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A-HED

Moveable Feast: This Cycling Tour Has Bikers on a Culinary Crusade

Riders Warned About Gaining a Spare Tire; Kudos for Mr. Pork Chop, the Pancake Man

By JEANNETTE NEUMANN

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Training for a weeklong trek across Iowa, Georgie Libbie racks up about 1,000 miles on her bicycle.

Powering up the rolling hills of the heartland gets her in top shape, she says, but it's downhill from there once the ride begins.

"Usually riding 80 miles a day, you should lose weight," says Ms. Libbie, a receptionist for an Urbandale, Iowa, insurance broker who has made the annual ride through the state three times. "But I definitely didn't lose any. Each town you go through, there is just booth after booth of food.

Pie, Pork Chops and Corn on the Cob



In Baxter last summer, Jason Gienger grilled pork ribs for the Tama County Pork Producers as the cyclists passed through. *Christopher Gannon/The Des Moines Register*

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A Ride Across Iowa >

In 2006, Wall Street Journal reporter Dave Kansas rode across Iowa in Ragbrai and chronicled the experience.

"And you've got the church ladies with their pies..."

Only in Iowa, cyclists like Ms. Libbie say, can a 500-mile bike ride help give you a spare tire.

The annual July event is called Ragbrai, the Des Moines Register's Annual Great Bicycle Ride Across Iowa, draws about 25,000 cyclists each year. And there's a reason it's called a ride not a race.

Every 10 miles or so, cyclists pass through a small Iowa town, where churches, restaurants and ad hoc vendors line the streets to tempt bikers with homemade pie, buttered corn on the cob and pork chops. Those three delicacies comprise the "Holy Grail of Ragbrai," says T.J. Juskiewicz, the event's director.

"You have to try those along the way," Mr. Juskiewicz said. "Multiple times."

Many cyclists have trained for months to be able to bike about 70 miles a day past rolling fields of tasseled corn and sturdy soybeans under the blistering heat of a Midwestern summer sun, and, this year in a terrible drought.

The ride isn't just for amateurs: Lance Armstrong has made four appearances on Ragbrai, most recently last year. While Mr. Armstrong isn't planning to be there for this year's trek, 65 cyclists raising money for his foundation, known as Livestrong, do plan to ride.

But even the most seasoned cyclists lack the wherewithal to resist a gantlet of food.

Carl Voss was on the first Ragbrai in 1973, and this year is preparing for his 35th ride. His motto: "If you lose weight on Ragbrai, you're not having a good time." The 63-year-old says he typically gains two to four pounds.

"You've got Mr. Pork Chop, the pancake man and Beekman's Homemade Ice Cream," says Lisa Hein, program and planning director for the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation. "And, of course, beer."

Mr. Pork Chop is 83-year-old Paul Bernhard of Bancroft, Iowa. His family has been selling pork chops served on paper towels to Ragbrai cyclists for 30 years.



Georgie Libbie

"It's always nice when the smoke from the grills blows across the road," says Mr. Pork Chop's son Matt, who now runs the business. "You hear the brakes hitting."

For cyclists, that means the weight creeps on despite sweaty days pumping across the heartland.

On the official Ragbrai website, organizers urge cyclists to be careful. And not just about the usual dangers of dehydration, sunburn and traffic.

"One word of warning—people can gain weight on Ragbrai!" the website says. "Take home wonderful memories, but not extra pounds."

Cyclists start the ride on the banks of the Missouri River and end when they dip their wheels into the waters of the Mississippi.

This is Ragbrai's 40th anniversary, and cyclists will cover 471.1 miles from July 22 to 28. Organizers plug the ride as the "oldest, largest and longest bicycle touring event in the world."

Friends and colleagues form cycling teams and wear jerseys. Team Cow, whose motto is "Playing Well With Udders Since 2004," hauls the group's gear in a revamped school bus, painted white with black spots, with a pair of bull's horns.

One bus is named Day Drinkers. Some members of Team Skunk decorate "road kill" skunks with Mardi Gras-style beaded necklaces. Other cyclists bedeck dead raccoons and deer along the route.

"And then of course there's the famous cornfield bathrooms," says Ms. Libbie. Veteran cyclists recommend walking in about four or five rows to ensure privacy, she says.

The neighbors don't seem to mind. One year a farmer framed two rows of his field with two doors—labeled "Boys" and "Girls."

Towns eagerly anticipate visitors. This year is Lohrville's first appearance on Ragbrai. The central Iowa town

of less than 400 people has a theme: "Lohrville: The Ride's 40-Year-Old Virgin." Residents are hyping their maple-wood-smoked bacon wrapped sweet corn.

"For most towns, it's the biggest event they will ever host in their existence," says Ragbrai director Mr. Juskiewicz.

A 2008 University of Northern Iowa report estimated that direct spending in Iowa by Ragbraiers on food, lodging and other goods was \$2.4 million per day. Mr. Juskiewicz reckons that figure has increased with the growing number of cyclists.

The smallest town on this year's ride is Nemaha (pop. 85), whose residents will be wearing bright yellow T-shirts. On the front, the town's motto: "Nemaha: A 'Mighty' Small Town." On the back: "Now, get on your bike and get the hell out of town!!" immediately followed by: "Have a nice day!!"

The T-shirt captures the sentiment of residents preparing to welcome thousands of cyclists. "We're looking for pure chaos," says 67-year-old Marlys Waters, owner of Books on Main.

To drum up excitement, Ms. Waters posted the T-shirt design on the website for her Methodist church—with one minor tweak. "I took out 'hell,'" she says.

Ovens are ablaze in Zeoring. Bev Chance and 10 other church women are preparing to bake 50 to 60 pies for visitors cycling through the town, which has a population of 550. "We've got banana cream, raisin cream, pumpkin, mincemeat and pecan," says the 69-year-old retired nurse. "Cherry, apple, blueberry, blackberry, oh, and raspberry."

Mr. Pork Chop Jr., as Matt Bernhard calls himself, says sometimes the heat and hassle of preparing for the ride—setting up two giant grills and cooking for hours in 90-degree-plus heat—is a drag.

"I would probably quit if it wasn't for Ragbrai itself," Mr. Bernhard says. "But Dad's been on it for 30 years. It gets in your blood."

The cyclists, he says, "expect that they'll come over the hill and they'll see those pork chops."

It's that camaraderie that keeps cyclists coming back for more Ragbrai. And more food.

Mr. Voss says he cycled through Jefferson in 1989 and saw a teenage girl selling homemade vanilla ice cream laced with lemon juice. She was trying to raise money to pay off an insurance deductible following a car accident.

"I tried to help her out," Mr. Voss says. "I had eight dishes."

Write to Jeannette Neumann at jeannette.neumann@wsj.com

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