

Dominik Flammer
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Swiss Cheese

Origins, traditional Cheese Varieties
and New Creations

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In Defence of Raw Milk Cheese

For the Swiss, raw milk cheese – cheese made from unpasteurized milk – is more than just food. It is an exquisite expression of the very best that our ancient tradition has to offer and is deeply rooted in our culture. Swiss cheese is art, joie de vivre, culture, culinary heritage and the image of beautiful pastoral landscapes. This wonderful heritage, which has become the epitome of Swiss identity, needs to be kept alive for future generations. For although the production of Swiss raw milk cheese is still higher than average, traditionally hand-crafted raw milk cheese is becoming increasingly rare. More and more cheese is now being produced in an anonymous, standardized environment rather than in a traditional, local cheese dairy. Even though the great Swiss hard cheese varieties are still largely produced with unpasteurized milk, there is a creeping tendency to close small, regional cheese dairies, which means that our raw milk cheeses are no longer the expression of the diversity and the character of our regions.

As an organization that has been fighting the corner of raw milk cheese for many years, Slow Food is honoured to assume the patronage of this book. The author, Dominik Flammer, has gone on an exemplary journey to trace the local Swiss cheese traditions. Not only did he manage to assemble an encyclopaedic body of knowledge, he is also telling the story of the people behind the products in a compelling and personal way. We like his portraits of exceptional people who produce equally exceptional cheeses and so keep the unique Swiss cheese tradition alive.

We hope that above the wealth of information that this book has to offer, the readers will become aware of the responsibility to maintain the diversity of our regional cheeses. Only as long as there is demand for high quality, artisan raw milk cheeses, will future generations have a chance to learn about the great tradition of Swiss raw milk cheese.

Dr. Raphael Pfarrer
Slow Food Switzerland

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Foreword



It is high time for this book, high time first and foremost for the portraits of the best dairymen of this country, which are well on a par with their French and Italian competition. All of the men and women portrayed in this book – from the traditional Ziger producer to the innovative Toggenburg cheese creator – have contributed to the fact that Swiss cheese has newly risen to a bright new future. A future dedicated to raw milk cheese, because raw milk equals unadulterated taste, powerful cheeses and unforgettable indulgence. This is the strength of the culture of Swiss hard cheese, because here, natural, unprocessed milk, the powerful impact of the unspoilt nature of the Alps and the craftsmanship of so many of our Swiss dairymen come into their own.

Unfortunately, in some cases, there is a reverse trend, for instance in the case of the Appenzeller and the Tilsiter, where a large quantity is being made with pasteurized milk in order to adhere to the European hygienic standards. Of course, this simplifies production and eliminates health risks, but when it comes to flavour, it is a sad loss. Another negative trend is the fact that cheese is nowadays sold far too early. This is the case, first and foremost, with the Emmentaler, which is barely allowed to mature long enough to develop holes, but certainly not long enough to have anything to do with the kind of flavour that the cheeses made by the Emmentaler craftsman Handsruedi Mumenthaler have to offer, who are left to mature for eighteen months.

In this era of the liberalization of the agrarian economy, it is hardly surprising;

after all, you can now buy artificial cheeses made from vegetable oils and other non-dairy ingredients. But do the customers really want insipid, standardized products, which have nothing but calories to offer? In my thirty years as affineur (ripening expert) and cheese merchant, I have come to doubt that very much.

After all, I have been witness to the revival of the innovative and meticulously prepared traditional raw milk cheeses. More and more happy customers now frequent my stand on the markets of Lucerne, Wetztingen and Aarau and they support me in the hope of a new awareness of our country's great cheese tradition.

This book, as well, is based primarily on the awareness of the first-class quality of the great Swiss raw milk cheeses; only sporadically, thermized cheeses are mentioned, such as Switzerland's best Vacherin Mont-d'Or produced by Danièle Magnenat in the Waadtland. This cheese can compete with France's best Vacherins made from raw milk because it was created by an artist and left to ripen in the right type of cellar. Artists like her, however, are exceptional talents and often also clever businesspeople, a growing trend, which can also be observed among Switzerland's vintners. And in any case, cheese has a lot more in common with wine, a fact that may escape many of our countrymen in spite of all the pride in their national product. Both cheese and wine are very much linked to the «terroir», the region of origin, which is a unique product of the local soil and flora. And they are, most of all, dependant on the expertise of their creators,

which from time out of mind have been using their knowledge as well as their intuition to create the many unique specialties known today in Switzerland. This is true in the case of the traditional hard cheeses like Emmentaler or Sbrinz, the unbelievable L'Évitaz and the new soft and semi-hard cheeses from Toggenburg, the Waadtland or central Switzerland. They have all found their aficionados. But Switzerland is not only the home of the most flavourful raw milk cheeses, but a cornucopia of the most wonderful stories linked to cheese – a fact that this book demonstrates to the fullest. The sad thing, however, is that our numerous cheese organisations have not been fully successful with the marketing of these treasures. The lack of self-confidence and adequate marketing has always been one of the greatest shortcomings of the Swiss dairy industry.

One of the best examples for this fact is the failure to copyright the brand name Emmentaler. The result is that nowadays, every factory, no matter where in the world, can sell their product as Emmentaler, even if it is nothing more than a lump of rubber with holes in it. Most of the Europeans are familiar with the brand name Ricola but have never even heard of Sbrinz let alone had a taste of this outstanding cheese. This is why this book is dedicated first and foremost to the marketing professionals of the cheese industry. Maybe they will find here the stories that have eluded them for so long – in order to employ all these millions of Swiss Francs of advertising subsidies to finally put the Swiss raw milk cheese in the place it belongs. Which is, of course, first place.

The unique blend of traditional craftsmanship and innovative creativity has made Switzerland, what it is – a great cheese country, whose influence on the global dairy industry cannot be discounted. This book tells the story of these influences, the great artists of the métier and of the unsurpassed cheese specialists of this country. It is about the great legend that has shaped the image of Switzerland in the eyes of the Swiss themselves and of the world in general. And it is about our cultural heritage, which we need to protect because it is an integral part of our prosperity and of the high culinary consciousness of our nation.

Dominik Flammer has united all the facts, anecdotes and stories that have made Switzerland the great cheese country it is today into an informative and entertaining book. And with his fantastic work, the Zurich photographer Fabian Scheffold has managed to put a face to all those enthusiastic and talented cheese creators that have helped to make it so.

Rolf Beeler
Maitre Fromager



The Wheel
of Time:

The evolution of Swiss cheese



Climatic fluctuations, famines, wars and the plight of homeworkers in the preindustrial era have been contributing factors in the rise of Swiss cheese to international fame. During the Middle Ages, the cheese produced in the Swiss Alps was predominantly soft sour milk cheese made from goat- and ewe's milk, while in modern times, there was a transition to cheese made from rennet and to hard sweet cheeses.

