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The Cuisines and Culinary Traditions of Germany's States

Even if it is one country, Germany is not one monolithic entity. It is made of sixteen states, much of them with differing, even opposing, cultures within themselves. Every culture has its own cuisine and culinary traditions; these cultures are no exception. Germany's regional cuisines are all unique, and each of them have something to contribute to wider German cuisine.

Although the states of Germany have their own unique cultures and points of individuality, there are striking similarities between regional cuisines throughout the country. Beer and sausage are synonymous with German food; with the popularity of both, this is quite understandable. In 2018 alone, about one and a half million tons of sausage products were produced in Germany ("Production Volume of Sausage"). In that same year, 102 liters of beer were consumed per capita (Deutscher Brauer-Bund). Outside of beer and sausage, several crops are ubiquitous in German cuisine, the most notable among them being potatoes (Metzger 84), asparagus (Metzger 342), and grains in the form of bread (Metzger 326) and dumplings (Metzger 16, 434). Unless one of these common foods is special to a state's cuisine in some way, it will not be covered further than this.

In the southeasternmost corner of Germany is Bavaria, a proud and culinarily rich state. The most notable event of Bavarian cuisine, the autumnal celebration Oktoberfest, is hosted between September and October in Munich. Oktoberfest began in the year 1810, when the marriage of Prince Ludwig and Princess Theresa coincided with the tapping of the first beers in Munich (Metzger 430). To this day, the party continues to be hosted, and still only Munich breweries can serve beer at it (Metzger 431). According to the official website of Munich, the 2019 Oktoberfest saw the pouring of over seven million liters of beer and the cooking of over 100 oxen for over six million guests (“Oktoberfest 2019”). It is no exaggeration to say that Oktoberfest is well and alive despite, or perhaps with thanks to, its age.

The cuisine goes beyond Oktoberfest. All throughout Bavaria, a taste for pork is displayed. Pig knuckle (Hughes 25) and *Bierbrat'l*, pork roasted in beer (Hughes 29), are common ways of eating swine in the state. Bavaria’s favorite sausage, *Weisswurst*, is made with bacon (Metzger 390). It is often served alongside a pretzel and sweet mustard (Metzger 390). The traditional way to eat *Weisswurst* is to cut it into two, dip one half cut side first into mustard, then suck out the insides: a process Bavarians call “*zuzeln*” (Metzger 391).

Baden-Württemberg, the second state in this tour, is home to Germany’s Black Forest and its cuisine. *Kirschwasser*, or “cherry water”, is a liquor made from the forest’s cherries, best served cold (“Baden-Württemberg”). While it can be made with either sweet or sour cherries, the fruit most appropriate is the sour morello cherry (“Baden-Württemberg”). *Kirschwasser* is also known to give a cherry flavor to the Black Forest cake, a baked good with mysterious origins: some say it was made by a chef who named it after his home, or that the *Kirschwasser* brings it the name, amongst other theories (“Baden-Württemberg”). Black Forest

ham, on the other hand, is ensured to be from the region, at least by European regulation standards (“Baden-Württemberg”). It is made from the fat leg of a pig that, as tradition demands, should be at least six hundredweight (Metzger 341).

Besides the Black Forest, Baden-Württemberg is home to two traditional German foods: *Spätzle* and asparagus. Asparagus was first grown in Germany near Stuttgart, sometime in the 1500s (Metzger 342). Prior to the 19th century, the vegetable was reserved for royalty alone (Metzger 342). Today, asparagus is a common vegetable in Germany, with early-season prices being based off that of veal: expensive, but not ridiculously so (Metzger 342). The other ubiquitous German food from this state is *Spätzle*, a sort of noodle made from batter being pushed through small holes into boiling water (Metzger 336). *Spätzle* is often served as a side to meat dishes or potato salad and may be served plain or with a sauce (Metzger 336).

