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What is Switzerland's gastronomic culture?

The kitchen door has always been

Swiss national cuisine does not exist. There are innumerable regional specialities. But the cooking trend is foreign. At both stove and table, the style is multicultural.

Where can we still find classic Swiss cuisine if not halfway between fashionable Gstaad and remote Lake Lauenen? In Lauenen the explorer will actually find a rösti factory, and he is confronted with a choice between rösti with chili con carne, rösti pizza, rösti burger and other bizarre exotic combinations.

Many of the original recipes have died out, but multicultural dishes based on traditional domestic products are

booming. One thing is certain, there has never been a really original Swiss type of cuisine.

Since the Middle Ages, quick adaptation has been the order of the day. Returning mercenaries brought the first foreign recipes back home with them, and the transit land which Switzerland was becoming diligently copied everything that travellers gave them in terms of cooking methods and ingredients. Today half the dining establishments

*Urs Paul Engeler**

found in Swiss towns specialise in foreign dishes. Pizzerias and Chinese restaurants abound.

*Dr. Urs Paul Engeler was previously an editor with the magazine "Facts" and has now rejoined "Weltwoche".

Switzerland simply does not exist in the kitchen. There is of course the great star cook with the international reputation in the person of Frédy Girardet. But, as they work in Crissier near Lausanne, the master and his successor do not produce perfect versions of Berner platte, Basle flour soup, suuri gummeli (potatoes in vinegar sauce) and Aargau carrot tart, but imported French gastronomy.

There are even two cookbooks by parliamentarians. But both collections of recipes (or rather ideas for eating and drinking) provide evidence more of the modest pretensions of the authors than of the state of cuisine in the country. Swiss cuisine never had to cook for a royal court with heads of state. Swiss cuisine was in the countryside. Every little valley was proud of its own specialities.

A recipe from French-speaking Switzerland

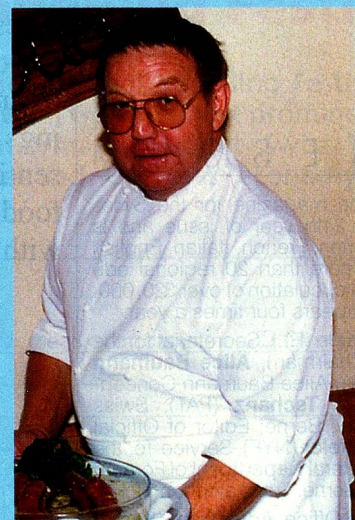
Papet of Chez Pécoud, Hôtel de Ville, Grandcour

Makes 4 servings

4 liver sausages or Swiss cabbage sausages
800 g leeks
200 g potatoes
3 dl milk
30 g butter
30 g flour
4 cl apple vinegar
Salt, pepper

Wash the leeks and cut them into 1 cm pieces. Blanch them in salted water. Peel the potatoes and grate them with a rösti grater. Prepare a roux with the butter and flour, moistening it with the milk. Mix in the vinegar, salt and pepper. Add the grated potatoes and blanched leeks. Simmer 1 hour on low heat. Season to taste.

To prepare the sausages, prick them at each end with a toothpick, then simmer in very hot water for 40 minutes. Serves with a red wine, for example Feu d'Amour, Yvoire.



Chef Gerald Ruchat.
(Photos: Georges Surdez)

open



"Figugegl – fondue is good and brings good cheer".
(Photo: Jean-Jacques Ruchti)

There is one dish which has become known throughout the world with the name of Swiss musli. But the fact is that birchermuesli, the very definition of grated natural

health food, cannot be taken as a valid expression of Swiss cuisine. It was mere coincidence that Dr. Bircher-Benner developed and marketed it in Switzerland.

Both international and regional

Swiss cuisine – in so far as it is permitted to use this expression – is at the same time a completely regional and

Recipe from Romansh-speaking Switzerland

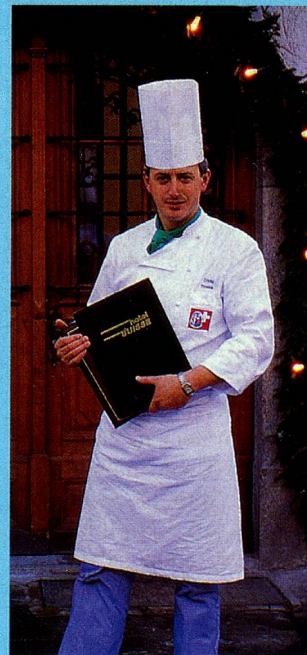
Pizzoccheri alla Livio Tuena, Hôtel Suisse, Poschiavo

