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Saving the skin of the Cervelat sausage. The Cervelat as we know it is in danger of disappearing because of a lack of the Brazilian cows' intestines used for the sausage casing. Swiss meat industry experts have stepped in and, together with politicians, are now looking for alternatives. A report by Alain Wey

The days of Switzerland's favourite sausage are numbered. It all began with the ban on imports of the Brazilian cows' intestines traditionally used in Cervelat production. Switzerland followed the lead of the European Union, which introduced the ban on 1 April 2006. Now stocks of the intestines are running out, and there is a distinct possibility that Euro 2008 may be a Cervelat-free zone! The Swiss Meat Association has stepped in to help find a solution. Supported by the Federal Department for Veterinary Affairs, it has formed a task force to identify new sources of supply. Calls have also been made in Parliament for Berne, Brussels and Brazil to seek a political solution.

How did this situation arise?

Most people will find it astonishing at the very least that the skin plays such a key role in Cervelat production. However, the skin possesses characteristics that determine a sausage's size, shape, how it is unwrapped and its suitability for grilling. Moreover, not all intestines are suitable for the Cervelat: Swiss cows' intestines are too thick, and since the BSE crisis are now always destroyed in any case. The imports from Brazil began precisely at the time when the measures to counter BSE (bovine spongiform encephalopathy) were introduced in Europe twenty years ago. So why have imports of the renowned Brazilian cows' intestines now been banned? The European Union and now Berne, in line with the so-called equivalence procedure, have placed Brazil in the category of countries with "controlled BSE risk"*, to which Switzerland also belongs. To date there has never been a single recorded case of BSE in Brazil, however, which is why it was originally categorised as a country with "negligible BSE risk". According to Balz Horber, head of the Swiss Meat Association, Brazil imported cattle from Europe in the 1990s, and this is the only reason for the change of category.

Stocks of intestines have been dwindling since the import ban. As the Cervelat is ex-

tremely important to the Swiss meat industry (see box), the Swiss Meat Association could not simply stand aside and wait while Switzerland's national sausage disappeared. Its chief strategy is to find replacement intestines or persuade Berne and Brussels to reconsider the import ban. Rolf Büttiker (FDP), member of the Council of States for Solothurn and President of the Swiss Meat Association, said: "We will have to fight for our Cervelat in Brussels." In December 2007 he tabled a motion in Parliament entitled "Sausage skins made of cows' intestines". He wants the Federal Council to petition the European Union to grant Switzerland an exemption that would allow it to import Brazilian cows' intestines. In addition to these lengthy political proposals, the research institute Agroscope Liebefeld-Posieux (ALP) has been asked to test possible alternatives to Brazilian cows' intestines.

The political route

Two strategies are being considered to obtain an import exemption from Brussels. Firstly, the task force will argue that only a part of the Brazilian intestines poses a BSE risk. "While this strategy may take longer, it is also the most likely to succeed", said Cathy Maret, spokesperson for the Federal Office of Veterinary Affairs. "BSE only affects a small part of the intestine, the ileum. We are therefore now focusing directly on es-

tablishing exactly what constitutes risk material, and will attempt to persuade the European Union that the intestines could be imported provided the ileum is removed beforehand. However, we do not believe we will achieve this before 2009."

An emergency solution for the Cervelat

The research institute ALP tested twelve alternative sausage skins, assessing them according to taste, shape, colour, variation from the standard size (12cm long, 3.8cm in diameter), the ease with which it can be removed and its suitability for grilling. Three alternatives – cows' intestines from Uruguay, pigs' intestines and collagen – made the shortlist. "They all have at least one disadvantage", admitted Rolf Büttiker. Uruguay is probably unable to meet Swiss demand. In the case of pigs' intestines the thickness of the Cervelat would vary considerably, meaning that the solution would be unsuitable for industrial manufacture. It also makes it harder to remove the skin and means it bursts very quickly on the grill. A collagen skin cannot be removed. The journalists who attended a press conference in Zurich in January had what can at best be described as mixed feelings about these emergency solutions. While many agreed that there was no difference with Cervelat salad, this was not the case with grilled sausages. For example, sausage skin made from pigs' intestines had an unpleasant burnt taste after grilling.

Stocks of Brazilian intestines will run out within months. The Cervelat task force must now be patient and wait for decisions to be taken on their proposals.

*The World Organisation for Animal Health, which has 167 member countries, divides BSE risks into three categories.

THE CERVELAT – FACTS AND FIGURES

■ Production – around 160 million Cervelats per year, almost 25,000 tonnes. Some 120,000 cows and around 360,000 pigs, almost 90% of them bred in Switzerland, are purchased for production. The Cervelat accounts for around 30% of Switzerland's total sausage production. Domestic consumption is 25 sausages per capita per year. The Cervelat as it is eaten in Switzerland today, however, has only existed since the 19th century. This was when machines were first introduced to produce sausage meat. It became the national sausage on 1 August

1891 and, together with chocolate and Emmental cheese, represented Switzerland at the World's Fair in Paris in 1900.

