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State fairs

From Vikings to mobile phones

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A venerable American institution becomes a little more urban

AP



You've come a long way, Babe

"THE best food ever" is an ambitious tag for a breaded meatball on a stick. But this delicacy, unaccountably called a Viking, is hailed as such by some people at the annual Montana state fair. What's the secret? Beef, veal and pork are mixed with egg, canned milk, oatmeal and spices. The concoction is cooked, dipped in batter, then deep-fried. "We wait for it all year—it's the only place you can get 'em," explains Jan Sheryak, a fairgoer who has doused her Viking with ketchup.

Fair season in America is just getting underway. In most states this means a week-long frenzy of grease-gulping, rollercoasters and pig-racing, as well as more civilised activities such as goat-milking and quilting. Montana's fair, one of the earliest, is taking place this week. It could pull in 140,000 if the weather co-operates.

There are still plenty of agricultural trappings. Judges hand out ribbons for everything from sheep-

breeding to Lego-stacking. Not to be missed is the "World's Largest Steer": Big Red is more than 6 feet tall, 11 feet from nose to tail and, sadly, kept in a small pen. But fewer than one in 20 Montanans now live on farms. "In most places, there are less agricultural exhibits," says Tom Atkins, who co-owns the travelling Mighty Thomas carnival. Since seven-year-olds no longer grow up milking cows every morning, they have to be introduced to these strange animals in petting zoos.

Meanwhile, two other urban blights are also forcing their way into state fairs: advertising and politics. In the old days, "marketing" usually meant no more than getting the fertiliser company to sponsor the prize for the sheepdog trial. Now Gary Goodman, of the International Association of Fairs and Expositions, points out that Madison Avenue is paying a lot more attention to the audiences that fairs draw in. The families who come are in the mood for entertainment and, to advertisers' especial delight, they are nowhere near their TiVos (ad-skipping remote controls).

The new consumer businesses want to make their events more interactive. At the Montana fair, Qwest, a telecom company, invites fair-goers to audition to be in its commercials. Hormel Foods, the maker of SPAM, sponsor a recipe contest at fairs across the country: the winner in Montana was "SPAM chops", garnished with pear and pepper chutney (and arguably as vile as the Viking). At the huge Los Angeles County fair in September, Levi Strauss will peddle a body-scanning technique that will allow fairgoers to find the perfect pair of jeans in 10 seconds, says Mary Ann Halford of the Fair Network, a company which arranges sponsorships.

There has always been a degree of politicking at state fairs, but carousing with drunken farmers has given way to a more urban form of democracy. The Montana fair boasts two opposing booths: one, backed by PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) laments a recent state ballot initiative that banned gay marriage; the other booth joyously offers "Freedom from sodomy, Freedom in Christ". The culture wars have reached the greatest American event of all. Oink.

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