

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 48 (2021)
Heft: 1

Artikel: The timeless influencer
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1051900>

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The timeless influencer

Switzerland's fictitious national cook, Betty Bossi, came into her own during the Covid lockdown.

DÖLF BARBEN

Betty Bossi probably felt a bit like Helvetia this year. She was on hand when people needed her during the pandemic. As restaurants closed, we retreated to our own homes and reacquainted ourselves with the nation's favourite housewife. Recipes from some 120 Betty Bossi cookbooks – normally hidden behind a digital paywall – were made freely available online, showing us all how to fry burgers and bake banana bread. Successfully, it goes without saying. And the ploy worked. Once again. The Swiss visited the Betty Bossi website over ten million times. In one month.



Betty Bossi and Helvetia have one thing in common in that neither actually exist. Yet both are synonymous with Switzerland. Helvetia appears on our one- and two-franc coins. She stands upright, armed with a spear, amid a circle of stars. Betty Bossi, on the other hand, has forever and a day been helping us to answer one of life's trickiest questions: what shall I cook today?

For almost 65 years, Betty Bossi has been part of our national psyche. It is about time that we asked what her tireless cooking over a hot stove has actually achieved. Have her cook books really left a "lasting mark" on Switzerland's households, as it says in the Historical Dictionary of Switzerland? Would we still be smothering our veggies in a flour-based sauce if Betty Bossi had never existed?

The "Betty Bossi Post" was published for the first time in 1956, as a newsletter (printed on both sides) available free of charge in grocery stores. "What shall I cook today?" was the title of its first-ever article. It looked like Betty Bossi had written it herself. Her beaming face adorned the cover. Her signature was at the bottom of the piece.

This publication already contained nearly all the ingredients – excuse the pun – that make Betty Bossi the household name that she is today. To her readers she was a friend who did not simply spoon-feed her audience, but wanted to empower them. She encouraged people to create their own meal plan, so they could eat a good, varied diet, not waste any food, and have some money left over at the end of the week. And she showcased half a dozen recipes, including this one for bread pudding with apples: 300 g left-over bread; 0.5 l milk; 3 eggs; 60 g Astra-10; 300 g apples; 80 g sugar; 2 tbsp. sultanas; grated lemon peel.

"Astra-10"? Betty Bossi not only wanted to be the friend of every housewife; she also wanted to market the fats, oils and margarines of Astra – a Unilever subsidiary that operated a factory in Steffisburg near Thun. Essentially, Betty Bossi was a fictitious character from the outset. Her purpose was a reciprocal one of give and take. She was an influencer before the word had even been invented.

Betty Bossi was invented by ad writer Emmi Creola-Maag, who was inspired by the popular US women's magazine "Betty Crocker". Based on her American namesake, Betty Bossi took Switzerland by storm. According to historian Benedikt Meyer, cars, televisions and new hair styles were not the only spoils of the post-war economic miracle. Home cooking was also transformed – with electric ovens, blenders, mixers and kneaders among a new generation of kitchen utensils, and a veritable conveyor belt of new products available in the shops. Meyer: "The Swiss needed someone to help them negotiate all this technology. And Betty Bossi was their saviour."



"What shall I cook today?" This was Betty Bossi's first question – then thousands of cooking and baking recipes followed.

Photo provided

Lemon drizzle cake – the most popular Betty Bossi recipe, attracting almost half a million clicks a year



It was a huge success story. “Betty Bossi” magazine, which later became a subscription publication, continues to be read by hundreds of thousands of people. When tiramisu was first introduced as a dessert in 1984, tubs of mascarpone quickly sold out around Switzerland. The first-ever Betty Bossi cookbook was published in 1973. Since then, 35 million Betty Bossi cookbooks have been sold, the most successful of these a book on baking cakes (1.35 million copies). If all the Betty Bossi cookbooks that have been sold were put in a line one after the other, they would stretch from Switzerland to the USA.



Betty Bossi in figures

Around 2,500 new recipes are created every year at the Betty Bossi kitchens in Basel and Zurich. “Betty Bossi” magazine is published ten times a year and has a print run of 540,000, making it Switzerland’s biggest paid-for publication. The Betty Bossi website is visited three million times per month, but this number has been much higher since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. People also view Betty Bossi recipes via a daily email newsletter that goes out to 520,000 different addresses. (DB)

As a business, Betty Bossi has always been cutting edge. From television cookery shows to online platforms, to gluten-free food. In 2012, she became a 100 per cent subsidiary of Coop, one of Switzerland’s two supermarket giants. Betty Bossi AG employs 120 people in Basel and Zurich. The company generated net sales of 89 million Swiss francs in 2019. You will see Betty Bossi around any Coop supermarket. The brand comprises over 600 different products. In addition to baking items, Betty Bossi also offers a range of convenience foods such as salads, sandwiches and ready-made meals.

For decades, Betty Bossi taught Swiss households the art of cooking. Suddenly she now wants to serve us fast food. Is that not a gigantic contradiction? There is probably no al-

ternative – it is hard to contradict Betty Bossi spokeswoman Viviane Bühr when she says that life is completely different now from 60 years ago. People are less active. They no longer want to stand in the kitchen for two hours every day either. As Bühr points out, the Swiss like to follow global food and lifestyle trends. Those hearty flour-based sauces belong to yesteryear. The “Bettys and Bossis”, as Bühr calls the company workforce, identify and incorporate these trends into new recipes and food products. To continue to exist in future, she says that they need to move with the times like all companies. This philosophy has worked a treat so far. “We are doing really well for a company of our size. Betty Bossi is in a great place,” she says.



Food photographers serve up appetising images of “influencer” Betty Bossi’s cooking feats.

Certainly, no one would resent Betty Bossi for trying to stay relevant. At least being an ageless, made-up character gives her an advantage. But how will she master this quest? What does the future hold? Her competitors are lining up – how will they respond? No one had heard of food blogs when Betty Bossi began her career as an influencer. Cookbooks were nowhere near as common as they are now. Are classic recipes such as lemon drizzle cake and pork fillets still enough for Betty to hold her own?