

Fastnachtzeit oder Fastenzeit: Carnival Season

Why are there different names for „Carnival“?

Fasching and Karneval

The Fifth Season: *Fasching & Karneval* – Mardi Gras, German Style

Different Traditions, Different Dates

There are three different words in German for “Carnival” or “Mardi Gras”: *Karneval*, *Fasching* and *Fastnacht*. Although all three refer to the same pre-Lenten observance, each has a different tradition and reflects somewhat different customs in different regions of the German-speaking world. Some *Fastnacht* celebrations in Switzerland even take place after Ash Wednesday. Let’s take a closer look.

In general, *Karneval* is the word used for the Rhenish (Rhineland) version of carnival in northwest Germany (except in Mainz), while the word *Fasching* refers to the similar celebration in southern Germany and Austria. The big day for *Karneval* is the Rose Monday parade, whereas the big *Fasching* parades are usually the day before, on Carnival Sunday. (The big final parade for Mardi Gras in New Orleans is on Shrove Tuesday.) But one of Germany’s biggest carnival parades takes place in the northern German city of Braunschweig, also on Carnival Sunday. Called “Schoduvel” (“scaring away the devil”), the Braunschweig carnival dates back to 1293.

As we can see from the examples above, keeping track of carnival customs is far from simple. The term *Fasching* is also seen and heard in Berlin and other parts of northern Germany. *Fastnacht*, mostly used in Swabia and Switzerland, is also used in the northern city of Mainz. However, that still does not mean that these words are interchangeable. In fact, if we examine the origin of the three words, we discover that each is derived from a different source.

The word *Fasching* dates back to the 13th century and is derived from the Germanic word *vaschanc* or *vaschang*, in modern German: *Fastenschank* = the last serving of alcoholic beverages before Lent. In olden times the 40-day Lenten period of fasting was strictly observed. People refrained from drinking alcohol or eating meat, milk products and eggs. The English word “fast” (to refrain from eating) is related to German *fasten*.

Karneval, on the other hand, is a newer, much more recent (17th century), Latin-based word borrowed from French and Italian. The true origin of the word is uncertain, but it probably comes from Latin *carne levare* (“away with meat”) > *carnelevale* > *Karneval* or Carnival. In earlier times, the German word was even written with a C rather than today’s K-spelling. (Some German carnival associations still use the *Carneval* spelling in their names.)