

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 34 (2007)
Heft: 2

Artikel: Swiss specialities : the battle over what constitutes "real" raclette cheese
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-907557>

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The battle over what constitutes “real” raclette cheese

Only in Valais has raclette cheese been produced in the same way for centuries from unpasteurised milk. And yet the Valaisans have been fighting for years to protect “their” cheese from industrial imitations. The row has now reached the Swiss Federal Court. By Philippe Welti

October on the Simplon, and the mountain summer is drawing to a close. It is cool, and heavy autumn fog hangs over the pass at nearly 2000 metres. Here and there, cows are still grazing in the luscious Alpine meadows. The slopes on the southern side of the pass are sheer. Italy is closer than the Rhone valley. Brig, the nearest Swiss town, lies more than 30 kilometres away on the other side of the pass. Few people traversing the Alps here along winding roads take the time to stop and look around Simplon village perched on a terrace high above the valley.

As early as the 17th Century, cheese from Simplon was being traded by Kaspar Jodok von Stockalper, the man who built the castle of the same name in Brig. Today it is sold

by the local Alpine dairy cooperative, which enjoys an excellent reputation far beyond these narrow valleys. The cooperative supplies the entire region to Brig and Gondo with milk, cheese and butter. Everyone knows everyone else, and everyone knows the cooperative’s 12 dairy farmers, whose 120 cows produce the milk they bring to the co-op. For years, the people of Simplon have lived on tourism, transport and farming. There is no industrial activity. By contrast, Simplon’s traditions are alive and well – especially those related to cheese-making.

In his dairy, Felix Arnold produces raclette cheese from unpasteurised full-fat milk to a recipe that has survived unchanged for more than a thousand years. Fifty-year-

old Arnold is proud of his handiwork. Cheese is his life. Every year, he produces 65 tonnes of raclette cheese and 35 tonnes of tomme. He thinks little of the cheese that industrial dairy conglomerates outside Valais churn out from pasteurised semi-skimmed milk. “Unpasteurised milk is a natural product that gives the cheese its unique character,” he says. This unmistakable flavour comes from the spicy Alpine plants that the cows eat, he explains. And whereas the cheaper, industrially-produced cheese of the major distributors tastes exactly the same all year round, the taste of his raclette cheese reflects the vegetation growing in the different seasons.

To experience this variety first hand, try a spot of cheese-tasting at the Chateau de Villa in Sierre run by a foundation promoting Valais specialities. On your culinary journey through Lower and Upper Valais, you’ll discover that none of the five raclette cheeses on offer taste quite the same. One of them is made by Felix Arnold. The Valaisans are proud of the diversity of their raclette cheeses, and they are convinced that real raclette cheese comes from Valais.



SWISS RACLETTE

■ The cheese-makers in Valais produce some 2000 tonnes of raclette cheese a year. A further 11,000 tonnes are produced under various names by Swiss dairy companies. Despite this, an extra 1000 tonnes of raclette cheese have to be imported every year to meet domestic demand.

Here’s where you can buy it:
Sennereigenossenschaft
CH-3907 Simplon-Dorf
Cheese shop: Open daily from
8am-noon and 4pm-6pm.



Which is the “real” raclette cheese? Will there soon be an *appellation d’origine contrôlée*? The Federal Court must now rule on the matter

Even so, they know that the mountain farmers and cheese-makers of Valais can only survive if consumers understand the difference between their raclette cheese and cheaper, industrial varieties. Unfortunately, that is not the case. Switzerland's largest raclette producers sell their pasteurised raclette cheese under names like Mazot and Racard. "These are typical Valais expressions," bemoans Urs Guntern, the director of Weiss, the Valais dairy association. He thinks that such names mislead consumers. For this reason, the locals are at pains to protect raclette cheese from cheap imitations.

As early as 1997, the Valais dairy association petitioned the Swiss Federal Office for Agriculture for an *appellation d'origine contrôlée* (certified indication of origin, AOC) for raclette cheese. This would mean that cheese could only be called raclette if it were made in Valais to a traditional recipe using unpasteurised milk, and it would effectively forbid cheese-makers outside Valais from producing raclette cheese. No

sooner had the Federal Office given its approval than the protests came pouring in from other cantons. Given that domestic demand for raclette cheese far outstrips the volumes that cheese-makers in Valais can produce, it was suggested that the ruling risked disrupting basic supplies of melting cheese for raclette meals.

Nonetheless, the Valaisans are convinced that raclette cheese is their sole preserve, and they point to historical documents showing that cheese was melted as far back as the early Middle Ages. Even the Duden, the Bible of the German language, defines raclette as a cheese dish from Valais. Whether it was actually invented in Valais is debatable, and people in central Switzerland and northern Italy also claim that they started melting cheese first.

Fact is, the wrangling over raclette continues, albeit not quite as heatedly. The appeals commission of the Federal Department of Economic Affairs recently revoked the original ruling, arguing that the term "raclette" described a dish rather than a

product and therefore could not be copyrighted. This incensed the Valaisans, who are now contesting the decision in the Federal Court. One way out of the impasse would be to label raclette cheese from the Valais as "Raclette du Valais AOC" or "Walliser Raclette AOC", since this would enable Swiss raclette producers to continue to sell their pasteurised cheese.

Felix Arnold says that he could live with this solution. Business is good, and the raclette cheese that he makes together with his assistant, Enrico Serino, is considered a first-rate product, as recognised by several international awards. Even so, Arnold supports the efforts to protect the raclette name. In his cellar, he lifts one of the cheeses stamped "Alpe Simplon" off the shelf where it is left to mature for three to five months (the ideal length of time is a moot point in Valais). "This cheese contains essences of healthy Alpine plants," he says. "It is natural and doesn't come off a conveyor belt. That's something that the consumers should never forget."

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