



Diners gather for currywurst at Konnopke's.

PHOTOS: AP

FAVOURITE DISHES LADEN WITH FAT, KETCHUP AND CONTRADICTION

TRAVEL & FAMILY

Bangkok Post | WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 23, 2011 | LIFE

A taste of Germany

BERLIN

MICHAEL SLACKMAN

There is no shortage of contradictions when it comes to this city. Like the rest of Germany, Berlin demands conformity to certain rules (think twice about crossing against the light), but leaves moral judgements up to the individual (no problem with nude bathing in public parks or gambling in storefront casinos).

Germans are largely blind to the contradictions, of course, because they are in concert with their tastes and values. But the inconsistencies can be jarring for newcomers, especially Americans, who are often cautioned to cast aside preconceptions, ignore the seemingly familiar terrain of the modern cityscape, and brace for the unexpected.



That may be especially true when it comes to currywurst, the most popular fast food in the city, and maybe the nation. The dish, generally eaten from a paper plate with a tiny disposable fork while standing up, is itself a culinary contradiction: A greasy pile of pork sausage (very German), smothered in ketchup (quintessential American), sprinkled with curry powder (thank you, Britain and India).

"Currywurst is a culinary symbol of Berlin and of all Germany," said Birgit Breloh, who said she eats currywurst once a week, stays fit by going to yoga class and is the director of the world's only Currywurst Museum, near the better-known Checkpoint Charlie.

Germans, or at least Berliners, look a bit puzzled (maybe offended?) when asked how they could be so health-conscious, with their regular walks and emphasis on organic foods, and yet devour the fat-laden dish, often accompanied by a shimmering pile of chips or French fries doused in ketchup, mayonnaise or both. According to Breloh, currywurst is eaten in huge quantities, with Germany's 82 million people consuming 800 million curry sausages annually.

"You can eat a lot of currywurst without getting fat," said Mario Ziervogel, the strapping owner of Konnopke's, one of the city's most popular currywurst



Diners eat currywurst at Konnopke's in the Prenzlauer Berg neighbourhood of Berlin. The pork sausage dish, which was invented after World War II by combining German sausage, American ketchup and curry powder from Britain or India, is a fast food staple in the city.

stands, in the trendy Prenzlauer Berg neighbourhood. "You have to move! If I sit and watch TV, all day, of course I will get fat."

In many ways, Germans are misunderstood. From the historic — "How could such a civilised society have produced the Holocaust?" — to the contemporary assessment that Germany is the tightwad of the euro zone, even while its own economy booms. People here are often determined to explain certain facts about the place as a way to help others understand that Germans guard their privacy, for example, and are proud of their collective discipline and focus on quality.

"It's true, they see themselves as being the only world-class economy, and maintaining their standards is important to their success," said John Kornblum, a former US ambassador to Germany who still lives here and cautions newcomers not to psychoanalyse the place.

But how does this explain the love for fried pork sausage smothered in ketchup and curry powder?

"It is my favourite meal," said Peter Ossig, 55, a businessman from Stuttgart, who barely paused to chat as he popped a steaming currywurst into his mouth. He happened to be quite trim in his full-length blue coat.

However, taste is not where the ex-

planation ends, because currywurst is not merely extolled as a meal. It is a political statement, too. Berlin, in particular, likes to see itself as egalitarian, and currywurst fits neatly with that image. It costs about \$2 (62 baht), and the sloppy nature of the dish generally requires diners to stand together eating off chest-high snack tables on the sidewalks.

"Currywurst is very democratic. Poor or rich love it the same way, and at the booth, all people come together," said Breloh, as she gave a guided tour of the museum, which tended more toward the kitsch found along a beach boardwalk.

Like much of the substructure of modern Germany, currywurst has its roots in the last world war and its aftermath. Breloh said the dish was first prepared in 1949 by Herta Heuwer, a Berliner, who like many others in postwar Germany, struggled to make ends meet.

Sausage, or wurst, has long been a staple, the hamburger of Deutschland. But Breloh said that when Berlin was divided into occupied sectors, Germans saw Americans eating steak with ketchup. They could not afford steak, but they could manage to whip up ketchup.

Heuwer, a rather stout woman who despite her eating habits — or perhaps because of them — lived to be 86 years old, traded some alcohol in the British sector for curry powder, or at least that

is how the story goes. There is some dispute about the story, with Hamburg also claiming to be the birthplace of the beloved dish.

The recipe is rather straightforward: plop the sausage in oil and fry until crisp. Slice it into five chunks. Squirt on a mess of ketchup (Heuwer took her ketchup recipe to the grave) and shake on curry powder.

That's it.

"It's good pork sausage, yes, yes; I have it three times a week," Guido Neumann, a bricklayer with multiple piercings, said as he slowly lifted the morsels on his tiny fork during a lunch break.

There was a time, not long ago, when it appeared that currywurst might be knocked off its mantle as the most popular fast food, said Eberhard Seidel, who wrote a book about the challenger: the doner kebab, which is effectively the same as a gyro, or a shawarma, but retrofitted to German taste, slathered in a choice of sauces.

Germany has a large population of ethnic Turks, who came here as part of a guest-worker programme half a century ago. The guest workers became residents and had families, and when their factory jobs started to disappear, many began to sell a dish popular in Turkey, meat cooked on a rotating upright post, sliced off and packed with salad in bread.

"It doesn't look pretty, but it's delicious," Kemal Akar, 19, said as he and his friends took a break from their studies to enjoy a cheap lunch of doner kebab in Mitte, the centre of the city.

The doner is cheaper than currywurst, but it has run into public relations problems, Seidel said, amid cases of questionable quality meat. It remains popular, some say even more popular than currywurst, especially among students and the poor, but Seidel says it has slipped as Berlin has become more of an international and, in some ways, a wealthier city. Now the kebab must compete with specialty soup shops, noodle houses and sushi vendors to appeal to the taste of diners on the run.

But currywurst continues to hold its own. "Currywurst," said David Schultze, 19, a high school student and friend of Akar's, "is a German tradition." NYT NEWS SERVICE



A worker serves a doner kebab at the Grill und Schlemmerbuffet in Berlin. The doner kebab, similar to a Greek gyro, was brought to Berlin by ethnic Turks half a century ago.