There is no other cheese-producing nation where the entire cheese industry has been as inextricably linked to a romantic image – the idyllic life on the Alps – than Switzerland. To this day, the Swiss cheese industry makes ample use of the romantic cliché hailing back from the era of Enlightenment of colourful transhumances, nostalgic cheese dairies, yodelling mountain shepherds, red-cheeked children and the cheertful antics of the mountain folk. The mountain folk in question, often deeply rooted in tradition and patriotism themselves, actually appreciate the image perpetuated more or less successfully by the advertising industry. Yet this image has little to do with the actual story of the rise of Swiss cheese to international fame. The real reasons have much to do with suffering and precious little with

romance. They were the famines and the Black Death during the Middle Ages, the wars of the early modern era, climatic changes in the Alpine regions as well as widespread malnutrition during the proto-industrial era. Hand in hand with this went the Catholic church's greed for new sources of income, for instance through the infamous "butter letters" of the time before the Reformation. These letters exonerated the believers from the ban on eggs and dairy during Lent – against a fee, of course.

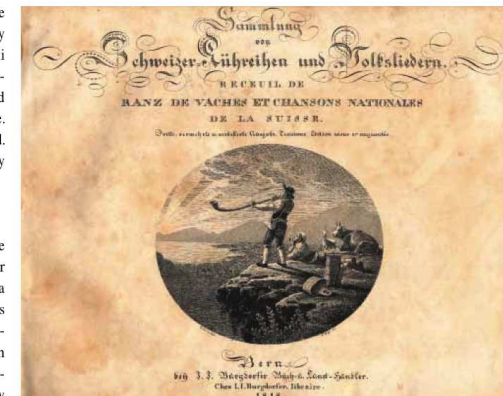
In a way, abject poverty has been the Leitmotiv in the evolution of Swiss cheese. It is of little importance that cheese as such is not a Swiss invention but a clever improvement on the dairy traditions and methods of other cultures. And yet, Switzerland has developed a unique cheese culture, which many Swiss citizens have been all but unaware of for a long time – unlike the cheese lovers of France and Italy, whose appreciation of Swiss cheese have been responsible for a substantial boost in the production of cheese in our nation. And although some of the world's most delicious and unique cheese varieties come from the Alpine valleys of Switzerland, the Swiss cheese industry has been largely hostile towards mass production. Even today, large quantities of Swiss cheese are being hand-produced by passionate cheese artists and left to mature to reach their fullest flavour. Most of this cheese is made from raw milk, not from pasteurized milk, as is the case in France, another great cheese nation.

"What is it that makes Swiss cheese so special?" we asked the exceptionally gifted Toggenburg cheese maker Willi Schmid. Schmid's creations grace the tables of all our first-class restaurants and are sought after by gourmets everywhere. "The ingredients are special," says Schmid. "In this milk, in this cheese, is our very core."

The Roman Influence . . .

However, it took a while before cheese made its home in Switzerland. For this, we have to thank the Romans and, a thousand years later, the Italians. There is precious little written evidence of the origins of Swiss cheese besides a few roman manuscripts and some medieval documents. Although we are indeed largely reduced to speculation, this has been taken a little too far in certain advertising campaigns by the former Cheese Union and the Interprofessional Organizations. We hear, for instance, quite often that the Romans appreciated the "caseus helveticus", although most Roman sources only mention "caseus alpinus" and "caseus gallicus", i.e., Alpine or Gallic cheese. According to legend, the roman Emperor Antoninus Pius had liked Alpine cheese so much that he died after overindulging in it, albeit at the ripe old age of 75. Clever marketing strategists took that to mean Rhaetian cheese, cheese originating in the Roman Province of Rhaetia.

Of course there can be little doubt that in the centuries after the Roman invasion of large areas north of the Alps, the



Dairyman blowing his alpenhorn in a picturesque and romanticised landscape: This image, which was invented during the era of Enlightenment, still dominates the cheese industry.

cheeses made way for a new type of small soft cheese made from goat's or ewe's milk with the help of rennet. The cheeses produced with this technique kept longer and could therefore be transported over longer distances. It is highly unlikely that a lot of cow's milk cheese was produced in those days in the Alpine region, because cows, if they were known at all, were kept predominantly as working animals and to a lesser degree as a meat provider, certainly not as a milk-producing animal. Cows in the Roman era were hardly bigger than deer and produced no more milk than was needed to make a pat of butter and a lump of low-fat cheese.

... and the Alemanni

After the fall of the Roman Empire, during the subsequent barbarian migrations from the 5th century A.D, Alemannic tribes overran and occupied large parts of Switzerland. Due to their influence, the art of making cheese from rennet fell into neglect. The Alemanni preferred making their curd cheese the old way, without the help of rennet or herbal rennet substitutes such as fig, thistle or cleaver. The milk was left to curdle on its own, with the help of naturally acidic whey or plants such as sorrel. The Roman trade routes lost their importance and so the farmers and shepherds no longer saw the need to produce long-lasting cheeses. The Alemanni were predominantly self-sufficient. They preferred to live in isolated farmsteads and either dismantled or completely ignored the Roman remnants. Since the production

of sour milk cheese is far less demanding and needs far less expertise and knowledge than the making of rennet cheese, the latter almost entirely disappeared again. It is possible that the Roman influence merged with the ancient expertise in the making of sour milk cheese in parts of western Switzerland, for instance in the Valais, the Gruyère, the Pays-d'Enhaut in the Vaud and in the Saanenland region in the canton of Berne. In any case, we can safely assume that the knowledge and the basic technique of making rennet cheese were still known in the monasteries of the early Middle Ages (6th to 10th century A.D.). Still, hundreds of years had to pass until clever dairymen – with the help of several religious fraternities, it is true – started to develop the predecessors of modern Swiss rennet cheeses.

From Goats to Cows

It is important to note at this point that in Switzerland as well as in the rest of Europe, and from ancient times until well into the Middle Ages around the year 1000, the cow had very little importance as a provider of meat or milk. Goats and sheep were of far more importance. They had made their way into the Swiss Alps from Greece and established themselves just as easily as the chicken and pigs had done earlier. We know from historical documents that even at the end of the early Middle Ages, milk in the Alpine valleys was produced predominantly by goats and to a lesser extent by sheep and made into sour milk cheese. It was under the influ-



GEIS-KAS, GEIS-KAS.
*Was wollst du mehr, als Käse von Geisere,
Die Schmachschafft u. nicht hart zu beisse?*



ZIGER, SÜSSE-ÄNCKE.
*Nachdem die Kuh, nachdem ihr Butter,
Nachdem gelbes Milch, Ziger, Butter*

The evolution
of Swiss cheese

ence of the Carolingians in the 9th century that the cow became more important in the Alpine region and in the rest of middle and northern Europe. The eldest known source mentioning a cow's milk dairy in Switzerland dates back to the year 855. According to this document, the Alemannic landholder Pozzo in Mönchaltendorf near Zurich was giving the dairy to the monastery of St. Gallen.

