

COLLEGIATE TIMES

The power of polka

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Munich may be an ocean away from Blacksburg, but don't tell that to the director of the traditional German Oompah band, Ed Schwartz.

Decked out in traditional German lederhosen (think leather shorts with suspenders), a red plaid shirt and a liter glass full of beer in hand, Schwartz is ready to lead the Sauerkraut Band in a night of festivities at Mountain Lake Hotel's first night of its annual Oktoberfest celebration of 2009, which also coincided with the first day of Oktoberfest in Germany.

"The whole point is interaction and a sense of community," said Schwartz, director of development programs administration and collaboration at Virginia Tech.

Schwartz said he wants the night to capture the essence of the German word "Gemutlichkeit." The word has no direct English translation, but it basically means a sense of good camaraderie.

Mountain Lake Hotel, about 20 minutes away from Blacksburg in Pembroke, Va., began celebrating Oktoberfest 21 years ago and has no plans to stop soon.

Starting around 5 p.m. basic appetizers, including sausages, salted pretzels, bread and alcohol, are served. Guests will park and walk a little past the hotel to a wooden banquet hall that has an "Oktoberfest" banner nailed to the front.

Inside, the ceilings are high and lined with long banquet tables that seat 20 to 30 people. The center aisle is cleared as a dance floor and the Sauerkraut Band has a stage in front. The hall can seat about 200 people. The food and alcohol are served outside the building under a covered area. They serve German beer, wine and Jagermeister, as well as sell German goods, such as drinking mugs, Sauerkraut Band apparel and traditional German clothes.

To start the official Oktoberfest dinner celebration, around 6 p.m. executive chef of Mountain Lake Hotel unveiled a pig that had been roasting for about eight hours. The chef unveiled a three foot long pig before carving and serving the meat.

"Some kids see that and laugh, and others just get scared," said Buzz Scanland, general manager of Mountain Lake Hotel.

Scanland has been at the hotel since Oktoberfest began and said he wants everyone who attends to have a good time.

He also gave credit to the band for creating a lively atmosphere for guests.

“I can tell you that personality is what counts,” said Scanland of Schwartz. “I don’t know of anyone who can step up and take his place.”

Schwartz gestured to the buffet table behind him filled with trays of steaming food, including ham, potato pancakes, sausages and stew. They have an assortment of meats, as well as some salad items, which Schwartz joked that he wouldn’t recommend that anyone eat.

He said he works hard and needs to keep “hydrated” throughout the night. He usually drinks about five liters of beer each night of Oktoberfest.

Schwartz is not alone in this endeavor. His bandmates also quench their thirsts yet manage to never miss a beat.

The Sauerkraut Band plays continuously for three hours starting at 7 p.m., an hour after dinner officially starts. The band pauses in between each song for traditional German chants that encourage merriment and drinking. Schwartz and other Mountain Lake Hotel staffers are sure to clink glasses with everyone sitting at a banquet table.

Although alcohol consumption is generally encouraged, Schwartz said it’s not a necessity and will knock cups filled with tea, coffee and water as well.

In between each song is the occasional impromptu polka, waltz and, yes, even a special rendition of the “Funky Chicken.”

One “Funky Chicken” participant, Stephan Ross, an academic adviser at Virginia Military Institute, said he decided to go up on stage and play the rubber chickens the band had provided because they looked like they needed help.

Ross attended Oktoberfest with his friend, De-dee Foti, a nursing professor for Jefferson College of Health Sciences in Roanoke.

“The fact that they can get him up on stage says a lot,” said Foti of the Sauerkraut Band.

Those called to the front of the stage are rewarded with a shot of Jagermeister for their efforts, like Foti was at one point during the night. Participants, such as one Nebraska Cornhusker fan, were asked to whistle along with the band. Others were asked about their professions, and one young man eventually managed to slur out “Aeropostale.”

Group activities are also encouraged throughout the night. Attendees are asked to link arms with the person sitting beside them and sway back and forth to the music. Polka and waltz music are also played during the celebration. To the casual observer, a polka or waltz, seems to consist of little more than jumping around. However, the dances are supposed to be fun, and finesse is not a requirement on the dance floor.

To cap the night off, all who were able to get up were asked to stand up, get in a line and put their hands on the shoulders of the person standing in front of them as band director Schwartz led them in a parade around the banquet tables.

Schwartz officially closed out the night with another toast and left attendees with a final thought.

“You don’t have to go home,” he said, “but you can’t stay here.”

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