Northwest of Baden-Württemberg is Rhineland-Palatinate, a state renowned for its wine. The most prominent of Rhineland-Palatinate's winegrowing areas is the Rheinhesse, Germany's largest and oldest-recorded winegrowing area (“Rheinhessen”). It consists of almost 27,000 hectares of vineyards, with over 400 individual winegrowing sites (“Rheinhessen”). A variety of grapes are grown here, the most populous being Riesling, Müller-Thurgau, and Dornfelder (“Rheinhessen”). This wine is enjoyed both as a drink and an ingredient; it finds its way into roasts, as well as soups and even ice cream (Hughes 84).

Not as famous as the wine, but just as core to the cuisine, Baden-Württemberg likes the pig. Spit-roasted pork is the main course of Wittlich's *Säubrenner Kirmes*, “Pig-burner's Carnival” (Metzger 291). This festival began in 1951, when city officials found records of a pig

eating a carrot that was keeping an invading force from knocking down the city's gates (Hughes 84). This let the invaders into the city, so the next day the townsfolk gathered all Wittlich's pigs and burned them alive (Hughes 85). Perhaps the story might not be true, and perhaps the retribution was unfair, but it makes for the backdrop of *Säubrenner Kirmes* all the same.

Another way the pig is a part of Baden-Württemberg's cuisine is through their unique sausage *Saumagen*, or "pig stomach". *Saumagen* is made from a pig's stomach filled with cubed pork, cooked potatoes, and spices, which is cooked by simmering and pan-frying (Metzger 292).

Coddled by Rhineland-Palatinate is Saarland, with a history of mining and agriculture that affects its cuisine today. The northern miners enjoyed rich soil and thus a variety of food, but the southern "colonies" had poor soil, and thus had to subsist on potatoes and goat dairy. From these limitations, dishes like *Kerschdscher*, potatoes steamed and fried in clarified butter, and *Verheirate*, potatoes and dumplings in a gravy of milk and bacon, arose (Metzger 308).

Good farmland or not, mining occurred all over Saarland. In Merziger Becken, where the soil was better-off, apples were grown and brewed into *Viez* for miners (Metzger 320). *Viez* is a sort of cider that was made as a nutritious alternative to polluted river water for miners to drink with lunch (Metzger 320). Even with the mining industry in Saarland being mainly a thing of the past, apples are still made into *Viez*, as well as an assortment of pastries and snacks (Metzger 320). Another similar case is that of *Lyoner*, a sausage made just for miners' lunches. It is smoked and made of lean meat and bacon, certain to keep good in a lunchbox and give hard workers the protein they need to carry on (Metzger 310). *Lyoner* is a Saarland specialty today, and the makers use all the same ingredients and techniques to make the sausage as they did in the old days (Metzger 310).

East to the last two states is Hesse, home to Germany's most bustling metropolis, Frankfurt am Main (Hughes 57). Frankfurt am Main is home to an abundance of skyscrapers, a bustling airport, and the genuine *Frankfurter Würstchen* (Hughes 57). The *Frankfurter Würstchen*, or the *Frankfurter*, is a smoked and scalded sausage of pork in sheepskin that is only legally a *Frankfurter* if produced in or near the city ("Hesse"). A beef-based variant, the *Frankfurter Rindswurst* ("Hesse"), was invented in the 1800s when a pair of butchers who moved into the Jewish quarters of the city needed to adapt the recipe to sell to the locals (Metzger 256). The *Rindswurst* is still around today, and acts as the basis for the popular *Currywurst* ("Hesse").

Outside of Frankfurt am Main and its sausage, Hesse greatly enjoys *Grüne Sosse* and *Apfelwein*. *Grüne Sosse*, also called *Griene Soss*, both of which translate to "Green sauce", is a sauce of eggs, sour dairy, acid, and seven herbs: borage, chives, cress, parsley, chervil, burnet, and sorrel (Metzger 248). Depending on the specific recipe, other greens may act as a substitute for some herbs (Metzger 248). No matter the recipe, *Grüne Sosse* is meant to be served with savory foods, like potatoes, hard-boiled eggs, and meat ("Hesse").

