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How does Switzerland ce

In the following articles, selected authors take a light-hearted look at the Swiss approach to celebrations and give an outsider's view of customs and traditions in a region of Switzerland they have come to know well.



Photo: Bildagentur Baumann AG

On St. Martin's Day Sursee celebrates the "Gansabhuet".

The festive spirit is slow to awake

BY EROS COSTANTINI

"WHERE LAUGHTER and pleasure are forbidden, weeping is also banned," remarked Gottfried Keller on his many visits to folk festivals. The great Zurich writer was a dedicated and enthusiastic visitor to such events. As early as the Middle Ages Konrad of

For many years the author was the Ticino TV correspondent in German-speaking Switzerland and now works as a freelance journalist.

Würzburg wrote of the pleasures and revelries in the country that was later to become a confederation.

Contrary to the prevailing image of our country, particularly in the eyes of visitors from abroad, this proves that traditions, customs and the festive spirit have been eagerly nurtured for centuries in German-speaking Switzerland. By quoting Gottfried Keller above, my aim was not to score any cultural points but rather to highlight the fact that it was through his works that I came to know the fantastical and colourful world of the Basle and Lucerne carnivals,

the spectacle of the Zurich "Sechseläuten", Berne's Onion Market, and other traditional folk festivals in German-speaking Switzerland.

Like any other country, Switzerland boasts its own customs and popular traditions. The nature and extent of the festivities depend on their historical origins – modest or spectacular, popular or aristocratic, religious or secular. They are the product of ethnological-historical processes whose origins in some cases date back to pre-Christian times. Yet one key aspect of festivals has remained unchanged to this day: they provide everyone

celebrate?

with an opportunity to get together and let off steam. But what animates a festival? It appears in Switzerland at least that there is no universal, nationwide spirit of festivity and no common sense of humour.

Restrained merrymaking

In view of the fact that I have lived, worked and celebrated festivities in German-speaking Switzerland for over 20 years, I feel entitled to make some light-hearted observations on the festive customs of my Germanic compatriots. Naturally traditions vary in different parts of the region, for instance between Zurich and Basle or Uri and Berne. At first glance people behave in much the same way as at festivals the world over: they stroll, stop and chat, laugh, eat, drink, sing and dance – or, in the case of Basle's "Morgestraich", wait in silent anticipation of the coming event.

But these similarities are merely superficial. At his core the German-Swiss is ruled by a festive spirit peculiar to his breed: one

that is slow to awaken and swing into action. Rarely is the atmosphere explosive or electric as in other regions and parts of the country. Weeks and months of loyally observing duties and obligations cannot be drowned from one second to the next in a glass of beer.

Alongside exercising the laughing muscles and providing an excuse to dance, a festival is intended to warm the soul. In the eyes of

Swiss in the Ticino, the merrymaking of the German-Swiss appears very controlled, as if carefully orchestrated by unseen conductors. One's first impression is that festivals and celebrations are also to be taken seriously, rather than surrendering to improvisation or spontaneity.

Meticulous planning

Frankly, I have experienced festivities in German-speaking Switzerland that were as precisely organised as a rocket launch at Cape Canaveral. Everyone punctually at his post. Military precision in planning. Disciplined, tactically co-ordinated teams, like the erstwhile Swiss national team under coach Rappan. Even at carnival time many of the participants need a certain period of preparation before they can exchange the mask they wear throughout the year with their carnival mask.

This is the first impression of someone who finds themselves at festival drinking benches alongside German-Swiss swaying with arms linked and singing in unison. At times one feels a complete outsider. Yet at other times one feels in complete harmony, as when visiting the alpine festivals and country fairs which for centuries have played a major role in the annual cycle of rustic traditions. Once things have heated up at such events, the mood can become liberated and euphoric. Discourse is general and simple. At such moments one risks crossing the boundary between languages and cultures – and the reward is well worth while.

Photo: Bildagentur Baumann AG



On the evening before New Year's Eve, "Trychler" march through the villages of Oberhasli.



Photo: Bildagentur Baumann AG

The filigree headdress is the main characteristic of Appenzell's "Silvesterkläuse".

The festival of festivals is held in French-speaking Switzerland

BY MARCEL SCHWANDER

MANY GERMAN-SWISS regard their compatriots in French-speaking Switzerland primarily as people who are constantly raising their glass of Saint Saphorin wine and hopping around in jester's clothing. But appearances can be deceptive. In cantons with a tradition of Protestantism, Calvin once condemned any kind of profane pleasure: gluttony was punishable, and colourful clothing, dancing and games were also banned.

