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How Grisons became the Swiss champion of the organic sector

Over 65 percent of farming in the canton of Grisons is organic. A Swiss record. Mountain agriculture and tourism have sped up the transition. Going organic is both ideologically and economically motivated.



Higher, further, faster, more beautiful? In search of the somewhat different Swiss records. This edition: The canton with the highest proportion of organic farmers.

STÉPHANE HERZOG

On this January morning, the Heinrich family farm is in the shade. Marcel and his wife Sabina are counting the days until the sun returns. Only one week left to wait. Welcome to Las Sorts, a hamlet in the Albula valley, perched at an altitude of 1,000 metres, not far from the famous Landwasser railway viaduct.

The Las Sorts farm – the name means “destiny” in Romansh – is similar to many of the holdings in Grisons. The transition to organic began through milk sales, thanks to pastures free from synthetic fertilizers. “My father was one of the first farmers to take this step in the valley,” recalls Marcel, who started out working as a woodsman. The move was not a simple one. To start with, the milk produced by these pioneers of the organic sector went unnoticed. But then, in the 1990s the retail giant Coop began to contact cheese dairies in search of organic produce. “As this milk sells for a better price and the nature of the farming is already close to being organic, a lot of farmers make that transition,” explains Claudio Gregori, President of Bio Grisons. “The open-mindedness of the farmers in Grisons contributed to this development,” adds Martin Roth, advisor at the canton’s agricultural training centre.

The leading product at Las Sorts is the mountain potato. Every year, the Heinrich family produces almost 70 tonnes of potatoes, of over 40 varieties, ranging from the black Vitelotte potato, red in colour and with a taste of chestnuts, to the delicate Belgian variety, the Corne de Gatte. This cul-

tivation requires a lot of manual labour on small plots, where crops are grown in rotation. “It’s a demanding choice, which leads to an understanding of the cycles of nature. In the organic sector, we see things it would be impossible to spot sat atop a tractor,” explains Marcel. Just at that moment, a fox appears in front of the house, provoking a slight panic because of the chicken coop. The valley also has wolves. “We sometimes hear them howling near the farm and we find deer carcasses, but they haven’t caused us any problems so far,” Marcel assures us.

The mountain potato: a niche product

In these high lands, where the ground is mown late, the organic farmers have to create niche products and show a knack for marketing. For example, the Heinrich family participated in the launch of a potato academy, which brings together fans of rare varieties. “Organic potatoes have a very distinctive taste. Chefs tell me that they are four times more nutritious than a conventionally grown potato,” enthuses Marcel, who counts among his clients Michelin-starred chefs such as Sven Wassmer in Bad Ragaz and Heiko Nieder in Zurich. The farmer likes to share his knowledge, but is not out to convert everyone to organic farming. His latest project is the cultivation of an ancient variety of beans, launched with the help of the association Pro Specie Rara. The operation has taken five years of trials. In 2020, the harvest of these beans, which can withstand the

cold weather, came to 1,500 kilograms.

At Las Sorts, approximately 65 percent of the revenue is generated through direct sales. The rest comes from subsidies from the Confederation, where what counts is the number of hectares. “The proportion of our revenue that comes from sales is high for a mountain region,” states Marcel. He has stopped selling to major distributors, a system that he considers “precarious, and which leaves farmers with their hands tied”. We leave the convivial warmth of the Heinrich home, its stove with bundles of wood piled up in the bathroom, and head for Filisur.

The decision to slaughter calves on the farm

Further north, we meet Georg Blunier and his wife Claudia. Their farm, leased from another farmer, offers a magnificent view of the Rhine. The cold is biting and the sun burns your eyes. Welcome to Dusch, situated at an altitude of 850 metres. The couple began their life together living in a town, but after spending two summers in alpine pastures in the cantons of Valais and Grisons, they decided to take the plunge into farming. Georg Blunier worked as a graphist and artist in Biel. Now, here he is with his feet caked in mud, working 70-hour week after 70-hour week. “With art, you create problems to find solutions. In farming, you follow the rhythm nature imposes on you and you see the tangible results of your work,” he says. The Dusch farmers, who have cultivated their land organically since 1989, grow cereals and



Potatoes are the leading product at the Las Sorts farm run by Sabina and Marcel Heinrich (left). The couple grow over 40 different varieties. This cultivation requires a lot of manual labour. Photos: Mayk Wendt

The Dusch organic farm, run by Georg Blunier (below) and his family, has been growing cereals since 1989. However, the farm's niche product is its Rhaetian grey cattle meat. Photos: Mayk Wendt



Grisons's organic sector in figures

At the end of 2019, the canton of Grisons counted 1,291 organic farms, including 1,255 bearing the Bio Bourgeon label, out of a total of 2,067 farms overall. This means that 62.5% of farms are organic. This is the Swiss record both in percentage and in absolute terms. In Switzerland, organic produce represents approximately 10% of the food market. (SH)

fruits. But the farm's niche product is its Rhaetian grey cattle meat, which represents around 30 percent of their revenue. In 2018, Georg was granted the right to have his calves slaughtered on the farm, which was a first for Switzerland. The animals are killed and bled out on site by a butcher. This practice avoids the stress generated by transporting them to the abattoir. Here, the calves feed on their mother's milk for 12 months and are killed at the age of two. The packaged meat is home delivered.

Malans: a farm for male chicks

Further down the Rhine, we arrive in Malans with its south-facing vines. The snow has vanished from the orchards here. In an area where a square metre of land is worth its weight in gold, Valérie Cavin, born in the canton of Vaud and raised in Zurich, cultivates half a hectare of vines with her partner, Roman Clavadetscher, from the canton of Grisons. Their bottles of pinot noir are in great demand, but the niche product here comes in the form of male chicks, not killed upon hatching, but raised alongside the females in four little mobile huts, each housing 500 birds. "High-class restaurants buy the male chickens from us, which means they can tell a story to their clients about the dishes. Other



Valérie Cavin and Roman Clavadetscher tend to their sun-drenched vines in Malans. Photo: Mayk Wendt

customers make this choice for ethical reasons and they pay a higher price for our eggs in order to help support the farm," explains Valérie Cavin. Another niche is the production of organic garlic, which requires intensive manual labour. In 2020, the Malans farm produced three tonnes. Both graduates in agronomy, this farmer and her husband state that only 10 percent of their revenue comes from public subsidies. Because here, crop cultivation does not depend on the same subsidies as mountain pastures. Having arrived in Malans in 2003, the couple have retained external positions: she is a teacher in the agriculture sector and he is an organic advisor. "This choice grants us more freedom and security, in case we lose our potatoes to the frost, for example," explains Valérie.

Buoyed by the increased support of the Confederation, the organic movement is spreading from valley to valley. "But the choice to make this transition remains one of the heart," believes Claudio Gregori. At least the farmers we met in Grisons seem to think so. The use of chemicals is effec-



An organic farming tour of Grisons:

- ① the Las Sorts farm and its potato fields in the Albula valley;
- ② cereals and Rhaetian grey cattle on the Dusch organic farm near Paspels;
- ③ the sunny vineyards of Malans – our final, mostly northerly stop.

tively cutting off the hand that feeds. Land cultivated organically is more resilient. What's more, the real cost of organic farming would be lower if the external costs of intensive farming – the waste products – were factored in. "In the end, it is the food choices of Swiss consumers that will set the pace of this transition," concludes Georg Blunier.