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The whiff of revolution from the dinner table



Salmon with cream cheese on a toasted baguette? No, the “salmon” is a vegan imitation made of carrot, while the “cream cheese” is made from almonds. Photo: Keystone

With climate considerations in mind, the Swiss are rethinking their shopping and eating habits, as plant-based protein becomes more mainstream. However, it is fair to say that Switzerland remains a nation of meat eaters.

DENISE LACHAT

Luc has prepared a fruit skewer for his mid-morning snack, along with some vegetable dips followed by pasta salad with cherry tomatoes and Halloumi for the main course and a layered glass of quark, yoghurt, berries, and crumble for dessert. The nine-year-old is attending a cookery course. Accompanying the boy is his father, who confesses he would have made something different. "But he enjoys it, that's the main thing." Luc's primary school in Berne arranged the tuition. The idea is that children who dabble in cooking eat a more diverse, balanced diet and are more receptive to new foods.

Studying the production process at Kempthal-based Planted Foods AG also feels like a classroom lesson, albeit the subject matter is related more to physics and chemistry. You start with a flour mixture. This can be made from peas, sunflower seeds, or oats. This is fed into a big machine, where it is mixed with water and rapeseed oil, then kneaded, heated, and pressed. You end up with a dough that can be cut in different ways depending on whether you want it to resemble chicken breast, chicken strips, or kebab. Clad in white smocks and sanitary hats, employees at the laboratory-like company factory in the Zurich Oberland are producing plant-based imitation meat. The Planted Foods mantra is clear: "Every chicken counts." No animals are killed in the making of these products. The firm says that over a million chickens (and counting) have been saved from slaughter thanks to the consumption of its products. According to Planted Foods, global warming is another issue. Tradi-

tional animal meat production is one of the largest instigators of the climate crisis, it writes.

Looks like meat, tastes like meat

Plant-based means more vegetables and cereals – and less meat. But why make imitation meat in the first place? Why invest so much technology into pulling globular plant-based proteins together to look like sinuous muscle fibres? Why ferment these proteins with microbes such as fungi and bacteria? And why go through the complex process of producing bigger, juicier, more complex and more ten-

der cuts and adding micronutrients like vitamin B12? Planted Foods has an oven-ready answer for these and other FAQs: "We humans are creatures of habit, as we all know. To have an impact on the planet, our eating habits need to change. The best way to do this is with a meat-like product that can be integrated into our eating habits."

Meat alternatives from the supermarket giants

Meat analogues, i.e. plant-based products that mimic meat, seem to satisfy a consumer need. As far back as 1997, Migros began selling products made from Quorn, which is derived from a fermented, edible fungus. Its Cornatur brand was pioneering at the time. Meat substitutes have become increasingly popular of late, and we are seeing greater innovation, says Migros spokeswoman Carmen Hefti. Migros now has over 1,000 different vegan items in its range, of which meat and milk substitutes are the most popular, according to Hefti. Erstwhile niche products such as these have entered the mainstream. Coop has had a wide range of meat substitutes on its shelves – including own-brand Délicorn – since 2006. Bratwurst and schnitzel were among its first plant-based products. The supermarket currently offers over 2,000 vegetarian products, of which more than 1,800 are vegan, says Coop spokesman Caspar Frey. The retailer stocks over 100 vegan meat and fish alternatives, more than 50 milk alternatives, 40 vegan yoghurts, 20 vegan butters, and some 20 vegan cheese alternatives. Vegan

Focusing on future-proof solutions

The world's population will be just under ten billion by 2050. If so many are to be fed without endangering the planet, food production as well as eating habits must radically change. This means less meat, sugar, and fewer eggs – and more vegetables, nuts, and legumes. In addition to the public sector, numerous NGOs in Switzerland are working to achieve this goal. One of them is the "Fourchette verte – ama terra" quality and health label for canteens, which applies to 17 cantons and aims to reduce meat and fish consumption, promote environmentally and animal-friendly food production, and minimise food waste. Tools such as Eaternity, which calculates the carbon footprint of canteen menu options, or Beelong, which scores foods on a scale from A to G, also help to improve sustainability for food caterers in care homes, hospitals, preschools, and companies.

(DLA)

Good examples of ways for municipalities and cantons to promote sustainable nutrition (document available in French, German and Italian): revue.link/menu



Feeding our insatiable appetite for chicken – a poultry farm with 18,000 birds in Gundetwil (canton of Zurich). Photo: Keystone

milk alternatives are also finding favour among Migros customers, who have been able to buy soya drinks since 2010 and now have oat, rice, almond, soya, quinoa, chickpea, coconut and hazelnut beverages to choose from. In recent years, Migros has seen double-digit growth in non-dairy alternatives, says Hefti, without specifying precise sales figures. Coop also prefers to communicate in percentages. It says that vegan milk alternatives have gained market share over the last four years and now account for 18 per cent of total milk sales. Frey: "At present, more than one in seven milk products at Coop are vegan."

For the sake of the planet

Are animal-based foods becoming less attractive to Swiss consumers? Are we all eating fruit and veg, and more specifically plant-based proteins, instead? Yes and no. According to the Plant-based Food Report published by Coop in January this year, 63 per cent of the Swiss population consciously choose to have a day without eating animal-based foods more than once a month. This is over 20 per cent more than ten years ago. Meanwhile, the first-ever Swiss Meat Substitutes Report by the Federal Office for Agriculture (FOAG), covering the Swiss retail sector from 2016 to 2020, says that sales of meat substitutes have risen sharply: from 60 million Swiss francs in 2016 to 117 million in 2020. They have almost doubled in four years, increasing by an average of 18.4 per cent each year. The biggest growth is in meat analogues, says the report.

