

# The Cheese and their makers:

## Portraits and History

The origin of Swiss cheesemaking has its roots in the Alps where milk was used to make cheese since the celtic era



## The Origins of Swiss Cheese

It is more than likely that cheese made from sour milk already existed in our area before the Romans introduced the preparation of rennet cheese north of the Alps. They even had a long lasting renaissance after the decline of the Roman Empire when the Alemanni settled in the region. Until the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, sour milk cheeses were the predominant cheeses in Switzerland. Among them are the Bloderkäse from the Toggenburg valley and the Suurchäs of the Rhine valley as well as the Schabziger. Other indigenous Ziger varieties are made from cow's, ewe's or goat's milk or a mixture of them and go by the name of Mascarpa, Mascarpin, Puina or Zigra in Graubünden and the Ticino.



The Origins  
of Swiss Cheese

## **Bloderkäse from the Säntis Massif**

Jakob Knaus, Unterwasser SG



The oldest type of cheese ever made in the Swiss Alps is a type of sour milk cheese called Bloderkäse in Toggenburg and “Sauerkäse” or “Suurchäs” (sour cheese) in the Rhine valley. They bear witness to the age-old tradition of cheese making that served to sustain the individual farmsteads long before the advent of Swiss cheese.

Yet this oldest of Swiss cheeses would be long forgotten by now, had it not been for dairymen such as Jakob Knaus, strong Alpine men with broad shoulders and hands like shovels, proud proponents of the ancient Swiss cheese tradition. It is thanks to them that we know about Bloderkäse and are still able to enjoy this sour milk cheese in its pure and unadulterated form.

It had long been relegated to a marginal position in the Swiss cheese landscape, this oldest witness of the many centuries, perhaps many millennia old tradition of cheese making in our country. Sour milk cheese had been all but replaced by the large wheels of hard and semi-hard cheese, which had laid the foundation of the hugely successful Swiss cheese export in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Many people are convinced it was this kind of cheese, which Arnold von Melchtal enjoyed on returning to his farmstead after forming the pact of the Rütlichschwur with his Eidgenossen. However, in those days, Emmentaler or Gruyère were far from common; until well after the Middle Ages, the main protein source in many regions of the Swiss Alps

was still sour milk cheese. No farmer had even seen, let alone imagined wheels of hard rennet cheese.

Even though the globalization of the cheese market began early in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, sour milk cheese manages to hold its own. The main sour milk regions are the Toggenburg and the Rhine valley of St. Gallen and to a lesser degree, the Austrian Vorarlberg and the tiny country of Liechtenstein. Until just a few decades ago, he had also been popular in the region of Glarus, Prättigau and Nidwalden. To this day, sour milk cheese enjoys a niche existence in some European regions, for instance as “Graukäse” (grey cheese) in the Austrian states of Steiermark and Tyrol or as “Harzer Käse” in the German Harz mountains. Similar sour milk cheeses are even found on the Norwegian west coast.

It is no coincidence then to find this cheese on the Flies Alp, high up on the rugged bluffs of the south-facing Säntis in the Alpstein massif. Here in Toggenburg, the age-old traditions of cheese making have managed to survive intact, whereas in many other regions, they already disappeared one or two centuries



The curdled whey is formed into lumps with the help of a wooden ladle and filled into the moulds.

Like this mould for Bloderkäse, cheese moulds used to be made of wood. The French and Italian names for cheese – fromage and formaggio – derive from the Latin formaticus for cheese mould.



ago. The main cheese of this region is the Bloderkäse made from sour milk, but also the genuine Magermilchziger, made from skimmed milk on a few Toggenburg Alps and resembling the Magerziger from Glarus, which unfortunately is now being prepared semi-industrially. Up here, the ancient cheeses can look back on a very long tradition – the very first cheese chroniclers in Switzerland told of the Toggenburg dairymen carrying on the knowledge of their forbears. And it stands to reason that cheese was made in these regions long before the first documents were laid down in the St. Gallen monastery. At any rate, Bloderkäse was mentioned alongside the Sbrinz and the Gruyère in the very oldest manuscripts. We know from several manuscripts that early as 1418, during the siege of Waldshut, the daily ration of the St. Gallen mercenaries consisted mainly of sour milk cheese from the upper Thur valley.