Hesse's other specialty, *Apfelwein*, is a typically sour wine made from apples ("Hesse"), comparable to apple cider and *Viez*. It is poured from a clay jug called *Bembel* into a diamond-patterned glass called *Gerippes* ("Hesse"), or, if in Frankfurt, a tall earthenware mug (Hughes 58). *Apfelwein* is usually enjoyed alongside *Handkäs mit Musik*: hand-cheese and music (Hughes 58). *Handkäs* is sour cheese with pickled onions, oil, and vinegar (Hughes 58), a snack that acts as a sour-savory counter to the sour-sweetness of *Apfelwein*.

The next state, Thuringia, has a history of agriculture and hunting that continues today. Almost half of its land is dedicated to farming, and a little over a third is forested (The European Network of Rural Development). The woods of Thuringia have wild mushrooms and game big and small as their bounty, which are more than good for mushroom bakes and goulash (Metzger 22). Thuringia's farmlands provide far more: potatoes and onions are perhaps most relevant. Potatoes are the main ingredient of Thuringian dumplings, of which there are countless kinds but no standard (Metzger 18). The sheer variety of dumplings in Thuringia outshines that elsewhere in Germany, making them of note here (Metzger 18).

The other Thuringian vegetable of interest, the onion, is the subject of Apolda's *Zwiebelmarkt*: onion market (Hughes 115). Here, the bulbs are tied into braids and hanged as decoration (Metzger 20). Many onion-based foods are served here, with bakers competing to make the greatest *Zwiebelkuchen* of them all (Hughes 115). The *Zwiebelkuchen*, or "onion cake", is a flatbread topped with caraway seed, cheese, and onion (Hughes 115). This is a savory version of the usually sweet traybake, which has a few other Thuringian varieties (Metzger 28). The dry kind are not dissimilar to a streusel, and a festive dry traybake for Easter is the *Prophetenkuchen*, made with equal parts egg yolk, liquor, and flour (Metzger 28). Opposing the dry variety is the moist traybake, which is smeared over with a sweetened *Quark* cheese filling before being baked (Metzger 28).

"Die Sachsen sind süß," goes a saying about the next state's inhabitants, meaning "The Saxons are sweet" (Hughes 103). This comes from the collection of baked goods found in Saxony. A collection of these sweets are: *Plinsen*, a round yeast cake; *Bienenstich*, "bee sting cake", a sheet cake topped with almonds, butter, and sugar; and *Striezel*, a yeast-risen loaf cake

filled with seeds, nuts, or marzipan (Hughes 103). At Christmastime, *Striezelmarkt* is held in Dresden, and that brings even more cakes and cookies ("Dresdner Striezelmarkt"). *Pfefferkuchenmänner*, "Gingerbread men", and *Dresdner Christstollen*, a dense, festive sweet bread or cake, are local treats made just for this event (Hughes 103). To wash these sweets down, one might drink *Glühwein*, "mulled wine", at the *Striezelmarkt* ("Eating & drinking"), or coffee in any other context.

Coffee has a special place in Saxony's cuisine. It has been beloved since its introduction to Germany, and even through a prohibition on the drink in the mid 1700s (Metzger 34). Early in Saxon coffee history, coffee houses served the public both as cafes and community centers (Metzger 34.) All men were welcomed at coffee houses, where discussion on politics and culture were held, creating a camaraderie between neighbors (Metzger 34). Women, however, were banned from Leipzig coffee houses until the 1900s (Metzger 35). To make their own meeting halls, ladies would hold get-togethers in their own homes to enjoy coffee and, more importantly, company (Metzger 35). Today, coffee houses and cafes are still a part of Saxon culture, still holding the role of communal area as they did so long ago (Metzger 35).

