

The culture of the backhouses in Baden-Württemberg



The interview with Dr. Wolfgang Doster was conducted by Betram Wegemer

Dr. Wolfgang Doster, expert on the subject of bakehouses, took a closer look at the baking traditions in the Danube countries.

Link: <https://bread-connects.tastes-of-danube.eu/brotbackhaeuser/>

Mr. Doster, why have so many bakeries been built in Württemberg?

According to our research, the history of bakehouses in Central Europe began around 400 years ago. At that time, almost every farming family had own oven at their farm. Most families baked their bread from home-grown wheat, spelt, rye or other flours. However, baking in own courtyards often led to devastating house fires and fire catastrophes. Therefore, in 1808, the baking in one's own yard was banned by the Württemberg fire protection authorities. From then on, community bakehouses on the outskirts should ensure adequate fire protection. This was not adhered to, but over the time more and more bakehouses were built in the village centre, often near the church or the village hall, and were used collectively. The villagers gathered wood together and fired up the stove, saving both time and wood.

How was the use of the bakehouses organised?

There was often a master baker who was commissioned by the community to organize the baking process, distribute the work and monitor the baking process on the so-called baking day. Because the ovens in the bakehouse were very simple and were built differently from village to village, to bake good bread the master bakers needed a lot of experience. But the social factor should not be underestimated, bakehouses were places of community. That is why, as we in our working group suspect, bakehouses were banned in socialist countries.

How come?

Bakehouses were a place of lively interaction between the villagers. There was a lot of social interaction while waiting for one's turn or for the bread to be baked. The people, especially the women, exchanged news, discussed things of everyday village life and work organization, but at the same time many things of everyday life in the community were settled there. Presumably that's why the use of the bakehouses was prohibited during the communist era, because they could have been community places where people organized themselves without state control. However, it could also be that the importance of the (extended) family is greater in Eastern European countries and that is why the ovens were more likely to be found on property used by families.

Who runs the bakehouses?

Today it is mostly clubs and associations that regulate the use of the bakehouses and the life around it. This has given rise to many newer traditions, such as bakehouse festivals, which often attract many people from all over the area. This is where economic, ecological and social components come together in the village community. Bakehouses are not just places where the basic food bread is made, but also places where local customs and festivals are organized and held, with many local pastries baked, such as the Brittlekuchen, the Platzkuchen and, in many places, the onion cake.

With today's technologies, bread is baked quickly and cheaply by corporations. Nevertheless, many village communities have raised money to restore old bakehouses, partially in self-help, to get them going again or to build new ones. What is the motivation behind the bakehouse revival?

The bakehouses are subject to a functional change. In the past, bread had to be baked there for the extended family. Today you can buy bread very cheaply anywhere in Germany. The motivation today has an ecological background. The bakehouse users want sourdough bread that keeps longer and is produced without artificial additives, for example a hearty farmhouse bread with a thick crust. You won't find anything like that in the supermarket. An oven can hold up to 40 loaves of bread at a time. That's why bakehouses still serve as a kind of social bond today. The residents of the communities meet and bake their bread together. In everyday life, most of them work in very different jobs, often in different places and under very different conditions. The baking brings everyone together. In any case, for the "bakehouse people", bread is not just staple food, but also stands for community, sharing and responsibility for everyone.