In the culinary black hole between afternoon tea and aperitifs, I often experience an irresistible desire for pickled cucumbers, to which I clandestinely yield. If I am seen reaching for pickled cucumbers, my action automatically leads to comments that I must either be pregnant or have drunk too much the night before. The truth is that I simply like the way pickles taste and have since earliest childhood, whether atop a slice of bread with coarse liver sausage, served in beef-heart ragout, or straight from the jar. As children during the 1960s, we called these pickles *Beamtenwurst*—"Civil Servants’" sausages. We purchased them in the fish department of the KaDeWe department store in West Berlin, in the very same corner where, today, beautiful people guzzle oysters and champagne. Back then the pickles would be plucked for us straight from a wooden barrel with wooden tongs, weighed, and wrapped, first in waxed paper, then pink butchers’ paper. The smaller gherkins in glass jars were a luxury reserved for Christmas or birthdays.

For me pickled cucumbers were never associated with a particular place, even though the Spreewald, a region about seventy kilometers from the gates of Berlin, just before the town of Cottbus on the Polish border, has traditionally been regarded as the city’s “cucumber barrel.” But regional chauvinism played no role in my passion. For anyone who grew up in the artificial entity of West Berlin during the 1960s and 1970s, cut off from the surrounding country by the Berlin Wall, the Spreewald seemed like an incredibly distant place, a place one had only heard or read about. For postwar generations of West Germans, the east represented a threatening enemy rather than cultural potential, and perhaps because of its isolation, the culinary fashions of West Germany were especially strong on the island that was West Berlin. Consciously or unconsciously, we orientated ourselves toward the west, in the direction of America.

In fact, there never was a single German cuisine. In terms of food, as in many other respects, Germany is a decentralized entity, especially in comparison to France, where the haute cuisine of Paris brings together products from all the regions, unifying and idealizing them. At the risk of generalizing too much, one could say that the north of Germany is strongly marked by Scandinavian and Celtic influences, the cuisine of the Rhineland has Roman roots, the east carries Slavic undertones, and the cooking of the southwest is clearly Alemannic in character.

Of course, my grandparents’ generation in Berlin enthused about their old homelands in the agricultural expanses of Silesia, Pomerania, or East Prussia, with their huge farms and regional dishes such as *Hammelfleisch mit Kämmel* (mutton with caraway seeds), *Karpfen in süßsaurer Sauce* (carp in sweet-sour sauce), *Mohnpielen* (cold bread pudding with poppy seeds), *Beetenbarsch* (a version of borscht), *Königsberger Klopse* (meatballs in white caper sauce), and *Gänseichelsauer* (goose in blood aspic). However, in the decades following World War II, the gastronomic influence of the Mediterranean extended ever further north, and these culinary reminiscences from the German east were almost completely forgotten as other regional cuisines gained ground. Olive oil, basil, and tomatoes have largely pushed out the Slavic elements in German cooking, such as *Quark* (fresh cheese), dill, and beetroot.

However, since the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, the path to these new-old roots has once again emerged for all German consumers, opening up the possibility of

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developing richer and more complete regional culinary identities. And it turns out that cucumbers from the Spreewald are part of this new attention to culinary regionalism. In their pickled form the Spreewälder Gurken are among only sixty-four German agricultural products recognized by the European Union as having a specific regional identity worthy of protection.¹

Scholars dispute the exact origin of the cucumber (Cucumis sativus). Some believe that it originated on the lower slopes of the Himalayas, whereas others point to tropical Africa. In Egypt cucumber seeds have been excavated from burial chambers dating back to 2000 B.C.² The Greeks acquired the cucumber from Asia Minor; the Romans consumed cucumis fresh as well as sweet-sour, preserved in salt water. Although the English word "cucumber" is nearly identical to the Latin, the German Gurke ultimately comes from the Middle Greek angurion/águros (for "green" or "unripe"), which is rooted in áoros ("too early"). This word as a designation for cucumbers made its way from the Middle Greek into various Slavic languages;³ the first recorded use of the word in German dates from around a.d. 1500 in Eastern Middle Germany.⁴

If you drive or take the train an hour from Berlin in the direction of Cottbus and the Polish border, beginning in the town of Lübben you will notice many bilingual signs. Lubin, Lubyń, and Borkowy are the Lower Sorbian names for Lübbenau, Lübbenau, and Burg. The primeval landscape of forests and swamps here extends from the flatlands along the river Spree that flows through the Baruther Ustrom Valley. Red alders, ash trees, marsh oaks, water lilies, and marsh grasses dominate the region, which UNESCO declared a Biosphere Reservation in 1990. The Spreewald marks the beginning of the Sorb enclave that reaches through Lower and Upper Lusatia to the German-Czech border.

