

An Introduction to Hamburg's Culinary Scene: Regional Specialties and Ingredients

Hamburg cuisine offers a variety of specialties reflecting Northern Germany's maritime heritage and regional produce. The city's culinary scene is built upon seafood and potato-based dishes. In contrast to the heavier fare of Southern Germany, a lighter, fish-centric diet is prevalent in Hamburg. As an international port, it has facilitated the arrival of spices and foreign foods into this region of Germany for centuries, greatly influencing traditional foods.

Regional Specialties:

- **Fischbrötchen:** Widely consumed in Northern Germany, this "fish sandwich" stands out for its simplicity. The sandwich is commonly made with pickled herring (Bismarckhering) or marinated herring (Matjes), onions, pickles, and remoulade sauce. It can also be prepared with different fish, such as salmon or mackerel. The options are as diverse as the food stalls that offer them. One can eat fried fish or fish cakes, North Sea shrimp, or crab meat. Fischbrötchen tastes best when eaten while feeling the breeze of the Elbe River or the North Sea on one's face.
- **Labbskaus:** This hearty sailor's dish, native to Northern Germany, consists of cured corned beef, mashed potatoes, and beetroot. It may be served with additional ingredients such as fried egg, pickles, and rollmops (pickled, rolled herring fillets). Although its origins are somewhat unclear, the dish was most likely invented in the 16th century, when it was typically eaten by poor people, sailors, and seafarers because cured and tinned food was cheap and could endure long journeys. Variations of this dish are known in Scandinavia and even in Liverpool, England, as 'scouse'.
- **Finkenwerder Scholle:** This traditional fish dish is named after a district of Hamburg that was once a fishing village. Plaice (Scholle) from the North Sea is baked or pan-fried with bacon, onions, and shrimp. Plaice is one of the most frequently consumed fish in Northern Germany and was formerly a staple of fish and chips.
- **Grünkohl:** During winter, kale, known in German as Grünkohl, is served in Northern Germany in a manner that does not quite live up to its reputation as a healthy superfood. The kale is cooked for several hours and served with smoked pork, one or two types of sausage, as well as boiled or fried potatoes. The kale season starts after the first winter frost and is often celebrated by groups of friends or colleagues who go on a 'Kohlfahrt' - literally, a kale tour. In essence, they walk for a few hours playing drinking games and end the day at a restaurant eating their fill of grünkohl and dancing until morning.
- **Aalsuppe:** The earliest recipe for Hamburg eel soup, Aalsuppe, originates from a cookbook dating back to 1788. Some argue that this dish traditionally did not contain eel but rather was a concoction made from leftover ingredients. Today, this sweet and sour soup is prepared with broth, cured beef, vegetables, stewed fruit, and dumplings, as well as a bit of eel. Some posit that the latter was added to avoid surprising and disappointing the city's guests. Originally, it meant "everything soup" and was made from whatever was available in the kitchen. Although eel was not originally included, it is often added in restaurants. The soup is typically served as a main course.
- **Rote Grütze:** After tasting hearty fish and meat dishes, indulge in some of the local sweet delights—for instance, the mouth-watering Rote Grütze, cooked from red summer berries and served with milk, vanilla sauce, or ice cream. This dish was brought to the region by the

Danes but has become a staple of North German cuisine. While the traditional color of this fruit dish is red, green, yellow, and blue variations can also be found on some cafe and restaurant menus.

