

WURST-CASE SCENARIO

Japanese Perspectives and lived Culinary Experiences in Berlin

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Introduction

A platter of sizzling sausages, paired with sauerkraut or potato salad and a cold, refreshing beer glistening in the sun. For many, this is the first image that comes to mind when thinking about German cuisine. This is not so far-fetched, given the fact that Germany was ranked eighth globally for per capita meat consumption in 2024, with each German eating around twenty-five kilograms (Statista 2025). If grilled sausages are counted alone, around ninety-four million kilograms were sold in 2022 (Statista 2023). Germany also ranked eighth for per capita beer consumption in 2024, with each person drinking almost eighty-nine litres (Statista 2024). This certainly suggests that hearty meat dishes paired with alcohol is an integral part of an authentic German daily meal. Or does it?

The image of another country's cuisine is often influenced by stereotypes and, in some cases, also by a specific region that represents said country. When it comes to Germany, the image of the country's cuisine mainly consisting of sausages and beer is largely shaped by Bavaria, a region in southern Germany, which is also famous for hosting the Oktoberfest, the world's largest folk festival. On the other hand, in northern Germany, which is close to the Baltic Sea, that image about typical German food

would hardly be able to keep up as it would be difficult to find grilled sausages at all, since the daily diet mostly consists of fish. While in Berlin one can find *Döner* or currywurst.

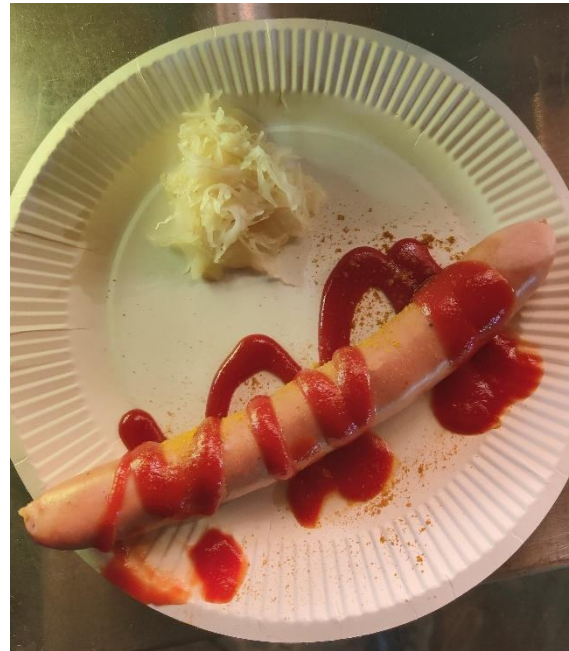


Figure 1. A Berlin-style "currywurst" at a Christmas marked in Japan.

These prior images and stereotypes regarding German food are often challenged after moving to Germany. While living abroad one of the authors, Nils, was confronted with stereotypes whether it was experiencing homecooked Japanese food for the first time or coming across a delicious treat from his hometown (see Figure 1: a vague Japanese interpretation of a Berlin-style currywurst).

Since this currywurst defies everything the authors had deemed as currywurst before, this research aims to explore the perception of German food by Japanese people, especially the image Japanese people had about German food before, and how this perception changed after coming to Germany and what their everyday culinary life looked like while living in Berlin.

Berlin was chosen as the main location to narrow down the area and being able to compare experiences without having to consider regional differences. Additionally, most of our Japanese contacts questioned for this paper are affiliated with the Free University of Berlin.

Although studies on food have increased in recent years, the perception of German cuisine, particularly from a Japanese perspective, is a topic that has yet to gain momentum. Shimizu (2023), who spent one year in Dresden, Germany, for his research, describes his image of German cuisine as simple, consisting mainly of meat, sausage, cheese, potatoes, and vegetables. He also points out that many Asians, including Japanese, get tired of German food and prefer to cook their own cuisine at home. Endō (2012) shared his experience of living in Germany from 1998 to 2005 and is clearing up the misconception of German food tasting bad. According to him this is simply because people had the misfortune of eating only “bad” German food. He recommends visiting a Michelin-starred restaurant, or traditional German restaurants, such as “Ratskeller” or “Brauhaus”, to find “good” German food. Benninger and Roosen (2025) examine the export of Bavarian food to Japan and argue that personality traits, as well as the exporting country's stereotype, affect the acceptance and experience of new foods.

Therefore, our research aims to fill the gap regarding the still underexplored Japanese perspective on German cuisine and their culinary experiences in Berlin.

