

## Barn cafes feed tradition

By MIKE KILEN  
 REGISTER STAFF WRITER

**Humeston, Ia.** - At the Humeston sale barn cafe, a visitor can get a full belly and a sense of the dynamic change in rural Iowa.

Used to be, you could stop and eat a country lunch in nearly any county because they all had nearby sale barns with cafes.

The number of livestock auctions has been cut in half during the last decade as the livestock industry consolidates.

But as in so much of rural Iowa - drained of farmers, population and hometown cafes - the sale barn lunch tradition is held together by old-timers with abundant good cheer.

Food is the social lubricant.

In the remaining 48 Iowa sale barns, the way it used to be has survived, and anybody who is hungry can get a bellyful for about \$5.

**ASK AROUND**, and Humeston's sale barn cafe in Wayne County is always near the top of Iowa's best places to eat.

It's no surprise when traveling through Iowa, searching for a fulfilling lunch, that locals will ignore the main street cafe and point to the "sale barn," where animals snort and stamp near plates of gooseberry pie with a real, flaky crust and hot beef sandwiches with real potatoes.

It is a place to simultaneously smell cowhide and sandwiches and celebrate the fantasy of eliminating the middle man.

Serving food at livestock auctions is a tradition born in horse-and-buggy days when farmers sold their animals right on the farm.

Their wives cooked up a robust meal as a social gesture and out of necessity - a good farmer never misses dinner, the proper name for the midday meal in rural Iowa.

That tradition moved into sale barns in the 1940s, seen as a more efficient way for a group of farmers to buy and sell.

Brian Waddingham, the director of industry relations with the Iowa Cattlemen's Association, visits all the state's sale barns, and he says Humeston is a favorite.

Most sale barn cafes are privately operated, but the Humeston Livestock Auction's food is cooked and served by local church groups. They use the profits to keep their small congregations afloat.

Rural Iowa is all about adapting to less.

More than a dozen churches also used to serve lunch; now it's only four because many have closed.



**RODNEY WHITE/REGISTER PHOTOS**

Farmers love pie, and church folks offer about 8 choices — from gooseberry to chocolate. Serving food at auctions is a tradition dating back to horse-and-buggy days.

### Sale barn cafes to try

#### **HUMESTON LIVESTOCK AUCTION**

1026 N. Front St., Humeston  
 (641) 747-8305

Lunch served starting at 10:30 a.m. on Tuesdays, auction day

Go for the tenderloin and the pie. On a recent day they offered cherry, gooseberry, rhubarb, custard, pumpkin, apple, pecan and pineapple pie.

#### **BAKER'S DOZEN, THE CAFE AT THE LAMONI LIVESTOCK AUCTION**

900 E. Main St., Lamoni  
 (641) 784-3323.

Open 7:30 a.m.-2 p.m. Monday-Friday  
 While most cafes are open on sale days, Baker's Dozen is open every weekday including Thursday, sale day. They make all rolls from scratch. A meat and three side dishes (a meat-and-three) is \$6.25.

#### **DAN-D'S DINER AT KNOXVILLE REGIONAL LIVESTOCK MARKET**

1583 Highway 5 S., Knoxville  
 (641) 842-5555

Open Fridays, sale day, from 7 a.m. until the sale ends, usually about 5 p.m.

Go for the homemade cinnamon rolls, dinner rolls, pies and famous hot beef sandwiches. For a complete list of other Iowa livestock auctions, go to

[www.agriculture.state.ia.us/livestoc2.html](http://www.agriculture.state.ia.us/livestoc2.html)

Food is only served on sale days - Tuesdays in Humeston - while some sale barn cafes are open all week.

A Thursday auction was dropped in 1997. Fewer pigs were for sale because large hog companies began to dominate the industry. Today, it's mostly cattle for sale.

Cynthia Barton, who with sister Susan White took over the auction from their father who bought it in 1950, ticked off six nearby auctions that have closed in the last few years.

Theirs has survived, fueled by their famous tenderloins and homemade pie.

