

PUTRID: MEAT SCANDAL HITS TURKISH IMPORT

By Fazile Zahir

FETHIYE, Turkey - Miscarriages arouse sympathy and interest in equal measure and are frequently featured in women's magazines and supplements as tragic human-interest stories. To find one as the middle-page spread of German newspaper Bild is unusual.

On the left hand side is a mother, head downcast, gazing sadly at the floral tributes sent for her seven-month-old but miscarried baby, and on the right hand side another picture, almost as large as that of the grieving woman, of a doner kebab. Katja B blames a doner kebab - a Turkish dish consisting of spiced lamb cooked on a spit and served in slices - for the death of her baby, and the reason for the high profile given to her story is that Germany is currently gripped by a rotten-meat crisis.

The Turkish media are highly interested in the story because of the effect on their countrymen in Germany. The scandal broke when health inspectors in Bavaria discovered a meat wholesaler in Munich selling products that had reached expiry four years previously. They estimated that 110 tons of bad meat had been sold, not only to local restaurants but also to eight countries in the European Union, including Denmark, France, Italy and the Netherlands.

They described the meat as putrid, confiscated tons of it from distributors, and raided several restaurants in central Munich. When the German media ran the story they made editorial decisions that seem highly questionable. As the story of the bad meat was aired with the headlines "Playing with our health, feeding us spoiled meat", the television showed a doner kebab spinning slowly on its axis.

This and the Bild miscarriage story followed hot on the heels of a another expose by health inspectors in Frankfurt the week before. Decaying meat was found again, and despite the fact that some of it was pork, the local papers ran the story next to a picture of a chef cutting strips off a doner. When the 74-year-old German manager of the wholesale butcher in Munich hanged himself, the story catapulted into the arena of national politics.

Agriculture and Consumer Minister Horst Seehofer accused regional authorities of inadequate controls on food quality and challenged the regions by stating that the central government should control food monitoring. What the Turkish papers are focusing on is the

effect in Germany of the negative and undeserved publicity on the largely Turkish purveyors of doner kebabs.

Doner is now a national dish of Germany, adopted as quickly and as successfully as chicken korma in the United Kingdom. Every day 250-300 tons of doner meat is produced, and Germans consume 800 million doner kebabs a year. Even the smallest backwoods Dorf will have at least one Turkish Imbiss (fast-food stand). Doner sales are equivalent to 2 billion euros (US\$2.56 billion) annually, more than McDonald's, Burger King and Wienerwald combined. But since the news of the spoiled meat was illustrated with pictures of doner, sales have fallen by about 30%.

The Berlin Union of Doner Producers has protested the negative portrayal, but despite the fact that 11 newspapers sent representatives to the union's press conference, the demands for attention and rectification of the errors have gone entirely unheeded. Instead, the German nation has fallen over itself with commentators suggesting that Germans have fallen victim to their obsession with low-priced food.

Turkish guest workers introduced the doner to Germany in the 1960s, but one man, Mehmet Aygun of Hasur restaurant in Berlin, is credited with turning this exotic specialty into the favored Teutonic fast food. In Turkey, doner (the word means "rotating" in Turkish) is served in restaurants on rice with a sauce of melted butter and paprika over it or sandwiched between half a loaf of bread with onions (with no dressing) for those on the go.

The fast-food format is more common in Europe, where the meat is served in a hot pita bread with salad and yogurt or chilli sauce, all designed to appeal to Western tastes. Doner has not limited its spread to Germany, though. In Austria it is fast replacing local Wurstelstande selling roasted sausages.

In the United Kingdom, it is seen as an evening meal rather than lunch or breakfast food, and because of the high South Asian population often comes wrapped in a naan bread rather than a pita. Doner is probably France's cheapest fast food, and the meat used is beef rather than mutton or lamb. Australians see doner as a healthy alternative to KFC and McDonald's, but because of the large numbers of Greek immigrants, the doner is often called a souvlaki.

Doner kebabs are just starting in Japan, where the salad is replaced by shredded cabbage and the sauce is mayonnaise rather than yogurt-based. The meat sandwich is called a doneru kebabu.

While German newspapers continue to see the issue chiefly as one of conflict between the central government and the individual states, the European version of Sabah newspaper has vowed to continue its fight on behalf of the doner men of Germany, calling its mission a "sacred campaign".

Hundreds of thousands of Turks work in the catering industry in Germany, with more than 50,000 establishments selling doners. The smaller vendors of this rotating dish are still reporting that they have lost more than half their trade. Let's hope that like the turning spit, fortunes will revolve and doner will regain its lost popularity.

Fazile Zahir is of Turkish descent, born and brought up in London. She moved to live in Turkey in 2005 and has been writing full time since then.

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