers and reading. She lives on a farm with a large number of pets and livestock and is part of the Black Sheep 4-H Club. Ashley enjoys time with her dogs, cats, horses, alpaca and goats. Her grandparents are Rod VanSon of Ilwaco, Washington, George and Kay Lacy of Hayden, Idaho, and the late Gwen VanSon.