**Summary Article: Oktoberfest**
From *Holiday Symbols and Customs*

**Type of Holiday:** Calendar / Seasonal, Historic

**Date of Observation:** Second to last Saturday in September until the First Sunday in October

**Where Celebrated:** Munich, Germany, and various towns and cities in the United States, Canada, and throughout the world

**Symbols and Customs:** Beer, Beer Halls, Parades, Tapping the First Keg

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**ORIGINS**

Oktoberfest began as an open-to-the-public wedding celebration. On October 12, 1810, Crown Prince Ludwig of Bavaria married Princess Therese of Saxony-Hildburghausen. Five days later, an outdoor party took place in a meadow just outside Munich, the capital city of the German state of Bavaria. This location permitted the family to celebrate the marriage with horse races, a popular pastime of that era. The large, open-air setting also allowed the residents of Munich to attend the celebration.

The event proved so popular that the following year, local people recreated it. The horse races were repeated, and, in addition, local farmers organized an agricultural show. In 1818 Oktoberfest included beer stands, a carousel, and various musical performances. The festival continued to grow throughout the nineteenth century, attracting new activities and a greater variety of entertainment. The *trachtenfest*, or costume parade, began in 1835, and the grand entry parade began in 1887. Beer stands were replaced by beer tents in the late nineteenth century, expanding seating capacity and offering customers greater comfort.

The festival took its current shape in the twentieth century. Festival organizers dropped the horse races, which had been the original attraction. The agricultural show has continued till this day, though nowadays it takes place only every third year. The beer tents, or halls, grew in popularity, size, and number during the twentieth century. These days the most popular festival activities, drinking beer and listening to music, take place in the beer halls. Carnival rides, parades, and children's activities are also important elements of Oktoberfest.

Although Oktoberfest began as an October wedding celebration, not many vestiges of the original inspiration for the festival remain. The celebrations still take place in the same field, however. This land, which is now within the Munich city limits, is called “Theresienwiese,” or “Therese's meadow,” in honor of the princess and her wedding festivities. Sometimes locals refer to the festival itself simply as the *wiesn*, in reference to its location. Oktoberfest, which means “October festival,” originally took place during the month of October. It now begins in September and ends during the first weekend of October. Festival organizers made this change because the October weather in Munich is unreliable, and cold rain, blustery winds, and even sleet have driven away festival participants in past years.

Munich's Oktoberfest attracts about six million party-goers yearly. It is certainly the largest folk festival in Germany. Over the past 150 years, German immigrants have established Oktoberfest celebrations

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It is estimated that over 3,000 towns worldwide celebrate Oktoberfest each September and October. About a thousand of these festivals take place in North America. Cincinnati’s celebration attracts about half a million people yearly. In Canada, the Kitchener-Waterloo Oktoberfest hosts about three quarters of a million festival-goers. Other American cities with notable Oktoberfest celebrations include Milwaukee (Wisconsin), Torrance (California), Mt. Angel (Oregon), Columbus (Ohio), Fredericksburg (Texas), Tulsa (Oklahoma), and Frankenmuth (Michigan).

SYMBOLS AND CUSTOMS

Beer

Drinking beer has become the primary pastime of Oktoberfest. In Munich about 1.3 million gallons of beer are consumed each year during the festival. Only locally brewed beer is served during the city’s Oktoberfest. The six Munich breweries represented at the festival are Hacker-Pschorr, Spaten, Lowenbrau, Augustiner, Paulaner, and Hofbrauhaus.

In Munich, breweries make a special beer for Oktoberfest called wiesenbier, or “meadow beer.” Marzen bier, meaning “March beer,” is also popular during Oktoberfest. In past times, March was the last month in which beer was brewed before summer. Beer wasn’t brewed at all during the summer because it tended to go bad during the hotter months. In the early fall, people were ready to brew again, so the March beer had to be drunk up to make room for the new brews. March beer was purposefully brewed to be somewhat stronger and sweeter than ordinary beer, and somewhat reddish in color. The high alcohol content helped to preserve it. Even though modern technology has eliminated the need for these traditional brewing styles, March beer is still popular during Oktoberfest. In the U.S. specialty brewers have produced a lighter-tasting, lighter-colored beer, called Oktoberfest beer.

Beer Halls

Nowadays Munich’s Oktoberfest boasts fourteen beer halls: Armbrustschützenzelt, Augustiner-Festhalle, Bräurosi, Fischer-Vroni, Hacker-Festzelt, Hippodrom, Hofbräu-Festzelt, Käfers Wiesn Schänke, Löwenbräu-Festhalle, Ochsenbraterei, Schottenhamel, Schützen-Festhalle, Weinzel, and Winzerer-Fähndl. Each hall features different beers, foods, décor, and entertainment. Schottenhamel is both the oldest and the largest of the beer halls, with a seating capacity of 10,000. Traditionally, the festive atmosphere inside the halls was enhanced by German brass bands performing traditional German drinking songs and oom-pah-pah waltzes. These days taped music, rock and roll, and even non-German music may be heard. Inside the beer halls, hungry festival-goers can order German sausages, roast chicken, and other hearty German foods to accompany their steins of beer.

Parades

Munich’s Oktoberfest begins with the Grand Entry parade led by the mayor. It features beautifully decorated horse-drawn carts representing Munich’s breweries, on top of which ride the brewers and Oktoberfest beer hall owners. Beer waitresses in traditional German dress march behind the brewery floats, as well as the members of German brass bands who will entertain the Oktoberfest crowds. Men, women, and children in traditional German dress follow. The four-mile-long parade moves through the city streets and leads to the Theresienwiese, where the mayor of Munich officially opens the festival. About 7,000 people take part in this parade.

Another parade takes place on the second day of Oktoberfest. Called the Trachtenfest, which means, “celebration of traditional clothing,” this parade features groups of marchers from various locations...
throughout Germany and the rest of Europe, all in traditional dress. The men representing Bavaria wear white shirts, knee-high stockings, and leather shorts held up by suspenders. These shorts are called lederhosen. The German women wear flowery dresses referred as dirndl. Folk music and dancing accompany this parade.

**Tapping the First Keg**

In Munich, Oktoberfest begins with a ceremonial tapping of the first keg. This ceremony dates back to 1950. At noon on the opening day, the mayor of Munich enters into the Schottenhamel beer tent to tap the first keg of the festival. Schottenhamel receives this privilege because it is the oldest of the beer tents, having been established in 1867. Festival organizers arrange for a cannon to shoot twelve times. Then the mayor taps the first keg of beer. He fills his stein and declares “Ozapft is!” meaning “the keg is tapped!” Oktoberfest beer drinking officially begins after this moment.

**WEBSITES**

Munich Oktoberfest


Munich Tourist Office

[www.muenchen.de/Rathaus/tourist_office/oktoberfest/126032/oktoberfest_geschichte.html](http://www.muenchen.de/Rathaus/tourist_office/oktoberfest/126032/oktoberfest_geschichte.html)

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