



## Lifestyle in Germany - about wine and dine

by Juergen Zeitler & Joerg Buchberger / BZ • Relocation Services Fuerth, Germany

This is the second in a loose sequence of postings which will highlight certain aspects of German everyday life and will explain some of the things that might appear as unusual or strange to you as an immigrating foreigner in general, the idea behind it being to create your curiosity and to encourage you to find out more for yourself - and at the same time helping you to avoid embarrassing situations.

## Lifestyle in Germany – about wine and dine ...

Like any other part of the world, Germany has developed its own style of culinary culture – and like everywhere there is a large regional variety. It *does* matter whether you live in Bavaria or in the north of Germany. The cuisine in Baden or Swabia is much different from what is being served in Berlin.

And don't bother to continue reading this if you intend to carry on living on what fast food eateries, international restaurant chains and Chinese restaurants and pizza parlours offer.

Getting to know the regional cuisine is a wonderful experience and can give you cultural insights which you might not get otherwise. Furthermore we won't describe here what will happen to you in a German posh high-class restaurant. These places work more or less identically all over the world.

You book a table, you will be seated and in a lot of cases receive an English menu. Of course, the staff will do their best and at least try their school English on you.

Here, we'd like to speak about what you might generally experience in roadside places or places where you might meet your neighbours in the village, town or city where you live. What we will not speak about are the different styles of preparing the food itself or which German wines (yes, there are!) you should try – it's up to you to find this out for yourself.

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## ... in restaurants – “Is this seat taken?” - or “Ist dieser Platz noch frei?”

First of all – whatever you are accustomed to in your home country – in a common German restaurant you will not be seated. You are expected to look for a free table for yourself. If you don't find one it's up to you whether you'll want to sit together with e.g. another couple. Do yourself a favour and don't be too shy. If at a table with six places only two are occupied and there is no other free table, ask the people sitting there whether you are permitted to sit with them. In 99% of all cases they'll invite you to do so and you'll have the opportunity to socialise with locals as a lot of people will try their English on you. But use common sense not to squeeze in at a table which is too crowded, the exception being the beer gardens and festivals such as the Oktoberfest (where sometimes you have no other choice).

If you have made a reservation in advance, you'll ask the waiter to show you to your table. In most cases, your reservation will be mentioned with a cardboard sign on the table, stating your name and the number of persons.

### „Stammtisch“

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In many places, you'll find a table which is completely empty, even if the rest of the restaurant is crowded. This table is reserved for local regulars (“Stammtisch”). On the table you'll find some kind of sign mentioning this. If you want to sit there, ask the owner or the waiter and if you are permitted to sit you might soon find yourself in the middle of a card game or as a part of a more or less interesting discussion about ... well, whatever. Once you sit there, paying for a round of drinks can help a lot to win some sympathies. But do so only if you really feel like it. As for additional rules, see “die Kneipe”.

Don't be surprised, if people bring their dog along into a restaurant – as long as they behave, dogs are normally tolerated (on the floor) and will mostly receive a bowl of water and a treat.

Unlike other countries, table water isn't automatically served and you'll have to ask (and normally pay) for it. Germans are very fond of fizzy water/club soda, and this is what you'll normally be served when you ask for water. So, if you don't like the bubbles make sure that you ask for “stilles Wasser” (flat water).

After you finished your meal, you are not expected to leave in a hurry! If you fell like having another glass of wine after eating – go for it. If you want to continue speaking with your partner in a romantic environment – do it! The waiter won't press you to settle your bill unless the place will close down for the night.

Vegetarian restaurants are abundant and can be found on the Internet, though nearly all restaurants offer at least a small variety of vegetarian dishes. In larger cities you will also find halal or kosher restaurants.

All German restaurants are fully licensed whereas BYO restaurants are unknown.

## ... in beer gardens and garden restaurants - or „is Bavaria everywhere?“

In the minds of most people, sitting in the open having a beer is somehow connected to Bavarian beer gardens. Strictly speaking, a beer garden is always a place with self-service (though most of them have a smaller area where drinks and food are served) in which people are allowed to bring their own food and just buy the beverages. So don't be surprised if you see families bringing baskets full with food, plates and cutlery.

All other places are to be considered as garden restaurants (the possibility to bring your own food and self service makes the difference). To complete the confusion, a lot of garden restaurants outside Bavaria are called "Biergarten" which is incorrect in the true sense of the word – so make sure in which kind of place you are. A short look around will tell you.

In general, the rules about sitting at somebody else's table also apply here too and you are supposed to ask, but in this places it's a completely customary thing to sit with strangers and nobody thinks twice about it. The same is true when you visit festivals like the Oktoberfest. When you come into the country, make sure to get information about the dates of local festivals. It's an experience which you wouldn't like to miss.

Keep in mind that if you order a beer in most Bavarian beer gardens (without any other comments) you will automatically be given a one liter stein ("eine Mass").

