

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 32 (2005)
Heft: 6

Artikel: Winter pleasures : Fondue: a stirring tale
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-906622>

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Fondue: a stirring tale Fondue, the national dish par excellence, runs like a leitmotif through Swiss history. Everything you ever wanted to know about the fondue pot, melted cheese and the birth of the fondue era in Switzerland. By Alain Wey



Velvety-smooth fondue, the symbol of conviviality, came about not because someone wanted to impress their dinner guests, but because necessity is the mother of invention. To understand the origins of our national dish, we need to go back to the era of alpine cowherds, snow-capped mountains and harsh winters in the Jura and the foothills of the Fribourg Alps. Without those brave and hardy alpine farmers, this simple recipe – as uncomplicated as “Grüezi” or “Bonjour” – would never have been invented. So cut yourself some bread cubes and dip into the history of the fondue.

Some people claim that fondue comes from the canton of Fribourg, or more precisely the Gruyère region. Others believe it has its roots in the Jura. No-one will ever know who's right, but whatever the case, it appears that we have those alpine cowherds to thank for our national dish. It was they that, during the months when they were cut off from the world, created the famous recipe by using up leftover cheese and stale bread.

Astonishingly, the oldest written mention of fondue is to be found in Homer's Iliad. In it the classical Greek poet describes a meal made

from sheep's cheese, grated with a bronze grater, then melted and mixed with wine and white flour. Historians, on the other hand, agree that the present-day dish was invented in all cheese-producing regions of the Jura and the Alps, which explains the Swiss origins of fondue. But even if fondue really is a Swiss invention, its recipe was first written down in around 1794 by French gastronome Brillat-Savarin. The ingredients were Gruyère cheese, eggs and butter. Wine only appears in the recipe around 1911, and kirsch even later, around 1923. It stands to reason that the preparation evolved over the centuries, and even today it is being continually refined thanks to the ingenuity of countless fondue cooks.

When the world was in economic crisis during the 1930s and Europe was in turmoil, the mood in Switzerland was not exactly upbeat. It was then that the Swiss Cheese Union had the brilliant idea of boosting flagging sales by associating fondue with a feel-good factor. The slogan “Fondue isch guet und git e gueti Luune” (“fondue is good and makes for a good mood”) is still as popular as ever. Finally, the rest of the world discovered the fondue pot and its con-

tents at the 1940 World Exhibition in New York. In the following decade even the Swiss army was equipped with fondue pots. By bringing fondue home to their families after they had completed their service, Swiss soldiers helped to spread the popularity of this cheese dish throughout the country. Since then, fondue has become part and parcel of the Swiss identity. The first ready-to-serve fondue was launched on the market in 1955, and the best-known one – Gerber – was introduced in 1960, accompanied by the marketing slogan: “Es gelingt immer, im Gegensatz zum selbstgemachten” (“It's fail-safe, unlike the home-made variety”).

Since our national dish has been exported to countries all over the world, every country has put its own stamp on the dish by using local products. In the UK, for example, you can eat a Welsh rarebit fondue (with beer and cheddar cheese), and in Mexico fondue is made with local cheeses. The Swiss can be particularly proud of the fact that, thanks to fondue, they have succeeded in exporting good moods.

FACTS AND FIGURES: FOND OF FONDUE

Alongside chocolate, fondue is a key element of Switzerland's gastronomic identity. The figures speak for themselves: 88% of Swiss households have a fondue burner and pot. The Swiss consume 21 million portions of fondue a year, i.e. an average of 3 portions per person. There's no denying it: At the first sight of a steaming fondue, almost every Swiss melts.

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Fondue is a highly sociable meal.