The dairyman Jakob Knaus is one of the best and certainly the most passionate of his trade in the Toggenburg. The steam rising from the curdling cauldrons brings beads of sweat to his forehead, his wet t-shirt clings to his chest. The ancient ceiling is almost unbearably low for us; even natives like Jakob Knaus now have to stoop to get through the doors.

For just a few weeks in the high summer, Jakob Knaus makes three or four cheeses per day in this austere Alpine cottage. Each of them weighs about three kilograms. It is a small quantity and it harks back to the days when cheese was mainly

produced for individual consumption. Bloderkäse is still being produced under the same circumstances as centuries ago, when communal grazing was unknown in the Toggenburg and every Alpine herdsman lived in his own small cottage. It was impossible to transport the milk over long distances and so the milk was skimmed and made into butter to be brought to market down in the valley. The remaining skimmed milk was made into Bloderkäse and served as the main source of protein for the local population. But these times have changed; even in the Toggenburg valley, rennet cheese now takes the lion's share of production. Bloderkäse remains in the hands of a few enthusiasts.

Jakob Knaus is one such enthusiast. It hardly pays to make the arduous trek to the highlands at the beginning of July. But this charismatic, cosmopolitan and extremely well read dairyman has chosen to stick to the tradition of "Three Stage Dairy Farming" still widespread in Switzerland. His passion is the Bloderkäse, which served as a staple diet of the Alpine dairymen during the first few weeks of the summer season on the high Alps and is now a delicacy, which gourmets much prefer to the sour milk cheeses produced in the valley dairies of the Toggenburg and the Rhine valley. While in the early and in late summer, Knaus makes far larger amounts of milk into first-class semi-hard cheeses on a lower Alp, the short summer weeks are dedicated to the Bloderkäse. There is not much capacity on the high Alp – half a dozen dairy cows and a hand-



Traditions persist: Bloderkäse and Milchziger are still being made in copper cauldrons. The curds are cut with the help of the "Tanngrötzli", a stripped spruce sapling.



There are still nostalgic cheese dairies like these in the Toggenburg valley.

ful of calves is all the little barn can take. It has always been like this up here. Jakob Knaus leads us to a small stone building half hidden behind blooming tiger lilies under an overhanging rock wall, just a stone's throw from his cottage. He thinks that nomadic Alpine herdsmen have been using such places for more than a thousand years to make cheese in the summer. Maybe they used animal hides for the roof, rolling them up and carrying them back down to the valley at the end of each season. Similar customs have been known from archaeological finds in the Veltlin and the Piedmont.

There is not much room in Knaus' cheese dairy: It is sparsely furnished with a table, two chairs and a fireplace with the obligatory curdling cauldron. Above it, the traditional wooden utensils: a stripped pine sapling, called "Tanngrotzli" in the local dialect, which will later be used to cut the curds, and a "Schuumer" – a large ladle which will be used to form the cut curds into a lump while still in the whey. In one corner, the traditional rectangular cheese molds, here called "Blodertrucken", are waiting their turn. Until just a few years ago, the perforated molds were made from wood, now they are made from plastic.

Bloderkäse was most likely brought to Switzerland from the east, long before the time of rennet cheese. Not very long ago, Jakob Knaus found a similar cheese in Poland and a friend had been raving about a Bulgarian sour milk cheese, which according to him was almost up to Knaus' Bloderkäse. This type of cheese prepara-

tion is probably the oldest known to man because it is based on the natural souring of the milk, the so-called curdling. The milk fat tends to rise to the surface of the milk and can be skimmed off and made into butter. The remaining low-fat skimmed milk will eventually turn sour and curdle with the help of the naturally occurring lactic acid bacteria, separating into curds and whey. This is the underlying principle for the making of Bloderkäse. In order to accelerate the natural souring, the dairyman will add lactic acid bacteria or simply more whey. The curdled milk is then heated to 35 to 38 degrees Celsius and further curdled under constant stirring. The whey-condensate is then pressed into lumps and ladled into the "Blodertrucken" while whey runs off through the holes in the mold. After 24 hours, the cheeses are ready to be unmolded.