Unlike Saxon coffee houses, Brandenburg's winemaking tradition did not survive into the modern day (Metzger 96). In fact, the tradition died so long ago that it has been long replaced by another tradition: fruit growing (Metzger 96). The state's farmers produce a great variety, and what they cannot sell, they brew into alcohol: peach wine, apple cider, and raspberry wine are a few possibilities (Metzger 96). The fruits of the brewers' labor are celebrated annually at Werder's Tree Blossom Festival, one of Germany's biggest folk festivals where over 500,000 guests are served every year ("Brandenburg").

Besides sweet fruits, Brandenburg produces an array of vegetables. Most notable are the *Spreewälder Gurke*, the Spreewald Gherkins, pickles so important to the culture that they are protected by the European seals of Protected Designation of Origin and Protected Geographical Origin ("Brandenburg"). One canning site in Spreewald has been reported to be able to can up to 450,000 jars of pickles in one day (Metzger 90). Also grown in Brandenburg are asparagus, pumpkins, and horseradish, all of which have a place in the wider German diet (Metzger 92).

Nestled within the bosom of Brandenburg, German capital city-state Berlin has an array of contributions to the nation's cuisine. The two most popular are the street foods *Currywurst* (Metzger 64) and *Doner Kebab* (Metzger 65). *Currywurst* was invented on a slow day in the September of 1949 when sausage vendor Helga Heuwer experimented with seasonings and sausages to stave off boredom (Metzger 64). The result was a fried and scalded sausage covered with a curry-spiced tomato ketchup (Metzger 64). *Currywurst*, as it was dubbed, was unchallenged in its dominance over German street food until the 1970s brought *Doner Kebab*. The *Doner Kebab*, invented by Turkish immigrants during the early 70's, is a wrap of sliced meat, traditionally spit-roasted mutton or beef, and a medley of vegetables like lettuce, onions, cabbage, and tomatoes, all accompanied by a sauce such as tzatziki (Metzger 65).

As for more traditional foods, Berlin offers a variety. The *Pfannkuchen*, known elsewhere in Germany as the *Berliner*, is a jelly-filled doughnut that is enjoyed throughout the country; it is also the pastry U.S. president John F. Kennedy mistakenly called himself (Hughes 34). Another popular Berlin treat is *Baumkuchen*, a spit-cooked cake with tree-like rings

(Hughes 34). Perhaps a surprise, the *Baumkuchen* has achieved popularity half the world away in Japan back in 1919, when it was introduced by a German prisoner of war (Sheraton).

The next stop is Saxony-Anhalt, the state with one of Germany's most significant grain-growing areas, the *Magdeburg Börde*. The *Börde* consists of over 300 square miles of farmland for cereals, such as wheat, oats, and rye, as well as sugar beet (Metzger 50). Sugar beets from the *Börde* were once omnipresent in Germany's sugar industry, and their sales made some landowners grow wealthy (Metzger 50). Despite this, the *Börde* was and still is preoccupied with grain, which can be seen in some traditional meals. *Klump* is a common *Börde* pastry that is something like a hearty pie crust. It is a dough rolled out on top of a pot of cooked food, typically kale, and baked until golden brown (Metzger 50).

In the Saxony-Anhalt town of Würchwitz, a cheese with a shocking story calls itself the traditional cuisine. This cheese is *Würchwitzer Spinnenkäse*: Würchwitz mite cheese (Metzger 58). To make it, one puts a dried log of organic *Quark* cheese into a box of microscopic cheese-eating mites for up to a year, giving the mites some rye flour daily to make up for nutrients the *Quark* does not have (Metzger 58). The final product of this process is a bitter, blackened cheese, enjoyed with the mites still on it (Metzger 58).

Lower Saxony offers a more recognizable affair in the form of their fruits. The state has been growing fruit since the 14th century and enjoying it for just as long (Metzger 190). Lower Saxony's orchards are a pride of the state not only for their fruit, but their immensity: there are over 10,000 hectares of fruit-growing land in the state (Metzger 190). Apples are the most

abundant crop here, making up nearly nine-tenths of the fruit grown (Metzger 190). Also grown are sweet and sour cherries, pears, and many varieties of plum (Metzger 190).

