

Knave Gazing

by Dara Moskowitz
Renaissance Festival

1244 S. Canterbury Road (on Hwy. 169, 4 miles south of Shakopee, about 30 minutes from the Twin Cities); (800) 966-8215 or (612) 445-7361

Call me naive, sheltered, cloistered. In fact, call me straight-out dumb. But I just didn't know about the codpieces: leather, velvet, feathered, fringed, bursting, straining, muddy, gleaming.

I mean, I've seen Xena. I've been to Mardi Gras. And I like to think I'm not unfamiliar with sex. But I never expected in my life to find, in the middle of a field in Shakopee, so many codpieces. And breasts! Bursting like winter tides out of tight-pulled corsets, falling like summer harvests out of loose-looped blouses, shaking, bubbling, tasseled, gilded, crushed like birds into nets of chain mail. This is where parents spend quality time with their prepubescent kids?

In retrospect my expectations seem ridiculous. I guess I'd seen Renaissance Festivals made fun of on television, so mostly I was expecting pottery, big roast turkey legs, a lot of unicorn-and-serpent souvenirs, maybe some jousting. Aesthetically? Velvet, tapestry, maybe patchouli. I just didn't know about the sex.

It all started innocently enough: Me skulking around a gas station—because that's where I do all my banking, because I'm just that classy—and casually picking up a Renaissance Festival flier. Inside? A list of food events including the "Feast of Fantasy" (\$55), a seven-course meal with entertainment, unlimited beverages, and souvenirs; the "Queen's Tea," a four-course meal with entertainment and souvenirs for \$15; the "Renaissance Smoker" (\$10), a "bawdy" event with cigars, hors d'oeuvres, beverages. And me a food critic! How convenient.

So I called and got a press kit. From which I learned that Minnesota's is the biggest Renaissance festival in the country. That 337,000 people attended last year. That the festival is in its 28th season. That it's been named one of the "Top 100 Events in North America" by the American Bus Association! Clearly, this I had to see.

So I started asking my friends about the festival. "I don't know that much about it, except that I know it's stupid," said one. "Huzzah," said another, and rolled her eyes. "Here are a few things I don't do with my life. I don't eat all I can at buffets, I don't discuss my love life with my relatives, I don't deal with terrorists, and I don't do Renaissance festivals." Did you ever have one of those conversations in early grade school during which your chums insisted that babies came out of belly buttons? It was the adult equivalent. Finally I found a buddy to go with me, a fellow East Coast expat who thought we were going to see historically accurate candle-dipping and sword-forging exhibitions.

Of course I wanted to get there early, so I got there very late. My goal? "Fables at the Table," a bright, early, and inexpensive (\$5) continental breakfast and entertainment event aimed at the whole family. My reality? Cowering beneath a crab apple tree on the wrong side of a big lake menaced by torrential urban streams caused by screaming thunderstorms. I figure there are a lot of lessons to learn in life, and apparently it was my time to learn that when the lightning is overhead, it's already *too late* to avoid the storm. By the time I got to the festival, rain-soaked and rain-chastened, breakfast was long gone and the storms had transformed the ground into silty mud. So the



young men at the gates, in tights, were caked with mud, from their rosy cheeks to their wet and blackened thighs. "Come hither, my ladies, and I will admit you to innumerable delights." You don't say.

So I headed into the ersatz 16th-century village (a day's admission is \$14.95 for adults, \$5.95 for kids; tots 5 and under get in free) and smack-dab into a parade of belly dancers. Not just any belly dancers, and certainly not those Playboy/Daily Burn belly-free belly dancers, but real women with fleshy, mud-speckled middles roiling and rolling like so many ships on stormy seas, fringes and bells making a great clatter. And next came

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princes, in tapestry and mud. Jesters. Kings. Peasant women carrying boa constrictors and ferrets. A lot of young ladies, their busts pulled up and pushed out like knickknack shelves. Looking past the parade, I was amazed to see that Renaissance Festival staff, all laced and corseted and bodkined, seemed to outnumber the guests. Then it hit me: Many of these people were in fact civilians, dressed up for the day. I had wandered into the biggest erotically charged costume party in the state.

