

## Schaumtorte, Cheese, and Cherry Pie: Food in Wisconsin German-speaking Communities

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When asked, most Americans can come up with a food that is central to or representative of their state or region. They might even be able to name foods they associate with other regions, while yet other regional foods even have their name in the title, like Philly Cheesesteak, Texas Toast, New York-style pizza, or Chicago-style hot dog. Wisconsin is no different, and many Wisconsinites today pride themselves on being known for brats and cheese curds (Steinbrinck 2014; Leggin 2018). Food is central to culture and in this paper, I show how Wisconsin German Heritage Speakers and monolingual English speakers in the same community address food and food-related topics based on interviews conducted with 29 participants in Dodge County, Wisconsin in 2013.

Food and drink rituals are a part of cultural heritage maintenance (Lum & de Ferrière le Vayer 2016), and discussion has arisen at previous WILAs about food and drink as a tool of language maintenance by heritage speakers. How this varies across heritage languages in the US is addressed in this paper as well as papers proposed others working with Scandinavian languages in Utah and the Midwest regarding language use and food and drink rituals.

I give an overview of food that was offered to interviewees as a courtesy during the interview process, remembered language domains which included or revolved around food, and unsolicited comments and discussions of food. At the time of these interviews no specific questions related to food were included in the elicitation materials. Rather interviewees noticed that food topics came up when consultants were completing translation sentences, such as “I love cherry pie”, as well as in the free response section of the interviews. These unsolicited statements show consultants’ perceptions about culture and heritage and how they perceive their affiliations with in- and out-groups of “Germanness” in their community.

Major food topics among Wisconsin German Heritage Speakers are often tangentially related to foodways in Wisconsin, with a focus on where German could be spoken, such as at local stores. Several speakers mention cheese factories as places of employment where German was spoken, even after most public domains had switched to English. Others opened discussion of food at holidays and birthday parties, especially of specific dessert items such as *Schaumtorte* ‘a kind of meringue dessert’, *Blitztorte*, *Strudel*, *Grapsen/Krapfen* ‘a fried dough dessert, like a donut’, and other baked goods.

Perhaps most striking in these interviews was the apparent interest and passion for food from non-speakers or ‘remembers’, rather than heritage speakers themselves. Differences between Wisconsin German Heritage Speakers and monolingual English-speaking community members are highlighted via the case-study of a married couple, in which the wife, who grew up speaking German, considered both the use of the German language and German foods to be part of her German heritage and she says, “*I never really think about it, because it’s all I’ve ever really known was German.*” This is in stark contrast to her husband, who grew up monolingual English-speaking and mentions their connection to German heritage through food several times declaring things like, “*We can make ‘Kuchen’ like any German can make ‘Kuchen’. We can make it better.*” and after offering us something to eat, “*See that’s our German heritage see. You gotta have something before you go.*”

## References

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