

CHRISTMAS FOODWAYS AND RITUAL IN NORTHERN GERMANY: DISTINCTIONS EAST AND WEST OF THE FORMER BORDER

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Geographically close, but separated by forty-five years of political difference, the regions of Northern Germany bordering the Baltic give evidence of how rapidly discontinuities in traditional foodways can appear within a generation or two. Having lived for over a year near Hamburg during the 1980s as an exchange student, and later, for a year in the eastern area as a Fulbright recipient in Rostock, I am in the position to be able to compare Christmas foods and rituals on both sides of the former wall, before and after 1989.

In this essay, I focus on the food and beverages prepared and served between Christmas Eve (*Heiligabend*) and New Year's Eve (*Silvester*) in this region, drawing on field notes, memory, personal photos, and my collection of German language cookbooks from either side of the wall.

Moving from West to East, and forward in time from 1984 to 2000, I will start with my favorite tradition of Northern Germany, the serving of *Bockwurst und Kartoffelsalat* as the daytime meal on Christmas Eve. This is one I have adapted for my own family, to the dismay of my Cologne-born and bred husband, who (half-jokingly he claims) calls it "lazy." Christmas Eve in contemporary Germany is one of the liveliest days during the season, and yet, due to its semi-secular nature, (shops are open half-day); there is work to do before society shuts down for the remainder of the holiday. Homemakers, preparing for the evening's big meal and *Bescherung* (present-giving) are only too happy to dish up such an easy meal. In addition, the simplicity of sausage and potatoes marks a conscious break from the more elaborate meals to follow.

Of interest to the casual observer, Christmas Eve, regarded as the most important day of the season by many Germans, is also a day when their rules of hospitality are at their most relaxed. In contrast to the United States,

where much of the holiday season is celebrated with work-related parties and large get-togethers of relative strangers, Germans tend to withdraw into the circle of family and close friends at this time, especially in the former GDR.¹ Christmas Eve, then, is a time for last gatherings in Kneipen (pubs) with friends after the main meal has been consumed (the younger generation especially). Following this night out, the holiday spirit descends with hushing solemnity, and most non-family activities are suspended for a week.

The main meal of Christmas Eve provides one of our first points of departure between West and East. In the West, three holiday meals can be comfortably interchanged on the high moments of Christmas Day and New Year's:

1. Roast goose with red cabbage (*Rotkohl*) and potato dumplings (*Knoedel* in the south, *Kloesse* in the north). Generally, the goose is stuffed with vegetables rather than the bread stuffing more familiar to Americans.² East Germans of my acquaintance were simultaneously horrified and fascinated at the thought of dampened bread crumbs forced into the inner cavity of poultry and then consumed.

2. "Blue" Carp, poached in vinegar and served with horseradish and sweet whipped cream, boiled salt potatoes garnished with parsley, and butter. Carp is popular across Germany, but Blue carp seems to be limited to the north. The town of Reinfeld, where I lived in 1984, had a functioning carp pond that was part of a former abbey dating to the early middle Ages – when a craze for carp farming swept Central and Eastern Europe. Reinfeld was the heart of 'carp country' and people came from miles around for the fish.

3. Raclette – a Swiss import, like a mixed grill (see photo below). An alternative to fondue, found more often further south.

Raclette is a semi-hard cheese³ that is sliced and then melted over sliced, boiled potatoes, cured meats (ham, salami, and prosciutto) in the little grill by using small spatulas. The concoction is then scraped out with the scraper, and garnished with pickles, tomatoes, and onions, as well as sauces. The name Raclette both applies to the apparatus and the method. The origin myth of Raclette is that Swiss goatherds would melt their cheese on hot stones and then scrape it off.

In the west, any of these meals can be served on any day, with some preference for goose on Christmas Eve, and carp or Raclette for New Year's Eve.⁴

In contrast, East Germany does not appear to have this triad of meals, but switched from roast goose to roast duck in the main Christmas Day meal. Perhaps this reflects more trying economic circumstances, or possibly a Polish influence. However, it could also be a traditional preference -- prior to World War II, Mecklenburg and Pomerania were famous for the quality of the poultry, and an old Mecklenburg cookbook shows five duck entrees and only four goose recipes.⁵

Another deviation between East and West has been in the popularity of the *Feuerzangen-bowle*. Like most of Europe, there is a tradition of hot wine drunk in winter (*Glogg* in Scandinavia, *Gluhwein* in Germany, mulled wine in the United Kingdom), and a popular variant on this involves a copper kettle, red wine, spirits, citrus fruit, and sugar all set ablaze to celebrate the New Year.

One set of instructions for its preparation reads:

To prepare a *Feuerzangenbowle* you need red wine, rum, oranges or orange juice, lemons or lemon juice, cinnamon and cloves. Variations are naturally possible. Add the juice of the lemons and oranges to the red wine in the kettle – then add spices. Heat the mixture, but not to boiling. As an alternative, peels can be used instead of juice, and then removed after heating. Now comes the exciting moment – balanced over the kettle on a pair of fireplace tongs (*Feuerzangen*) is the *Zuckerhut* (a cone of hard packed sugar approximately 7" high). High proof rum is poured over the sugar. All lights in the room should be dimmed to provide the appropriate atmosphere. Then

the rum-soaked sugar is set alight. The flames leap up and the sugar drips into the spiced wine. Continue adding hot rum until the sugar cone is fully melted.