A country's food and its stereotypes

– Theory

Traditional and local food products are closely tied to a country's history and image. The “traditional” in “traditional foods” is defined as the idea of transmitting or delivering something, which can be knowledge, theory, and practice, to ensure continuity between generations. In short, they describe food products, whose preparation methods have been passed down through the generations, and whose production and used ingredients are often tied to a specific region (Rocillo-Aquino et al. 2021).

In recent years, due to globalization, traditional and local food products have been exported to different countries worldwide. While this gives people around the world the opportunity to experience a country's cuisine without the need to travel, it also contributes to the emergence of stereotypes. Giraud (1998, cited in Guerrero et al. 2009: 348) argues that traditional products per se cannot be exported. Local products outside their area of influence, outside their region, will simply be perceived as regular products, thus losing all or an important part of the additional values and feelings that consumers may experience in their original place of manufacturing and/or distribution. Therefore, experiencing traditional food outside of its country of origin and cultural context changes its cultural perception and transforms into stereotypes. Stereotypes are, as defined by Hilton and von Hippel (1996: 240), “beliefs about the characteristics, attributes, and behaviours of certain groups”.

Cuddy and colleagues (2008) highlight the phenomenon of individuals forming in- and outgroups to differentiate others. This process leads to stereotypes for the outgroups, as they are perceived as different from the group to which the individual feels a sense of belonging. Hilton and von Hippel (1996: 240-41) further elaborate that stereotypes stem from mental representations of real differences between groups, which is why they are sometimes accurate representations of reality. In this sense, stereotypes operate much like object schemas, allowing easier and more efficient processing of information about others. As with schemas in general, these stereotypes may cause the perceivers to disregard or fail to notice individual differences. However, these stereotypes are selective in that they focus on the most distinctive group features that provide the greatest differentiation between groups and show the least within-group variation.

Similarly, foreign food can become part of the outgroup, leading to stereotyping. In the context of German cuisine, a good example of this is the image that sausages are a central part of the German diet. In many countries, such as Japan, one can buy German-style sausages or sausages from Germany which reinforces the impression that this is indeed the true authentic German culinary experience. Leaving aside the fact that many of these sausages do not quite taste like the real deal, it is also overlooked that in many regions of Germany consumption of sausage is not as often as it seems. Especially the region of Bavaria, with its Oktoberfest, has created this image

of abundant sausage and meat consumption.

It is also worth noting that the phenomenon of a country's image being influenced by the formation of in- and outgroups to differentiate others often has a long history. In the case of Japan, for example, until the end of World War II meat consumption was quite low compared to Germany but dramatically increased in the post-war era (Kagawa 1978). Since stereotypes can persist for decades, if not centuries, the image of Germany (outgroup) as a country with high meat consumption served as a differentiation to Japan (ingroup), whose diet consisted mostly of rice, vegetables, and fish.

Methods

To fully understand the perspective of Japanese people on German food, it seemed necessary to us to conduct qualitative research, since that will allow us to get the thoughts directly from the Japanese participants. As a group we decided on doing an online questionnaire that we would send to Japanese people living in Germany (or Japanese people that have lived in Germany before) in our direct contacts.

We created thirteen questions that aimed for information regarding the stay itself, the image they had of German food before and after living in Germany and their eating habits in general. Some of these questions were kept quantitative, to have comparable data.

To check if the questions work and if the used Japanese expressions are appropriate, we tested the questions with one Japanese person in the form of a structured interview. From there we created the questionnaire, added a consent form, questions regarding demographics and a field for further thoughts, furthermore we asked if they are willing to participate in a follow up or sharing photos of their food experience.

The questionnaire was sent around from July 21st and closed August 11th. Via our connections the questions reached not only people from our university but also language exchange groups and Japanese individuals that are befriended with other participants.

In this blog article we will describe the answers to this questionnaire and analyse them in context of previous academic research.

Better than expected

– Findings

A total of twenty people participated in this survey, 70% of whom were female and 30% of whom were male. In terms of age, the range included individuals from their twenties to their fifties. The most represented age group was the twenties, with eleven participants, followed by the thirties, with six participants. The total time they lived in Berlin/Germany ranged from two months to 20 years. Thirteen people stayed for less than two years, and seven people stayed for more than two years.

As the study includes many exchange students, it is not surprising that the main motivation for most participants is related to

their studies. Participants aged thirty or older stated that their motivation is either work-related or related to their spouses.