**ON A CHILLY TUESDAY** in March, the Cambria Baptist Church is cooking lunch at the Humeston barn in a plain room with a cement-block wall that separates it from the buying ring where cattle are herded and sold.

Flossie Snyder, 86, is a lifelong member of the church and knows that "men like raisin pies" and money can be raised feeding them.

The church can earn \$1,000 on a good day, she said, and \$500 on an average one, selling a dinner with a main course, side dishes and dessert.

Today it's either a tenderloin or homemade meatloaf, a vegetable, several choices of salads, mashed potatoes and gravy and a choice of eight homemade pies.

The small Baptist congregation has grown from a low of four in the 1950s to 50 members, she said, because so many small-town churches are closing and joining together.

Still, they sorely need money to pay the bills.

"That's what keeps the church doors open," she said about the food.

LaVerne Street, 79, hauls in 16 pounds of meatloaf but refuses to divulge her recipe.

She looks around at the retirees who volunteer, including four men, and notes the difference from years past. Younger women weren't working outside the home, men didn't volunteer and so many were served that the women had to run to the store for more filling to make quick-serve pies.

The tenderloins are so good, she says, because her store in Cambria, Street's Trading Post, buys the good meat off the pig's back, not shoulders, and properly tenderizes it.

"We are serving the Lord," she said.

In the bustling kitchen, memories of old times are stirred up.

Wilma Garton is rolling the loins in egg and cracker crumbs and frying them. She remembers when she had youngsters at her feet, back when the building was so cold the kids wore gloves to color while their mothers worked.

"I used to make homemade bread every day for my family," Garton said. "But now I live by myself on the farm. I enjoy this."

Bob Brown, 78, of Cambria is cooking up to 60 pounds of potatoes and mashing them. He lived in Des Moines for 40 years before returning home "to get reacquainted with the undertaker."

"Our mother did this for many years," he said, describing the proper mixture of butter, milk and pepper he stirs together in the potatoes.

"My brother and sister and I would come, and Mom showed us how to do it."

He's continuing the tradition with each stroke of the potato masher.

**DINNER IS SERVED**, and the long lunch tables are filled with hat-wearing farmers from far and near, slinging bull near and far.

They greet each other, food trays in hand, with the all-purpose: "Well, for crying out loud!"

Kenny Blair, 79, of Osceola has been coming to this auction for 40 years and has known his table mate Darrell Eshelman, 71, of New Virginia, nearly as long.

"I first came here in 1965 and bought my first black bull," Eshelman said.

The pair sit shoulder-to-shoulder in rural Iowa fashion, so as to converse without too much eye contact.

The two rib each other endlessly, Eshelman accusing Blair of buying only young cattle and selling them quickly because he doesn't want to take care of them.

Blair switches the subject to Prairie Meadows casino, where a group of the boys meet to gamble on occasion.

"My wife sells cosmetics so I use that," he says.

"So that's what I smell on you," Eshelman cracks.

Blair eats his tenderloin, Eshelman his meatloaf and custard pie, and decades of life pass in the conversation.

"Many of us grew up under the bleachers of the sale barn," said Paul Lasley, a rural sociologist at Iowa State University. "We would get a pop and play under the bleachers. It was part of the socialization.

"One of the great things was the food. The food was the social lubricant. People go to auction to buy and sell but also they go to find out what's going on, talking about the weather, land prices, politics and who was married or who was divorced."

A few wise locals who aren't livestock farmers also show up to eat, but most are farmers long in the tooth - except for Brad West, 27, of Lamoni.

He took a day off from running the bulldozer to help a friend.

Land prices are too high to get into farming, like his grandfather could in 1909 when he bought a farm.

"If I could do anything, I'd farm," he said.

He sits across from Brian Cook of Diagonal, who farms and owns an excavating company.

"My dad gave each of us kids 80 acres when he died," Cook said. "I wish to do the same for my kids. That's my hope."

Served up with fresh pie at the Humeston sale barn cafe are dreams of the future and a longing for what used to be.

Reporter Mike Kilen can be reached at (515) 284-8361 or mkilen@dmreg.com

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