

Labor and the Love of Asparagus: A German Panic

APRIL 9, 2020: TUTTLINGEN, GERMANY

“Asparagus Harvest in Danger!” “No Asparagus Because of Corona?” “The Asparagus Crisis!” These kinds of headlines threw many Germans into turmoil at the end of March, the beginning of asparagus season. Falling in the middle of a pandemic, this year’s season is affected by the closing of borders worldwide, disrupting transnational labor migration that is required to harvest agricultural crops.

What if this spring, with all its limitations and uncertainties, inconveniences and fears, there will *also* be no asparagus? To understand this peculiar German panic, one has to understand that there is no spring in Germany without asparagus. Or rather, no spring without the holy trinity of a creamy wild garlic soup, a buttery white asparagus, and a strawberry dessert to follow. David Sutton writes in *Remembrance of Repasts* (2001) that Greek seasons are categorized by fruit, often starting or ending with holy days, a characteristic likely true of many agricultural societies. In Germany, this still holds true for asparagus. The start of harvest season depends on the weather, usually falling around the end of March or the beginning of April and ends on June 24 with the Day of St. John (close to the summer solstice). During this time, many Germans eat asparagus more than once a week, restaurants offer seasonal asparagus menus, and the cities are swamped with temporary stands selling three different categories of white asparagus. White asparagus is traditionally eaten boiled, with new potatoes, hollandaise sauce, and ham. Every magazine and newspaper, food related or not, offers plenty of new ways to cook asparagus each spring.

Asparagus should be plentiful in spring, it should be regional (read: German), and it should be cheap. We might want to eat good food, but at the same time it must be inexpensive. To satisfy this demand, farmers rely almost entirely on the labor of seasonal workers from Poland and Romania. It is by no means an easy job. Digging white asparagus out of its thick layer of soil,

which prevents it from seeing the light and turning green, requires great skill.

Over the last few weeks, as the threat of tons of rotten asparagus and empty tables loomed, a frantic search for solutions was launched. Suggestions were plenty: some farmers rented out corners of their fields to private individuals who could harvest their own asparagus; others suggested hospitality-sector employees, now jobless, should do the job. There was even a proposal to temporarily lift the ban on working for asylum seekers, to let them do the important, tough, badly paid job. YouTube videos appeared from farmers providing instruction on how to cut asparagus without harming the white gold.

Finally, 40,000 workers from Poland and Romania were allowed to come in this April, under the strictest health assurances, to save our asparagus. This deal provoked an outcry among activists who are campaigning to evacuate the refugee camps at the border of Europe. Refugees in the overcrowded border camps of Europe are in danger of an outbreak of COVID-19 as they essentially have no medical supply. Shortly after the deal to save the asparagus was settled upon, a meme went viral saying: “We leave 20,000 people to starve and shiver in the hell of Moria Refugee Camp in Greece. But we bring in 40,000 workers from Romania to harvest our asparagus. Asparagus’s dignity is inviolable.” Of course the system is such that the Polish and Romanian workers rely upon those wages to feed their family—they come annually. With the early disruption of the harvest and the strict health assurances the price of asparagus will rise this year, but without a rise in wages for the workers. It could be a good starting point to think about the real costs of our food and the labor of harvesting, and to advocate for higher wages—being aware that without the workers from the East of our Union there would be no asparagus this year. Alternatively, we can all stand on our balconies and clap while the asparagus boils. 🍷