

FOOD CULTURE

On the gherkin trail

You see them in every supermarket in Berlin, but have you ever wondered about the origins of the Spreewald pickle? Why not go straight to the source? *By Hannah Stein, photos by Viktor Richardsson*

It's like Disneyland, but for pickled cucumbers. A gherkin museum? Check. Gherkin mustard? Check. Gherkin liquor? Yup. Not to mention gherkin statues, gherkin key chains, gherkin hats and a mind-boggling number of gherkin varieties... your options are endless in the *Stadt der Gurken*.

Welcome to Spreewald, the nearly 500-hectare nature reserve where the Spree river splits into dozens of channels leading through a marshy forest. Apart from being one of Brandenburg's most popular boating and hiking destinations, it produces around half the pickled cucumbers sold in Germany. For locavores, *Spreewaldgurken* are the cheapest and most ubiquitous Berlin-area delicacies you can buy; for Ostalgiests, they're among the few GDR-era products to survive and even thrive after the republic's collapse. For foodies... eh, they're all right. If you're used to French cornichons or deli-style half-sours, you might find these too soft, untenably sweet... or really sour (for the brine-pickled sort). But for residents of the area, the product is a source of both regional pride and employment. Nearly three percent of Spreewalders work in the pickle industry; even more earn their keep from the tourism *Spreewaldgurken* help bring in.

Starting in the town of Lübbenau, a 260km bike trail known as the *Gurkenradweg* takes you through verdant fields where some 40,000 tonnes of cucumbers are harvested each year, and past the processing plants where they're fermented in airtight fibreglass containers or stainless steel tanks for around five weeks, then preserved in either vinegar and sugar with a mix of add-ins including onion, dill, horseradish and various herbs (the *Gewürzgurke*) or saltwater brine (the *Salzgurke*).

In picturesque Lübbenau itself, you can walk the *Gurkenmeile*: a line of stalls along the harbour selling an unfathomable variety of homemade gherkin-related products every day except Sunday. You can try most of the food before you buy it – among the locals, the sour gherkin seems to prevail as the favourite, closely followed by gherkin mustard.

Walk about 15 minutes to Lehde, a quaint fishing village where tourists outnumber locals and the mail is still delivered by boat, and you'll find the rather bizarre *Gurkenmuseum*. A €2 entry fee, paid via machine, grants you access to an apartment-sized mock-up

of village life from around the 19th century, including a fake bedroom and farming equipment, and a wall of fame showing all the “gherkin queens” to have been crowned at Spreewald's annual *Gurkentag* festival. There's little information given about what you're looking at, though, so the whole experience is a bit confusing.

You're better off talking to one of Lehde's 130 locals, like Dirk Kleemann. The fifty-something makes his living as a punter, using a pole to propel tour boats along Spreewald's waterways at a snail's pace while pontificating on the region's history – including, of course, gherkins. “They began to cultivate cucumbers in this region around the 14th or 15th century. It was very convenient because of the climate. Humid soil and humid air throughout the year.”

In addition to a hospitable climate, the water around Spreewald is high in iron oxides – great for cucumber farming – and the soil is rich in humus, an organic compound that makes it perfect for growing the vegetable. Historians believe Dutch settlers first grew the cucumbers in the Spreewald region in the 14th century, but they became popular among Berliners in the 19th century after author Theodor Fontane evangelised them in his *Wanderungen durch den Mark Brandenburg* (see page 23). He loved the area and the gherkins so much he insisted on having a barrel delivered to his home in Berlin each year.

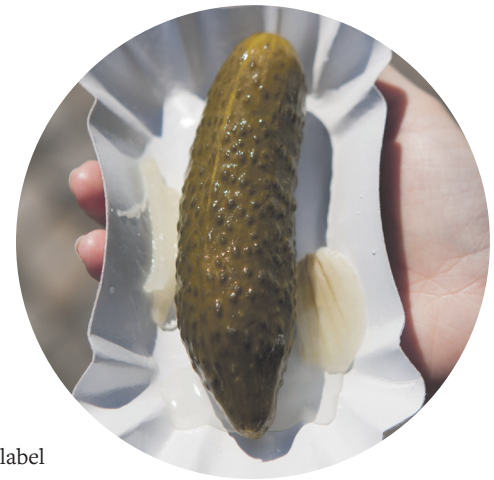
In GDR times, the region's gherkins were produced by the state-owned enterprise Spreewaldkonserve Golßen and became a highly prized food item – as seen in *Good Bye, Lenin!*, in which the protagonist frantically pastes *Spreewaldgurken* labels onto Western jars to convince his mother that the Wall hasn't fallen. Today, nearly a million jars a day are bottled by some 10 different producers, though just three brands dominate the market.

As of 1999, “*Spreewälder Gurken*” became a Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) a la Champagne – meaning no gherkins can be marketed under that name if they do not originate from the area. There are other guidelines that have to be followed in order to claim the title: artificial sweeteners (present in many other German pickles), for example, are strictly *verboten*, although “flavouring substances” are allowed. It's worth

checking the label if you're at the supermarket, or simply buying an organic version, offered since 2006.

Kleemann is fond of the traditional sour gherkin, which is pickled in a brine that is about 10 percent salt. And no, despite having lived in Spreewald his whole life, he hasn't gotten sick of them yet. “For me, they're just normal. Maybe in potato salad. Yes.”

If you're a gherkin die-hard, it may be time to start planning your trip out to Spreewald for this year's *Gurkentag*. Held in Golßen August 13 and 14, the festival celebrates the gherkin in all its various forms with over 100 vendors dedicated to sharing the fruits of their secret recipes. On the first day, the gherkin “royal couple” will be crowned in the town marketplace after a lengthy application process – wannabe gherkin queens must explain their connection to *Spreewaldgurken* and answer questions about the pickle's history. Just one wrong answer and you could be out. ■



The sour gherkin, pickled in saltwater brine, prevails as the people's favourite.

Spreewälder Gurkentag will be held August 13-14 in Golßen (RE5 train to Golßen, Niederlausitz). 10am-6pm. To get to Spreewald proper, take the RE2 train about an hour from Berlin to the station Lübbenau (Spreewald) and walk northwest into town.

Not a pickle fan? Take a slow-moving boat tour of Spreewald's canals.