(www.silvesterguesse.de, my translation)

Another website gives more precise measurements (for those who wish to try this at home):

"For eight people"

Four bottles of dry red wine

One bottle of rum (54%)

Two whole lemons and oranges per person

Three cinnamon sticks

3-4 whole cloves

1 250 gm *Zuckerhut*

This tradition is connected with the book of the same name by Alexander Spoerl, later made into a beloved film in 1944 starring Heinz Rühmann.⁶ According to my husband, *Feuerzangenbowle* in the west has been left to the province of elderly celebrants and *Burschenschaften* (student fraternities with mainly conservative-to-reactionary political views), but in the East it is a hip activity among the younger generation, similar to the recent ironic consumption of fondue in the United States.

Overall, differences in holiday food preparation and ritual between East and West in Northern Germany can be summed up as follows:

1. Ritual – the eastern half has only one 'traditional' meal that all of my informants recognized as appropriate to Christmas. This is in opposition to the West where there were four distinct menus that could fall on any of three separate days. The eastern half experienced regular shortages with respect to basic food items like meat, much less exotic or imported items, thus they are less likely to have incorporated them into extravagant, multi-course dinners as emphasized by Max Inzinger (Germany's most famous television chef). Additionally, they would have less of a need to contrast such high occasion feasting with the conscious consumption of simpler food, like *Bockwurst und Kartoffelsalat*.

2. Public versus private - Much has been made of the GDR 'niche' society, wherein members withdrew to safe spaces, away from the intrusive gaze of public authority. This trend is also seen

in the greater focus on family in the east. While citizens of both halves of Germany typically celebrate within the family circle to a (possibly) greater degree than in the United States, the western half, with greater personal autonomy and anonymity, produces more articulated sets of relations. Thus, we also see a more complicated negotiation of public versus private relationships in western Germany.

3. Variety - due to the lack of foreign currency, the exigencies of the centralized, planned economy, and the ideology of the German Democratic Republic, there was less trade in food items, less borrowing from other cuisines, and resistance to new 'memes' in food (such as *nouvelle cuisine*). Many differences in tradition are due to experiences marked by geopolitical differences during the Cold War – with the western side borrowing from the South (Switzerland, Austria, and Bavaria) and the eastern side borrowing from Warsaw Pact neighbors, particularly Poland. Linguistic inventions for food items also support this assertion - one example of this being the adoption of the term *Grillete* for 'hamburger' that in the Cold War period had American overtones.

In addition, many people in the East remain unfamiliar with New World food items a decade after unification. Avocados go unused, though they are for sale in the supermarkets. One informant, having been given an avocado, told me later she "didn't know how to eat it, or what it is for, so I bit right into it." Corn is treated as a garnish on pizza and salads, acting as one of Sidney Mintz's "fringe" items, rather than as the "core" item as elsewhere. Some elderly Germans associate it with pig food, and being forced to eat it during the war. Chilies are unknown, and the spiciest pepper one is likely to encounter is the bell pepper (often mistakenly used to give a 'Mexican' flavor to food, which cumin would do much better). Tomatoes are grown, eaten, and appreciated, but haven't entered German vernacular cooking to the same degree as they have other European cuisines.

Three exceptions to the lack of familiarity with New World foods are potatoes, *Kurbisse* (pumpkin), and turkeys -- *Puten* (hen) and *Truthahn* (tom). Potatoes are, of course, the defining German *beilage*, or 'side dish.' Turkeys are not common as whole birds, but are available by ordering them through the local butcher. As for pumpkin, it is occasionally

pureed and served in a soup with *Speck*, or bacon, sprinkled on top (and more rarely served as a roast vegetable); but I have glimpsed a tantalizing lead as to the origins of classic American pumpkin pie. It may have originated as a pastry for the Duke of Brandenburg's wedding in the late 16th century, an event of high glamour and fame, that may have well been encountered by the Puritans in Holland and then brought to the New World where it vanished from European tables for centuries. Pastries made from pumpkin, squash, or sweet potato (common variants in the United States) are not present in contemporary German baking, however.

The long shadow of feudalism, that lay over northeastern Europe on into the twentieth century, and the centralized economies that followed it, were macro-regional factors that stymied the expansion of New World food items into the area far longer than was the case elsewhere in Europe. I believe that residents of the former German Democratic Republic have not yet completed their encounter with the 'second agricultural revolution.'

Notes

¹ Extravagant office parties were just making their presence known in Hamburg 1999-2000. A media center, and hub of German 'New Industry.' It is doubtful that they have continued to penetrate the consciousness of the average German in the wake of the technology sector's collapse in March of 2000.

² Die Gute Deutsche Kueche, Max Inzinger, who even offers a Christmas menu with BOTH goose and carp.

³ Available in some parts of the United States at Trader Joe's, an Aldi subsidiary.

⁴ The publisher of the website www.silvestergruesse.de suggests that "for New Year's poultry is off the menu due to the old folk belief that its wings will make luck fly away before the New Year!"

⁵ *Mecklenburgische Kochbuch*, originally published in 1868 and reissued in facsimile 1981 by the VEB Hirstorff Verlag Rostock.

⁶ One website suggests that the film is a fascistic homage, and that "public viewing of the film should be stopped"

(www.cityinfony.de/tagblatt/kino/themen/bowl_e.php).

