Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 27 (2000)
Heft: 1

Artikel: The festival of festivals is held in French-speaking Switzerland
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DOI: https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-907620

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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, 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 Neuchatel. 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.

Marcel Schwander has been "Tages-Anzeiger" correspondent for Western Switzerland for many years and is an author and translator of numerous books on Francophone Switzerland.

Photo: Bildagentur Baumann AG

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