From Cornfields to Pastures

The rise of cattle breeding was one of the first, albeit small, agricultural revolutions – others that were rather more far-reaching were to follow until the end of the Middle Ages. This rise in the ranks of the farm animals resulted first and foremost in new nutritional habits. Milk as a beverage became more and more important in regions of extensive cattle breeding. Butter, as well, became an important aliment, especially in those times of malnutrition and recurrent famines. Around the year 1000, butter was known only in the monasteries and was a privilege of the nobility; the word butter derives from the monastic Latin "butyrum". After the turn of the millennium, even the common people, who had until then mostly cooked with pig's fat, gradually adopted butter. Thus the rising demand for butter had to be met before fat cheese could be made. The demand from the cities, which had risen in importance during the Middle Ages, was so high that there was hardly a Swiss region that could even begin to think of using milk for other purposes. It did not

help the case of cheese that butter was also used for lamps, as a curative ointment for horses and, in Burgundy, as hair grease.

Whole milk was not used to make cheese in those days; the fat was skimmed off and made into butter. From the remaining skimmed milk, only low-fat cheese could be produced. This was, according to the founding act of the monastery of Muri (Acta murensia) from the 12th century, rather similar to the Magerziger, which was popular until the end of the Middle Ages and is technically a sour milk cheese. The rare Fetzigers – creamy sour milk cheeses – were said to be delicious but the low-fat varieties, made durable through pressing and maturation, were barely palatable. In order to make them acceptable to the pampered city-dwellers, they were often mixed with salt and caraway, but also with numerous other spices.

Although the Acta murensia does mention rennet cheese, those were according to the extant sources simply small goat cheeses. Until well into the 15th century, the fact that one could extract more water from the curds by heating it, and so make a harder and longer lasting cheese, was all but unknown. The first rise in popularity for cheese making came right after the Black Death epidemic around the middle of the 14th century. Until then, cattle breeding had been rather unimportant in Switzerland because toward the end of the Middle Ages the demand for grain, especially rye, had steadily risen. Even the Zurich monastery of Schächental with its vast livestock herds consisting mainly of



Already in the 18th century, images of men and women selling cheese were favourite motifs for Swiss copper engravers and illustrators.



Dairyman saying farewell to his wife to go to war: Mercenaries were the first international advertising vehicles for Swiss cheese.

goats and sheep only boasted the grand total of four cows.

It was only after the ravages of the Black Death, which had killed off one third of the European population, that meat and, with that, predominantly cattle breeding began to displace grain as the main source of calories. One effect of the decimation of the populace had been that there were no longer enough hands available for the labour-intensive work on the fields. Hence, vast areas were converted into pastures. It helped that the Swiss had managed to seize the Aargau, the granary of the Mittelland, in 1415, which resulted in a drastic decline of the cultivation of grain in the Alps. Rye and other grain was still grown in the Swiss valley regions up to a height of 1500 metres, while the mountain regions from the Pays-d'Enhaut in the west until Toggenburg in the east gradually transitioned from grain cultivation to the less labour-intensive animal husbandry. This process was ushered on by the rise of monetarism and the improvement of the trade roads, especially the opening of the Gotthard route in the 13th century. Another important factor in the rise of animal husbandry was the fact that every year, thousands of young men left their homes, either because they preferred life as a mercenary to the hard agricultural labour or because they were forced into service to fight other countries' wars. This went on until far into the 19th century. Those men were in fact the first advertising vehicles for Swiss cheese, spreading the pastoral image of the Swiss Alps in many parts



Brienz was the most important export hub for hard cheeses from central Switzerland, which probably explains the name «Sbri(e)nz» for cheese from this region.

of Europe and in the overseas colonies of their warlords. Occasionally, it was rumoured, they were forbidden to sing their native tunes, shepherd songs such as the famous “Ranz des vaches”, because it made their fellow soldiers too homesick and led to desertions.

In the 16th century, the Swiss Alps began to turn into a veritable “shepherd’s country” and remained so until long after the beginning of the Industrialization. Many farmers were grateful for the

change. They had had to endure inundations, draughts, storms and hail on a regular basis, which had often ended in famine. Their plight was partly due to the climatic changes brought on by the Little Ice Age, which began in the early 15th century and lasted well into the 19th century. The reorientation towards animal husbandry resulted in a meat-intake per capita that far exceeds our own. According to recent estimates, the middle and upper classes of central Europe and north-



Cheese was packed into wooden barrels and transported over the Alps on the back of mules to be sold in Italy as early as the 16th century.

ern Italy consumed 100 kg per person per year in the 16th century, which, taken into account the many fasting days, adds up to a daily intake of 400 to 500 grams. The number of cattle and dairy cows was rising accordingly.

Cheese as Lenten Food

The rise of cheese in Switzerland has also been due to the successful intervention of the monasteries and parishes with regard to Rome’s fasting prohibitions. This development started in the second half of the 15th century. Until then, dairy products had been forbidden during Lent and the many additional fasting days, but now the Vatican gradually relaxed its strict proscriptions in many regions north of the Alps. Cities like Basel or Rapperswil defended their petitions with the argument that they did not have olive oil, as olives would not thrive in the harsh climate. Furthermore, the common oils, such as linseed-, poppy-, nut- or rapeseed oil, were not available in sufficient quantities to replace butter and cheese. (Today’s most important oil producing plants, such as sunflowers, peanuts and maize, did not arrive in Europe until the Spanish conquest of the South- and Central America and were first cultivated to an important degree in the 18th century.) Moreover, the petitioners went on, the common people abhorred cooking with olive oil. The people “ob und nid dem Walde” (i.e., the cantons of Ob- and Nidwalden), sent a petition to Rome in 1473 to be allowed the consumption of dairy food, since their mountain regions

provided neither oil nor fish or wine. The folk of this region, they pleaded, had lived a pious life for time out of mind but could not afford to forgo their staple diet. In most cases, dispensation was given and gradually, butter and cheese was allowed as Lenten food in many regions of Switzerland. So-called butter-letters were issued for this purpose, however, the Vatican insisted on a generous remuneration from the cities, municipalities or monasteries. This dispensation from the restriction of dairy food took the same shape as the classic "letter of indulgence".

The gradual relaxation of the strict fasting rules were gratefully adopted by wily "fast-breakers", who then proceeded to count beavers and frogs as fish, the consumption of which was allowed during Lent, while meat was forbidden. Many a clever monk spent his time not with adhering to the strict regime but with the concoction of elaborate justifications to circumvent the fasting prohibitions.