Yet it is in Protestant Vaud that by far the largest festival in Switzerland is held: the Fête des Vignerons in Vevey. This vintners' festival, featuring a cast of 5000 amateur and professional performers, was last held in the summer of 1999, attracting hundreds of thousands of visitors for a duration of almost three weeks.

Festival of superlatives

One of the richest in tradition, this festival is centuries old, perhaps even a millennium,

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and dates back to the times when monks first tilled the slopes above Lake Geneva and planted vines. To them the wine was holy, and every year the abbey awarded the best workers in the vineyard. This custom was continued even after the Reformation, and the president of the vintners' guild still bears the honorary title "Abbé".

Yet the modest procession has now become an increasingly expensive spectacle held at longer intervals. In 1955 Sir Charles Chaplin declared it "the most beautiful festival" he had seen in Europe. In 1999 this complex work of art focused on the traditional work of vintners over the seasons, as well as the common roots they share as a race of shepherds. At the same time the Fête des Vignerons also celebrated openness to the world.

While the festival has many admirers in German-speaking Switzerland, it is subject to misinterpretation, as a French-speaking journalist recently discovered. Many of the people she questioned confused the festival with a Teutonic booze-up. And one daily Zurich newspaper in all seriousness included in its preview a warning to French-speaking Swiss against the evils of drink.

Patriotic and solid

Annual vintners' festivals ("Fêtes des Vendanges") are to be found in Lutry, Morges,

Russin and on a larger scale in Neuchâtel. However, the most important folk festivals in the Vaud are shooting festivals – "Abbayes" – complete with flower-bedecked triumphal arches at the village entrance, colourful paper flowers in all the streets, on garden fences and houses. People gather for the patriotic service in the village church, followed by an awards ceremony in the festival hut, with honorary maiden, kisses for the winners, garlands and dancing.

Besides these patriotic events one finds gymnastic and song festivals as elsewhere in Switzerland, and even beer festivals. Many French-Swiss enjoy an evening of "Lederhosen" and swirling dirndls: French-Swiss TV even broadcasts the Austrian folk-music programme "Musikantenstadl", with simultaneous translation of its charismatic moderator Karl Moik.

In the Valais, cow fights are occasions for a folk festival, and the queens of the Eringer breed are as famous as Hohenzollern aristocrats in German popular magazines. In Fribourg alpine festivals, "Poyas" and colourful Corpus Christi processions are reminiscent of primitive customs. The Freiberg Equestrian Festival attracts tens of thousands to the Jura. And at Martini (11 November) carnival time is celebrated and revellers stuff themselves with grilled sausage and blood sausage, bacon and ham.


Young people from all over the world congregate for the music festivals in Nyon and Montreux, while Geneva attracts tourists with its «Fêtes de Genève» and a long-running youth festival. I almost forgot the Delsberg folk festival, which brings together tens of thousands to the modern capital of Jura, where poets used to recite their freedom poems as Czech poets did during the Prague Spring. Since then the situation in the Jura has relaxed, and erstwhile enemies once more speak to each other. 



Photo: Bildagentur Baumann AG

The tough Eringer breed makes for spectacular cow fights in the Valais.



Photo: Bildagentur Baumann AG

The Good Friday procession in Mendrisio is an impressive religious ritual.


A completely different type of procession, held in the uplands of the Blenio valley, is also worth a detour. In the cold Russian winter of 1812 many Swiss soldiers and officers, including Ticinese, lost their lives on the banks of the Beresina while fighting for Napoleon. Several of them pledged to dedicate a festival to the Madonna del Rosario should they return alive.

There were few survivors, but this gesture of thanksgiving is still performed, despite the fact that many participants nowadays have forgotten the historical origins and focus on the folklore aspects of the feast and its Napoleonic militia theme: uniforms, arms, drums, and a commanding officer barking orders to his 40-strong troop of men.

Early in the morning the militiamen gather, make preparations, parade for inspection and set off on their march to the accompaniment of drums. The most impressive moment of the procession is when it enters the church of Aquila, where a mass is celebrated in their honour. The drums resonate deafeningly yet stirringly throughout the building. The procession continues in the afternoon, bearing the statue of the Madonna and a religious reliquary.

Carnival capers

Without a doubt the most boisterous festival is the Shrovetide carnival held in many places throughout the Ticino. The most sumptuous is in Bellinzona, where for just under a week the city no longer belongs to the mayor but to the king and his jesters. King Rabadan is given a gigantic symbolic key to the city. He kisses his Dulzinea, confetti swirls through the air, and the revels commence.

