

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 27 (2000)
Heft: 2

Artikel: The cow over the ages : trimmed for high performance
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-907628>

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Trimmed for high performance



Since around one fifth of Switzerland's surface can only be used as pastureland, over half a million cows enjoy ...

BY RAYMOND GREMAUD

The Swiss milk their cows and live a contented life – what a wonderfully rustic idyll literature has created! The fact that cattle still play a key role in Swiss agriculture is due to the willingness of farmers to practise a far from idyllic system.

Raymond Gremaud is the parliamentary correspondent for the "Journal du Nord vaudois".

SWITZERLAND IS HOME to two world-famous breeds of cattle: the Simmental Spotted and the Brown Swiss. Both these breeds account for the lion's share of the national market. The black and white Freiburg breed used to rank third, but it disappeared in the 1970s and was replaced by the

Holstein Friesian, according to Hans Burger, Director of the Federal Office for Agriculture (BLW).

In 1988 Switzerland had 1,837,000 head of cattle, of which 44 percent were Simmental and 40 percent Brown Swiss. In third place, with 11 percent, came the Black Spotted. With 14,300 head, the Eringer breed made up only one percent of Switzerland's total cattle stocks. The remaining 5 percent consisted of various other breeds and cross-breeds.

For generations there was a status quo: the cattle farming community com-

prised breeders of Simmental Spotted and Brown Swiss, while only a handful of pastures were grazed by Black Spotted and Eringer. Under threat of government subsidy withdrawals it was forbidden to mix individual breeds in the byre or in the field.

There was no question of introducing other races which could have cracked the cattle farming equivalent of the "magic formula". Burger remembers that the few authorised breeds were meticulously listed under the old laws. Keeping Limousins or Charolaises was unthinkable. All forms of cattle import were forbidden except under strict control for scientific purposes.

The BLW Angus was allowed into Switzerland for the purposes of scientific experiments in collaboration with the Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich: not the

four-legged variety, however, but in the form of sperm.

Introduction of new breeds

During the 1980s policy finally changed. Due to saturation of the milk market, the government encouraged farmers to produce non-commercial milk. This marked the beginning of calf-feeding cows and a change of direction towards meat production. 1992 saw a major turnaround, when the new agricultural policy liberalised the introduction of new breeds. The only restriction governed veterinary measures.

This opening of the market globalised the trade in sperm, and a number of breeding bulls impregnated entire herds of cows across national borders. For the Brown Swiss, for example, there is a worldwide siring list of proven breeding bulls. Naturally everyone wants to own the top bull rather than Number 1000 in the rankings. This has again raised the issue of inbreeding.

Yet Burger remains optimistic. Not all cattle breeders have the wherewithal to afford the most expensive breeding bulls. Here, too, there is a price-performance ratio. Yet the siring lists, based on performance tests on predecessors, are a sign of progress.

Double milk yield

The liberalisation of the cattle farming sector has created enormous improvements. Cows now produce twice as much milk as cows in the 1950s, and Burger assures us that these advances will continue. It all began with the three-purpose cow. For many generations this animal served Switzerland as a working animal as well as a producer of milk and meat. Later this was reduced to two functions, milk and meat. The future lies in specialised breeds which produce milk or meat.

According to Hans Burger, professional breeders will keep milk cows which produce 24 hours a day. This will reduce stocks in favour of meat-producing breeds, some of which will extensively graze pastureland. These should allow some farmers to offer an additional service. Milk producers concentrate on three breeds: Swiss Brown, Holstein Friesian and Black Spotted. The market for milk and meat producing breeds is growing, and Simmentals are being joined by such ancient breeds as Angus, Aubrac, Blonde d'Aquitaine, Charolais, Dexter, Galloway,

Europe's largest cattle show

On 13 and 14 May 2000 all breeds will be on show at Estavannens (FR): Swiss pure-breds (Swiss Brown, Simmental, Black Spotted, Eringer and Evolène), "naturalised" breeds (Angus, Highland, Galloway), French (Aubrac, Gasconne, Blonde d'Aquitaine, Maraîchine), Italian (Chianina, Piedmontese) and Austrian (Pinzgauer).

Altogether 34 breeds of cattle are expected at the Poya cattle show – a gigantic cowfest where the geographical origins of individual breeds are also celebrated. The programme of events includes folk music groups from Sardinia, Brittany, the Austrian Tirol, Limousin and the Massif Central, a cattle fleamarket, tasting sessions, the sale of agrarian produce from the various cattle regions, the traditional dialect show with the Armaillis Choir, and a large procession. Information is available on the internet under: www.poya.ch.

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Hereford, Highland, Limousin and Piedmontese.

Declining revenues

Farmers draw on centuries of know-how when it comes to milk and cheese produc-

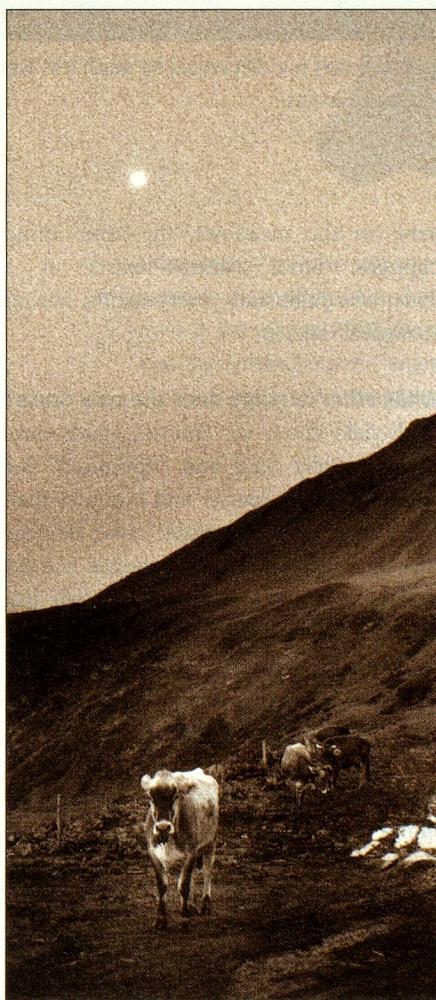
tion. This also explains why cattle breeding and dairy farming account for by far the highest incomes in the farming sector. So much milk flows that a quarter is exported in the form of cheese and other dairy produce.

The numbers reflect the not inconsiderable role played by mad cow disease and the drop in milk prices. While revenues from milk amounted to CHF 3.2 billion in 1994, they reached only CHF 2.8 billion in 1998. Beef production topped the meat revenues in 1994, earning CHF 1.5 billion, but declined to CHF 974 million in 1998 while pork production rose to CHF 1.1 billion.

Cattle exports

The situation for cattle exports is even more worrying. Traditionally Switzerland has exported between 10,000 and 15,000 cows a year, primarily to Italy. In the wake of the EU boycott induced by mad cow disease, this market has dried up. Yet our country has introduced the strictest controls in Europe – so far in vain.

Swiss farmers console themselves with the export of 2000 cows to Kosovo. The aim of this move is to build a subsistence basis in the war-torn region. The first 500 cows were flown out last autumn and are now providing the population with milk and will soon be producing calves. For Kosovo they represent hope, while here in Switzerland this humanitarian action serves as proof of the robustness of Swiss cattle stocks.



... a stay of several weeks in the mountains, breathing in the pristine alpine air.