The demand for Bloderkäse has risen remarkably during the last few years; Jakob Knaus is now producing his popular sour milk cheese even in the winter months in his splendid Toggenburg house in the town of Unterwasser. Cheese distributors like Thun based Christoph Bruni are instrumental in spreading the cheeses' fame beyond the borders of the Toggenburg. This old cheese brand is highly marketable due to its low calorie content and because in spite of the lack of fat, its taste is far superior to that of other industrially made cheese products, which hardly even taste like cheese anymore.

It is not quite clear where exactly Bloderkäse got its name. There are count-

**Breakfast before the transhumance:  
The people from Toggenburg cherish  
their ancient traditions.**



less theories on the subject but none of them could be proven conclusively. The most likely story seems to be that the onomatopoeic "Bloder" was the local dialect word for curdled milk in upper Toggenburg. Just a little further down, in the Rhine valley, this type of cheese is called "Suurchäs", sour cheese. Everyone in the region knows Bloderkäse but until recently, it used to be eaten predominantly by the older generation. They appreciated the mature loaves; after the spontaneous lactic fermentation, a substance forms on the surface that starts the maturation process from the outside. This process continues even though the loaves are regularly washed with water. The tradition of subtly changing the flavour of the loaves by washing them with cider or cold coffee, however, no longer exists. After a few weeks, the loaves develop their characteristic "Speck" or "Chäsbart", literally cheese beard, a thick layer of mould so appreciated by the aficionados of Bloderkäse.

Bloderkäse will probably always remain a niche product in the Swiss cheese palette. Although it has been derided as "non-cheese", it has reappeared on the radar of the cheese gourmets, as the sales figures prove. The percentage of Toggenburg Bloderkäse has somewhat diminished, but this has been more than compensated for by a surge in the sales of Rhine valley "Suurchäs". Today, the two Suurchäs dairies in Grabs and Sevelen in the canton of St. Gallen produce 42 000 kilograms annually, that is almost double the amount of cheese produced in the whole of the Rhine

valley fifty years ago. In the principality of Liechtenstein, however, sour milk cheese has lost a lot of ground. While it was once one of the main sources of income for this erstwhile predominantly agricultural country, in the time of the letterbox companies, it is barely produced anymore.



The square blocks of Bloderkäse are regularly washed with water; in the old days, cider or cold coffee was also used.

### Bloderkäse or Suurchäs

Low-fat sour milk cheese from unpasteurized milk (Rhine valley Suurchäs is often pasteurized)

#### Provenance:

Toggenburg SG,  
Rhine valley of St. Gallen

#### Milk:

Cow

#### Shape:

Blocks, ca. 15 x 15 centimetres

#### Weight:

3 to 8 kilograms

#### Fat content in dry matter:

4 to 15 percent

#### Maturation:

Up to 60 days

#### Flavour:

Mild, milky, slightly acidic



Bloderkäse.

**Schab- and Kräuterziger  
from the Toggenburg valley**  
Felix Giger, Nesslau SG



Harking back to another time: Barn on a Ziger Alp in the Toggenburg region.

Kräuter-, Gewürz- or Schabziger are among the very oldest Swiss cheese varieties. Although the enterprising people of Glarus have all but monopolized this sour milk cheese, variations on the theme are also made in the Toggenburg valley. In the old days, Ziger (Sap Sago) cheeses flavoured with caraway, yarrow or smoke were common in all parts of the country.

From the beginning of November at the very latest, Ziger aficionados all the way down to Basel are nervously eyeing the weather forecast for the upper Toggenburg valley. For soon after the first snow, a small ad will appear in the local Toggenburg newspaper: "Familie Felix Giger, Schneit, Nesslau, Ziger", with the telephone number. That is all. But one, maybe two days later, the 200 to 300 kilogram's worth of Kräutertziger (Ziger flavoured with herbs) will be sold out, the demand for this unique product far exceeding the supply. Mr. Giger does not take reservations; this would mean administration, which is anathema to this old-style mountain farmer.