- **Franzbrötchen:** A local specialty is the Franzbrötchen, which literally translates to French roll. You won't find these sweet pastries, made with generous amounts of butter and cinnamon, anywhere other than in Hamburg and the surrounding towns. According to the story, their creation was inspired by the French croissant, which was brought to Hamburg during the occupation of Napoleon's troops in the 19th century. Traditionally made only with sugar and cinnamon, most bakeries today offer various types of Franzbrötchen with, for example, marzipan, chocolate chips, or pumpkin seeds. Variations include those with raisins, chocolate, macadamia nuts, marzipan, or pumpkin seeds.
- **Bratkartoffeln:** Fried potatoes, Bratkartoffeln, are a classic and versatile German dish. Traditionally, they are diced or sliced, buttered, and salted. Subsequently, they can be combined with bacon, ham, onions, vegetables, and various spices.
- **Königsberger Klopse:** This is a hearty dish consisting of meatballs in a white sauce. It is served with boiled potatoes and sliced pickled beets.
- **Currywurst:** This is a street food that has become an integral part of Germany's culinary heritage. It is made by serving boiled and then fried sausage, whole or sliced, with a smooth and rich curry-spiced tomato sauce. This fast food, consisting of grilled pork sausage topped with curry sauce, is widely consumed in Germany.
- **Kartoffelpuffer:** German potato pancakes are a staple in restaurants, a homemade classic, and a popular street food. They are prepared with a thick batter consisting of grated raw potatoes, flour, and eggs. Typically, they are shaped into flat, round discs and pan-fried briefly until golden brown and crispy.
- **Leberkäse:** This is a traditional product consisting of minced meat seasoned with onions and formed into a meaty loaf. The loaf is characterized by a crispy crust on the outside, while the inside remains succulent and pink.
- **Pannfisch:** Originating as a means to utilize leftover fish and potatoes, this dish has become more refined over time. It is prepared with fresh, pan-fried fish and a light mustard sauce. Baked versions are also available.
- **Brathering:** Fried marinated herring is consumed in Northern Germany as a lunchtime snack or fast food. After frying, the fish are marinated in white vinegar, onions, salt, pepper, bay leaves, mustard seeds, and a pinch of sugar.
- **Hamburger Hummersuppe:** Lobster soup is served with whipped cream, dill, and a dash of cognac. It is a creamy lobster bisque featuring rich flavors and generous chunks of lobster meat.
- **Schwarzenauer:** Schwarzsauer is a traditional dish in Northern Germany and formerly East Prussia. Prepared with a spice mixture in vinegar-water, it involves a unique black pudding infused with vinegar, reminiscent of the Spartan black broth.
- **Birnen, Bohnen und Speck:** Green beans cooked with pears and bacon, a type of stew.

Regional Ingredients:

- **Fish:** Hamburg's maritime location has led to fish playing a significant role in its cuisine. Various fish, such as herring, cod, and eel, are used in dishes like Fischbrötchen and Hamburger Aalsuppe. Seafood such as lobster (Hummer), abalone (Meerohr), vongole clams (Muschel), shrimp (Krabben), caviar (Kaviar), oysters (Auster) are utilized. Fish such as flounder (Scholle), smelt (Stint), and pickled herring (Matjes) are also frequently consumed.
- **Potatoes:** Potatoes form the base of many traditional Hamburg dishes, such as Bratkartoffeln and Kartoffelpuffer.
- **Beef:** Corned beef is an essential component of Labskaus.
- **Pork:** Bacon and ham are commonly used ingredients in Bratkartoffeln.
- **Beetroot:** Beetroot is used in Labskaus and as a side dish alongside Königsberger Klopse.
- **Beer:** Hamburg has a rich beer brewing tradition. Beer is widely consumed to accompany meals.
- **Gin:** Hamburg has experienced a resurgence in gin production in recent years. Locally produced gins are used in cocktails such as the Gin Basil Smash.
- **Chocolate:** Hamburg is home to several boutique chocolate manufacturers. Producers such as Meybol Cacao craft chocolates from specialty cacao varieties, including Chuncho and Criollo, sourced from Peru.
- **Meatballs (Klösschen) and Croquettes (Kroketten):** Particularly those prepared with smoked meat, lobster, or shrimp.
- **Desserts:** Butter shortbread (Buttermürbeteig), almond macaroons (Makronen), truffles (Trüffel), and pear rice pudding (Quetschmadam).

References

- [HTML] <https://www.tasteatlas.com/best-dishes-in-hamburg>
- [HTML] <https://www.hamburg.com/visitors/dine-and-drink/food-20500>
- [HTML] <https://theculturetrip.com/europe/germany/articles/8-foods-you-must-try-while-visiting-hamburg>
- [HTML] <https://www.tasteatlas.com/hamburg>
- [HTML] <https://www.cityunscripted.com/travel-magazine/must-eat-foods-in-hamburg-germany-and-where-to-eat-them>
- [HTML] <https://www.quick-german-recipes.com/hamburg.html>
- [HTML] <https://germanytravel.blog/cities/hamburg/food/>