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Autor: Abt, Ueli
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Aromat and Stocki: the taste of Switzerland

Aromat and Stocki are the embodiment of Swiss cuisine. But Knorr products were never reserved for Swiss palates alone. The factory in Thayngen opened its doors one hundred years ago. By Ueli Abt

In the year 2000, the Knorr brand was acquired by the Anglo-Dutch company Unilever. Was this another example of a Swiss brand falling into the hands of a foreign multinational? Feldschlösschen has been taken over by Danes, Ovomaltine was bought by a British firm, while Toblerone and Valser water were snapped up by Americans. And yet the Knorr takeover was different. Knorr was neither a Swiss invention nor was the brand ever Swiss-owned for long, even though Aromat, Knorr bouillon cubes and Stocki are seen as embodying Helvetian cuisine. Knorr is German in origin, and it was never a solely Swiss preserve.

German entrepreneur Carl Heinrich Knorr founded a chicory drying and grinding factory in Heilbronn in 1838. From about 1870 onwards, he started producing powdered peas, lentils and beans. The company grew and was soon delivering across the border to Austria and Switzerland too. In order to circumvent the rising customs duties, Knorr opened a small packaging plant on Swiss soil, in St. Margrethen on Lake Constance, from where it supplied the Swiss market with powdered vegetables and



soup mixes. The first Swiss Knorr factory was set up in centrally-located Thayngen (SH) in 1907, producing soups and bouillon cubes.

In so doing, Knorr had ventured both geographically and commercially into territory previously dominated by Maggi, a Swiss company based in Kemptthal that had invented soup mixes in the late 19th Century. Indeed packet soups were long known as "Maggi soups". In 1886, Maggi went a step further, lending its name to a brown seasoning sauce that it marketed as an alternative to salt and pepper.

But then Knorr had a hit with Aromat in 1952. A year later, Knorr gave restaurants in Switzerland 30,000 cruet stands featuring the distinctive yellow, green and red tub

alongside the salt-cellar and pepper-pot. Almost overnight, Aromat became a household name throughout Switzerland. Fendor, an almost identical rival product from Kemptthal, never achieved the same level of fame. Although Aromat helped Knorr draw level with Maggi, the brown seasoning couldn't be edged aside completely, and to this day Maggi and Aromat stand side-by-side and on equal terms on our supermarket shelves.

Knorr was not content to confine itself to the German and Swiss markets. It opened a factory in the Austrian town of Wels in 1907, a bouillon plant in Nancy in 1909, and a soup factory in Monza in 1912, and between 1901 and 1932 it set up offices in Paris, Berlin, Wroclaw, New York and Antwerp.

The Second World War occasionally brought production at its headquarters in Heilbronn to a standstill. An air strike on Heilbronn in December 1944 destroyed half of the factory. But the War had hardly ended when production began again in May 1945. By September, the company's workforce had already swelled to 650 again. Meanwhile, Knorr's Swiss operations were spun off into a subsidiary.

Knorr's independence was short-lived, since its success increasingly whet the appetites of foreign firms hungry for a tasty morsel. Maizena, a subsidiary of the American Corn Products Company (CPC), became Knorr's majority shareholder in 1958. At about the same time, the last member of the Knorr family left the board of directors in Germany. In 1998, CPC became the con-



Knorr products began appearing in shops around the world 100 years ago. But to this day, Aromat is still only available in Switzerland.

sumer goods company Bestfoods. Two years later, Bestfoods was itself snapped up by Unilever.

Today, Knorr products are available in more than 100 countries. In spite of this globalisation, Knorr is still perceived as typically Swiss in Switzerland, partly thanks to Knorrli, the mascot dreamt up for a domestic ad campaign. Knorrli briefly enjoyed international fame, but only achieved lasting popularity in Switzerland. According to Knorr, he has a 98-percent recognition rate among the Swiss. In Germany, the company used Knorrli – an ox standing on its hind legs and holding a wooden spoon in its right “hand” – in its advertising in the 1960s. Knorrli’s sidekick was Stocki, a potato sporting a beret, who advertised potato starch of the same name.

Over here, “Swissness” has been part of the brand image since 2004. Knorrli, who had been shunted to the back of the packet, was brought back to the front, where Knorr’s graphic designers furnished him with a Swiss cross. The packaging also explicitly stress the “Swiss quality” of the product. However, not all the ingredients used at the factory in Thayngen are of Swiss origin, and Unilever remains tight-lipped about how many of its raw materials are imported. Interestingly enough, the packets and sachets that Thayngen sends abroad contain no reference to Swiss quality. It seems that the company does not want to draw attention to the fact that Knorr products aren’t only produced in Switzerland.

GLOBAL MARKETS, LOCAL TASTES

The foods sold under the Knorr brand in more than 100 countries taste different in each. Glance beyond our borders and you’ll see that Knorr isn’t identical everywhere. Although they are sold in Germany, you won’t find products like fatty broth, pea meal sausage or lentil stew in Swiss shops. In Austria, Knorr has a range of desserts like Kaiserschmarren that it sells collectively under the name “Sweety”, products for which Unilever spokeswoman Anne Zwyssig claims there is no market in Switzerland.

By contrast, you can’t buy the Grisons specialty barley soup or Basle gruel in Germany. Both countries also have local variations on similar products. Swiss “Hüttenlunch” is called “Hüttenschmaus” in Germany, and the Swiss are offered cheese “Spätzli” with ham, the Germans Swabian cheese “Spätzle” with fried onions. Zwyssig says that the two countries even have widely different tastes with regard to identical varieties: “Our gravies and cream sauces differ significantly from those of our German neighbours. The Swiss prefer spicier sauces, whereas the Germans like their food rather sweeter.” (ua)

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