

German markets serve up an Old World Christmas

Christkindlesmarkets offer a unique blend of the sacred and commercial worlds

BY WENDY O'DEA
FRANKFURT, GERMANY

There are things I love and hate about the Christmas season. For example, I love shopping, but I hate standing in long lines to pay inflated prices when surrounded by frantic, Scrooge-like shoppers.

So imagine my delight when I discovered a place where everyone mingles casually, drinking wine and munching on holiday treats, while perusing aisles full of unique gifts at reasonable prices.

The German Christmas markets, or *Christkindlesmarkets*, are a tradition that has endured since the Middle Ages. A unique blend of the sacred and commercial worlds, they consist of a multitude of wooden kiosks that line town squares and offer an Old World feel while selling an array of traditional gifts and foods. Sweets and fanciful *liebkuchen* (gingerbread cookies) hang on ribbons bearing endearing sentiments such as "the dear granny," and choirs in 200-year-old churches sing of Christ's birth.

My friend Jay and I arrived in early December to sheets of rain falling from a dark sky. However, I knew from a previous trip to Oktoberfest that Germans aren't about to let a little nasty weather keep them from a good party. And I wasn't going to let it keep me from two of my favourite things: eating and shopping.

After manoeuvring our umbrellas through a crowd of revellers in Dresden, we got our hands on a couple mugs of Germany's popular Christmas elixir. Deep, red and steaming with an aroma of cloves and cinnamon, it quickly becomes evident why *gluhwein* ("the wine that makes you glow") has been the drink of choice at these chilly gatherings for centuries. The stalls and trailers serving it, along with grog and other libations, are packed with merry makers and are as ubiquitous at the markets as a pint of Guinness in an Irish pub.

Jay and I decided not to limit our diet to *gluhwein*, and ordered up kraut and sausages from a massive flat skillet from which steam emanated like hot breath in frigid air. The combined smells of the dishes were intense — spicy and sweet, pungent and piercing.

After dinner, we indulged in a big chunk of buttery Dresdener *Christstollen*, the world-renowned Christmas cake mixed with dried fruit and sprinkled with powdered sugar. Although available all over Germany, Dresden's *stollen* is re-

garded as the finest. Legend has it the name *Christstollen* was a result of its appearance — a long oval log which, when wrapped, is said to resemble the swaddled Christ child.

Each day I did my own version of German carbo-loading to prepare for a marathon of shopping, scanning booths for the perfect gifts, scrutinizing each item to ensure its solid construction and digging into my pocket for a wad of euros. Prices were reasonable and I was able to purchase gifts for \$10 to \$20 each.

Craftsmen work throughout the year to produce an array of items. Among them are miniature, half-timbered ceramic homes, brown with white trim, reminiscent of a Hansel and Gretel cottage. The small dwellings hold tealight candles and incense, the scent billowing out the tiny chimney.

Perhaps the most charming items on offer are the wooden soldier nutcrackers painted red and green with hinged jaws begging for a shell to crack. Carved-wood ornaments of all sizes and shapes, from reindeer to ballerinas, fill booths suspended on red ribbons and waiting for a tree to call home. Santa Claus, Kris Kringle and Father Christmas statues of widely varying dimensions watch as visitors admire them.

It's not surprising that Germans are big on Christmas. Many North American traditions are direct imports, including the Christmas tree. Simply adorned with more than 4,000 miniature white lights, Frankfurt's tree is perched above the restored half-timbered buildings framing Romerberg Square. It's enough to prompt anyone to launch into a rendition of *O Tannenbaum*.

In fact, we discovered after arriving in Frankfurt that nothing about the market is small. Stalls and kiosks snake their way through half the city. Booth after booth appears along the streets, down the centre of shopping districts, outside hotels, shops and churches.

The city is packed with merchants selling gifts, serving up yet more *gluhwein*, mashing potatoes for pancakes with applesauce, and rotating the sizzling wursts that hang on monstrous metal grills suspended with heavy chains.

It was at one of the food counters that we recovered from shopping and refuelled. It was also here that we spotted a sophisticated woman, probably pushing 70, wrapped in fur and sitting with friends. She was swank and refined, stroking a small lap dog, but she could knock back a



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Kraut and sausages cooked on massive flat skillets are a festive favourite at Germany's Christkindlesmarkets.

gluhwein with the best of 'em.

We sat watching centuries-old traditions and everyday modern moments blend together effortlessly. Had that elderly woman been wearing a corset under a hoop dress, I suspect the scene would be oddly similar to that which took place on this spot 100 years ago.

She saw us eyeing her as she downed a shot of hard liquor then casually and elegantly lifted her finger to order up another round of *gluhwein*. Confidently and without hesitation, she adjusted her fur, looked at us and, in the true spirit of Christmas, winked and threw her head back laughing.

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If you go

WHERE TO STAY

Kempinski Hotel: Taschenberg 3, Dresden; phone: 1-800-426-3135; fax: 49 (351) 491 2812; Web: www.kempinski.com.

Gastehaus Mezcalero: Königsbrucker Strasse 64, Dresden; phone: 49 (351) 810 770; www.mezcalero.de.

Steigenberger Metropolitan: Poststrasse 6, Frankfurt; phone: 49 (69) 506 0700; or visit the website at www.metropolitan.steigenberger.de.

INFORMATION

The Germany National Tourist Office in Canada: phone: 416-968-1685; e-mail: info@gnto.ca; Web: www.cometogermany.com.