Makes 4 servings

350 g buckwheat flour
150 g white flour
1 egg
about 1 dl water
1 tablespoon olive oil
salt
160 g hard cheese
80 g parmesan cheese
100 g potatoes
100 g Swiss chard
black pepper
200 g butter
1 garlic clove
4 sage leaves



Combine the buckwheat flour and white flour and mix in the salt, oil and egg. Blend the mixture lightly and add lukewarm water until the dough is soft. Peel the potatoes, cut them into 2 cm pieces, and then boil them in salted water. Clean the Swiss chard and cut the white part into 3 cm pieces and the green part into large pieces. Boil separately in salted water. Cut the hard cheese into 1/2 cm pieces. Roll the dough out to a thickness of 2 mm. Cut it into 8 cm-wide bands and then each into 1/2 cm-wide noodles. Boil these pizzoccheri in a large pan of salted water. When almost cooked, add the Swiss chard and the already cooked potatoes. Drain, then fill a pyrex dish with alternate layers of the pizzoccheri mixture and hard cheese. Sprinkle with the parmesan cheese and fresh-ground black pepper. Scatter bits of butter, garlic and sage over it. Serve with mortadella from Poschiavo, salad and a red wine for example La gatta, Triacca.



Chef Livio Tuena.
(Photos: Engadin Press)

completely international phenomenon. This is not so much a contradiction as an enormous element of strength. There is no other country in the world in which so many and such diverse influences have worked on its cuisine and the customs of its valleys as Switzerland. The Basle gastronomic authority, Hanns U. Christen, concludes that until recently it was practically impossible to eat badly in any Swiss restaurant.

The same ingredients

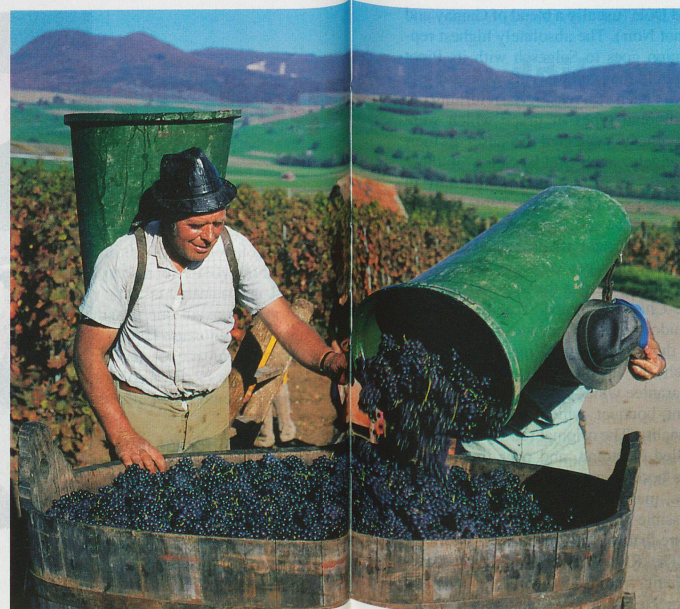
The food tastes good perhaps because the recipes have developed in a country which was once impoverished. All the sparse and meagre food had to be used in order to survive – with only the bare minimum thrown away as rubbish: potatoes again and again, fresh and dried fruit, milk, cheese, chestnuts, barley and innards (in the famous “kuttelsuppe” or tripe soup). The “räbebappe” (a parsnip mash), either with or without bacon, was until comparatively recently the nightmare of the children seated round the family table.

In eating, poverty was the mother of invention. The most had to be made of the little you possessed in order to

create at least some variety. This concept pervades many Swiss cookbooks. They are less interested in maintaining the gastronomic heritage and original specialities than in providing instructions for keeping house in a prudent, thrifty and careful manner. The main features of Swiss cuisine are not specific dishes and blends but are defined by adjectives such as homely, durable, reasonable and healthy.

Identity through cheese

The few really national dishes first arose from a latter-day necessity: the fact that surpluses from an over-efficient agricultural industry had to be exploited. As the cheese mountain grew, marketing strategists made the Neuchâtel speciality, fondue, a staple for the Swiss of all cantons. Following a highly successful advertising campaign, there is now a fondue pot and warmer in practically every household. The slogan was typically Swiss: “Figugegl – fondue is good and brings good cheer”.



Grape-pickers at work: “Wümmet” (vintage) in Klettgau. (Photo: Max Baumann)

Swiss wine is often underestimated

An unknown gem

As if it were not enough that overseas Switzerland and Sweden are often confused, our wines are also largely unknown. And quite wrongly.