This paved the way for cheese as important Lenten food; a development, which was accelerated by the Reformation. The Reformation and ensuing confessional schism was triggered mainly by the dissention around the letters of indulgence. In the mid-16th century, Pope Julius III allowed all Catholics the consumption of dairy food during Lent. As a result the cheese from the high plateau of Engadin became a sought-after export article for the next three centuries, as northern Italian monasteries considered cheese a worthy replacement of the forbidden meat.



Tête de Moine from the region of the monastery of Bellelay in the Berne Jura is one of the oldest Swiss cheese varieties.

After the reformation and the ensuing relaxation of Lenten prohibitions, all of Europe was swept up in a wave of buttermania. Even in Flanders, northern Europe and England, the commonly used pig's fat was increasingly replaced with butter. The demand for cheese in these regions began after a slight delay.

The effect of the Black Death is an even more important factor in the rise of rennet cheese to the status of staple food. City dwellers especially were hungry for better and, most of all, nutritious food. Those who had managed to escape the plague were now faced with an overabundance of work because everywhere, hands were short. Those who could work received far higher compensation, and in those days, a large percentage of the payment was made in the shape of food. Many people literally rose from rags to riches

because of the unprecedented redistribution of inheritances.

All of this meant that middle class citizens and, to a lesser degree, even the rural middle class could suddenly afford food, which had hitherto been the privilege of the gentry, the clerics and the ruling classes. The "Fromage de Bellelay", today known as "Tête de Moine", was produced by the monks of the Bellelay monastery in the Berne Jura and has been documented since the 12th century. It was a sought-after delicacy, which the monastery often sent to important people as a special gift. The prince-bishop of Basel, for instance, received a shipment of Bellelay cheese every New Year. The cheese made in the monastery of Trub in the Emme valley was another such delicacy, which had hitherto only been presented to high dignitaries of the clergy and the ruling classes. Documents of the Trub monastery mention small rennet cheeses from 1453.

Cheese for the Middle Classes

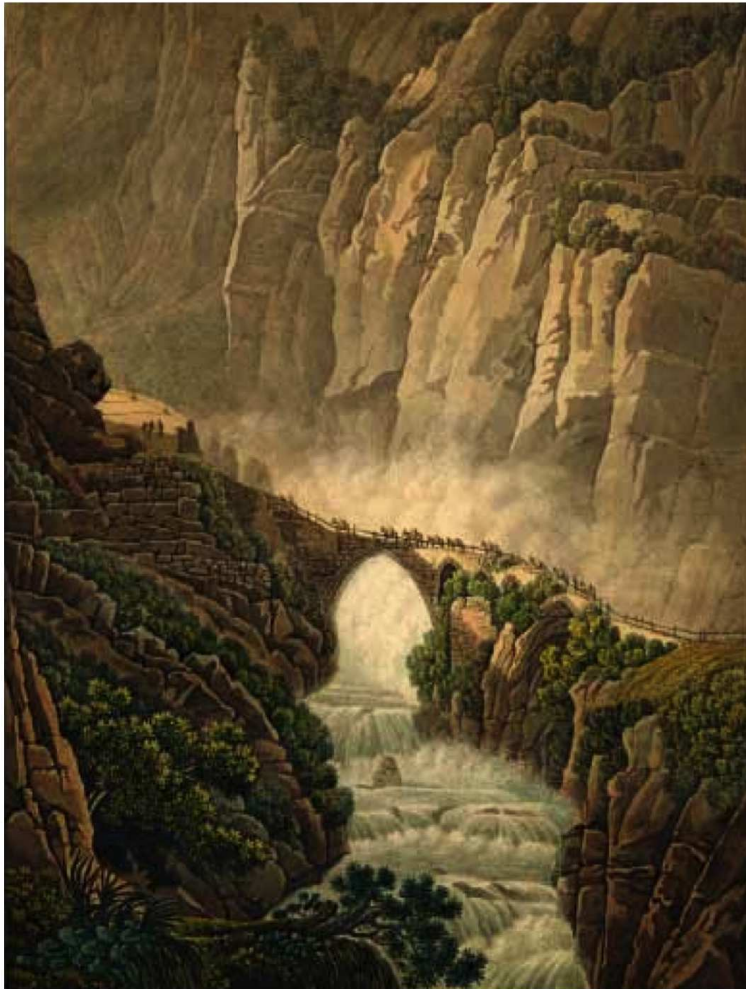
Triggered by the demographic changes in the 14th century, middle class citizens now behaved according to the "law of cultural decline", attempting to emulate the gentry and adopt their cultural – and culinary – achievements. Exquisite cheeses, which had outside of their areas of production been reserved to the tables of princes, suddenly became an affordable delicacy. The mildly sweet rennet cheese quickly replaced the rather tasteless Ziger. As the demand for butter was decreasing, the farmers and shepherds

had more un-skimmed milk at their disposal and were able to produce creamy, full fat or whole-milk rennet cheese. Still, the transition from sour milk cheese to rennet cheese must be envisioned as a very slow process. In the 16th century, sour milk cheese was still in high demand, especially in Switzerland. Rennet cheese was first and foremost an export article and went mostly to Italy and France. Until the beginning of the Thirty Years War in 1618 and in spite of the rising interest in the production of rennet cheese in the Alpine regions, the Swiss themselves preferred the Ziger. One of the reasons was the lack of dental hygiene and the resulting tooth infections, which made the soft Ziger and the small goat cheeses much easier to eat than the comparatively hard rennet cheeses. "What better than the cheese of goats, they're tasty and not hard to bite," ran the caption of one of the famous copper engravings made by David Herrliberger for the Zurich market around 1750.

Rennet cheese long remained the food of the rich because it was too expensive for the common people. The farmers, however, found its production very profitable. Cattle trade and cheese making soon became the basis for a rural middle class, which had hitherto been all but non-existing. In his famous chronicle of Switzerland from 1548, Johannes Stumpf calls the "cattle trade the best trade in Switzerland".

The oldest Swiss cheese varieties

Swiss rennet cheeses had their first, tentative boom at the transition from



For a long time, a large percentage of Swiss hard cheese was transported over the Alps because it fetched more money in Italy.

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Pictures of San Lucio, the patron saint of the dairymen of the Ticino and northern Italy, can be found in countless churches from Locarno all the way up to the Gotthard pass.

The evolution of Swiss cheese

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the Middle Ages to the early modern era; mainly, however, in the Gruyère, the canton of Schwyz, some Bernese regions and individual Alps in the Ticino. In all these regions, rennet cheese production has been documented since the Late Middle Ages. Cheese and Ziger were sent to the monastery of St. Gallen from Toggenburg and Appenzell, but there is no written evidence for the way these were made.

