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The legendary cow

BY WALTER DÄPP

Whether they live in town or country, the Swiss love the cow and uphold it as a national symbol.

NOT LONG AGO, at a birthday party for author Hugo Loetscher, Federal Councillor Moritz Leuenberger took the bull by the horns, bemoaning the fact that our home country often calls to mind cows or at most alpenhorns and idyllic landscapes, although "we city-dwellers also have our home here".

Leuenberger, a city-dweller himself, hit the nail on the head: what would the idyllic Swiss landscape or the sounds of the alpenhorn, ringing out clearly over ice-capped mountains, be without the cow? Without the solid Swiss cow, feeding contentedly on aromatic alpine grasses and patiently chewing the cud to produce milk: the foaming liquid which flows in abundance from its mighty udders and makes its way to processing plants to be turned into pasteurised milk, low-fat milk, buttermilk, butter, cheese, cream, yoghurt and milk chocolate.

Walter Däpp is an editor of the Berne newspaper "Der Bund".

Where would Switzerland be without this female symbol of fertility and reliability, purity and health, steadfastness and contentedness, or perhaps even languid complacency and self-satisfaction? Of course the cow is not there merely to adorn lush alpine meadows, pose on colourful postcards and cement the myth of a matchless alpine country and its matchless inhabitants. Its chief purpose is to bear calves and produce meat as well as milk. The farmers who raise, fatten and milk them know much more about calculating their yield and live weight than admiring their aesthetic qualities.

Framed souvenir

With one exception: "Lady" was a Simmental Red Holstein of the highest calibre. Born

in 1976 and died in 1995, she was not only the best cow in the byres of the Rutsch family of Bittwil, in the Canton of Berne; her prodigious lifelong milk production of 153,224 kilograms made her the First Lady among Swiss cows. "Lady," say Christine and Ernst Rutsch, "was a member of the family. Our children grew up with her. When it was time for us to let her go, we had her put to sleep in our courtyard rather than send her to the slaughterhouse."

"Lady", mother of 17 calves, still has a place of honour in the Rutsch's home, where her framed photograph hangs in the hallway. "She was a corpulent and extremely long cow," says Ernst Rutsch, "with a tremendous frame and deep flanks. And she had a long, noble head."

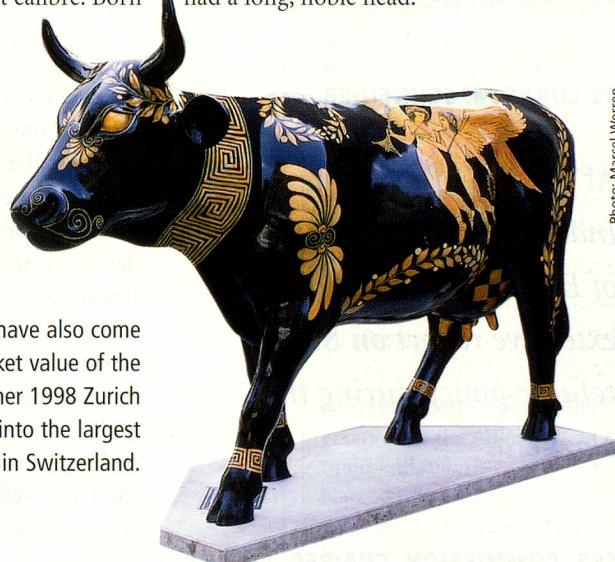


Photo: Marcel Weren

Urban marketers have also come to appreciate the market value of the cow. In the summer 1998 Zurich was transformed into the largest pasture in Switzerland.

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But "Lady" was not alone: there are around 760,000 cows in Switzerland producing four million tonnes of milk per year. That, Federal Councillor Leuenberger, is the reason why city-dwellers regard the cow as legendary. As Emmental author Ernst Eggerman once remarked, "This creature is out of place in urban landscapes with their fast-moving, noisy, stinking traffic. Yet subconsciously everyone knows that inexhaustible supplies of milk flow from countless udders in rural settings to feed city folk."

That includes city folk like Federal Councillor Leuenberger. They know that the cow is not just a placid milk-making machine, but is also inextricably linked with the image of Switzerland.