

# The way we're treated is rotten, say German produce queens tired of sexism

Oliver Moody : 4-5 minutes : 7/15/2022

There is Queen Lisa I of the cabbages, a lentil queen, a Swiss Brown cattle queen and even a couple of “herb fairies”.

For decades Germany's “product queens” — usually bright and personable young women from a farming background — have criss-crossed the country to promote their wares, appearing at countless festivals in traditional costumes and discreetly lobbying politicians.

When they gathered for their latest annual meeting on a sweltering summer's day in the Bavarian town of Traunstein, however, something snapped.

As the queens stood around the palace hall in their heels and dresses, Klaus Steiner, a local conservative MP, joked in a speech: “I'm sure you're on the hunt for your princes this evening. My advice is to simply turn up in a bikini or a thong. You'll be cooler that way.”

For a guild that has spent years trying to shake off the lingering image of air-headed beauty pageantry, this was a gaffe too far.

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One satirical television show swiftly dubbed the episode “bikinigate”, while a national newspaper even described it as the queens' #MeToo moment.

That was probably putting it too strongly. Yet many of these professionally minded women are fed-up with the lack of respect shown to their roles.



Sina Erdrich, the German wine queen. Some of the produce queens feel that their work is undermined by men who only value them for their appearances

“I find this statement extremely tough,” said Theresa Hagl, 25, who is approaching the end of her three-year reign as Queen Theresa I of the Hallertau hop-growing region in central Bavaria. “It conveys that we women can't do anything more than just look good, and that's not actually the case.”

The tradition was imported to [Germany](#) from the US in the early 1930s — the first national wine queen was crowned shortly before Adolf Hitler took the chancellorship.

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“Perhaps it’s part of the German psyche that they said back then: ‘OK, we don’t have a kaiser or a monarchy any more, but at least we’ve got something pleasant,’ ” said Matthias Roeper, 60, head of the German Kings and Queens Company, the national umbrella organisation.

The Germans embraced the concept with gusto after the war, as rural communities spotted an opportunity to market their goods. There are now more than 250 of these brand ambassadors, representing everything from milk and beer to forestry and local tourism. There is even a white sausage queen of Bavaria, whose symbol of office is a special sceptre with a Weisswurst on the end.

The queens are typically unpaid and elected to the throne for a year shortly after they leave school. The work often amounts to something almost like a full-time job: as many as 200 rounds of speeches and handshakes over 12 months, including state visits overseas.

Some have used the job as a stepping stone to careers in national politics. The most famous example is Julia Klöckner, 49, a former wine queen who became agriculture minister under Angela Merkel and was briefly spoken of as a possible successor to the chancellorship.

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In recent years there have been efforts to modernise the tradition. In 2001, Roeper founded a yearly conference for the queens to give them a chance to network.

Many have presences on social media. Last year, 12 of the queens posed for a calendar that depicted them hard at work at their chosen trades rather than teetering in stilettos. There is even a small but growing number of kings, such as the fish sandwich king of Schleswig-Holstein.

This helps to explain why the residual sexism rankles, although not all of the queens see it as a big problem. “Most of the other queens told me they didn’t think it was as bad as it ultimately came across,” said Michelle Hofner, 19, the newly crowned national potato queen. “Personally I’ve never experienced that kind of thing.”

Roeper said Steiner’s “stupid” remark was atypical, but acknowledged that some Germans still thought of the queens as young women who simply stood around and looked pretty.

“We’ll only get rid of that when people know and accept that these women didn’t win some kind of Miss Germany vote because they look nice or whatever,” he said. “These women are representing their home turf, their products — it’s love of their home country that drives these women.”