Earlier than any other region in Switzerland, the Ticino took advantage of the more advanced cheese making expertise of the Italians, hence the oldest images of cheese originate from this canton. Images of San Lucio, the patron saint of the dairymen of the Ticino and northern Italy, can be found in many churches from Lugano or Ascona all the way into the Leventina district of the Ticino. The saint is depicted with a cheese and occasionally with a branch, which was used to cut the curds. The act of curd cutting is still reflected in common surnames for the region north of the Alps, such as "Tanngrötli" or "Chäsbrecher". According to legend, the martyred San Lucio was a shepherd and dairyman. He was generous toward the needy and still so successful in what he did that his former employer killed him out of envy. Images of San Lucio appear as early as 1280 in Ticino's churches, which proves the early Italian influence on the cheese production in Switzerland's southernmost canton. Accordingly, the first historical mention of the Piora, a cheese made in the upper Leventina mountains, stems from the 13th century.

Some of the oldest Swiss rennet cheeses, the "Fromage de Bellelay" of the Berne Jura, the Gruyère and the Sbrinz are all mentioned in medieval documents. Another well-known cheese already known at this time was the Glarner Ziger (Sap Sago), a vestige of the medieval Alemannic tradition of sour milk cheeses. It is open to speculation as to whether the two hard cheeses – the Gruyère from the region of Fribourg and the Sbrinz hailing from several regions of central Switzerland – or even the Piora can be traced back to Roman influences. It has been frequently written and equally frequently copied that 10th century documents from Rougemont monastery mention a cheese made on the estate of the count of Gruyère, but all this document vaguely talks about is a cheese-like dairy product. Although cheese and Ziger from this great Swiss cheese region frequently appear in documents from the 14th and 15th centuries, albeit without making further reference to either quality or way of preparation, cheese of the geographically clear denomination of "Gruyère" is first mentioned in a document from the year 1602. The oldest document explicitly mentioning "Brienze cheese", i.e., Sbrinz, stems from the first half of the 16th century. Also in this case, frequent reference to this great Swiss hard cheese is made in earlier documents in a roundabout fashion. Be that as it may, both Sbrinz and Gruyère are exponents of the oldest Swiss cheese tradition and both come from regions, which have been exposed to Roman meth-



For many centuries, apart from the Sbrinz route via the Grimsel and Gries pass, the Gotthard route was the most important trade route for Swiss hard cheese.



The evolution of Swiss cheese



Since the Thirty Years War (1618–1648), barrels of cheese from the mountains of Berne, Vaud and Fribourg was shipped from Vevey harbour to Geneva, Lyons and Marseille.

ods of rennet cheese preparation. But in the Middle Ages, sweet cheese simply was not that important. Until the 16th century and all over the Swiss Alps, the sour milk Ziger was far more popular than any type of rennet cheese.

Until the 13th century, the people of Glarus, Appenzell and the Bernese highlands paid their dues to their monastic liege lords in Bad Säckingen, St. Gallen or Engelberg mainly in the form of small Ziger cheeses. Before the 16th century, the Ziger was the most popular dairy product in Unterwalden. Ziger was several times as expensive as the small cottage cheeses because those were mainly made from low-fat skimmed milk, had due to the scant experience of their makers very little taste and kept for only a few days.

The only exception in those days was the Sbrinz. It owes its early reputation from the fact that in the wake of the cattle trade – in those days also called “Welschland trade” – the dairymen of central Switzerland profited from the expertise of Italian shepherds and dairymen. The Sbrinz quickly found its way over the Gotthard pass into Lombardy, where hard rennet cheeses were far more popular than in the regions characterized by the Alemannic influence. Swiss cheese was very popular indeed in Italy. In the case of the Sbrinz, this has never changed – in fact, to this day, top Italian chefs frequently prefer the exquisite Swiss hard cheese to Parmigiano Reggiano. In Switzerland, however, it has never quite reached the status it deserves.

High Fat Cheese and Butter Shortage

While the pre-runners of the Swiss cheese varieties developed from the 11th to the 16th century, genuine high fat and rennet cheese making had its first real boom in the 17th century. The export of Swiss cheese to France, Italy and increasingly to Germany made such a tidy profit that some regions, for example Unterwalden – the largest milk-producing area of central Switzerland –, switched to the production of high fat cheese. Another contributing factor was the great demand from Holland because the Dutch sailors, even before the French, had discovered the value of the long-keeping and nutritious Swiss cheese for overseas journeys. Great quantities of cheese were transported in barges and rafts on the Rhine to Holland and on the Rhone to Lyons or Marseille.

In the Berne Alps, the switch to hard rennet cheese had been made a few decades before the great export boom. At that time, a large part of this region as well as the Pays-d’Enhaut and parts of the Fribourg Alps south of Gruyère were controlled by the count of Gruyère. Unfortunately, this changeover had a devastating effect on the butter supply for the cities – so devastating, in fact, that in 1619, a conference was called to investigate the reasons behind the butter shortage. In fact, more and more cowherds had been making their way from the highlands down to the Emme valley to share their knowledge of rennet cheese preparation, which had a huge negative impact on butter production.



In the 17th century, cheese began to be transported on rafts, mainly on the river Emme down to Rotterdam. This is one of the oldest renditions of such a raft.

The Gruyère cheese experts played a pivotal role in central Switzerland, the Berne region and in many other pastoral regions with regard to the development of the high-fat hard cheese. Even the Emmentaler was not that different from the Gruyère, neither with regard to the size of the wheels nor to the type of holes inside. Indeed, this cheese was known abroad as the "Gruyère de l'Emmental". This is due to the fact that it was shipped from Vevey harbour like almost all of the Gruyère cheeses, across Lake Geneva and down the Rhone to the French business and export hubs. And it explains why even today in certain French or Spanish cheese shops, you can buy Emmentaler cheese as "Gruyère".



With the boom of the lowland dairy industry, the cauldrons – and the cheese wheels themselves – became bigger and bigger.

After the Thirty Years War, in the second half of the 17th century, Swiss cheese production went into a decline, which was to last a hundred years. The only cheese that sold reasonably well was the Gruyère, but even that fluctuated from year to year. As a result, Fribourg dairymen began to migrate to the French Jura, to Burgundy and to upper Savoy, and to produce Gruyère cheese in France. Soon, they were in serious competition to Switzerland because now, the French Marine could buy their cheese locally.

The first serious rise in Swiss demand for milk- and cheese products came at the beginning of the proto-industrial era, when the numbers of the Alpine sweat-shops rose steadily and they no longer kept their own cows, goats or sheep.

Soon, larger and larger regions in the canton of Zurich and eastern Switzerland began to produce cheese or to step up their existing production. Large parts of Switzerland developed their own brand of agricultural and pastoral entrepreneurship. The "Chüjer" and "Senntenbauern" were the prototype of the "early capitalist entrepreneur", renting private and communal land and producing cheese at their own expense. Their products sold for a good profit and soon rich farmers and city-dwellers began to invest in cheese Alps.