The processing of the raw Ziger will have to wait until the first snowfall; until then, the mountain shepherd and lumberjack simply has not got the time. This summer, he filled four heavy, narrow Ziger

boxes with Milchziger (milk Ziger) on his Alp and brought them down to his home in the valley in autumn. This Ziger, like the Bloderkäse, is really a sour milk cheese and does not have much in common with another typically Swiss product, the Molken- or Schottenziger, which is a whey cheese.

Felix Giger's Ziger is made from skimmed milk, which already in the Middle Ages was considered a superior variety, fit to be sent as tribute to the landlords of the monasteries of St. Gallen or Alt Sankt Johann. Giger still prepares the Ziger in his cheese dairy high on the summer Alp exactly according to the method so meticulously described by the historian Rudolf Steiner more than two hundred years ago. Watching the dairyman make his cheese in the soot-blackened mountain cabin, you are transported back to another era.

It takes almost until midnight to pack



a few kilograms of raw Ziger into the boxes where they will mature until the autumn. This is not a very lucrative job, rather a passion, which, according to Giger, "just makes a bit of pocket money." Every night after milking the cows, the mountain man spends three hours at the fire, slowly heating the skimmed milk to boiling point, adding some buttermilk, stoking the fire again and finally adding the sour whey until the milk begins to curdle and flakes of milk protein rise to the surface. Just like Bloderkäse, Ziger is made by heating the milk but unlike the former, the curds are separated by a process called heat-acid precipitation.

Felix Giger creams this milk in a dairy cellar, which looks exactly like the milk chambers described centuries ago by Konrad Gessner and Johann Jacob Scheuchzer in their great works on natural history. The milk cellar in Giger's ancient mountain cottage lies deep below the earth so that the "Gebesen" – large, shallow milk pans – are constantly being cooled by running spring water lapping almost up to their rim. This way, most of the cream rises to the surface to be skimmed off and made into butter on the premises. Giger makes the butter in a large, wooden butter barrel, while the raw Ziger matures in the boxes. Every morning, he takes the previous night's butter production to a bakery in the valley, where it is made into buttery pastry.

Giger's raw Ziger is identical to the type of Ziger from which the people of Glarus produce their famous Schabziger. However, while he processes the raw material

himself in a special Ziger mill, the raw Ziger produced in the canton of Glarus is brought to the Geska, the only company left to make "Glaruser Schabziger".

Judging from the extant historical documents, Schabziger is Switzerland's oldest export cheese and most likely the oldest cheese brand of our country. But first and foremost, it is a true relict of the Alpine cheese making technique of the Middle Ages or maybe even of antiquity. Schabziger is often confused with Glarus Ziger, due to the fact that the enterprising people of Glarus managed to monopolize the brand name centuries ago and managed to hold their own despite attempts by the Toggenburg valley and the eastern Appenzell region to get a piece of the market segment. And although the production of Glarus Ziger has always depended on raw Ziger from outside of the canton, there have been frequent attempts to embargo the import of raw material from neighbouring regions. This, however, was less due to the quality of the "foreign" Ziger but to the attempt to fix the prize of the local raw material. These restrictions were finally lowered in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, so that today, Glarus Ziger consists of milk from neighbouring cantons, last but not least from the Toggenburg valley.

Apart from Felix Giger, only two other Toggenburg farmers are producing a kind of Schabziger outside of the Glarus region. In the old days, however, almost every household used to make their own Ziger. Before the 16<sup>th</sup> century, it was the most popular dairy food in Unterwalden and the Valais and, apart from butter, the most im-



Felix Giger still produces his Ziger according to the methods described by the great natural historians of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century.

portant dairy product produced in domestic and Alpine dairy kitchens.

While in Glarus, probably thanks to the gardens of the Säckingen monastery, the Ziger was flavoured with blue fenugreek, a herb brought to Switzerland by the crusaders, in other regions, the local sour milk cheese was mixed with caraway (Graubünden) or ground yarrow (Toggenburg valley and Vorarlberg). According to historical documents, in the cantons of Berne and Graubünden, the Ziger was hung into the chimney and sold as Rauchziger (smoked Ziger). Already in 1588, a Spanish envoy described the Ziger from Unterwalden as “dense and rich like a marzipan cake made with angelica, hard and all green in colour.” A century later, the Ziger from the Beckenried region of Nidwalden was considered an effective prophylaxis against the plague. The herbs used in its preparation were said to ward off poison. In his dissertation on the “Caseo Glaronesium” published in Basel in 1711, Conrad Schindler expounds the Schabziger’s virtue as a remedy against nosebleed, ague, dropsy and mental disorders.