Bellinzona's business and club community are responsible for decorating the premises and locations which are transformed for the week into pubs, wine-bars and dance-halls. Bands of musicians wander the streets playing on brass instruments and drums. Children's processions are held by day, a market for adults in the evenings, and there is a procession of floats decorated with artistic or satirical motifs. Finally people dare to poke fun at politicians and local bigwigs. And as with every carnival, the laws of decorum are temporarily suspended. 

Bastion of processions

BY LAURENCE BOLOMEY

WHEN A FRENCH-SPEAKING SWISS first sets foot on Ticino soil, he takes a deep breath and says to himself, "I'm already in Italy". Yet one only has to look at all the balconies on August 1st, decked out in red flags with a white cross, to be reminded that one is still on Swiss soil.

The Ticinese are members of the Confederation and proud of it – especially when fireworks light the night sky above Lugano's lakeside promenade on Swiss National Day. But celebrations are not limited to this particular date: from the colourful, noisy carnival festivities to the measured paces of silent processions, from "Castagnata" (in honour of the chestnut tree one sees everywhere in the Ticino) to risotto: almost every one of the 245 boroughs of the Ticino has its own festival.

At the heart of religious festivals

With Catholics making up more than 80 percent of Ticino's population, many events

are of a religious nature. The historical link with Italy is difficult to ignore. Processions featuring revered Madonnas are legion, and often the entire population of the locality take part in such festivals.

Mendrisio is a good case in point. Every year at Easter two processions make their way through the narrow streets of this idyllic town, which is lit up for the occasion by enormous lanterns called "trasparenti". These are truly biblical works of art which lend the town a warm glow.

The Good Friday procession is silent and solemn: a religious march involving around 600 people including many children. By contrast, the Maundy Thursday procession is a historical picture-book parade featuring a cast of 200 and around 40 horses. The festival begins in the changing room, where the actors proudly slip into their costumes. The theme is Jesus and the stations of the cross.

Tradition has it that the name of the actor playing Christ is kept secret, and the face of the man bent under the weight of the cross is only revealed at the end of the procession. Around 15000 spectators watch the procession, and the festival celebrations continue afterwards in the courtyards and squares of the town.

Laurence Bolomey is the Ticino correspondent for Radio Suisse Romande.

"Bien di bien onn" rather than champagne



Photo: Bildagentur Baumann AG

The "Chalanda Marz" rings in the start of spring with deafening clangs.

BY CLAUDIA CADRUVI

AT MIDNIGHT on New Year's Eve I avoid kisses, champagne and the the ringing of bells. I need something else at New Year, and spend January 1st as often as I can in the Grisons Oberland. There, in the small snow-covered villages, the children go from house to house, entering without knocking. As soon as the householders appear the children greet them with the words "Bien di bien onn", which roughly translated means "Good day, good year". In some villages the children ask without further ado for a "bimaun", a New Year's gift. In other villages the New Year's greeting is followed by a special prayer, and the master or mistress of the house is wished happiness in Heaven.


How big is the coin?

Rhaeto-Romansh is gradually being eroded, and unless you know exactly what the shivering hordes of children are about, you will understand nothing. But the children care not a fig about articulation, far less the Kingdom of Heaven. Because the most important part of the ritual is the "bimaun" which follows their greeting. Critically and silently they follow every gesture of the

house-owner. The small pre-schooler beams when he is handed a large denomination of coin. In sheer joy he forgets to thank his benefactor and rushes outdoors. There the children congregate and tell each other what or how much they have been given, rejoicing or feeling offended if they think they have been given too little for their age. The smallest ones who are still too young to be entrusted with a purse are ecstatic.

The groups make their way throughout the village. They know from the previous year roughly what they can expect in each house. One door is pushed open with eager anticipation, while at another door they stop to debate who should enter first. One yard smells good, another sour. The old teacher Maissen welcomes the girls and boys warmly and takes the time to tell every child

how he or she resembles one or other of his or her parents. At Giuseppa's, the post-mistress, every child is dryly mocked, and woe betide the child who made fun of her last year. For strategic reasons many courageous children make the village rounds on their own. "There's more that way", they argue, though that is not always the case in the final count.

If I could join these children again, I would even refuse the banknote from old Giachen. All I would wish for is a cold nose filled with aromas of cooking from various kitchens, and the delicious sense of anticipation before opening every door. But I am too old for that, so instead I look forward to a Rhaeto-Romansh New Year and the sight of fidgeting, excited children exclaiming "Bien di bien onn". 

The author is editor of the Rhaeto-Romansh news agency "Agentura da Novitads Rumantscha".

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