A Century of Cheese Fever

Similarly to the effects of the Black Death and the Thirty Years War, the rising poverty levels at the beginning of the proto-industrial era in the late 18th and early 19th century played a pivotal role in the rise of Swiss cheese. While well into the 19th century, hard cheese was predominantly produced on the Alps, cheese dairies now began to establish themselves in the valleys. The first one was installed in 1760 on the "Senntenhof" belonging to the monastery of Muri in the Aargau, but it did not have any noticeable effect on the overall industry. Around the turn of the century, more cheese dairies were established near the cities, predominantly in western Switzerland. Berne's first valley dairy was founded in 1802 in Hofwyl. The establishment of the great cheese dairy of Kiesen near Thun in 1815 is considered a milestone in the history of lowland cheese production. In the following decades, hundreds of lowland cheese dairies were built,



During the several hours long trek from the Alpine pastures to the valley, the «Armaillis», dairymen from the region of Fribourg, used to transport the fresh cheese loaves on their shoulders in a contraption called «Oji».

so that dairy farming effectively ended the century-old agricultural traditions in large parts of central Switzerland.

The demand for large wheels of cheese was steadily rising, not least because in Russia, import taxes were paid not per weight but per item. Many historians see this as the reason for the increase in size of the Emmentaler cheeses, which originally, with a weight of 10 to 40 kilograms, were not much bigger than a Gruyère. It was in the new valley dairies that they were first produced in a size of up to 120 kilograms per wheel. This was made possible by a glut of milk because more and more farmers had switched from agriculture to dairy farming. The rise of the railway with faster and cheaper transport and the new, more effective American fertilizers had made farming in central Switzerland and in the lowlands unprofitable. The import of cheap grain from southern Russia, Hungary and later the United States led to an agricultural revolution in Switzerland. Increasing industrialism cut off more and more people from self-sufficiency; in times of crisis, when there was no pay, they no longer had their own garden to fall back on. This led to a complete reorientation of commerce, which had hitherto been concentrating on the market places of the towns and villages. New structures developed; food and spice merchants now opened up shops in the vicinity of their clientele. New distribution channels were needed for the food, which was produced by fewer and fewer hands for more and more mouths and had

to be transported over longer and longer distances.

Agricultural universities were founded, which especially after the famines of the 1830s and 1840s were able to supply the country with new insights into pig and cattle breeding. Through the improvement of the fodder crops, better maintenance of the pastures, new breeding results and the new trend of livestock housing, after 1850, the animals became significantly larger with a commensurate yield of meat and milk. At the same time, margarine, the new butter replacement product, was invented in France and almost simultaneously, rape and maize was grown in increasing quantities to produce vegetable oil. Butter was no longer irreplaceable and so all obstacles had been removed from the production of high fat hard cheeses. However, margarine and vegetable oil failed to take root in Switzerland, as the Swiss people remained partial to butter. To the same degree that the cheese industry grew, the land became dependent on butter imports, but disaster was averted because the cheese export figures more than covered the import costs for butter.

These were the days of the Swiss cheese fever, which affected first and foremost the Emme valley. Between 1850 and 1870, a new cheese dairy fired up their cauldrons almost every month. Milk production went through the roof; the number of dairy cows and cattle rose to half a million in the second half of the century and doubled in the 19th century.



Propaganda poster from the time of the Great Depression at the beginning of the 1930, the heyday of the Swiss Cheese Union.

Cheese making became an economical necessity and outgrew its profitability, a story the novelist Jeremias Gotthelf told in his famous work "Die Käserei in der Vohfelden". In the canton of Berne alone, the number of cheese dairies rose from 140 to 400 between 1840 and 1860; ten years later, there were nearly a thousand dairies in the up- and lowlands. Although the number of large new dairies expanded especially in the lowlands, even the highlands experienced a certain expansion for a while because there was a steadily rising demand for milk, butter and cheese from the highly industrialized regions such as Glarnerland, Appenzell and Toggenburg. Cheese historian Alfred Roth rightly calls this time the Manchester era of Swiss agriculture. The bubble finally burst after the Vienna stock exchange crash of 1873. A long recession ensued, during which many dairy owners and cheese exporters went bankrupt and lost their livelihood.

Swiss Cheese, but not from Switzerland

The ensuing years of economical crisis had a devastating effect on Swiss cheese production as many dairymen went abroad, for example to the German Allgäu, to the French Massif Central and even to Russia, Finland, Greece and Turkey. Some even established new cheese dairies in the United States. As a result, only a fraction of the cheeses sold under the "Swiss" label or under the name of a Swiss cheese denomination are actually Swiss made. The United States alone – notably the world's largest

producer of cheese – is selling a multiple of the volume of cheese produced in Switzerland. In Turkey, the "Gravyer Peyniri" – the name deriving from "Güyük" – is as important as the "Emmentaler" industrially made in the German Allgäu. Even the Comté or "Gruyère de la Comté", by far the most produced raw milk cheese in France, has its origins in Switzerland. It was Swiss dairymen, after all, who once made their way into the French Jura and offered the necessary expertise.

While the large hard cheeses, which have been copied in different ways in many countries originally came from the Swiss Alps, the most well-known Swiss soft cheeses actually originated in France. There are, for instances, the "Tommes vaudoises", which with regard to their name and their way of preparation stem from Haute Savoie, where they have been documented long before their Swiss varieties. When it comes to cheese production, there has always been a lively exchange across the borders. Small wonder then that nowadays copies of the Italian Mozzarella – albeit mainly industrially produced – make up almost one tenth of the Swiss cheese production. Only Emmentaler and Gruyère are still being produced in larger quantities.

Disastrous State-Directed Cheese Economy

The End of the First World War was also the end of the free cheese enterprise in Switzerland, an era which, after all, had lasted for several centuries. Forced by the

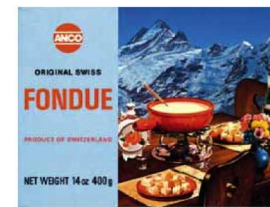
ravages of the war, the state established the Cheese Union (Käseunion), an umbrella and marketing organization called upon to implement the protectionist goals of agricultural politics. From a historical perspective, this initiative does seem to make a certain sense, because it was set up to protect the welfare of the farmers and the populace, even though the enormous volume of dairy farming made Switzerland more and dependant on grain imports. Nationalization, however, had a devastating effect on the overall development and the innovativeness of the Swiss cheese industry: New ideas were discouraged and old traditions were relegated to a niche existence or completely smothered. The restriction to a guaranteed utilization of only a few hard cheese varieties under theegis of a centralized organization managed to paralyse the cheese nation for decades. It went to the point that even the Swiss, pampered when it came to cheese, began to prefer industrially made, neutral tasting soft cheeses smothered in vacuum packaging to their local products. This was partly due to the fact that the better part of the first quality cheeses went abroad with the help of billions of Swiss Francs worth of export subsidies, while the local cheese shops were often reduced to offering second-rate goods. When in the 1990s, innovative young dairymen began to undermine the rigid planning of the Cheese Union and the “cheese moloch” finally began to crumble, the industry finally started to cast off the paralysis that had lasted nearly a century.



