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Musical Swiss cheese

Ripening cheeses were exposed to music for months on end in the Emmental region. As a result of this experiment, we now know that cheese develops different flavours depending on the musical genre. And hip-hop makes for the biggest holes.



Beat Wampfler is all ears when it comes to cheese. Here he is eavesdropping on a huge wheel of Emmental. Salter Markus Schneider looks on. Photo: Keystone

MARC LETTAU

First to the main issue at hand – how the Helvetic culinary heritage is doing. Well, Swiss cheese has never been better. The full liberalisation of the cheese trade between Switzerland and the EU in 2007 ultimately proved to be beneficial. Since then, Swiss cheese exports have been progressively increasing. Nowadays, this equates to well in excess of 70,000 tonnes a year.

However, one particular cheese news item this spring had a much stronger impact than all the export numbers: the news that Swiss cheese is musical. It even has sophisticated musical taste. It reacts differently to Mozart’s “Magic Flute”, Led Zeppelin’s “Stairway to Heaven”, Yello’s “Monolith” and the track “Jazz” from the hip-hoppers A Tribe Called Quest. We know this thanks to Beat Wampfler, the innovative Burgdorf cheesemonger, and Michael Harenberg, a music and media scientist at Bern University of the Arts (HKB). The odd couple actually wondered whether sound waves influence the metabolism of cheese to an extent that can be proved and also tasted. Wampfler and Harenberg’s team then subjected nine wheels of cheese to music over a period of six months. A “reference cheese” aged in silence.

At the beginning of the experiment, Wampfler hoped that the cheese exposed to hip-hop music would ripen particularly well: “That might lead young people to develop a taste for cheese”. His hopes were realised when a specialist jury tasted his cheese. They gave the hip-hop cheese excellent marks. It differed the most from the reference

cheese, impressed due to its “noticeable fruity aroma” and had the largest holes.

When asked by “Swiss Review”, HKB spokesperson Christian Pauli said that the “sensational research” would now be continued. That leads us to ask how we should actually view the cheese-sound experiment. Is it art, commerce or just a bit of fun? Pauli: “It’s actually somewhere between art and commerce. It was never just about a bit of fun.” Pauli refers to the analysis of the Zurich University of Applied Sciences (ZHAW) to refute any such allegations. This proves that exposure to sonic waves changed important flavour compounds in the cheese. Now it is a proven fact that the cheese sample exposed to deep frequencies of music contained higher concentrations of the flavour compounds 2-Methylbutanal, 3-Methylbutanal, Methional, Phenylacetaldehyde, 2-Ethyl-3,5-Dimethylpyrazine and propionic acid than the other samples.

Inexperienced cheese consumers who have unwittingly assimilated all these flavour compounds will surely welcome the continuation of this research. Perhaps everyone will fall in love with cheeses that have their very own flavour. A small survey of the “Review” editorial team shows the breadth of musical requests: front-runners are “Atom Heart Mother” (Pink Floyd), “Casta Diva” (Bellini), “We will rock you” (Queen), “Ha ke Ahnig” (Steff la Cheffe), the mellifluous “Boleros Inolvidables” (Tito Rodríguez) and – most importantly – Katja Ebslein’s “Wunder gibt es immer wieder” (“Miracles keep happening”).