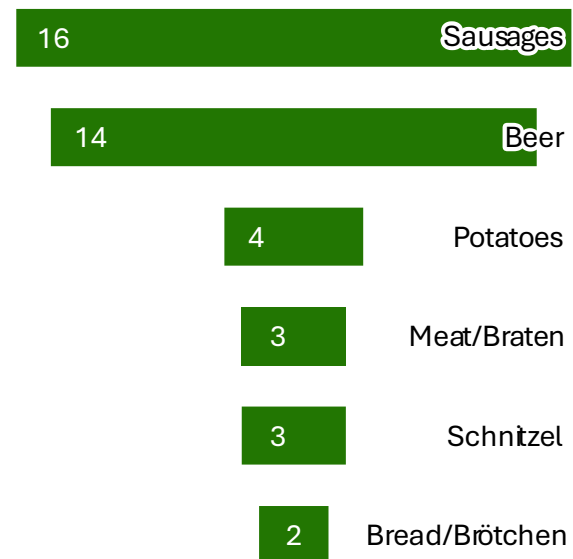


Figure 2. Foods and drinks our Japanese participants viewed as German, before coming to Germany. (Multiple mentions only.)

When asked for their association with and image of German food, nine participants answered with meat. Another four participants named sausages. German food is not only perceived as plentiful in meat, but also heavy on potatoes and beer for drinks. Some participants viewed German food as usually big portions or brown and somewhat off-putting. Most participants named sausages and beer as the specific dishes they associated with food (see Figure 2), but potatoes and different kinds of meat like *Schweinshaxe* [roasted ham hock] were also mentioned.

Generally speaking, most of the participants tried to continue to eat or cook Japanese food, but when it comes to German bread and *Brötchen* [buns] especially, they were surprised how good it tasted. One of them stated that they are now no longer satisfied with the soft Japanese bread.

The participants told us that they depend on home cooked meals – whether it was Japanese food or pasta – and complained about going out to eat, since the prices were so expensive, so that the participants could rarely go out and actively try German cuisine in their daily lives. When they went out, the reality was that they ended up eating a lot of Asian food, because if they kept eating German food, it would ruin their stomachs, so one of them lamented. The other participants ate a lot of Asian food when they were going out. Italian and Turkish cuisine were also quite popular amongst them.

Another point that they realised is that Berlin's food scene is quite multicultural. The participants mentioned *Döner* and Vietnamese food, as integral parts of the German food scene, with *Döner* being considered as classic Berlin food. One participant reasoned that in Berlin it is easy to obtain ingredients from various countries, and thus there are many possibilities and opportunities when it comes to accessing and cooking food.

One participant tried the sushi from a supermarket and was so shocked, that they called it “basically westernised fake”. This shows that even though the cuisines might spread globally, the tastes differ, leaving the tastebuds disappointed.

While potatoes and meat are supposed to be very German, the participants remarked that this was not true. They realised the consumption of meat products was less than they expected. They stated that Germans do not eat them at all at times. No wonder that the participants were

surprised by the variety of vegetarian/vegan options and the diversity of dietary options in restaurants and in supermarkets. They noticed that supermarkets stock a wide variety of organic foods, giving consumers a wide range of choices for healthy products and that they label the nutrition grade from A to E. One of the participants remarked that they had become more conscious about their health and tried not to buy products rated D or E.

In the end there were some changes in their eating habits. For some, the consumption of bread and dairy products such as cheese and yogurt has increased.

Some noted that they eat meat more often, while others complained about the prices of meat and bought less. Prices were also an important factor when it comes to eating habits. The participants stated that due to the high cost of eating out and the need to cook for themselves, they have become healthier and now rarely use ingredients or seasonings that contain additives. Dishes like ramen had to be cooked at home in Berlin, since they were not willing to spend the German restaurant prices on a bowl.

While one participant found it difficult to find traditional Japanese foods such as Natto or Tofu, fruits and vegetables for example were said to be cheap, making them easier to access. But in the end the different personalities of our participants led to different choices, some ate more vegetables while others ate less.

For those who returned to Japan it can be observed that the eating habits acquired in Germany did not last.

Berlin is a multicultural city with a lot of different restaurants, so the participants did not find the exact food stereotypes in Berlin, as much as in other cities that they lived in, but they appreciated the local differences and local cuisines.

