

Fastnachtzeit oder Fastenzeit: Carnival Season

Fasching oder Karneval?



There are two main words used in German for Carnival or Mardi Gras, the pre-Lenten celebration that ends on Ash Wednesday (*Aschermittwoch*): the Germanic *Fasching* and the Latin-based *Karneval*.

Fasching vs. Karneval

Fasching is the most common word used for Mardi Gras in southern Germany, Bavaria and Austria. This Germanic word dates from the 13th century and the Middle High German word *vascganc* or *vastschnag* (*Fastenschank*, “last [alcoholic] drink before fasting”). The word later joined other German words ending in -ing to become *Fasching*.

It is not just that the names are different, so are the customs. Some of Germany’s best known *Karneval* celebrations are held in Cologne (*Köln*), Mainz, Düsseldorf and Munich (*München*). But Cologne’s *Karneval* is not really the same as Munich’s *Fasching*. Germanic Carnival celebrations vary from region to region, with each community often having its own unique traditions. One Swiss city even has its Carnival at a different time than all the others! The *Fasnacht* event in Basel happens a week after most other Carnivals, starting at 4:00 a.m. on the Monday after *Aschermittwoch* (Ash Wednesday). The main

Another distinction must be made between ‘official’ events and ‘un-organized’ partying. The organized Carnival includes Pomp Conventions, parades, and fancy uniforms, whereas un-organized Carnival is just this: party, party and party.

Karneval, is a Latin-based term that comes from *carnem levare* (“to remove [give up] meat”). The former Roman settlements of Cologne, Bonn and Mainz celebrate *Karneval* and use that Latin word for the celebration.

event of *Karneval in Mainz* is the parade on *Rosenmontag* (Rose Monday). Farther south in Bavaria and Austria, the culmination of *Fasching* takes place on Shrove Tuesday (*Faschingsdienstag*), like Mardi Gras in New Orleans. These and other differences reflect the long history and local traditions of the celebration, and they are also seen in the language.

A very important regional distinction is the Carnival Salutation. Around Cologne this is ‘*Alaaf*’, and almost everywhere else it is ‘*Helau*’. Never shout ‘*Helau*’ in Cologne, or ‘*Alaaf*’ in Mainz!

Whether the celebration is called *Fasching*, *Fastnacht* or *Karneval*, it is a time to let off steam and live it up before the Lenten period that traditionally called for fasting (*die Fastenzeit*) and sacrifice. It is this fasting tradition that gave the celebration its *Fastnacht* name (“night before fasting,” “fasting eve”).