

There's No Dish Like Domers

Welcome to Washington Island, where a special whitefish recipe is a century-old tradition.

By Tina Gohr, Door County Field Editor

RESTAURANT OWNER Ken Koyen is the last commercial fisherman on Washington Island, 5 miles off the tip of the Door Peninsula.

He comes from four generations of men who spent much of their lives on the waters of Lake Michigan and Green Bay, bringing their lessons with him. One is the evolution of the Domer, a whitefish-based meal as unique to the island as booyah is to Green Bay, 95 miles south.

Today, Domers resemble camping or "hobo" packets of fish and vegetables, roasted over an open fire, on a grill or in the oven.

The story of the Domer—which varies among the 700 or so census-counted island residents—starts over a century ago.

Ken suggests the story begins in 1840. Commercial fishing started with the advent of steam-powered fishing tugs then. Their engines were supplanted by Kahlenberg gas-powered engines after 1900.

"Fishermen wrapped a dressed fish in layers of newspaper," Ken explains.

The bundle was dropped into a pail of water for a few minutes, soaking the paper.



THE FISHING TUG *SeeDiver* is moored in Jackson Harbor. Captain Ken Koyen seeks whitefish from the 48-foot boat, built in 1950.



FRESH FROM THE FOIL comes this whitefish, steamed by Ken Koyen outside his K.K. Fiske Restaurant on Washington Island. The fish was wrapped first in water-soaked brown paper.

Then they'd place the fish on the domed Kahlenberg engine until the heat perfectly steamed the packet. It's believed the cooking fish would puff up and form a dome, similar to Jiffy Pop popcorn.

Today's cooks have replaced newspaper with water-soaked brown cooking paper or aluminum foil. Lightly seasoned potatoes, onions and other veggies are added to the butter-based packet.

Generations Worked the Waters

Ken's story is the way that his father, Alex Koyen (pronounced "coin"), described the onboard cooking method. And that might have come from Ken's grandfather Volney Koyen or great-grandfather Arbick Koyen.

Hundreds of commercial fishermen have worked the waters of Green Bay and Lake Michigan surrounding the island, and

most ancestors farmed and fished for food and bartering.

"It's a tough way to make a living, but I love every moment of it," Ken says. "It's a gamble every day to find the fish."

Ken, who owns K.K. Fiske Restaurant on the island, has provided fresh fish for 50 years, captaining the 48-foot *SeeDiver* fishing tug, built in 1950. The fish are caught with gill nets.

His father piloted the *Welcome*, built in 1926 on the island. She's still operational.

"Years ago, we'd boil fish in a coffee can on the stove," Ken says. This sixth-generation islander serves lawyers (burbot fish) at his establishment when available during colder months.

Note to island visitors: Do NOT call Domers a "fish boil in a packet"! The fish boil is another pride-filled Door County



HAPPY ISLANDERS. Melodie Ellefson (left) and Julian Hagen sample Domers served by their neighbor Ken. Melodie is from a commercial fishing family. Julian, son of the late charter captain Jack Hagen, is a popular folk musician who performs here often.



Luella's recipe incorporates sour cream, mustard and Swiss cheese. The Koyen dish uses Thousand Island dressing and Parmesan cheese. Both versions can be cooked on a pan/cookie sheet or grilled over indirect heat.

Julian Hagen, a fifth-generation islander, and a folk musician/songwriter, is man-

"Do not call Domers a 'fish boil in a packet!'"

aging director of the island's Trueblood Performing Arts Center. He's also the son of a three-generation charter fishing family of Jack, Grandfather Henry and Great-Grandfather Olaf (Ollie).

"Social life for us on the island is built around great people," Julian says.

During summer's peak, 5,000 visitors make the half-hour car ferry trip across Death's Door waters to visit the 5-mile-wide, 6-mile-long community of mostly Scandinavian descended people.

It's a low-pressure getaway.

"When guests come here," Julian says, "there are no strip malls, no amusement parks. We have hiking, biking, swimming, fishing, exploring, historical museums, lavender farms and, especially, the arts."

Julian adds that this special place also carries the allure of a Jimmy Buffet-flavored island.

"Yes," he affirms, "margaritas go perfectly well with Domers." 🍹

Try Some Yourself!

DOMERS

From Ken Koyen

- 1 whitefish fillet (or any fish)
- ½ cup Thousand Island dressing
- 1 medium potato or 3 red potatoes, boiled and cut into chunks or slices
- 1 small onion, boiled and left whole (can boil potato and onion together)
- ½ cup frozen green beans (or any vegetable)
- ½ teaspoon Lawry's Seasoned Salt (or spice of choice)
- ½ cup grated Parmesan cheese
- 1 tablespoon butter, cut into pieces or melted

Place fish on a 12- x 12-in. piece of foil. Spread dressing over fish; arrange vegetables around it. Sprinkle salt and cheese over fish and vegetables. Top with butter. Fold and seal foil so seam is on top. Place on a cookie sheet. Bake at 350° for 15 minutes or until fish flakes easily with a fork. (If grilling, cook over indirect heat.)

SWISS-BAKED DOMERS

From Luella Hannesson

- 2 pounds whitefish fillets
- 1 cup sour cream
- ½ cup shredded Swiss cheese
- ¼ cup finely cut scallions or onion
- 1 teaspoon spicy brown or stone-ground mustard
- ¾ teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon pepper
- Melted butter, optional

Place each fish fillet on a large piece of foil. Combine the remaining ingredients; spread over fish. Seal foil tightly. Place the packets on a cookie sheet. Bake at 425° for 10-15 minutes or until fish flakes easily with a fork.