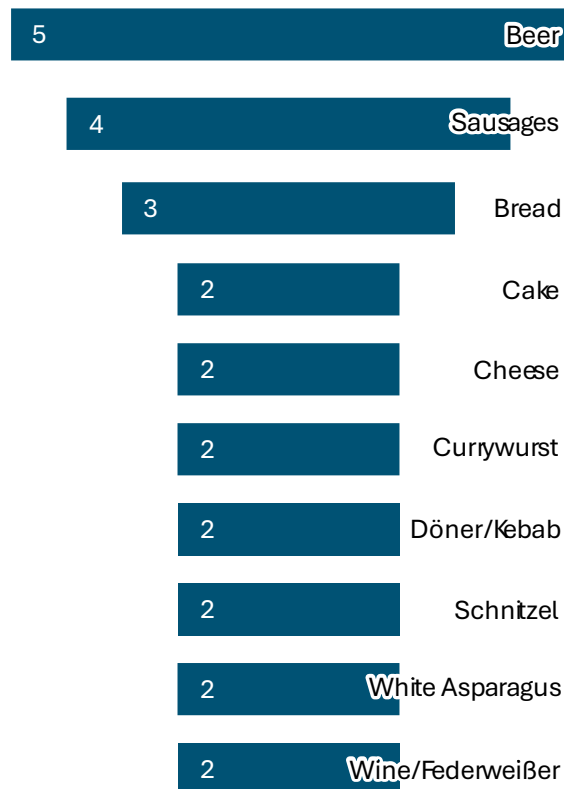


Figure 3. Ranking of German foods and drinks our participants love. (Multiple mentions only.)

What even is an exact stereotype? While the stereotype about German food is very meat-heavy, consisting of sausages and beer, they were all surprised how many nuances there actually are. Not only the variety of vegan and vegetarian food was a shock but also the different kinds of sausages and beer. They were also surprised that potatoes and meat are actually not that important, and warm meals in general, are usually dished only once a day.

In contrast to the unpleasing image of German food beforehand, the participants

fell in love with sausages, especially currywurst, beer, and bread (see Figure 3).

They found that German dishes pair well with beer, and the general eating environment is perceived as very social and relaxed, which they enjoyed.

One participant noted that the portion sizes are indeed huge and thus confirmed the image from before. Also, the importance of bread as a staple food was recognized by the participants.

In short, the images they had of German food before coming to Germany turned out true in the good aspects for most of them, and the negative traits were disproven. The dishes turned out more delicious than they thought, so much so that our list of dishes that they wanted to try ended up with twelve unique dishes: *Tote Oma*, *Labskraus*, *Blutwurst*, *Weißwurst*, ... - just to name a few.

“Liebe geht durch den Magen [Love goes through the stomach]”

– Analysis

‘Traditional food’ speaks for a country. It is traditional because it was passed down over generations and transports knowledge, theory, and practice of the past. Simply put it is a localised history lesson for the tastebuds. But this experience of traditional food is contested abroad. When food travels and disconnects from its original context it remains as nothing but a stereotype. This stereotyping leads to an emphasis on the differences and thus creating an outgroup. In the case of Japan, which had a relatively low meat consumption after WWII

compared to Germany, as well as Bavaria's well-known Oktoberfest, which is famous for beer and sausages, the image of German food is perceived as meat-heavy and with beer on the side. These images were confirmed when we asked our participants what kind of dishes they associated with Germany before actually coming to Germany: beer, sausages, pretzels, bread, and Schweinshaxe. After living in and experiencing Germany on the other hand they realised that German dishes are not necessarily always about meat. Especially when living in Berlin, the participants were surprised by its diversity and the huge amount of vegan and vegetarian options. Also, the consumption of potatoes was not as intense as expected.

However, some of the images they had were proven right: traditional meat dishes, such as *Schweinshaxe*, have indeed bigger portions. But in the end, they tried the dishes and were surprised how delicious they were.

One participant remarked that since Japanese people are not familiar with regional German cuisines, it would be nice if there were restaurants in Japan that served such dishes, so they could display German cuisines. They also wished for a wider variety of German wines exported to Japan. This shows that there could be potential for more German restaurants in Japan.

Another aspect the participants realised was the variety of local food. Some of them lived in different areas in Germany as well, and they experienced differences. One participant mentioned that they went to Mannheim and found over a hundred

variations of Schnitzel on the menus, whereas in Berlin they only had ten to twenty. Another one mentioned *Maultaschen* [German dumplings] and *Spätzle* [German noodles] as a local cuisine special to Baden and Schwaben.

Simultaneously a participant noticed similarities between German, Austrian, and Czech dishes.