Lower Saxony also offers a spirit called *Korn*. *Korn* is a distilled alcohol made from grain, traditionally pure rye, barley, oats, wheat, or buckwheat (Metzger 194). It has an alcohol content of 32%, but fans enjoy it by sipping it instead of quickly gulping it down like any other hard drink (Metzger 194). A tradition associated with *Korn* is *Lüttje Lage*, in which a glass of beer is served with a glass of *Korn*, and both are drunk at the same time: not consecutively, but the drinker is supposed to pour both drinks into their mouth at once (Metzger 194).

Tucked away within Lower Saxony is Bremen, a city-state with a history of seafaring. The effect this history has had on land is the traditional feast of *Schaffermahl*. *Schaffermahl* is an event that began hundreds of years ago as the final meeting between shipyard owners and ship captains before the captains began their voyages (Metzger 172). Today, it is a feast for the elite, populated by politicians and celebrities primarily (Metzger 172). Women were traditionally not allowed at *Schaffermahl*, but that tradition was broken in 2007 when Angela Merkel attended (Ini). This event consists of a five-hour feast peppered with speeches; the attendees are served dishes like roast veal and ox soup, and at one point, a hard-to-swallow sailor's beer (Metzger 172).

Of course, what sailors ate and drank at sea is far different from what is served at *Schaffermahl*. The only similarity is the sip of thick sailor's beer all attendees must take, a brew so infamous that it is only currently made and drunk for the event (Metzger 172). This beer was not meant to be enjoyed as much as it was meant to survive for long periods at sea. A ship's

food stocks typically consisted of fresh food, which ran out quickly, salt meat and fish, and potatoes (Metzger 181). To make the salt meat edible, a ship's cook might prepare *Labskaus*, a hash of mashed potatoes, salted meat or fish, and perhaps freshly caught fish (Metzger 181). If a crew was lucky enough to have caught a whale, they could enjoy *pluckte Finken*, a blubber stew named after plucked finches (Metzger 181).

The next destination is North Rhine-Westphalia, which, as the name implies, is a state composed of two historic places: North Rhine and Westphalia. The cultures, while they have been so close for all their history, have distinct cuisines. Where North Rhine is sweet-and-sour, Westphalian food has a heartiness to it, and has achieved some fame outside its borders. The *Westfälische Schinkenpatte*, served at many North Rhine restaurants as an appetizer, consists of Westphalia's famous ham and pumpernickel bread, along with balls of butter (Hughes 77). The ham is made from specially raised and fed pigs, whose shanks are salted or brined then air-dried and smoked (Metzger 220). Historically, this would be done in a fireplace (Metzger 220). Westphalian pumpernickel is no less special: the bread is set to rise for a whole day before it is baked low and slow for another 24 hours (Hughes 77).

The cuisine of the North Rhine region is less popular, but no less interesting. Its main quality is the mixing of sweet and sour flavors, which is best represented by *Sauerbraten*, or "sour roast" (Metzger 214). *Sauerbraten* is a roast of beef marinated in a cocktail of red wine, vinegar, and spices (Metzger 214). When cooked, the marinade is turned into a sweet sauce by the addition of dried or stewed fruits, or in some cases even *Lebkuchen*, a cookie called gingerbread in English (Metzger 214).

After North Rhine-Westphalia comes Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, a state with much in the way of fishing. These fisheries, however, are currently in a state of waning due to overfishing. Cod was once a major source of food and income for the state, but they are now a protected species, whose population has been threatened by overconsumption (Metzger 106). Fishers turned to the small, fat herring of the Baltic, but soon had to slow down their business so that the fish would not go extinct (Metzger 113).

Although the fishing industry might be at a low point now, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania can still rely on agriculture, as it has before. The traditional way to enjoy seasonal produce in the state was in *Mangkokt-Äten*, where all the vegetables were thrown in a pot and cooked together, perhaps with some meat (Metzger 114). This dish lost popularity around the time the potato was adopted by the locals, which coincided with the separate preparation and serving of foods in a meal becoming popular (Metzger 114).

