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The alpine herdsmen of the 21st century

Cheese-makers and mountain shepherds have moved with the times and the culture of the alpine herdsmen, or *armaillis*, is alive and well on the alpine pastures and is certainly not confined to museums. An interview with alpine herdsman Michel-Joseph Braillard. By Alain Wey

So who are today's alpine herdsmen, known as *armaillis* in French-speaking Switzerland and *Sennen* in German-speaking parts of the country? Alpine cheese-makers, shepherds, herdsmen and milkers, the traditional representatives of Swiss folklore*, would have died out in the 1970s if young people from the cities with alternative lifestyles had not arrived to bolster their ranks. The tradition of cheese-making on the alpine pastures now has decades ahead of it. Alpine herdsman Michel-Joseph Braillard looks back on a thousand-year-old tradition.

He explains: "The Olma Swiss Agricultural Fair in St. Gallen provides a reflection on the alpine herdsman tradition throughout Switzerland today, a way of life which has updated itself enormously. The law on land improvements has enabled the construction of access routes to the alpine pastures. The alpine herdsmen themselves have also changed tremendously. They almost all drive 4x4s today. There are even cable cars and monorails on the steepest alpine meadows. People have been working in the Swiss Alps for around 1,000 years. The expertise for the production of *caseus helveticus*, the hard cheese for which Switzerland is so famous, was brought by the monks." Michel-Joseph Braillard is full of anecdotes. He resumes: "Ever since crossing the Atlantic became commonplace in the 16th century, *gruyere* experienced its first boom because it is very rich in protein and easy to preserve. However, the origins go back much further. There is a site called *Chäs u Brot*, near to Berne, where the Swiss Germans who were on their march to Laupen to fight the Burgundian nobleman in 1339 were given bread and cheese."

In the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries, Switzerland experienced a boom in cheese-making with the emergence of so-called cheese barons when thousands of rounds of *gruyere* were sold each year at the market in Lyon, France. The golden age ended in the 19th

century. In the 1970s and 1980s, a return to nature and a rise in demand for regional products and alpine cheeses made in the traditional way saw the numbers of alpine herdsmen replenished with young people from the cities, who had an alternative outlook on life, training as cheese-makers in the agricultural colleges. In addition, a website www.zalp.ch now contains information on alpine herdsmen and job offers to help find staff.

Michel-Joseph Braillard believes the revival of the alpine herdsmen has been achieved by grouping together alpine pastures and modernising equipment and premises. This is already evident in Simmental (BE), for example. He says: "Thanks to growth in demand for regional products,

THE HERDSMAN WITH A TASTE FOR ADVENTURE

Herdsmen Michel-Joseph Braillard, aged 66, began learning about the different tasks involved in work on the alpine pastures at the age of five in the Fribourg Prealps. From a family involved in cattle breeding for four centuries, he attended agricultural college, traded calves between German-speaking and French-speaking Switzerland, became head of the stables at a leading riding school in Geneva, and then a horse-riding instructor in St. Moritz (GR). He worked at the testing centre for the breeding of cattle at the Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich and then at a veterinary clinic as an animal production technician. Through

mountain agriculture has been thriving again for several decades. *Etivaz* from Pays-d'Enhaut (also a *gruyere*) is a good example of the resurgence of the alpine herdsmen. This cheese was the first to obtain registered designation of origin status, and its makers work with some 60 cheese boilers." The assistant alpine herdsmen come from many different countries, including Poland, Kosovo, Paraguay and the Lebanon.

The alpine herdsmen also have a new role as guardians of nature. Michel-Joseph Braillard explains: "The magical relationship between the sky and the earth must be preserved. Cheese is like a good bottle of wine, a "*Clos de Vougeot*" or a "*Château Pétrus*". It has to be savoured with respect." The aspect of the grazing land and what the cows or goats eat has a direct impact on the cheese. In the same way, the smoke of the boiler's wood fire gives the cheese a certain flavour. The herdsman adds: "And sometimes stormy weather can give the boiler an extra bit of spark!"

**The alpine herdsmen wear traditional costumes, particularly in Appenzell, Toggenburg, Emmental and Gruyere.*

www.olma-messen.ch

www.zalp.ch

www.alporama.ch



his visits to cattle-breeding farms in Canada and studying in Newcastle in the UK, Braillard, originally from Gruyere, has become an expert on cattle over the years. He later moved to Zollikon where he spent 12 years rearing mother cows and producing organic meat, better known as "*naturabeef*". He then bred cattle on an alpine pasture in Moléson (FR) before emigrating to the Dominican Republic in 1985, where he could be "on

alpine pastures all year round". In 1998, he took over a flock of 400 ewes in the Portuguese Sierra and set up a cheese dairy. On his return to Switzerland in 2005, he worked in Upper Valais, Grisons and then in Pays-d'Enhaut (VD). Today, he is based in Gruyere at the "La Chetta" mountain chalet where he has a herd of goats. He combines cheese with aromatic alpine herbs. He says: "I met a herb gatherer, my partner, and this relationship produced a cheese, *Le liberta*. As long as I've got my health, I intend to work on the pastures."

L'*armailli* aventurier, Michel-Joseph Braillard, Editions de l'Aire, 2010.