After the parade, sliding muddily through the fair, I noticed the sexy banter everywhere. Walk past the pickle vendor: "I've got a big, juicy one just for you, miss. Care to try it out?" Pause in front of the mead booth and an older gentleman, noticing you fanning yourself with a program, bows and kisses your hand: "Ah, my dear, the hottest day is still nothing to the fire that burns in my heart gazing on one so beauteous as you." Meanwhile, the girls at the Maypole seem to be tying up some very willing men. Elsewhere a

man in a muddy costume chases after a pack of squealing women, shouting, "If you're going to be staring at my ass, at least you could oblige me with your opinion."

Settle in to one of the Feast of Fantasy's five seatings every weekend (Saturdays at 11 a.m., 2 p.m., and 4:45 p.m.; Sundays at 11 and 3), and the wacky role-playing grows even more dizzying. The hosts are men in kilts who dance and sing and deliver canned jokes about erections and sexual prowess. The guests, about a hundred of us seated around the periphery of a Robin-Hood-esque banquet hall, all wearing goofy hats, are encouraged to howl, smash the table with our fists, stomp the ground with our boots, clap, and sing. We are well-stuffed, plied with beer, wine, or soda, and ceaselessly entertained by bawdy limericks, fiddle players, jugglers, our kilted friends, and an S&M queen with a riding crop. Suddenly the innocent-looking young ladies around the corner from me are demanding that their waiter lift up the tail of his shirt and show them his butt, and he does. Where are we exactly?

Ah yes, we're all drinking out of the big pottery chalices we get to keep as souvenirs, in the midst of an impressive, never-ending menu. Start with mushroom and chicken vol-au-vent, a pastry cylinder holding a mélange of chicken and mushrooms garnished with sprigs of thyme; proceed to a very good creamy corn chowder shot through with red pepper coulis; sprint through a Caesar salad with cherry tomatoes and boxed croutons; delight in a very tasty scoop of raspberry wine sorbet decorated with mint sprigs; move quickly through overdone individual Beef Wellingtons served with a nice dried-cherry-infused gravy; string beans, and roast potatoes; linger over the best dish, pulled slow-roast pork, as succulent and toothsome as the best Carolina barbecue; and finish up with a brownie topped with coffee ice cream and a macadamia-Kahlua sauce.

What's the food like? It's very nice hotel food—far better than your standard banquet fare, far worse than your standard fancy-restaurant fare. But you don't come to the Renaissance Festival for

the food any more than you go to Goodfellow's expecting the staff to provide you with a 50-person singing, dancing cabaret performance. Staggering out of Bad Manor—the hall where the feast is held—two and a half hours after I went in, I couldn't have been more entertained or more full. Was it worth \$55? How fast can you drink?

Seriously, there were people near me who came to the Feast of Fantasy as many as three times a season, and people like that regularly sell the event out. They think it's a bargain at \$55. I think the "Renaissance Smoker" is even more of a bargain. The event is held in a tent, daily at 6 p.m., and for \$10 you receive two cigars, a cigar cutter, as much cheese, crackers, smoked and pickled fish, fruit, and Bass Ale or Guinness as you care to consume, plus lots more bawdy entertainment. Another thing I was naive about: I didn't know entertainment could sustain all-day bawdiness.

I suppose I should point out that it's quite possible to go to the Renaissance Festival and not experience a lick of bawdiness. In fact, my trusty gas-station flier indicates that juxtaposed with the food events I went to is the "Children's Realm" including "Free craft activities" and a petting zoo. So that's what life turns to in the absence of hand-kissing, anatomy jokes, and foolish, if charming, repartee. No thanks. The Renaissance Festival I went to isn't merely an outdoor Camp Snoopy or a 16th-century Fort Snelling, but a dynamic, adult costume event like Halloween and Mardi Gras—or, for that matter, like romance novels or Hollywood fantasy pics like *Ever After* or *Dangerous Liaisons*. (And don't even get me started about romance novels. They account for half of all books read in this country—and the fact that they're women's trash doesn't make them any trashier than Bruce Willis flicks.)

So will I be back next year? Perhaps. Especially if I can time my trip to coincide with the "Royal Ale Festival," a weekend that features the "Press-A-Wench" and "Best Tights" contests. **CP**

The Renaissance Festival runs weekends and Labor Day through September 27, 9 a.m. to 7 p.m.