The penultimate destination, the city-state of Hamburg, is located on the river Elbe, which has given it fresh fish and a natural port. *Hafen Hamburg*, the Port of Hamburg, is the largest port in Germany and the third largest in Europe (“Port of Hamburg”). The port boasts calling almost 8,000 ships a year and having passed over 100 million tons of cargo in 2019 (“Port of Hamburg”). Historically, Hamburg’s ports were significant sources of foreign goods, which included spices and tea (Metzger 153). A locally popular tea was the *Hamburg Mischung*, or “Hamburg mixture”, a combination of black and green tea that paired well with cookies (Metzger 157). The exotic spices brought in from Hamburg allowed for the creation of many old German favorites, such as cookies like *Lebkuchen*, soups, roasts, and so many sausages.

Hamburg's part of the Elbe has brought it much wealth by trade, but also directly provided sustenance through its fish and shellfish. The Hamburg fish market, now something of an attraction, has always been a way for Hamburgers to get fresh seafood (Metzger 154). There, merchants have made an art out of hollering sales, whether it's for t-shirts or just-caught eel (Metzger 154). Eel is the main meat of the Hamburg specialty *Aalesuppe*, a soup of either "eel" or "everything", depending on who is giving the etymology (Metzger 160). There is good reason for this confusion: not only is the recipe so old that nobody knows where it came from exactly, there is no standard for it either (Metzger 160). *Aalesuppe* is less of a strict dish and more of a traditional gathering of some key ingredients: eel, rehydrated fruit, vegetables, meat, and broth (Metzger 160).

Hamburg has one more notable contribution to cuisine: Hamburg steak. The sandwich called the hamburger is a derivative of this, created when an American sausage vendor ran out of sausages and had to improvise to continue his business (Metzger 161). The ground beef he used was called Hamburg, after the city, a kind of meat once famed for its purity (Metzger 161). Before the U.S. cattle farmers set up shop, beef was expensive, and many butchers added fillers to their ground beef (Metzger 161). The Hamburg butchers, however, sold ground beef with no fillers, bound only by egg yolks, and grew famous for it (Metzger 161). Now that cattle farming techniques have improved, Hamburg ground beef is no longer as luxurious as it once was, but it still has its place in food history.

The last state, Schleswig-Holstein, is the most northern of all German states, located between the North Sea and the Baltic sea, bordering on Denmark (Hughes 109). Its contributions to German cuisine include the cabbage-growing area of Dithmarschen and its

scenic *Katen* smokehouses. The Dithmarschen, on the west coast of the state, has grown cabbage for only a little over 100 years, making it a relatively new addition to traditional growing areas (Metzger 130). Tens of millions of cabbages are harvested by hand every year in Dithmarschen, making it one of Germany's premier places of cabbage cultivation (Metzger 130). These cabbages are celebrated in Wöhrden's *Kohltag*, "cabbage days" (Hughes 111). This festival consists of a parade led by the *Kohlkönigin*, "Cabbage queen", and numerous displays, such as those of *Kohlpyramiden*: cabbage pyramids (Hughes 111). After the parade and displays, celebrators enjoy food and drink from local eateries (Hughes 111).

The *Katen*, thatch-roofed cottages, of Schleswig-Holstein are a symbol of its smoking traditions and an artifact of its past. Even though most of Germany's smoked meat products come from the northern states, most of them are made in more modern, industrialized settings (Metzger 136). But still, there exist artisan smokers who keep their craft to the *Katen*, perhaps for the aesthetic, or perhaps to keep the past alive in a world that passed it by.

Each of Germany's states and localities, despite their shared influences, are unique places without anywhere else like them. The sixteen states of the country each display their own cuisines and traditions, just as any other long-inhabited place would. Germany, as a single nation, owes its culture and cuisine to those smaller regions that it is made up of.

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