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A Traveler's Guide to Johnsonville (The Town, Not the Brats)



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Johnsonville Marketplace opened near the Johnsonville sausage factory in late 2020. Visitors can buy T-shirts, all sorts of cookout materials from condiments to grills, and exclusive Potosi Brewing Co. beer. (Photo by Mary Bergin)

The famed bratwursts come from a tiny community that might have a smaller population than your last family reunion.

Within a few of Wisconsin's teeniest communities are good reasons to detour and visit.

Lovers of bratwurst know Johnsonville as a giant among sausage makers, but the Sheboygan County company's home turf is much more obscure.

[Johnsonville](#)—the business—sells its products in at least 45 countries, has 3,000 employees, and lists Sheboygan Falls (nine miles southeast) as its address.

Johnsonville—the unincorporated community—is big enough for a volunteer fire department, but not a post office or gas station. Its population is 65, and you can see the primary sausage factory from downtown.

The town, established in 1846, is of blink-and-miss-it size—one road through, surrounded by farm fields. No stop signs or sidewalks. All of it likely would fit into the corporate campus, with room to spare.



Business and burg are less than one mile apart (or across the street, if counting buildings for smoked meats). Welcoming you to the area, on a roadside sign, are a 4-H club ([Johnsonville Hustlers](#)) and sportsmen's club ([Johnsonville Rod and Gun](#)).



Johnsonville's name is known worldwide due to the delicious bratwursts produced there, but just 65 people call the town itself home. (Photo by Mary Bergin)

Polka lovers know Johnsonville because of century-old and fourth-generation [Laack's](#), a tavern and grill with [basement ballroom](#). Until a few decades ago, Laack's was on the playing circuit for regional bands and nationally known orchestras ([Guy Lombardo](#), [Dick Jurgens](#), [Romy Gosz](#)). Think brassy Big Band music—jazz and swing—plus schottisches and waltzes.

That was the heyday. Today, Laack's ballroom is more likely to host a private wedding reception than public dance (although polka bands still play on occasional Sunday afternoons). Mary Burbach, a Laack's employee for 20 years, agrees that the crowd tends to skew older, although an infusion of younger dancers—"in their 50s"—are showing up too.

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Unadvertised but well-known in the area is Johnsonville's annual Sausage Fest (always the Sunday after Independence Day), when volunteer firemen and relatives prepare the area's classic summer meal: brats, burgers, German potato salad, baked beans. Gone is the longtime, outdoor Catholic mass with polka music, but polka dancing begins at noon.

Also in July: the Pretzel Bender, whose highlight is a short but spirited midnight parade through Johnsonville—a tradition that began 40-plus years ago. Fasching Feast, before Lent, brings in busloads from the Fox Valley, in addition to the locals.



So word gets around. Johnsonville may look quiet on most days, but it has a longstanding reputation and character.

Laack's year-round following shows up for cold taps, burgers, and small talk. On the wall is a

menu board (there is also the off-menu Esther Burger, which loyalists know is served on rye bread instead of the standard Sheboygan hard roll).

Between Laack's and the fire department is little Schnappsville Park, next to the Sheboygan River, which snakes through town. "Schnappsville" was an earlier name for this hamlet with German roots, which was later renamed after President Andrew Johnson.

The satellite plant for smoked meats, across from Laack's, is on land where Ralph and Alice Stayer opened a small butcher shop in 1945. That's how the Johnsonville empire began, with the Stayers using a longtime family recipe from Austria to make sausage. The company remains privately owned.

Down the road a bit is [Restoration Gardens](#), a landscaper and holiday gift shop that is open two months per year. Around the bend is the rural neighborhood's newcomer, [Johnsonville Marketplace](#).

Bratwurst fans can't tour Johnsonville Sausage, but at the marketplace can fulfill their fixations with all the brand represents. This is where to buy insider-slogan T-shirts: "Don't call me a weenie," "You're the wurst," "You can't spell sausage without U.S.A.," and "This ain't my first brat fry," for starters.



The Johnsonville sausage factory operates just south of downtown Johnsonville. (Photo by Mary Bergin)

Anything required for a brat fry—from a grill to condiments—is sold here. So are 70-some Johnsonville products, some not sold in grocery stores. That includes Grumpy Grandpa beer and seltzer, made by [Potosi Brewing Co.](#) as an homage to Ralph Stayer.

A curated selection of other Wisconsin favorites is stocked: kringle from [Uncle Mike's Bake Shoppe](#), cheeses from [Sartori](#) and [Vern's](#), soda from Potosi. The 3,200-square-foot building is one

part company museum, too. Outdoors is a paved patio with grills for cooking demos and brat frys for local charities.



The marketplace's opening in late 2020 coincided with the company's 75th anniversary, a celebration delayed and complicated by the pandemic. Consider it a build-it-and-they-will-come project, and—like Johnsonville, the community—road trippers are finding it.
