

I am German. Please, don't mention sandwiches!

I am stranded in a mysterious country. At first sight, it doesn't look like this but that's only a cover. I have been living in England for about three weeks and English daily life is often a great adventure to me. Generally, I love adventures and indeed, I like studying at Keele and getting to know a lot of new friends. Everybody here is friendly and helpful and I can't help liking the English people. Sometimes however, I don't like my adventures at all. Especially, when they are about sandwiches and mixer taps. Seen with the eyes of a foreigner these two things are the weirdest that can be found in your country.

Talking about sandwiches used to be the favourite and most productive topic in international students' conversation. Lately, we try to avoid talking about it so we aren't forced to think about our next meal too soon. None of us had ever seen a sandwich buffet until we were invited to a welcome-buffet organised for us internationals. This is where we got our first insight into English culinary culture and learned our first lesson in sandwichology. At that point of time, we were simply amused by your liking for sandwiches.

The first time I got really suspicious was when I had a closer look at the cheese and the smoked ham I had bought at Sainsbury's. Ham and cheese were cut in the shape of squares in order to fit exactly the size of the bread. There's an entire industry supported by the sandwich: Supermarkets sell prepared sandwiches, there are special restaurants offering thousands of different kinds of sandwiches. On the wrapping of my bread, I read an advertisement for a sandwich box that was said to be absolutely "vital". Well, I was very much amused by all this.

One week later however, I was thoroughly fed up with sandwiches. At the mention of the word "sandwich" I broke out into hysterical laughter while trying to pretend I wasn't hungry. My friends suffered from the same symptoms. We all longed for our home food. The sandwich is always lurking in the back of our mind, ready to jump at us when we expect it the least. Every psychologist would diagnose "severe sandwichophobia" for the following case: Talking to a French friend of mine, I wanted to explain the meaning of the word "kitsch". I started my explanation with "When something's ugly and has no taste at all..." and she immediately interrupted me with a knowing face: "Ah oui, un sandwich!"

After one week of a sandwich diet, my friend and I were desperate enough to try cooking a meal in the kitchen of my residential hall. What happens if a Swedish, a Russian, a French, an Austrian and two German cook together? First, the kitchen gets totally crowded so cooking becomes impossible for any other party. (I think it's high time we apologised to the bereaved families of the students who used to live happily in Lindsay T Block before they tragically starved to death in front of the kitchen door. We will send flowers.)

Secondly, the cooking result is not a menu à la "sauna-raised frogs drowned in vodka with sauerkraut". Instead, we got a delicious meal which certainly had to do with the fact that I didn't actually cook but gave good advice to everybody.

Unfortunately, I can't give you the exact recipe for our meal that we unimaginatively called "International students Meal" (suitable for sandwich-allergics). Just mix anything edible you can find, apart from square cheese and ham, and see what happens. If you're lucky you'll have a lot of fun and a tasty meal. If you aren't, you'll just have fun.

The sandwich is weird but unlike the English wash basin is not really dangerous. Two taps on a wash basin! In my opinion, that's one too much. The wider the choice, the greater the trouble – this doesn't apply in my case because I don't have much of a choice: Either I freeze my hands or I burn them when I wash up my dishes. Well, the third option is not to wash them at all. I choose it whenever possible.

Why don't you have mixer taps? I understand your driving on the left side of the road. Napoleon never conquered your country and therefore, could never introduce the right side driving. It's something to be proud of. But please, what are you trying to tell us with your two-tap system? As far as I remember, Napoleon never told us continentals: "Alright folks, I order you to use wash basin with mixer taps for all eternity!" He didn't say that, did he? So why do you insist on two taps? Is there a secret in using them? And why aren't you consistent in refusing to use them? Oh, forget about the last question. Actually, I am very happy you have mixer taps in your showers at least. There, I wouldn't have a third option.

*(This article was published in Fuzzy Duck, the university magazine of Keele University, England, in November 2000)*