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Waldmeister
Sweet Woodruff Tastes like Now

By *Jude Stewart*

Photographs by *Jude Stewart*

Waldmeister, “master of the woods” to Germans, is the plant known as sweet woodruff in English (*Galium odoratum*). Other English names wax literary: “wild baby’s breath” and “sweet-scented bedstraw.” I became intrigued with waldmeister during various stretches of living in Berlin. In spotlessly bright-white cases of ice cream around the city, you can always spot the decidedly unnatural, even livid green of waldmeister. It’s a super-popular flavor throughout Germany for ice cream, candy, soda, and jelly, but largely unknown outside the country. The flavor is linked to the warming weather of spring, since waldmeister first appears in the woods in late April and must be harvested before it blooms in June. It’s a key ingredient in *Maibowle*, a punch that Germans drink in May and early summer, a heady mix of slightly effervescent, somewhat sweet white wine and *Sekt* (sparkling wine) sweetened with brown sugar, in which fresh sprigs of mint, lemon balm, and waldmeister are steeped. This *Parfumierung*, as the Germans describe it, gives the punch a delicate springlike flavor of fresh-mown hay. It also tinges it a pale green.

Something about a flavor specific to one culture, not so far removed from my own (American), fascinated me. Why isn’t waldmeister more broadly popular? I couldn’t say from my experience in Germany, because when I was there I never touched the stuff. I felt repulsed by artificially flavored waldmeister treats like *Berliner Weisse*, a cloudy wheat beer served in summer, into which violently false-green *Waldmeistersirup* is drizzled. I bypassed the green ice pops and gummy bears and gelati supposedly tinged with waldmeister. Fresh waldmeister owes its scent to coumarin, a chemical with homeopathic properties — it eases migraines and insomnia, reduces inflammation, even fights parasites — but it’s also poisonous in larger doses.

Waldmeister’s highly particular appeal to Germans seems to run deeper, tapping into the connections between flavor, tradition, and culture. As a spring ritual in Germany, *Maiwein* has a long history: according to *Der Spiegel*, the tradition dates back to 854 AD, when the Benedictine monk Wandalbertus of Prünn is said to have mixed the first *Maibowle* from waldmeister, black currants, and creeping ivy. Judging from its popularity in children’s treats, waldmeister is also clearly a taste of childhood: highly colored, blurred in memory, possibly nontransferable beyond a certain age. I also detected an edge of giddiness to the flavor, of alarmingly loosened controls. Its appearances in more highbrow German culture also suggest these meanings. Going far beyond Johann Strauss II’s lively operetta *Waldmeister*, in Günter Grass’s *The Tin Drum* the main character Oskar’s first encounter with sex revolves around waldmeister-flavored fizzy soda powder; elsewhere in the book it gets even weirder.

My academic husband and I visit Berlin nearly every summer, for a combination of work and pleasure, and with every return I’ve noticed waldmeister’s ubiquity more. Last summer we brought our now-four-year-old son with us and he was plied on all sides with summery, waldmeister-flavored treats. Once you notice its presence, you quickly realize: in Germany, waldmeister is everywhere.

Back in the United States, I set about getting to know waldmeister, ordering plants as well as artificially flavored *Waldmeistersirup*, available via imported-foods websites. This, I am compelled to admit, I found astonishingly bad. It evoked confectioners’ sugar, liquid baby powder, cough syrup, and was cloyingly sweet.

When my plants arrived, my husband and I mixed up a batch of *Maibowle* with adventurous friends, dissolving brown sugar with a dash of vanilla in most of a bottle of white wine with a little spritz to it. The recipe, in German, advised plucking five stems of not-yet-blooming waldmeister and letting them wilt “for a while.” Impatiently, I defined this as an hour. (My first mistake.) The recipe called for tying together a bunch of fresh lemon balm, mint, and wilted waldmeister, cut-stems up, submerging them in the wine for precisely 30 to 45 minutes — to limit the amount of coumarin infused into the drink. Inverting the waldmeister stems was key, as a bitter, earthy-tasting liquid can seep from the cut stems into the drink. While the herbs steeped, I sliced fresh lemons and froze them to replace ice cubes, which would apparently rob us of the delicate waldmeister flavor. After removing the herbs, I plunged the frozen lemon slices into the wine and poured half a bottle of bubbly *Sekt* on top. The resulting punch was refreshing, certainly drinkable, but not obviously waldmeister-infused. I resolved to repeat the experiment, after further research.

Waldmeister evokes time in many ways. Obviously, the punch is a seasonal drink that compels one to race against the plant's blooming. But the need for careful timing — in the form of patience and precise measurement — is also built into using fresh waldmeister. My additional research revealed that the plant should be wilted for at least *eight hours* before use. Drying it entirely concentrates the flavor further, but isn't suitable for a fresh drink like *Maibowle*. So I snipped more stems at breakfast and waited. The result by dinnertime: a tiny cluster of wilted leaves unloosed a pungent, extraordinarily "green" scent, some hard-to-place mixture of hay, cut grass, almonds, and vanilla. But more than anything specific, the scent evoked temporariness: a fleeting quality of sunlight and shadow, a lost-bright memory of a summer's day. Waving a stem under your nose was like tuning into a surprisingly crisp radio frequency in the middle of nowhere.

Time counts too in concocting *Maibowle*. I mixed up a second batch using properly wilted, aromatic waldmeister and again effervescent wine. I also froze the lemon slices solid prior to submerging them. The result was deeply improved. Lifting the pitcher from fridge to table left a stereophonic scent in its wake. My friends and I all plunged our noses inside the pitcher in turn; the perfume was strongest inside, like a fairy trapped in a terrarium. The time to enjoy *Maibowle* was exactly *now*, before the punch fizzled out, the lemons melted, and the wafting scent of waldmeister escaped the interior of each glass.



Real *Maibowle* is a cause for celebration.

To isolate the *flavor*, not merely the glorious scent, I made my own *Waldmeistersirup*. (My plants still weren't blooming, but were sending up more green shoots daily.) This was a simple syrup, infused for several days with waldmeister leaves and lemon zest. Locating the exact flavor in this syrup — my third encounter with waldmeister — was still tricky, but slowly I was becoming attuned to the flavor.

My last gambit — with our stoutly regenerating waldmeister plants — was forestmaster pudding, a panna cotta of sorts in which waldmeister leaves infuse sweetened whipping cream. You add softened gelatin and crème fraîche, then refrigerate it overnight. I woke up to cereal and coffee, followed improbably by waldmeister pudding. And finally, I could clearly taste the flavor. I turned to my two *Waldmeistersirups*, real and fake. Now I could detect their elusive similarity. I sniffed another wilting stalk. Its imprint rushed back again, detailed and immediate. With greater familiarity now, I find waldmeister's taste a bit one-note, if highly distinctive. Still, the flavor is specific enough that, allied with the onrush of spring, I can imagine anticipating its sweet return, year after year.

Here's what waldmeister tastes like: simple freshness, which is another way of saying it tastes like childhood, like nature, like deliberately wasted time, like incipience, first-ness, now-ness. Aging foods brings forth many smashing

flavors, but freshness is the edge we seek in so many flavors: a bright scintilla that floats above the otherwise specific qualities we're tasting. If Waldmeister tastes like freshness pure, the flavor above all other desirable flavors, no wonder the nation of Goethe and Strauss is hooked on it. And how has it remained their secret for so long?●

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