The roots of the Serbs or Serby, as the sixty thousand Sorbian Slavs living in this region call themselves, go back to the age of human migrations around the fall of the Roman Empire, when many Slavic tribes left their eastern European homelands. The western Sorbs (whom outsiders often refer to as Wends, a name that goes back to the Roman Veneti) settled in the region immediately south of Berlin, an area bordering the Pegnitz in the south, the Elbe and Saale rivers in the west, and the river Oder in the east. As a result of easterly expansion during the period of Germanization in the tenth century, the Sorbian realm grew progressively smaller, until the Sorbs finally took refuge in the swamps along the river Spree. Until well into the twelfth century, they shared this region with German immigrants, cutting tiny fields and meadows out of the moorland. In the Spreewald they primarily cultivated millet, buckwheat, and linseed.

Experts are divided as to when cucumbers made their first appearance in the Spreewald. Some think that seeds excavated from the early Slavic settlement at Tornow, near Calau, suggest that the Slavs brought the cucumber with them when they fled the Huns and Tartars,⁵ but most scholars believe that the cucumber was introduced into the area by Dutch immigrants at the end of the 1500s.

The Dutch weavers whom Joachim II von der Schulenburg had brought to Lübbenau (which then belonged to Saxony) in 1580 recognized that their weaving brought little profit and began to grow cucumbers instead. They quickly found the damp, warm, peaty-sandy soil of the moor both reminiscent of their homeland and ideally suited for the wind-sensitive and thirsty plants. Soon cucumbers had become more profitable than weaving. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Dutch settlers were regularly transporting punt-loads of cucumbers to Prussian Berlin, where they were a resounding success.

The tight-fisted Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm 1 did not like to see Prussian money spent on Saxon cucumbers, so he persuaded thirty Lübbenau families to settle in the Prussian Lower Spreewald, not only to grow cucumbers but also to help colonize the area. This decision led to the Gurken Krise (Cucumber Crisis), an exchange of diplomatic blows between Prussia and the Saxon court of August the Strong. But nothing was resolved. The Berliners’ enthusiasm for Spreewald cucumbers continued unabated, and even Frederick the Great enjoyed them during the second half of the eighteenth century.⁶ Finally, at the Congress of Vienna in 1815, the entire Lusatia region was ceded to Prussia.

As geographical designations Lusatia—from the Lower Sorbian luzza for “marsh”⁷—and the “Slavic North” still sound strange to West German ears. But when the German gastro-philosopher Karl Friedrich von Rumohr wrote in his 1822 Geist der Kochkunst (Spirit of the Culinary Arts) of sour, or pickled, cucumbers from the Lusatia, it was clear that he meant Spreewald cucumbers. By the end of the 1860s, the Berlin writer Theodor Fontane was calling Lübbenau “the fatherland of sour cucumbers.” He continued: “Cucumber farming flourishes in the Spreewald, where many farmers and merchants grow and trade in this product, which unquestionably belongs to the attributes of Berlin or the Spee-Goddess.”⁸

The excellent reputation of those “sour Lübbenauers” rests on a combination of special varieties grown in the distinctive local soil without chemical fertilizers and then hand pickled according to a traditional recipe. Saure
**Gurken** produced in this manner, such as those cultivated organically today by the Rebotzke family of Hohenbrück in the Lower Spreewald, are crisp and juicy, never tough. For pickled-cucumber novices the first taste might seem rather salty, but this saltiness is balanced by a mildly acidic fresh-cucumber flavor and a hint of dill.

Although we can assume that the Spreewald Sorbs cultivated cucumbers from the start, we have no documentation of how the cucumbers were used. Did they pickle them from the beginning? They seem to have had all the necessary ingredients: good water, salt, onions, horseradish, dill, mustard, garlic, grape and sour-cherry leaves. As Karl Friedrich von Rumohr writes:

> It is the true destiny of cucumbers to be preserved in various ways, for their glassy-spongy cell structure makes them extremely receptive to every flavor which they can develop themselves or acquire from outside… Place rather large, but still unripe cucumbers together with fennel, dill, grape and cherry leaves in brine, allow them to ferment slightly so that they keep a balance between salty and vinegary, like a very tasty sauerkraut. Sour cucumbers are preserved in great quantities and excellent quality in Bohemia, the Lausitz, and in a large part of the Slavic North.9

Today, as in the past, cucumbers are pickled in salt water, a process by which malolactic bacteria convert fructose into malic acid. The *Saure Gurken* are, in effect, salted cucumbers that become sour through fermentation. Here is a Berlin recipe dating from 1795, which Theodor Fontane’s sisters published in 1903:

Pickled cucumbers. Wash the cucumbers, which should be flawless and of a quantity adequate to last until the next cucumber season, layer them in a barrel with vine shoots, cherry leaves, and dill, then pour boiling brine over them. When it has cooled the same water should be boiled again and poured over the cucumbers. The third time this is done the barrel should be closed while the water is still warm, then placed in the cellar where it should be turned each day. The *probatum* can be obtained from Pastor Wiedemann.10

In 1874 Lübbenauer Albert Schulz11 noted that the Spreewald cucumbers often became hollow during pickling due to fermentation gases that were unable to escape. He discovered that if the cucumbers were pricked before fermentation the problem was remedied, and so the business of preserving cucumbers gained momentum. In 1908 over forty thousand metric tons of pickled cucumbers were transported from Lübbenau in oak barrels made by local coopers, not only to Berlin but to private customers throughout Germany.12 However, owing to increased demand, the cucumbers did not always come from the Spreewald itself; the Liegnitz was another important source. Pickled according to the Spreewald
recipe, these pickles were often sold as the “genuine” Lübbenau product. In 1932 a sterilization method was developed that made industrial-scale production possible, leading to the proliferation of companies outside the region who took advantage of the good reputation of Spreewald cucumbers and marketed their pickled cucumbers as “Lübbenauer.”