A shift in attitudes is cited as the factor driving the change in consumer habits, with people in the industrialised West viewing food and drink as



Plant-based chicken made from pea protein – one of a new and increasingly popular range of meat substitutes. Photo: Planted Foods



Plant-based alternatives to milk are a firm fixture on Swiss supermarket shelves these days. Photo: Keystone

Two popular initiatives on food production

Will food production soon be on the political agenda? Two popular initiatives are calling for more home-grown food produce in Switzerland, but advocate two diametrically opposing agricultural policy approaches. One wants Swiss farmers to produce less feed for animals and grow more plant-based foods for people. The other initiative wants to reduce biodiversity areas to ramp up intensive food and fodder production. (DLA)

less of a means to an end and more as a lifestyle choice to promote health and enjoyment, and preserve natural resources. "Many people are becoming more aware of the impact of our consumer and eating habits on the environment, climate, and animal welfare," it said in the 2019 Gottlieb Dutweiler Institute European Food Trends Report, for which 39 experts from Europe, North America, and Asia were interviewed. According to the Coop study, environmental concerns are now put forward as the main argument for eating less meat in Switzerland. This applies to all diets, from flexitarian to vegan. And the younger you are, the more likely this is to be the case.

A nation of meat eaters

Despite remarkable growth, meat substitutes are still very much a niche area. According to the latest figures from the Swiss meat industry association Proviande, they accounted for a market share of no more than 3.4 per cent in 2021. In point of fact, there has been no decrease in Swiss meat consumption. Since the mid-1990s, the average Swiss resident has carried on consuming around 50 kg of meat per year. They ate 50.91 kg in 2020 and 51.82 kg in 2021. Overall, beef consumption is down and chicken consumption up. Retailer Coop also says that the demand for meat remains high – even in January, or "Veganuary".

According to Coop spokesman Frey, meat substitutes appeal to vegetarians, vegans, flexitarians, those who also like to eat plant-based alternatives, and those who are interested in food trends or in a varied diet. There is no one-to-one inverse correlation between sales of meat and of meat substitutes. Such products mainly attract people who do not eat meat, says Pro-



Butchering a calf at Angst AG in Zurich. Despite the advent of substitute foods, meat consumption in Switzerland remains high. Photo: Keystone

viande spokeswoman Gioia Porlezza. On the other hand, meat substitutes and meat are not mutually exclusive. "You can easily consume both to diversify your protein."

In any case, there are considerable synergies between "natural" foods and sustainable high-tech foods. Experts concede that science is playing an increasing role in food production.

Sustainable nutrition

The federal government formulates strategies and legislation to promote sustainable nutrition. More and more cities and municipalities have taken the lead and put sustainable food on the menu at schools, care homes, and public institutions (see box). Even cooking lessons at primary schools have changed; the beloved home economics textbook "Tiptopf" has been completely revised. Half of the recipes in the March 2023 edition are new. They include lentil bolognese and tofu stew. "The book contains more vegetarian and vegan recipes than earlier editions," says Anita Stettler, marketing project manager at Schulverlag plus AG. "In partnership with the vegetarian restaurant Hiltl, we also created a supplementary cookbook called Greentopf in 2019, focusing purely on vegetarian and vegan cuisine."

A clear trend

Has a culinary revolution begun? We are at least seeing a discernible trend, according to Andrew Gordon, CEO of Eldora AG – a business that manages and supplies canteens in companies as well as at schools, preschools, hospitals, and care homes. Eldora now offers a daily vegetarian option on its menus, says Gordon. This option accounts for about ten per cent of can-



Canteens have a big influence on what people eat, because they can encourage – or discourage – new food trends. Photo: Shutterstock



In Switzerland, food sharing plays an increasingly important role in helping to reduce food waste. Photo: Keystone

teen meals eaten in French-speaking Switzerland, where Eldora has its roots. Demand is slightly higher in German-speaking Switzerland. It is primarily the public sector pushing for meat-free options. A vegetarian meal must be served at least once a week at schools and preschools. There is also a growing clamour for regional produce – although guests are reluctant to pay more for the privilege, unfortunately, says Gordon. "This squeezes our margins." Humans

The new type of Swiss shopping receipt

Nuggets, Délicorn, Coop

Quorn vegan nuggets

Planted Güggeli, Planted Foods

Chicken alternative made from pea protein

Wood Smoked Rüebli Lax, Mr Vegan

Salmon alternative made from carrots

vEGGie, Garden Gourmet, Nestlé

Vegan egg substitute made from soya protein

Mandel Vegurt Mokka, Migros

Vegan almond-mocha butter yoghurt

MozzaVella Bio, Züger

Vegan mozzarella made from almonds and oats

are contradictory creatures, he sighs. As the Gottlieb Duttweiler Institute says in its study, "We Swiss want the best of both worlds: global and local."

Coop "Plant-based Food Report" (in German): revue.link/plantbased

Swiss Meat Substitutes Report from the FOAG: revue.link/substitutes

European Food Trends Report from the Gottlieb Duttweiler Institute: revue.link/foodtrends

Proviande meat market figures (only in French and German): revue.link/fleisch