

Muenster Munching

German foods spice up a daytrip to north-central Texas.

Text and photos by RANDY MALLORY

A north-central Texas restaurateur once told me, “Those Muenster women sure know how to cook!” Turns out he was only half right. The men of Muenster also know a thing or two about hearty eating, as my wife, Sallie Evans, and I discovered on a recent daytrip of “Essen und Trinken”...eating and drinking German style.

We start our Muenster munching on U.S. 82 with breakfast at Rohmer's Restaurant, owned by Troy and Dina Sicking and their son, Jason. Dina's parents, Emil and Agnes Rohmer, started the eatery 50 years ago, and the family proudly serves German bratwurt, schnitzel, and Rieben sandwiches, plus typical American fare and made-from-scratch pies. Their homemade apricot jam, slathered on toast, nicely tops off our substantial breakfast of eggs, bacon, ham, and hashbrowns. In order to eat our way through Muenster, we pledge to pace ourselves...a pledge I quickly break by savoring a Rohmer's' buttery cinnamon roll. No regrets.

We walk off breakfast along Main Street to Muenster's culinary claim to fame, Fischer's Meat Market and grocery. Our jaws drop at meat and cheese counters spanning half the building, a hotel and car dealership of the 1920s. Forty kinds of sausages—smoked German sausage (top seller), knackwurst, Polish links, kielbasa, and wieners—snuggle by slabs of sugar-cured bacons and hams. We ogle another two dozen or so cheeses, some flavored with spices and peppers and smoked on site. The adjacent specialty department boasts several hundred Fischer's-label dressings and pickles, preserves and syrups, relishes and sauces, mixes and marinades. “We're sort of a giant picnic basket,” says manager Steve Taylor who, like owners Steven and Penny Fisher, is related to the Fischer brothers who founded the market

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85 years ago. *[NOTE: the owners' last name is spelled without a 'c'...because of a spelling change related to anti-German sentiments around WWI.]*

We pack up smoked German sausage and peppered cheddar (later enjoyed with French bread and fruit). As we leave, the market's rare Glockenspiel chimes the hour with animated characters—including a milkmaid, butcher, and cow—rotating from a clock tower.

We fill the morning poking our heads into nearby shops. At the Bird's Nest, fresh flowers and garden supplies blend with eclectic antiques that Cindy Bartush packs into a 1910 drygoods store. "Plants and antiques, that's what I love," she tells us, "so I put them all into one place." We love her funky bench on the sidewalk out front—two short wooden bears holding a bench seat between them. "A fellow came by a couple of years ago looking for work and pulled out a chainsaw to carve this and a few other pieces around town," Bartush explains. Later we run across another of his works, a totem-like sculpture behind Fischer's that turns a dead cedar tree into an owl habitat.

In Muenster's oldest business—Gehrig's Hardware, opened in the 1890s—proprietor Jim Gehrig walks me through his jumble of sporting goods, cookware, nuts and bolts, and even a working treadle-powered stitching machine used by his great-grandfather to repair harnesses. Down the street, a clutter of old model trains, toys, tools, and a lapidary collection draws me, improbably, into the front room of Bob's Automotive. My favorite surprise: a copper whiskey still that mechanic-collector Bob Walterscheid's Grandpa Kleiss employed a century ago.

Back to our mission, we eat lunch at Doc's Bar & Grill. Jo Ann Sicking and her sister, Norma Bayer, proffer a tavern atmosphere, with upstairs bar-gameroom and biergarten out back. Sallie picks a garden salad and brothy chicken-tortilla soup. I grab a grilled Rubeen sandwich on rye bread. We share a colossal slice of moist, nutty carrot cake, iced to the hilt by Jo Ann's daughter, Jessamy Hermes.

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Doc's building housed Muenster's hospital in the 1940s, a fact we confirm, after lunch, at the Muenster Museum. A period hospital bed, medical equipment, and nurse uniforms recall the old clinic. We marvel at an 1870s playable pump-organ from Sacred Heart Catholic Church. The museum's kitchen—with wood-burning stove, sausage stuffers, and waffle irons—preps us for our mid-afternoon snack back on U.S. 82.

Surprisingly, a convenience store houses a busy bakery called Bayer's Kolonialwaren und Bakerei (German for grocery wares and bakery). Charles Bayer opened the shop in the 1970s, and current owners John and Darla Pollard fill cases with decorated cookies, donuts, and kolaches. Most folks come for their seven styles of German bread and 11 flavors of Viennese strudel. In fact, the Pollards deliver strudels to 14 restaurants within 75 miles. We pick the most popular flavor, apple and Danish cream cheese, and revel in its cinnamon-rich taste and flaky crust.

Re-energized, we peruse the nearby Muenster Antique Mall. Jeannine Flusche operates the 50-vendor emporium in a former grocery built by her father in 1958. We enjoy sifting through classic antiques and collectibles, some cleverly displayed in former meat lockers. Several booths offer German items such as beer steins, handcrafted nutcrackers, and lead crystal vases.

A few blocks west on U.S. 82, we slip into the tiny tasting room of Weinhof Winery, operated by Brenda and Larry Thompson along with their winery in Forestburg, 17 miles away. Larry touts his fruit wines—pear, plum, and blackberry—and small-batch grape wines made from traditional German recipes. Not much for sweet wines, we sample an exotic-sounding blend of blackberry wine and Merlot, called Muenster Red, which we find surprisingly dry and refreshing.

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We finish our culinary excursion at The Center Restaurant, where Jacob Pagel and his sister, Glenda Pagel Russell, have specialized in homestyle German fare since 1988. We settle into the eatery's wood-paneled tavern overlooking the biergarten. Sallie chooses a wiener schnitzel (think German chicken-fried steak) topped with grilled onions and bell peppers. I go for the sausage platter, featuring Pagel's sausage (made on site), plus bratwurst and German sausage from Fischer's. Sides include warm German potato salad and pungent red cabbage.

To wash it down, Sallie goes for her usual glass of Chardonnay, and I select a yeasty glass of German beer, a Paulaner Oktoberfest. And we raise a toast to our successful day at dining and drinking our way through Muenster: "Prosit!"

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Muenster

lies on US 82 in north-central Texas 15 miles west of Gainesville. For visitor information call the Muenster Chamber of Commerce at 940/759-2227; www.muensterchamber.com. Muenster's popular Germanfest celebration is held annually the last full weekend of April.

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RESOURCES: all area code 940

--Rohmer's: Troy & Dina (Deena) Sicking; 759-2973

--Fischer's Market: Store Manager Steve Taylor 759-4211

--Bob's Automotive: Bob Walterscheid 759-4474

--Bird's Nest, Cindy Bartush; 727-9888

--Gehrig's Hardware; Jim Gehrig, 759-4112

--Doc's Bar & Grill; Jo Sicking; 759 3627;

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--Muenster Museum, Janie Hartman, 759-2227 (mus); 759-4311 (wk)

--Muenster Antique Mall, Jeannine Flusche; 759-5033

--Bayer's Kolonialwaren; 759-2822; John or Darla Pollard

--Weinhof Winery, Larry Thompson 972-571-7192

--The Center Restaurant, Jacob Pagel, Glenda Pagel Russell, 759-2910

--Texas Handbook Online