

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 49 (2022)
Heft: 6

Artikel: Hard cheese : Emmental comes under pressure
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1051887>

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Hard cheese: Emmental comes under pressure

Two or three centuries ago, Emmental cheesemakers exported their know-how all around the world. This is now causing problems for Emmental: authentic Emmental cheese, an iconic traditional Swiss product, is under threat. More cheese labelled as ‘Emmental’ is produced outside Switzerland than within the country. Swiss cheese producers are appealing to the European courts for help.

DÖLF BARBEN

Emmental cheese, with its large holes, is famous around the world. If something is full of holes, it is said – in many languages – to be like Swiss cheese. The Swiss product has been a resounding success.

Today, Emmental cheese can still be made in around 100 dairies across Switzerland. The requirements are strict: the farms must be no more than 20 km from the dairy, the cows must be fed on grass and hay only (i.e. no silage), and the cheese must be made exclusively from unpasteurised milk and stored and aged for at least 120 days in its place of manufacture.

Every dairy bears its own number, which is stamped every few centimetres on the top of each wheel of cheese. This means you can tell where even small portions of cheese have been made. For example, number 3206 stands for the Hüpfenboden dairy.

In the midst of meadows and forests

The Hüpfenboden dairy is located north of Langnau, at the heart of the Emmental valley, whose inhabitants lived the high life for many years from the 16th century onwards, thanks to the cheese trade. The

Marlies Zaugg does not sound optimistic when she talks about the future. In the absence of stricter protection, she believes the beloved tradition of cheese-making could die out. Photos: Danielle Liniger

smart building rises up between two hills as though riding on a saddle, surrounded by fields and forests. Marlies Zaugg and Bernhard Meier live in Hüpfenboden together with their two children and an apprentice. In addition to Emmental cheese, they also make other specialities. They are masters of their craft. That said, they do not sound particularly optimistic when they talk about the future. They do want to “do something to maintain Switzerland’s great cheese-making tradition”. However, if the authentic product is not afforded greater protection, this hardly seems possible. “We can’t keep up with all



the cheap imitations,” Zaugg says. “The cheese as we know it today is set to gradually disappear,” her husband adds.

‘Foreign courts’ to the rescue?

There is a genuine problem here. The presence of numerous imitators is a threat to authentic Swiss Emmental, which has borne the AOP protected designation of origin since 2006. However, the issue of trademark protection is now gaining momentum. The delicious irony here is that European courts are being asked to award the famous Swiss Emmental greater levels of protection. ‘Foreign courts’, so often the target of heartfelt mistrust and suspicion in Swiss farming circles, could be the very ones to come to the rescue of an agricultural product that could not be more Swiss.

Alfred Rufer understands the background to this situation. He is the deputy director of Emmentaler Switzerland, a trade organisation responsible for positioning Swiss Emmental on the free market and protecting it from imitators. A lot of other countries now also manufacture cheese that bears the ‘Emmental’ name, he says – far more than is made in Switzerland itself. Switzerland is not even the largest manufacturer of Emmental in the world: France is. “These are facts that we just have to accept,” he says. According to Rufer, the battle was lost 200 to 300 years ago. This was the period when cheesemakers emigrated and began to make Emmental all over the world.

The fight against freeloaders

Today, the fight has taken on a different tone. In Rufer’s view, it is unfair that foreign manufacturers can profit from the noble reputation of Swiss

Emmental. This is in spite of the fact that the cheap imitations cannot hold a candle to the original, as they do not meet the official requirements and the quality is not the same. “They are just freeloaders,” Rufer says. “No one should be able to ride someone else’s coattails.” The objective is clear: customers all over the world should be able to tell whether they have a Swiss Emmental cheese in their hands or not. Many people are prepared to pay more for Swiss quality, says Rufer. “However, if the origin is not clear, that means other people are getting rich off our efforts.” Swiss manufacturers know the benefits that legal protection would bring: only their cheeses would be allowed to be sold under the ‘Emmental’ label, writ

The dairy in Hüpfenboden resembles an idyll from the past, surrounded by forests and meadows on a hill in the Emmental valley.

The process of manufacturing Emmental begins in the copper-lined cheese kettles. Every two months, the dairy farmers are told how many cheeses they are allowed to produce.

large and without any qualifications. Any other ‘Emmental’ cheeses would need to state their region of origin just as boldly as the name, such as Allgäuer Emmental.

Just a cheese with holes?

Unfortunately, the European Union has rejected this definition of the intellectual property behind the cheese. According to the EU, the term ‘Emmental’ is not a designation of origin but merely a commonly used name for a hard cheese with holes. This does not make any sense to the trade organisation, so it is appealing to the European Court. Recently, verbal negotiations took place. The verdict is expected in three to four months’ time, according to Rufer. “We think it’s going to go in our favour,” he says. If the verdict goes the way he hopes it will, it will open the doors for more Swiss Emmental to be sold in key markets such as Germany, France and the Benelux countries. The reason is obvious: customers who care about quality are more likely to pick the authentic product.

The biggest customer of all is... Italy

Exports of the cheese are already considerable: a little over 2,200 tonnes of Emmental was shipped to Germany alone in 2021, and just un-





der 770 tonnes to France. The biggest customer was Italy, with 5,500 tonnes – more Emmental than is eaten in the whole of Switzerland. Trademarks are very well protected in Switzerland's southernly neighbour, however.

Any break in the negative trend in Swiss Emmental would be a success in itself. Within the space of a decade, the quantity produced annually in Switzerland has fallen from over 25,000 tonnes to just under 17,000 tonnes, whereas the quantity of all cheese manufactured rose from 181,000 tonnes to 207,000 tonnes.

Not all milk becomes Emmental

Marlies Zaugg and Bernhard Meier have experienced this in their dairy as well. Every two months, they are told how much Emmental they are allowed to manufacture. "The quantity just keeps going down over time," Zaugg says. Currently, they are allowed to devote 40 percent of the milk they receive from their suppliers to making the cheese.

The remainder is used to make their own varieties of cheese. They then sell this cheese directly, to res-

The wheels of cheese are hefty, often weighing in excess of 100 kg, and today are regularly turned by machine. That said, the daily routine still involves plenty of manual labour.

Photo: Danielle Liniger

taurants, via small regional shops or at local markets. There is a self-service cupboard in front of the dairy containing a wide range of their products. Sales are good. People who visit on foot or by bicycle are only too keen to take advantage of the offer.

But if shifting their cheese is so easy,

what is the problem? Emmental made as tradition demands "is simply better", Zaugg says. But that quality comes at a price. "Feeding the cows, manufacturing the cheeses by hand, regularly tending the wheels, the cellar used for ripening – everything costs more." Enough people need to be aware of this and also think it matters, "otherwise there's no point".

Finally, this traditional career needs new blood that is prepared to go the extra mile. This is a further source of concern for Marlies Zaugg. Her day begins at 5 am. Cheese is made seven days a week. "Cows produce milk at the weekends as well," she says with a grin. At least she and her husband can take it in turns at the weekend, or hire a replacement in order to take time off.

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These large, striking holes are typical of Emmental. The taste and texture vary widely depending on its ripeness.

Photo: Keystone