GOING “BIO” IN GERMANY

BY SHARON HUDGINS

“BIO” means “organic” in Germany – organic food products, as well as non-edibles such as textiles and paints. And the Germans have gone BIO in a big way. Although only six percent of their agricultural land is devoted to certified organic food production, Germans are the second largest consumers of organic foods in the world (behind only the United States, with a much bigger population) and the largest importer of organic food products in the European Union.

Both the European Union and member countries like Germany have strict rules regarding products that can be labeled “organic,” from the seeds for growing crops, to the animals who provide meat, eggs, and dairy products, to the processors, packagers, shippers, and servers of these commodities (butchers, bakers, cereal makers, chefs). In general, BIO foods are produced without chemical or synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, antibiotics and hormones, artificial colorings and flavorings, and any preservatives beyond the natural ones already present in the foods. Animals must be treated humanely and allowed to graze in open spaces, not confined in feedlots. Radiated foods and genetically modified organisms (GMOs) are prohibited.

The aim of the BIO movement is not only to provide safe, healthy food for consumers, but also to protect and preserve the land and water, and to make farming, viticulture, and animal husbandry sustainable at the local level, while also providing a living for the producers themselves. Since 1989, Germany has promoted organic farming with subsidies from public funds, at both the federal and state levels.

Organic farming has a long history in Germany, starting of course before the development of chemical fertilizers and pesticides when all farming was “organic” by definition. However, polluting processed foods through unsafe additives has a long history, too, from bread baked with alum, chalk, plaster of Paris, or sawdust (to use less wheat and make the loaves heavier), to beer, wine, milk, coffee, tea, and cooking oil adulterated with harmful substances. The Bavarian Reinheitsgebot (Beer Purity Law) of 1516 – allowing only the use of water, barley, and hops in making beer – is an early example of German food safety regulation (although there were also economic reasons for its promulgation).

Consumers in Germany today seek out BIO foods because they believe these products are fresher, healthier, better tasting, and less harmful to the environment, even though they’re often more expensive than non-BIO foods. Some people also prefer to eat only BIO-certified meats, for moral reasons.

And another growing segment of BIO buyers includes people with allergies to gluten, lactose, peanuts,
food colorings, and other natural or artificial substances.

Forty years ago, the only places to buy organic foods in Germany were at small Reformhauser (health food stores) and from a few vendors at local farmers’ markets. However, as a 2006 article in Der Spiegel noted, “Organic foods in Germany are no longer associated with Birkenstock-wearing hippies or overly protective mothers. Organic has gone mainstream. Of course, mom and pop health foods shops still exist...but there are also more than three hundred [some sources say two hundred] supermarkets across the country devoted exclusively to trade in pesticide, antibiotic, and hormone-free fruits, vegetables, cereals, meats, and just about everything else imaginable. And it doesn’t have to be expensive. Discounters like Lidl and Aldi all have their own inexpensive ‘bio-label’ products.”

In addition to the new all-BIO supermarket chains like Basic, Eat Organic, and Supernatural, most standard grocery stores sell at least some organic products, too. German customers look for package labels certifying BIO authenticity, such as Bio-Siegel, Demeter, Bioland, Naturland, Biokreis, and Ecoland, as well as the European Union’s own organic logo. And the market for these organic foods continues to grow. Recent studies show that up to forty percent of all Germans buy BIO products at least once a month, and twenty percent purchase BIO products weekly.

The BIO movement has even expanded to certain hotels and restaurants, too. On a recent trip to northeastern Germany, I visited Gutshaus Stellshagen, a 1920s-era manor house converted to a country hotel, restaurant, spa, and wellness center. In 2007, it was designated the first “BIO-Hotel” in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. Restaurants belonging to the BIO-Hotels association offer only organic foods. Some serve only vegetarian dishes, whereas others have BIO-certified meat, fish, and fowl on their menus. Despite their emphasis on healthy eating, these BIO restaurateurs are not fanatic food faddists, and they’re certainly not prudes. In addition to cooking delicious dishes that would satisfy the taste buds of any culinary connoisseur, many of their chefs offer wines, beers, liquors, and cocktails made only with organically grown ingredients.