## ... in pubs, bars and the local watering holes (die "Kneipe") – or: "meet your neighbours for a drink"

Whether you call it an "after work party" or you just want to relax over a beer with some buddies or you take the dog out at night and have a stop-over at a local watering hole – we are sure that you'll find a decent place in your neighbourhood. But in German a "bar" normally refers to a posh and expensive place e.g. in a first class hotel or a club joint - and probably this is exactly not what you're looking for. What you need is called a "Kneipe" and these places have their own rules of engagement in any country – so here are the German ones:

Whether you decide to sit at the counter or in a booth, there will be a waitress or a waiter to take your orders (in nearly all of them you will be served). So forget about going to the counter to place your order. As well, you are not supposed to pay for it at once. With your first drink the

bartender or waiter will give you a cardboard beer mat ("Bierdeckel") recording your drinks and meal, mentioning your check mostly in form of a tally sheet. You are supposed to settle this before leaving. In the Cologne Area you will be given a fresh beer without ordering once you finished your glass, unless you put the cardboard beer mat on top of your glass thus signalling that you intend to pay.

Compared to other countries, Germans are more reluctant when it comes to buy a round of drinks. When you have a chat with a stranger, nobody will expect you to do such a thing and if you do, it may happen that some people even start to behave a little reserved as nobody is used to this kind of behaviour.

As a consequence, don't be annoyed if nobody buys a drink for you. Of course it's a different

thing when you meet your fellow workers e.g. for a birthday or a promotion.

It is said that "bar culture" ("Kneipenkultur") is slightly more pronounced in the North of the country and in the Rhine area than elsewhere but it is up to you to find out about this.

If you bring minors to a Kneipe, make sure that the regulations of the German Youth Protection Act ("Jugendschutzgesetz") are obeyed. According to the German state in which you live, different laws about smoking in pubs, restaurants or coffee shops may apply. Make sure to be informed about the relevant regulations ("Nichtraucherschutzgesetz").

## ... about picking up the tab – or “getrennt oder zusammen?”

In Germany it is common practice to pay separately. If e.g. you have dinner together with your partner and another couple, the service staff will inquire whether you intend to invite the other couple by asking “Getrennt oder zusammen?” (lit.: “separately or together?”) when it comes to pick up the tab. This may even happen in a restaurant when you have dinner together with your partner and you are not known in the place. In case you intend to invite a larger group e.g. for a birthday party, it is a good idea to inform the waiters beforehand that you intend to pay for everybody (or e.g. the drinks only), a fact that used to drive waiters e.g. in Spain crazy when German tourists insisted on paying “getrennt”.

## ... about wine and beer in general – or: “ In which part of Germany have you landed?”

In the beginning we promised that we wouldn't speak about particular drinks or food, but this one is unavoidable. Right through the middle of the country you will find an invisible border separating the wine growing areas (roughly the South west) from the other part. Some 70 years ago, German white wine was famous and sought for all over the world, being served in good restaurants and hotels everywhere.

We won't mention what food industry has done to it in the 50's to the 80's (see brands

like “Liebfrauenmilch”) but if you are a wine lover, make sure to settle in an appropriate part of the country, because German wine is back and this is good news for you!

What is true for wine is to a certain degree also true for beer.

Like in most other countries, many of the large German breweries are nowadays owned by the few remaining international beverage groups which retain the traditional brands, but not necessarily the traditional methods of

production. Small and medium sized family owned breweries managed to survive all over the country, even experiencing a recovery in the last few years.

The best example for this may be the Franconian area. The “Franconian Switzerland” being the region with the highest brewery density in the world with over 300 breweries producing literally hundreds of different kinds of beer.

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## ... about German fast food (die "Imbissbude")

– „does Leberkäs or Döner sound strange to you?“

Hot snacks in very good quality are also offered in most butcher's shops ("Warme Theke")

Needless to say that like everywhere the big international fast food eateries have also made it into Germany. But there is also a local variety – mobile snack stands ("Imbissbuden"), which can be found in city centres or in front of supermarkets.

They offer the local variety of the German Bratwurst as well as other small and cheap snacks and are licensed too.

Hot snacks in very good quality are also offered in most butcher's shops ("Warme Theke").

Due to the Turkish immigration of the last decades, Döner kebab stalls have come up everywhere in the country and are abundant, playing now an important role in the local fast food culture.

## ... after all, some remarks about what Germans eat

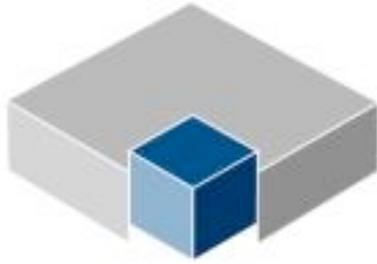
– or "strange things you never thought edible"

Offal is not to everyone's taste. However, many people consider liver ("Leber"), kidneys („Nieren“), sweetbreads ("Kutteln"), tripe ("Bries"), lungs ("Lunge") and heart ("Herz") as delicacies.

In some dishes vegetables and fruit are mixed (e.g. "Himmel und Erd" in the Rhine area) and in others smoked fish together with dried fruit ("Aalsuppe"). And make sure that you know what

you ordered when you ask for "Labskaus" in Northern Germany.

Otherwise, have fun exploring what the country offers on the culinary side because one thing's for sure: German kitchen is much better than its screwed-up reputation!



**BZ•RELOCATION SERVICES**

**Geleitsgasse 2  
90762 Fuerth  
Germany**

**[info@bz-relocation.de](mailto:info@bz-relocation.de)**

**[www.bz-relocation.de](http://www.bz-relocation.de)**