The first extensive book on Swiss viticulture, “The Surprising Wines of Switzerland” by Canadian diplomat John C. Sloan, was published in 1996. This work – available only in English – carries the appropriate subtitle “Switzerland’s Best Kept Secret”.

It is true that with 15,000 hectares of vineyards (as against 900,000 in France) and an export ratio of about 1%, Swiss wine has a very low profile internationally. The fact that the Chasselas grape, widely disregarded as neutral in flavour, takes up 40% of Swiss vineyards contributes to the general underestimation of Switzerland’s potential to produce quality wine.

Even the indigenous population seem to be unaware of the many-sided facets of their own wine production. Although for decades the Swiss remained true to the elegant Vaudois white wines, the spicy Dôle from Valais and the fruity Blauburgunder from eastern Switzerland, in the last few years consumption of domestic wines has been falling steadily. This is certainly unjustified,

Stefan Zenklusen*

since the emphasis on quality on the part of Swiss wine-growers (at the expense of higher yield) is now well-known.

But the wine lakes of the 1970s and 1980s are still present in the minds of consumers, and the memory frequently results in a conviction that Italian or Australian products give you more for your money.

*Stefan Zenklusen is an editor with the international wine magazine “Vinum”.

A recipe from German-speaking Switzerland

“Chnöiblätzle”: Carnival biscuits, Moospinte, Münchenbuchsee

400 g flour
3 eggs
20 g sugar
60 g clarified butter
13 g kirsch
20 g cream
Icing sugar to dust
Makes about 16 biscuits

In a bowl, shape flour into a well. Mix the remaining ingredients thoroughly and place them in the middle of the well. Mix the whole into a smooth dough, pack into a plastic wrap and let rest for about an hour in the refrigerator. Then mould the dough into a sausage-shaped roll 3 cm thick and cut into about 16 equal lengths. Roll these out into very thin rounds (0.75 mm). Deep-fry them in oil (e.g. peanut oil) at 170°. Drain them onto kitchen paper. Dust them with icing sugar.



Oskar Marti, also known as “Chrüter Oski”, with his carnival biscuits and the sweet white wine he recommends: Grain de Malice, Provins Valais. (Photo: Jean-Jacques Ruchti)

Oskar Marti’s “Chnöiblätzle” recipe suits the time of year, as do all the menus in his restaurant. Visitors to the “Moospinte” in Münchenbuchsee in the Berne countryside get to know a cuisine which combines the fresh vegetables, fruit and herbs available on the day. Driven by fantasy and curiosity, the 50-year old host and head chef creates such crazy dishes as carrot and orange soup with gingerbread spices, monkfish ragout in aniseed sauce and apricots in basil. So he is simply known as “Chrüter Oski” (Herb Oski), in spite of his many honours, publications and TV programmes.

A recipe from Ticino

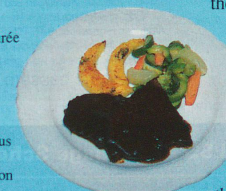
Braised beef with Ticino Merlot, La Palma au Lac, Locarno

Ingredients for 10 servings

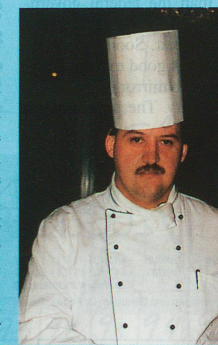
2.5 kg shoulder of beef, larded
0.5 dl peanut oil
250 g blanched celery stalk
250 g leeks
250 g onions
600 g carrots
120 g tomato purée
1 litre Ticino Merlot wine
1.5 litres water
1.5 litres brown gravy
20 g dried boletus mushrooms
80 g beef bouillon cubes
Salt, pepper, a little paprika

Spice the meat with the salt, pepper and paprika, and brown it thoroughly in the peanut oil. Remove it from the pan and lightly brown the chopped vegetables in the same pan (do the leeks

last since they burn easily and may become bitter). Add the tomato purée. The vegetables will take on the beautiful dark colour of the sauce and at the same time absorb both sweet and sour the purée. Be careful not to let the vegetables burn as they will then taste bitter. Next, add the red wine and, together with the water and the gravy, cook until the mixture thickens. Add the bouil-



lon cubes. Put in the meat and the mushrooms, and cover. Braise slowly for two to three hours. When the meat is cooked, remove, then purée the vegetables in a mixer. To test whether the meat is ready, stick a long fork into it, lift it and shake it lightly. If the meat falls easily from the fork, it is done. If the sauce is too thin, continue cooking it



Chef F. Müller. (Photos: zvg)

to the desired consistency. Caution: first test whether the sauce is too salty, and if it is bind it with cornflour. This dish is best served with polenta or mashed potatoes and a Merlot from the Delea vineyard in Losone.