Long after the First World War, Swiss cheese was still being transported even to the tropical regions in wooden barrels or tin containers.

Swiss Cheese for the Tropics

One milestone for the Swiss cheese export industry, however, was actually laid down in the 20th century. Although cheese gourmets may abhor the very idea, some of them had probably liked the products in question when they were children: We are talking about the processed cheese “suitable for the Tropics”, which was first developed by the Thun-located Gerber company between 1903 and 1914. The increasing globalization of the cheese export had made it necessary to come up with new packaging solutions, because the traditional way of transporting cheese wheels in wooden barrels or in sealed tin containers was not suitable for hot climates. The Gerber Company in Thun had invested – and lost



Processed cheese, which had a longer shelf life, was invented in Switzerland shortly before the First World War and soon after copied all over the word.





Aquatint etching by the former Toggenburg dairyman Walter Dick: Dairy kitchen where Bloderkäse, the oldest Swiss cheese variety, was prepared.

– large sums of money in the development of innovative packaging until, right before the First World War, it had a breakthrough. The solution was a new kind of processing, i.e., melting the cheese, which was then packaged in tins or splint boxes. In the beginning, this cheese was made from Swiss hard cheese, primarily Emmentaler. The rinds were removed from the cheese wheels; the cheese was then chopped and mixed with emulsifying salts to increase their shelf life.

At first, these small, processed cheeses were marketed under the name “Gerberkäse”, but soon, other companies followed suit, especially in the years after the First World War. The Alpina Company in Burgdorf came up with boxed cheese cut up in segments and individually packaged in tin foil. This was quickly copied all over the world. Switzerland alone sprouted a dozen cheese companies, which sold small processed cheeses such

as the still popular “Tiger”; other brand names known at the time where “Negerli-Spezial”, “Heidi-Streichkäse” or “Chalet-Emmentaler”.

Processed cheese became an export hit. As soon as 1916, American companies spearheaded by the Kraft Company of Chicago began to experiment with the expertise pioneered by Gerber, processing Cheddar, Camembert or Limburg cheese. Soon after, France and Germany followed suit and it was not long before the new processing technique had spread as far as Turkey and all the way to South America. The main competition for Swiss processed cheese came from the countries, which had taken on the Swiss immigrants before the turn of the century and had already been producing Emmentaler cheese. For a long time, the new type of cheese was predominantly made from Emmentaler cheese; copies of the “holy” cheese made in Finland and in the Ger-

man Allgäu were Switzerland’s main competitors on the market for the new “cheese for the Tropics”. The development of processed cheese was the last big innovation in the era of free enterprise in the Swiss cheese industry. Very soon after began the long, self-induced hiatus of the state-directed cheese economy.

The Reincarnation of the Cheese Country

In spite of a few obstacles in the foreign trade sector, the cheese industry’s return to free enterprise has yielded extremely encouraging results: In the last ten to fifteen years, the number of new or newly rediscovered cheese specialties has become legion – you only have to look at the Swiss cheese directory at the end of this book. Of course, many of the “new” cheeses are rather non-descript pseudo-innovations, which are being marketed though more or less successfully by tooting the horn of nostalgia. But there are a few dozen inspired cheese creators, who have put a few exquisite new varieties on the shelves of Swiss cheese merchants and, lately, even the supermarkets. Among these, there are the two dozen or so creations of the Toggenburg dairyman Willi Schmid, the delicacies of the Andeer couple Maria Meyer and Martin Bienert and the innovative products of the cheese pioneer Josef Barmettler of Stans. But the collapse and demise of the Cheese Union has also managed to inspire the more traditional dairymen. Many old and all but forgotten cheese varieties are now



Preparation of Tommes in the Vallée de Joux, photography from the 1960s.

being revived, for instance the matchless Bloderkäse made by the Toggenburg highland dairyman Jakob Knaus or the large palette of “Vacherin fribourgeois à l’ancienne” produced by the versatile cheese expert Marc-Henri Horner of Marsens in the canton of Fribourg.

And who knows, one day, maybe some clever dairymen will manage to rediscover the recipes for all those Swiss cheese varieties, which have become lost in the course of history.

> Paper cutting from the Vaud region by Johann-Jakob Hauswirth, around 1850.



Cheese Trends in Switzerland



About Goat's and Ewe's Milk Cheeses. About Mature and Soft Cheeses from Raw Milk and about Cheese Mould. And about the fight against the Lack of Fantasy and the Cheese Industry.

The top dairymen and -women portrayed in this book are living proof of the trends in the gourmet sector of the Swiss cheese industry. These are not necessarily identical with those of the rest of the industry, which in the past has been concentrating mostly on export and on holding its own in the competition with the cheaper mass-produced cheeses from other European countries. Of course you can find illustrious names in the low-cost segment, but more often than not, these are tasteless, insipid products, whose packaging appears to be of more importance than their quality.

Copies and Standard Spices

When it comes to the development of new products, the imagination of many dairymen seems to be limited to tarding up their standard cheeses with a handful of herbs and spices, which can be cheaply bought in bulk from their suppliers – chilli, for instance; chives or garlic, the trendy wild garlic, the ubiquitous pepper and, of course, caraway. These ingredients have their place, even if gourmets turn up their noses at spiced cheeses because these spices tend to obliterate the natural flavour of the milk, the preparation process and the maturation. But even the fans of spiced cheese are faced with a rather limited choice; they all seem to be much of a muchness, since cheese dairies of all sizes tend to copy each other rather than look for real innovations. Wouldn't it be nice, if for once, they opened a history book to research lost cheese traditions or maybe to discover different herbs, which have been used in past

centuries for cheese making – herbs such as yarrow, rosemary, sage or, yes, saffron. So far, however, precious few dairymen have rediscovered these spices. Yoghurt production is a similar case – almost every dairy is selling its own product line, but they are all flavoured by the same fruit compotes bought from the same one or two bulk suppliers.

Blue Cheese and Soft Cheese

There are a few trends in the gourmet segment that run parallel with the trends of the mass market. This is true in the case of blue cheese. Here, Switzerland has launched a range of high-quality blue cheeses, which can more than hold their own against the great blue cheese specialties of France, Italy or England. Mould cultures have been used in soft cheeses for many years, especially in western Switzerland and in industrial production. This product range has recently grown, especially in the segment of soft cheeses made with white mould. Many small cheese dairies are selling first-class raw milk cheeses, for example Tomme or Reblochon varieties, well deserving their place on a Swiss cheese platter next to the great hard and extra hard cheeses.