Meanwhile, in the Spreewald daily life for the cucumber growers was still difficult. The flat-bottomed punt, today a tourist attraction, was the only practical means of transport through the region’s countless narrow canals, and the tiny fields could be cultivated only by hand. Floods regularly threatened both the crops and the farmers’ property. On the positive side this state of affairs ensured that a unique landscape of great ecological complexity, home to eagles and storks, was preserved.

Under the German Democratic Republic (GDR) the indigenous population finally received recognition and assistance. The Sorbs, who had been persecuted under the Third Reich, acquired equal rights with all other citizens. Today there are Sorbian kindergartens, and the Sorbian language is taught in schools and adult-education centers. The GDR’s program of assistance also included the construction of dams, reservoirs, and the Nordumfluter Canal, which, when completed in 1973, almost entirely eliminated the danger of floods. However, as a result of the GDR’s 1957 Coal and Energy Program, strip mining of brown coal was undertaken at Schlabendorf for burning in the huge power stations at Vetschau and Lübbenau. This new industry not only brought many new people into the region but also led to an increase in the water temperature. All of these changes represented a substantial threat to the local ecology. For vegetable growing clear plastic was introduced, as were subsidies. Manufactured Gurkoma or Gurkenkombinationsaroma (Standardized Cucumber Combination Aroma) was brought in from Dresden for pickling, and the industry extended its range with many new fruits and vegetables.

Nevertheless, with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Spreewald farmers suddenly faced the reality of competition in a free-market economy. Because of the region’s new status as a Biosphere Reservation, it was impossible to further streamline local farming methods. In 1990 an average of 25 metric tons of cucumbers was grown on 450 hectares of land in the region; by 1993 only 50 free hectares of land remained. As had happened seventy years earlier, companies throughout Germany were marketing pickled cucumbers as “Spreewald Gurken,” a situation that led the Lübbenauers to consider action to preserve the integrity of their product. In 1996 the Spreewaldverein e.V., an association of local farmers and picklers, applied to the European Union for a Protected Geographical Indication (PGI), an appellation that had been created just four years earlier. Their application defined the region of origin as the Spreewald economic zone.
extending from Golßen in the west to beyond Peitz in the east (including Cottbus), beyond Märkisch Buchholz to the north, and in the south up to the lake region of the Lausitz. At least 70 percent of the cucumbers used would have to originate within this region and be pickled there. Producers outside the region vigorously opposed the proposal, which resulted in a new Gurkenkrieg. Industrial picklers, including Kühne, Nowak, and the Jütro factory in nearby Teltow-Fläming, contested the application at the European Court of Justice. However, in March 1999 the European Union approved the pgI for Spreewaldgurken, which includes the designation nach Spreewälder Art (in the Spreewald style). By 2001 the area under cultivation had increased to 550 hectares, and the average production, to 62 metric tons per hectare, an increase in total production of slightly more than 200 percent, compared with a decade earlier.

The success of Spreewald cucumbers continues to be linked with tourism. At the Werbener Hotel “Zum Stern,” Peter Franke runs the Spreewald Cucumber Academy, where you can pick and pickle your own cucumbers and thereby acquire a Cucumber Diploma. Humorous though this may sound, there can be no question that folklore and culinary pride indirectly help preserve the area’s unique cultural landscape.

Anyone who has not yet discovered Spreewälder Gurken is strongly recommended to try them as a hangover cure. The salt and malic acid do wonders for a stomach upset by too much alcohol, and even if you aren’t suffering from overindulgence, you might find that you like the taste. With its very low calorie content and mineral richness, the cucumber ideally fits our contemporary conception of a healthy diet. Why, then, have Saure Gurken yet to make their mark on the West German gastronomic scene? Are the great majority of people too lazy to explore long-forgotten culinary memories? Perhaps it is because of an East Prussian gene somewhere deep inside of me that I am repeatedly drawn to the cucumber jar.

NOTES
1. Protected Geographical Indication (PGI)/Geschützte geographische Angabe (GGA)/Indication Géographique Protégée (IGP). Of the sixty-four German PGI’s more than half are for mineral waters and beers.
6. Manfred Donderski, Die Mark Brandenburg und ihre Küche (Berlin: Stapp, 1993), 92. On the royal menu card of Frederick the Great from August 5, 1786, the monarch put a cross next to Saure Gurken to indicate his personal satisfaction.
10. F. Fontane, Wie man in Berlin zur Zeit der Königin Luise kochte (Berlin: Die Wirtschaft, 1986), 220. Probatum est (it is tested) refers to the proven reliability and source of the recipe.
12. Ibid., 25.
14. Ibid.

FURTHER READING

SUMMER 2004
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