After an excellent vegetarian buffet lunch at Gutshaus Stellshagen’s restaurant, I toured the beautiful gardens and grounds where the proprietors – an American from New York and his German wife – grow many of the foods (including edible flowers) served at the hotel. The couple also gave me a copy of an interesting cookbook sold in their gift shop: Kochlust PUR: Die kulinarische Reise durch die BIO Hotels geht weiter, the second of two books comprising recipes from twenty-two BIO-Hotel chefs in German-speaking countries, illustrated with color photos of their ultra-modern dishes, dispelling any notion of BIO foods’ being dull on either the palate or the plate.
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How about a salad of baked goat cheese with an herb- and hazelnut crust? A pretty green soup made with fresh spinach, onion, and apple, spiced with curry? Lamb cooked with honey, white wine, and fresh rosemary? Wild venison medallions with pine nuts? Chocolate brownie torte, or crème brûlée with absinthe? Are you hungry yet? Go BIO yourself by making the following recipes with organic ingredients available at many stores and farmers’ markets here in the United States, too. *Guten appetit!*

**WEBSITES:**
www.bio-hotels.info
www.gutshaus-stellshagen.de
www.bmelv.de/SharedDocs/Standardartikel/EN/Agriculture/OrganicFarming/OrganicFarmingInGermany.html

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**CARROT, APPLE, & RAISIN SALAD**

This colorful, easy-to-make salad can be prepared a day in advance and refrigerated until needed. The ginger in the dressing provides a surprising zing.

1 pound of carrots, peeled and shredded (about 3 1/2 to 4 cups of shredded carrots, lightly packed)
1 large apple, peeled, cored, and diced into 1/4-inch pieces
1/2 to 1 cup golden raisins
1/2 cup sunflower or canola oil
2 tablespoons apple cider vinegar
1 tablespoon honey
1 teaspoon ground ginger
1/2 teaspoon salt

Toss the carrots, apple pieces, and raisins together in a large bowl. Whisk together the oil, vinegar, honey, ginger, and salt in a smaller bowl until the mixture becomes emulsified (cloudy and thick). Pour this dressing over the carrot mixture and toss very well to coat all the pieces with dressing. Cover and refrigerate until needed.

Let the salad sit, uncovered, at room temperature for 15 minutes, then toss it again just before serving.

Makes approximately 5 cups (6 to 8 servings).

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**BAKED GOAT CHEESE WITH GREEN SALAD**

Recipe adapted from Kochlust PUR (Ludwig Gruber, 2010).

1/2 cup fine dry bread crumbs
1/2 cup grated hazelnuts or walnuts
2 tablespoons minced fresh parsley, firmly packed

2 tablespoons minced fresh chives, firmly packed
Finely grated zest of 1 lemon
1 large garlic clove, pressed
1/2 teaspoon coarsely ground black pepper
1/6 teaspoon salt
1/4 cup good quality olive oil
1 pound (16 ounces) log-shaped goat cheese (approximately 6 inches long, 2 inches wide), chilled
6 to 9 cups mixed fresh salad greens, tossed with an olive oil and balsamic vinegar dressing

Crusty bread rolls (accompaniment)

Preheat the oven to 425° F. In a shallow bowl, mix together the bread crumbs, grated nuts, minced parsley and chives, lemon zest, garlic, pepper, and salt. Add the olive oil and mix well again. Slice the goat cheese log crosswise into 6 equal-size pieces about 1-inch thick. Pat the cheese slices lightly by hand to smooth out the edges and form them into 6 identical rounds. Using your hands, coat each round of cheese thoroughly and evenly with the bread crumb mixture, using up all the coating in the bowl.

Place the cheese rounds 2 inches apart on a baking sheet and bake on the middle rack of the oven for 8 to 10 minutes (depending on the thickness of the cheese).

Divide the dressed salad greens evenly among 6 large salad plates, putting 1 to 1-1/2 cups of salad on half of each plate and 1 piece of hot goat cheese on the other half. Serve immediately, accompanied by crusty bread rolls.

Makes 6 servings as an appetizer.

Sharon Hudgins is celebrating her fifteenth year as the food columnist for German Life.