In Germany there are so many vegetable-centred options, organic foods and healthy products, participants added, that they became more conscious of their own health and well-being. But at the same time one participant thought that there seem to be Germans who just eat fast food and do not care about their health, so there appear to be only two extremes. They believe that in



Figure 4. Homemade gyōza by one of our participants.

Japan, on the other hand, there is a certain “balance” between healthy vegetable-based side dishes and greasy main dishes. However, these extremes might root in the participants' perception. It is a choice to only eat one specific way. A good German meal consists of a main component, usually meat, one side of potatoes (or other starchy foods) and one side of vegetables - at least that is what our mothers taught us. Balance is something every meal should have since the goal is eating something nutritious.

But they did not only engage with German cuisine. Since the prices in German restaurants are higher than in restaurants in Japan, our participants cooked for themselves rather than eating out (for the example of *gyōza* [Japanese dumplings], see *Figure 4*). This led to them re-discovering their own country's cuisine. One participant remarked that never in their life had they cooked Ramen before, since Japanese Ramen shops are so affordable, but after coming to Germany they learnt how to cook Ramen for themselves. Others reminisced about their home cooked foods from Japan.

When eating Japanese outside or buying Japanese food from a supermarket, some of our participants also made the discovery that the taste was off and not satisfying them. However, some were disappointed and called such food “westernised fake,” while others enjoyed the twist.

So, in the end, going abroad not only led to the experience of new culinary horizons but also to face their own country's foods, putting emphasis on the traditional sentiment.

While most of them shared the opinion that they will not continue their German eating habits after returning, the influence can be seen nonetheless: some miss the German bread, others the sausages or the variety of beer and cheese. Stereotyping might be an issue at times, but in this research, rather than (dis)proving the stereotypes, this research showed that the foods associated with Germany are famous for a reason: because they are delicious.

Conclusion

Through globalisation cultures and cuisines travel across the globe. This globalization gives people the chance to try new cuisines, provide people with an image of a country, but at the same time there is a risk of global cuisines being stereotyped. Travelling, and especially living in another country, and thus experiencing the food culture gives the opportunity to try more dishes and to fully discover the rich variety that the country has to offer food wise.

In this blog article we created an online questionnaire, which we sent out to twenty Japanese people with experience living in Berlin, to find out about the perception of German food by Japanese people and how this food and their eating habits changed after living in Germany. Especially in Berlin the multicultural food landscape had an impact on the participants: they tried different cuisines of different countries but also realised that the German cuisine and the foodscape is not as meat heavy as they first thought but rather diverse with a lot of vegetarian and vegan options. Some

reported that they live now healthier and are more conscious about their food choices.

Many had critiques about the prices of eating out. This might have been a hindrance to fully experiencing German food, but it also led to the participants cooking and (re)discovering Japanese food and recipes.

When they had the chance to eat out, they found not only Asian foods but also *Döner*, bread, sausages, and beer in Berlin surprisingly delicious. Since some of the Japanese foods found in supermarkets or restaurants were westernised, not everyone liked it. This shows that stereotyping can lead to a disappointing food experience for those who know the dishes from home. Nils and his currywurst in Japan are just another example, the other way around.

Since we shared the questionnaire with our direct contacts, who then shared it with their friends and acquaintances, the range of this research was rather limited.

For further research, a range of other nationalities' perspectives would add enormously to the understanding of the

image of local food on a global scale. Furthermore, for the understanding of eating habits and how they change in the long run after living abroad, additional research would be recommended.

In the end Japanese people seem to enjoy eating out and discovering new foods, as long as they can stay connected with Japanese food. This happens by cooking for themselves at home. The image they had of German food did not change drastically from before, which means that the experienced food aligned with existing stereotypes, and that these dishes are famous precisely because they are delicious.

That means that a platter of sizzling sausages, paired with sauerkraut or potato salad and a cold, refreshing beer glistening in the sun is indeed one aspect of German food.



Figure 5. A typical German BBQ?

Figures

Figure 1: Ohnesorge, Nils (07. Dec 2023), Photograph.

Figure 2: Frank, Isabell; Ohnesorge, Nils (2025a), *'German' Food and Drinks*, Graph.

Figure 3: Frank, Isabell; Ohnesorge, Nils (2025b), *Our Japanese Participants Favourite German dishes and Drinks*, Graph.

Figure 4: Anonymous participant (Jan 2025), Photograph.

Figure 5: Frank, Isabell (July 2025), Photograph.

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