There is one detail in the Ziger’s history, which must be a thorn in the side of the producers of the Vacherin Mont-d’Or, who to this day unleash their venom against all other cheeses wrapped in spruce (epicea) rind: In the days of Felix Giger’s grandfather, the cheese was not packed in a Ziger box but in the so-called “Zigerbaier” or “Zigerrumpf”, a mould made from spruce rind and stitched close with spruce roots. When we mention this, Felix Giger leads us

up into the attic of his Alpine cottage and produces a large roll of spruce rind, which is said to be sixty or seventy years old. His grandfather had prepared the rind to be made into Ziger moulds. At the end of the Middle Ages, the Ziger cheese of the Berne region of Simmental was also transported in spruce rind.

This tradition, however, has since been abandoned, the modern view being that Ziger cheeses stored in spruce rind are of lesser quality. Yet every year in the late winter and early spring, Felix Giger still peels spruce trees in order to make bark strips for the Liechtenstein cheese artist Willi Schmid. It is a welcome source of extra income for the Alpine farmer, who works as a lumberjack in the winter months and enjoys a fearsome reputation.

Giger processes his cheese in the old-fashioned way, in his own Ziger mill called “Zigerreibe” (Ziger grater) in the canton of Glarus. But while the Glarus Ziger contains only blue fenugreek and salt, Giger adds some caraway to his cheese. After the raw cheese has been grated and mixed with salt and herbs, it is shaped into “Zigerstöckli” (Ziger cones) of 700 gram or 1.4 kilograms – a common size for the canton before the era of industrialization called for considerably smaller item sizes.

Still, it is impossible to consider Giger’s Ziger separately from the Glarus Ziger, which as “Sap Sago” has been exported as far as to the United States and was copied by some German cheese dairies as early as two hundred years ago. For even the dairymen of the Toggenburg val-



Fireplace in the dairy kitchen:  
A log fire heats the cauldron for  
three hours until the Ziger can  
be skimmed off.

ley considered the Glarus Ziger their role model, certainly in as far as using the blue fenugreek, which is said to be used for Ziger production since the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> century. And for hundreds of years, the Glarus folk were instrumental in marketing this cheese all over Switzerland. While in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Zurich was the main market for Glarus Ziger, itinerant Ziger merchants, the so-called "Zigermannli" and "Zigerfraueli" were seen all over Switzerland as late as 1943. These men and women were responsible for about half of the domestic Ziger sales. In 1924, however, the numerous Ziger mills and Ziger factories were replaced by just one company, the Gesellschaft Schweizerische Kräuterkäse-Fabrikanten (Company of Swiss Herbal Cheese Producers, Geska).

The exceptional entrepreneurship of the people of Glarus managed to draw the traveller's attention to this cheese time and again. The author of "Leather Stocking", James Fenimore Cooper, wrote in 1836: "Apart from Glarus, I do not know a single place where you can see this cheese as frequently as on Broadway."

Felix Giger's cheeses do not go that far abroad, however – local demand is seeing to that. The customer from Basel can count himself lucky if he has managed to catch the first snowfall in autumn, taking this as a cue to travel to the Toggenburg valley to catch a couple of kilograms of the coveted Gewürzziger. Otherwise, he will have to wait until next year.



After maturation, the Ziger is taken out of the wooden storage boxes. Brown discolorations are shaved off the cheese loaves.

### Ziger or Schabziger

Low-fat sour milk cheese

#### Provenance:

Glarus, sporadically Toggenburg SG

#### Milk:

Cow

#### Shape:

Cone-shaped "Zigerstöckli"

#### Weight:

45 grams to 1,4 kilograms

#### Fat content in dry matter:

1 percent

#### Maturation:

6 to 11 months

#### Flavour:

Dry, sharply spicy (with a touch of caraway)



Kräuterziger with caraway seeds.