



Doner kebab becomes Germany's favorite fast food

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BERLIN — Forget about bratwurst, currywurst and other kinds of sausages — doner kebab, or shawarma, has overtaken traditional German fast food as the country's favorite snack on the go.

First brought to Berlin by Turkish immigrants in the 1970s, the grilled meat snack that comes wrapped in a pita bread with shredded lettuce, tomatoes, onions and different dressings, is now being sold everywhere in Germany from the Baltic Sea to the Bavarian Alps.

Students and late night revelers relish it as much as construction workers, children and foreign backpackers on a tight budget.

"We assume that doner kebab is the Germans' favorite fast food by now," said Yunus Ulusoy, an expert from the Center for the Study of Turkey in Essen, who has done extensive research on how the ethnic specialty conquered Germany's culinary mainstream.

The secret behind the doner's success story is not only its satisfying grilled taste, Ulusoy said, but also the big portions and its affordability — a regular doner in a pita costs only between 2.50 euros and 5 euros (\$3.30 to \$6.70).

The veal and chicken sandwiches are more popular than pizza, hamburgers, French fries and even classic German sausages, according to a poll by German *Men's Health* magazine from 2008.

"We can actually no longer speak of Turkish food, because the Germans like it even better than the Turks," said Ulusoy.

Some 15,500 doner places in Germany sell about 400 tons of doner meat every day, according to ATDID, the Association of Turkish Doner Producers in Europe. About 60,000 workers produce, cut and process the hearty delicacy with annual sales of 2.5 billion euros (\$3.3 billion).

The word doner, comes from the Turkish verb donmek, or to turn, because it is grilled for hours on a spit and cut off in razor-thin slices when the meat is crisp and brown.

In Turkey, the dish was originally made of lamb and sold only on a plate. According to the legend, it was Mahmut Aygun, a Turkish guest worker, who invented the first doner sandwich in 1971, when he sold the meat in a piece of pita bread with yoghurt dressing at City-Imbiss stand near West Berlin's main Zoo train station.

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Since then, the snack has been exported around the globe, and even countries as far away as Vietnam, now sell doner pita as "typical German students' food," as papers in Germany have repeatedly reported.

Germany is home to 2.7 million people of Turkish origin; an estimated 500,000 are German citizens.

While the dish was first mainly sold in Berlin, outlets sprang up across the nation in the 1990s, when the second generation of immigrants came of age and set up their own, family-run doner shops. Wholesale dealers who are offering meat already on the spit — between 22 to 175 pounds (10 and 80 kilograms) — have also mushroomed.

In the last 40 years, doner vendors have refined the taste and assimilated it to the gusto of German palates. Razor-thin slices of crispy chicken or veal are usually accompanied by chopped lettuce, tomatoes, cucumbers, cabbage and red onions. Customers can choose between garlic, yoghurt and spicy dressing.

"In Turkey, the dish is served without dressing, but Germans just can't eat any meat without sauce," said Ulusoy, adding that the meat itself is also much more seasoned in Germany than in its country of origin.

The recipes for the seasoning vary and are a well-kept secret. Often the meat is marinated in yogurt and flavored with bell pepper flakes, salt and black pepper, cumin and pimento. Arabic shops who sell the so-called shawarma variety, sometimes add cinnamon, coriander seeds and pomegranate juice.

Different from gyros, the Greek pork spit that contains a lot of oregano and is served in bigger chunks, doner has to be cut very thinly.

"You need to have a real feel for the meat when you slice it," said Ismet Donmez, who runs Rosenthaler Grill- und Schlemmerbuffet in Berlin. "The art is to cut thinly, but to avoid pressing the knife against the spit, otherwise all the fat will run out and the meat becomes dry."

Donmez, who immigrated from Turkey 20 years ago, sells chicken and veal doner 24 hours a day on a busy square in the city's Mitte neighborhood. He insists that his workers cut the meat by hand, using long knives with rounded tips.

When asked about the so-called doner robot, an automatic doner cutting machine that was invented in Izmir, Turkey, and recently introduced at Germany's first doner trade fair, Donmez only snubbed.

"Ten years ago, they tried to introduce electronic knives and that also didn't work out," he said. "We're going to continue doing everything manually, that's the best way."

The long line of customers forming in front of his store, seemed to prove him right.

"I've come here every day for lunch since I arrived in Berlin," said Ofir Steinberg, an Israeli tourist, who was visiting the city for a week. "It's the best shawarma I've ever had. It tastes even better than at home."

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