

Thanksgiving in Germany



— A church altar *Erntedank* display in Germany.
PHOTO: From a video by Elena Körtels

***Erntedank*: Thanksgiving Customs in Germany and the USA**

In the German-speaking countries Thanksgiving is an autumn harvest celebration called *Erntedank* or *Erntedankfest* ("harvest thanksgiving festival"). The observance usually takes place in September or October. Similar harvest festivals are common in many countries and regions around the globe.

In Switzerland, many communities observe *Erntedank* in mid-September. In Germany the observance is often on the first Sunday in October, which is usually also the first Sunday following *Michaelstag* or Michaelmas (29 Sept.). This puts the Germanic thanksgiving closer to Canada's Thanksgiving holiday in early October, rather than the American observance in late November, but there is no official date or any nationwide observance as in the US and Canada. Not even the "official" *Erntedank* date of the first Sunday in October, recommended by the German Catholic Church since 1972, is followed uniformly everywhere in Germany, nor is it included in the Church calendar of official observances. In some areas, *Erntedank* coincides with the wine harvest and takes place as late as November.



— An *Erntekrone* (harvest crown)
hangs in a church in Germany.
PHOTO: From a video by Elena Körtels

The typical German, Austrian or Swiss thanksgiving celebration (*Erntedankfest*) is usually a rural harvest time observance with church services, a parade, music, and a country fair atmosphere. In larger cities, *Erntedankfest* is sponsored by Protestant and Catholic churches. A typical German church observance begins with a sermon and perhaps some choral singing. Then comes the thanksgiving procession, complete with the presenting of the traditional "harvest crown" (*Erntekrone*) for the harvest queen (*Erntekönigin*). (Note: The queen gets a crown much smaller than the one in the photo above.). Later in the day, there's more music, dancing, and food. In some places, there is also an evening service followed by a lantern and torch parade (*Laternenumzug*) for the children — and even fireworks!

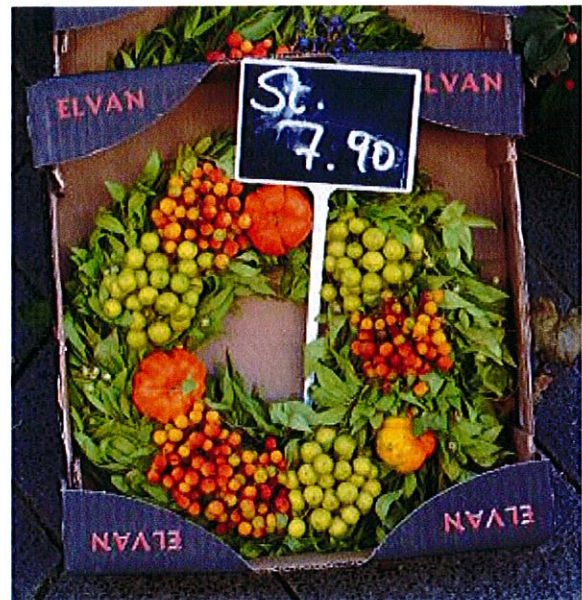
Some aspects of the New World's Thanksgiving celebration have taken root in Europe. Over the past few decades, *Truthahn* (turkey) has become a popular dish, widely available in German-speaking countries. The New World bird is valued for its tender, juicy meat, slowly usurping the more traditional goose (*Gans*) on special occasions. (And like the goose, it can be stuffed and prepared in similar fashion.) However, the Germanic *Erntedankfest* is still not a big day of family get-togethers and feasting like Thanksgiving in

America. But like Thanksgiving, following the *Erntedankfest* celebration, the unused food is distributed to the needy.

There are some turkey substitutes, usually so-called *Masthühnchen*, or chickens bred to be fattened up for more meat. *Der Kapaun* is a castrated rooster that is fed until he's heavier than the average rooster and ready for a feast. *Die Poularde* is the hen equivalent, a sterilized pullet that is also fattened up (*gemästet*). But this is not something done just for *Erntedank*.

While Thanksgiving in the US is the traditional start of the Christmas shopping season, in Germany the unofficial starting date is [Martinstag](#) on November 11. (It used to be more significant as the start of 40 days of fasting before Christmas.) But things don't really get started for *Weihnachten* until the first *Adventsonntag* (Advent Sunday) around December 1. (For more about German Christmas customs, see our [Christmas](#) pages.)

As you can tell from the above, the European thanksgiving observance is not anything like the more secular traditional family holiday and feast in Canada and the United States. Unless they live in a rural area or are church-goers, most Germans have only experienced *Erntedankfest* by seeing it on television. But, if you ever get a chance to personally participate in *Erntedankfest* in Austria, Germany or Switzerland, it will be a very enjoyable cultural experience!



— A German autumn wreath.

PHOTO: Hyde Flippo