

Catch Oktoberfest while it lasts

By Wade Anderson
Special to The Roanoke Times

Some of my fondest childhood memories revolve around annual family reunions at Mountain Lake in Giles County, but I haven't been there in almost 25 years.

So when a friend recommended that I review the vast food offerings at the lodge's Oktoberfest celebration, I couldn't wait to ascend the mountain and share the experience with my wife, who had never been there.

To her, of course, Mountain Lake was the famed Kellerman's Resort depicted in the 1987 movie "Dirty Dancing," which was partly filmed there.

Because I didn't want to drive home after stuffing myself with wurstel (sausages) and German beer, I booked a room for \$189.39, which included two tickets to Oktoberfest, a substantial breakfast the next morning, taxes and gratuities.

Considering that individual adult tickets to Oktoberfest are \$35, this seemed like a very good deal. Be warned, however, that the resort charged my debit card for the full amount several days after making the reservation rather than waiting until we checked in.

A carnivore's delight

Oktoberfest at Mountain Lake celebrates the well-known Bavarian festival and, as in Germany, includes lots of food and beer. Mountain Lake's "activities barn," with its high, raftered ceiling, rows of banquet tables and German decorations channeled an old Bavarian bierhaus. The smell of roasted pig (schweinbraten) wafted through the building.

We walked through the barn and onto a covered patio, where we bought tickets for cold, draft Spaten and perused the booths peddling huge German beer mugs, classic Bavarian hats and lederhosen.

One booth offered a variety of domestic and imported beers, as well as chilled shots of Jagermeister. This was where we first glimpsed the buffet line where, starting at 5 p.m., a variety of grilled sausages were available (the buffet opened at 6 p.m. with the unveiling of the whole



Photos by WADE ANDERSON | Special to The Roanoke Times
A display of German beer steins adds to the atmosphere of Oktoberfest at Mountain Lake.



A whole roasted pig is the crown jewel of the German buffet.

roast pig). It was immediately clear that the evening would be delightfully meat-intensive.

The grilleur offered a variety of sausages, including smoked venison, smoked wild boar, Italian wild boar, beer brat and cheddarwurst. After briefly waiting in line, I selected the smoked wild boar while my wife chose the smoked venison. I also dabbed a sample of each of the four available mustards (Heidelberg, creole, yellow and spicy brown) on my plate.

The slightly dry and mildly flavored smoked boar sausage presented a faint gamy taste if I let the bite linger. On my return trip to the grill, I selected an outstanding beer

brat that was juicy, flavorful and perfectly complemented by the spicy brown mustard. Of the three sausages I tried, it was the best.

About 6 p.m. we congregated on the patio to behold the unveiling of the roast pig referred to as "Hans." With two wide-eyed, horrified little girls watching, the chef sliced Hans from stem to stern and stripped the skin to reveal the juicy ribs, hams and loins. With Hans spewing steam from his mouth, the chef scored the meat, glistening under the heat lamps, so that patrons could use tongs to remove servings to their plates.

The pork dislodged clumsily and with no small degree

of difficulty. Hans neither appeared nor tasted as though he had been seasoned (a near impossibility given that he was cooked whole), but the pork was moist and tender.

The buffet offered two standout dishes: the sauerbraten and wild boar stew. The sauerbraten, a miraculously tender pot roast marinated in a brown sweet-and-sour sauce, could have been cut with the handle end of a spoon. Contrary to the sweet sauerbraten, the robust and savory wild boar stew, full of chunky root vegetables and lumps of pork, had a slightly gamy flavor. Both dishes were even heartier when ladled

Oktoberfest 2009

What: A groaning buffet of German food accompanied by beverages and entertainment

When: Oct. 2, 3, 9, 10, 16, 17, 23, 24, 30, and 31 (Halloween costume contest with prizes on the final night)

Where: Mountain Lake Hotel, 115 Hotel Circle, Pembroke

Cost: Adults, \$35; kids 12-18, \$26.25; kids 4-11, \$17.50

More info: 800-346-3334; www.mountainlakehotel.com

Festivities beyond food

Music is a critical ingredient for the proper Oktoberfest mindset, and the German oompah band at Mountain Lake did not disappoint. The Sauerkraut Band, a music group based in the New River Valley, performed German waltzes and polkas while dressed in traditional Bavarian garb.

But audience involvement is the key to The Sauerkraut Band's success. The group's leader, clad in lederhosen, acted as master of ceremonies and made the rounds between each song, clinking glasses with practically everyone while the audience chanted a German toast to health and well-being.

Audience members were brought up on stage to perform the "chicken dance," there was a children's story with bell-ringing, and another young man waltzed ladies around the dance floor.

Although only 200 tickets for Oktoberfest were available, attendance was a little light — likely a result of the Virginia Tech-Nebraska football game that night, as many fans from both sides appeared to be staying at the hotel. We were seated next to a nice couple about our age and shared in the revelry; the atmosphere was celebratory, communal and, despite the availability of alcohol, family-friendly.

Oktoberfest at Mountain Lake occurs every weekend in October, so get out there while you can. My wife and I had a genuinely good time, enjoying the ushering in of fall in the secluded mountain setting.

over a bed of small German egg dumplings known as spaetzle, which were appropriately soft and fluffy.

Although it is not actually a German dessert, I'm a sucker for a big slice of German chocolate cake (the name derives from the use of a chocolate bar named Baker's German's Sweet Chocolate, not the country of origin). Mountain Lake's version turned out to be moist and delicious, with creamy coconut and pecan frosting.

I only encountered a few disappointments on the buffet. The somewhat soggy, bland potato pancakes derived only slight benefit from a dollop of applesauce. A mediocre brown gravy smothered the stuffed pork loin and drowned the stuffing, leaving an unexceptional dish. In my opinion, one's porcine passions are best satisfied by the wild boar stew.