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Autor: Pfander, Matthias
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The crux of Swissness

The new Swissness Act has been in force since the start of the year. The food industry has had to modify packaging and recipes as a result.

MATTHIAS PFANDER

The pork in the mini cordon bleu comes from Switzerland, as do the cheese and ham used in it. Until now the convenience food producer Bofrost has labelled this product with a Swiss flag in its catalogue. However, that now has to stop owing to the coating. The breadcrumbs do not come from Switzerland and under the new Swissness regulations the product may no longer be advertised as Swiss. The new law stipulates that at least 80 % of the weight of ingredients in food products must come from Switzerland in order for it to be marketed as Swiss. The coating accounts for 25 % of the weight of Bofrost's mini cordon bleu.

Many Swiss companies in the food industry have been forced to change their recipes, packaging or both owing to the new legislation, including the muesli manufacturer Bio-Familia. The company would have needed to remove the Swiss cross from 110 of 130 different product packaging types owing to the new provisions. By modifying 50 recipes, it was able to leave the flag symbol on the packaging. Niklaus Iten of Bio-Familia reveals that intensive discussions took place within the company about whether to make the changes or to simply relinquish the Swiss cross in future. In the end the company decided to retain the symbol, fearing a fall in demand from abroad otherwise. "Export customers clearly indicated to us that they wouldn't buy without the Swiss cross," remarks Iten.

Juices or French fries

The new law has also forced the food producer Hero to take action. The Swiss logo has been removed from 70 products, including pasta sold under the Napoli brand. While it is made in Switzerland, there are not sufficient supplies of durum wheat semolina here and it is therefore imported. Further examples include Nestlé removing the Swiss cross from 80 products, including the Thomy and Leisi brands. The Swiss cross has had to be taken off Ramseier juices containing exotic fruit. The logo has been removed from the French fries in Frigemo's convenience food range. Guarantees could not be provided that they consisted of 80 % Swiss potatoes. However, the herbal sweets manufacturer Ricola, which exploits its Swiss origin very heavily in marketing, is only talking about making selective modifications to recipes.

Many companies are critical of the new legislation. Hochdorf, the milk processing company, believes it focuses too one-sidedly on the origin of raw materials and too little on production in Switzerland. Daniel Bloch, CEO of Camille Bloch, which makes Ragusa chocolate, complains: "The cumbersome demands on the origin of raw materials create new obstacles for companies manufacturing in Switzerland."



Photo: Keystone

Consumer protection representative Sarah Stalder has little sympathy with such views: "Complaining now just shows that food producers are keen to cash in on the Swissness bonus but want to leave everything as it was," remarks the head of the Consumer Protection Foundation (SKS). The industry has had enough time to adapt to the changes or to apply for exemptions. The Federal Office for Agriculture also rejects the claims: "The consequences of the Swissness law are being overdramatised," says Vice-Director Dominique Kohli. He is unaware of any company forced to make job cuts as a result so far.

MATTHIAS PFANDER IS BUSINESS EDITOR AT THE "TAGES-ANZEIGER"

The new Swissness regulations

When can a product be marketed as Swiss?

Natural products: For minerals (such as salt), plants, fruit, game and fish, the place of extraction, harvest or hunting is the decisive factor. In the case of meat from the rearing of livestock, the animals must have spent most of their lives in Switzerland. With animal products, such as eggs, milk and honey, the animals must be kept in Switzerland.

Food products: At least 80 % of the weight must be made up of raw materials from Switzerland and the main processing stages must take place here. If an ingredient is not available in Switzerland – such as cacao or pineapple – or not to the required quality standard or in sufficient quantity, it is excluded or only partially taken into account. Low quantities of additives, such as salt, herbs and yeast, are not included. Federal government has also provisionally approved 58 exemptions, including candy sugar and protein powder.

Industrial products: 60 % of manufacturing costs (such as with watches) must be incurred in Switzerland and the main manufacturing stages must take place here. The costs of research and development, quality assurance and certification are also taken into account.

Services: With regard to services, the provider must have its administrative headquarters in Switzerland and also carry out its main activities here. (map)