

Best of the Wurst

What's the "Wurst" That Could Happen?

by Sharon Hudgins

Vegetarians beware! Germany's meaty meal staple has flavor, tradition, and a ravenous following to ensure its continued place on the plate.

If any one food is characteristic of Germany, surely it's the sausage. Known as *Wurst in German (Würste, plural)*, the fame of Germany's sausages has spread far beyond the borders of the federal republic, with frankfurters and bratwursts now ranking among the favorite sausages of millions of people around the world.

Germans are the world's biggest lovers of sausages, producing more than fifteen hundred different types and consuming nearly seventy pounds per person each year (half of all the meat they eat). Sausages are so embedded in the culinary cultures that they've even inspired several proverbs and folk tales, such as "The Mouse, the Bird, and the Sausage" by the Brothers Grimm.

Sausages show up on German tables at every type of meal, from breakfast to late-night snacks. They're cast in a starring role in appetizers, main dishes, sandwiches, and sides. They serve as supporting actors in soups, stews, salads, omelets, casseroles, and savory pastries. And they're eaten everywhere, from home kitchens to fancy restaurants, from local festivals to urban fast food stands.

Invented in ancient times, sausages were a practical way to preserve meat in an era before artificial refrigeration. And they continue to be a popular way to utilize every edible part of the animal, from nose to tail. In many cases, sausages are made with offal (heads, hearts, livers, lungs, and other parts, not commonly eaten on their own), but some use more expensive muscle meats, especially bacon, ham, or lean pork. If you're squeamish about what you eat, don't ask what went into that juicy sausage on your plate.

The meat is chopped or ground, coarsely or finely or to a texture in between, then mixed with other ingredients that also give the sausage its distinctive character. Most German sausages are made with pork, but others contain beef, veal, lamb, poultry, fish, or game (especially venison and boar), sometimes alone, sometimes in combination with other meats. Fat, especially pork fat, is an essential ingredient, and occasionally starches such as bread, cereal grains (oats, buckwheat, barley, rye), or potatoes are included to absorb the meat juices and plump up the sausages during cooking.

Seasonings are another distinguishing characteristic, often what separates the taste of one sausage from another. Herbs, spices, garlic, onions, mushrooms, truffles, green and red peppers, lemon zest, pistachio nuts, cheese, even anchovies – you name it – are mixed with the sausage meat for additional flavor and color. The spices used in German sausages would fill a large spice shelf: white and black pepper, caraway, coriander, cinnamon, cayenne pepper, cloves, allspice, mustard seeds, ginger, nutmeg, marjoram, mace, thyme, saffron, sage. And salt, sugar, nitrates, and nitrites have all been used as preservatives in sausages for centuries...

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