When it comes to soft cheeses, the influence of the most important Swiss exponent of its kind cannot be denied: To this day, many innovative cheese makers consider the Vacherin Mont-d'Or the benchmark for their own creations. It is understandable that the Jura dairymen defend their product claws and teeth and litigate against every real or imagined attempt

to copy them, but with all this, they fail to mention that they are by no means the originators of the soft cheese in the spruce box. This method of conserving cheese had been practiced centuries earlier in Switzerland as well as in France and many regions of Spain. Long before the invention of Vacherin Mont-d'Or, cheese in the Blenio valley was kept in boxes of larch bark. And the famous Strohkäse of the Maggia valley was not just packed in straw, as its name suggests, but from the 17th century onwards also in spruce bark. At the same time, the Zigers from Toggenburg were shaped in molds of spruce bark.

Above all, Raw Milk

It is a sign of the transition of the cheese industry to more freedom that the Swiss authorities are sometimes turning a blind eye to certain regulations, allowing cheese to be sold as "raw milk cheese", even if only a fraction of the milk is indeed unpasteurized. But a cursory glance over the counters of the cheese shops as well as the supermarkets in Switzerland suffices to reassure us that the country is still very much keeping to the raw milk tradition. Even the supermarkets try to offer some well-matured raw milk hard cheeses next to the standard range of pasteurized spread cheeses and flavourless Brie imitations. Even now, more than half of the cheese varieties produced in Switzerland is made from raw milk. Taking into account that especially the traditional cheeses like Gruyère, Emmentaler, Sbrinz, L'Etiwaz, Piora or the Valais Raclette cheese, even

when produced in large quantities, are exclusively made from raw milk and that this wonderful tradition is even kept with semi-hard cheeses such as Tête de Moine or Vacherin fribourgeois, the relative proportion of raw milk cheeses lies between 60 and 70 percent of the total cheese production. This is a surprising result, considered that Interprofessional Organizations like those representing the Tilsiter or the Appenzeller are caving in to the mounting pressure from the EU and its hygiene regulations, making their cheese more and more often from thermized milk.

Hard and Mature Cheese

Vis-à-vis the European situation, Swiss dairymen seem to have realized how they can extend the niche existence of raw milk cheese that the country has been defending for centuries. We can see this in the case of the much-copied Emmentaler. You do not have to be a patriot in order to realize that well-matured raw milk Emmentaler is far superior to foreign pasteurized products and that it can only survive in the competition with these cheap mass-produced cheeses if the local dairymen stick to their guns. Well-matured hard cheeses from Switzerland are very popular abroad; the wonderful L'Etivaz, for instance, is winning medals in France that French hard and extra hard cheese producers can only dream of. The importance of the maturation process has been reconsidered in many a cheese dairy, which can be seen in the abundance of "cave-matured" cheeses that appeared in the last decade. Although

the Swiss have all but abandoned their traditional cheeses in the era of industrially made soft cheeses, many gourmets are now beginning to rediscover the superiority of these rich cheeses over the admittedly creamy but otherwise rather characterless soft cheeses.

Ewe's Milk and Goat's Milk Cheeses

The Swiss have also rediscovered their love for the century-old tradition of ewe's and goat's milk cheeses, a segment, which had been struggling under the state-directed economy of the 20th century. The choice of aromatic, fresh as well as mature goat's cheeses has multiplied in the last few years even in regions like Toggenburg or the Appenzell, where for a long time, goats had been taken to pasture only from a sense of nostalgia. Even mixed-milk cheeses from cow, goat and ewe's milk are having a renaissance all over Switzerland. These cheeses had once been produced by medieval Swiss and Italian dairymen and had been the most popular cheese of their time in Graubünden. This trend can even be seen in the hard and extra hard segment, where cheeses made from cow's and goat's milk had long been found only in the Maggia valley of the Ticino.

This trend is helped on by a growing awareness of healthy nutrition, especially with regard to ewe's milk cheese. Since this cheese has far less cholesterol than cow's milk cheese, more sheep are now taken to pasture and a handful of dairymen have taken it upon themselves to enrich the Swiss cheese palette with a choice of first-

rate ewe's milk cheese. This cheese is the perfect alternative for people who suffer from lactose intolerance.

The Resurrection of the Ancient Sour Milk Cheese

The rise in the production of goat's and ewe's milk has further led to the resurrection of very ancient traditions, for example the Mascarpin of the Italian-speaking southern valleys of Graubünden and Ticino. This sour milk cheese has now found its niche in the cheese palette of south-eastern Switzerland and can increasingly be found north of the Alps. A similar development can be seen with the Bloderkäse of Toggenburg and the Suurchäs of the Rhine valley of St. Gallen. Thanks to the trans-regional marketing, both of these cheeses have now crossed the borders of their native areas. They are very ancient cheeses, which have first been discovered by a handful of gourmets and gradually been adopted by affixers and cheese merchants all over Switzerland. But these traditional sour milk cheeses will probably always remain niche products, similarly to the Ziger of Glarus, which has never been able to regain the popularity it had just before the Second World War, both in and outside of Switzerland. It is probably also owing to the lack of marketing that Schabziger, the oldest Swiss cheese variety, has once seen better days.

Quality instead of Artificiality

Although the mass market has adopted many of the trends mentioned above, it

is nevertheless clear that the Swiss cheese export still tends mostly toward highly caloric, meltable semi-hard cheeses that are similar to the creamy Tilsiter or the Dutch Gouda. More than a third of the cheeses produced in Switzerland are semi-hard, full fat or even creamy or extra creamy, owing mostly to the preferences of Germany, the main importer of Swiss cheese. Although there are many tasty and aromatic varieties among these cheeses, there is a definite trend toward industrially made pizza cheeses and pseudo Camembert. Many large dairies live mostly from the production of simply made, freshly packed mozzarella-like cheeses or pasteurized, tasteless soft cheeses.

Luckily, another tendency that started in the Netherlands in 2008 has not yet reached Switzerland: artificially made industrial cheese from vegetable oils, fibres and synthetic ingredients that has never even been near a drop of milk. But since you will find this type of cheese on every fourth pizza in the Netherlands, it will only be a matter of time until it appears on the shelves of our supermarkets. Even if the Swiss themselves have abandoned this method of cheese production a while ago, cheap artificial cheese, which became a challenge to be reckoned with – a challenge the Swiss dairymen will only be able to meet with quality products, the honouring of tradition and with honest innovation. Only then will Switzerland be able to counterbalance these imports by a rising demand for top-quality Swiss cheese by gourmets everywhere.