

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 51 (2024)
Heft: 2: Better to be safe than sorry : Switzerland increases its emergency stockpiles

Artikel: "Working with 150-year-old wood is an honour"
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1077613>

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“Working with 150-year-old wood is an honour”

The tradition of *tavillonnage*, or wood-shingled roofs, can be found in some of the French-speaking foothills of the Swiss Alps. A small number of passionate artisans are keeping this tradition alive. One of them is Tristan Ropraz from the western canton of Fribourg.

MARTINE BROCARD*

From a distance, the pastel-hued chalet roofs seem to blend into their gently undulating surroundings. They stand out more close up, their rounded forms consisting of tightly packed rows of overlapping, small, thin wooden boards. This, the tradition of *tavillonnage* (wood-shingled roofs), is particularly strong in the Alpine foothills of Fribourg and Vaud. But it can also be found in other parts of Switzerland.

Shingle-making is an ancient Swiss craft that has been kept alive, although very few now practise the art. There are around a dozen shingle-makers in French-speaking Switzerland. Most of them originally worked as carpenters or joiners before catching the *tavillonnage* bug. It is a niche profession, and the shingle-makers are keen to pass on their knowledge and expertise every so often. To people like qualified carpenter Tristan Ropraz, who picked up the skill six years ago.

“We are like marmots”

We meet Ropraz on a slightly chilly morning at his workshop in Sorens (canton of Fribourg). From his window he can see Moléson, a well-known mountain in the Fribourg Alps. Ropraz, 26, surveys his next task. He has a pile of wood in front of him. Using a wooden mallet and a froe, he will split the logs to make six-millimetre-thick *tavillons*, or shingles. He will tie these in the exact order in which he cut them, then start over. All day long. And all week long, from mid-November to mid-April. This is the time to make shingles.

“My body and soul recover in winter – I no longer have to think,” he says. “You split the wood, tie the pieces together and stack them out-

side.” For him, none of this work is boring or laborious. It is a monotonous procedure, but every shingle is different. “My teacher says you need to have eyes in your fingers.” Splitting the wood along the grain without damaging the fibres is the tricky bit. If you get that right, the wood – and the future roof – will remain leak-free. Every strike with the mallet has to be perfect.

Shingle-makers live according to the rhythms of the seasons. “We are like marmots,” he laughs. “We retreat to our dens when it gets cold, and re-emerge when it gets warm.” Topaz

has a tanned complexion. He spends winter making shingles, spring and autumn putting the shingles on roofs down in the valleys, and summer lay-

“I have great respect for these trees. They were here long before us and will remain on roofs long after we have gone.”

Tristan Ropraz

Tristan Ropraz at work. His skill lies in splitting the wood along the grain without damaging the fibres. That makes it leakproof.



All Photos:
Pierre-Yves Massot

ing them on roofs up in the mountains. “We nail them non-stop during the warmer months.” A shingle-maker will knock in between 150 and 200 kg of nails every year, or around 1,000 nails on every three square metres of roof. “But I would go crazy if I kept count.”

One out of every thousand

The shingle-maker’s year begins in autumn, when they select the trees that they need to make the *tavillons*. They only chop spruces in the canton of Fribourg. “This is the best moment, when the whole process begins.”

The search for suitable trees starts at 1,000 metres. “At higher altitudes, there are fewer nutrients available to the trees – and the trees grow more slowly. This provides shin-

Once Ropraz has split a log, he ties the shingles together in the order in which he cut them. That way, there are no irregularities on the roof.



A shingle roof will last for 35 to 40 years, which more or less corresponds to the length of a career in *tavillonnage*. This is why it is rare for a shingle-maker to still be working when one of their roofs needs to be re-laid.

Tristan Ropraz





Have the shingles been laid properly? Tristan Ropraz checks the surface he has just laid, which will keep out the wind and weather for 35-40 years.

are going to lay out the wood to dry as quickly as possible."

"It is always a poignant moment when I lay my shingles," the young man says. Ropraz also gets emotional after he nails the final shingle on any chalet roof. "I sit down, look towards the horizon and think of these little tiles of wood, each and every one of which I made and laid."

But let us not romanticise the profession. "Many people only see these chalets, the tranquility and the surrounding landscape. They never think of the work we put in. These bundles of shingles don't end up on the roofs by magic. It's hard work." Ropraz used to be a talented Swiss wrestler who threw opponents into the sawdust. He says that making a healthy living from *tavillonnage* is not easy either. The price for one square metre is approximately 175 Swiss francs, which covers sourcing, transporting, preparing and laying the wood. A carefully laid shingle roof will last for an average of 35 to 40 years.

Ropraz, whom friends used to rib for doing this old-fashioned job, believes that *tavillonnage* still has a future. "Everyone talks about sustainability nowadays. Wood is an eco-friendly building material, and our trees come from the nearby forests of Gruyère. It does not get much better."

[revue.link/shingles](https://www.revue.link/shingles)

*Martine Brocard is editor of the Swiss Alpine Club magazine "Die Alpen", in which the original version of this article appeared.

gles that are drier and will last longer." Shingle-makers prefer to source trees from mountain dells or shady, sheltered spots conducive to straight growth. Only one spruce out of every thousand is suitable for *tavillonnage*, according to Ropraz, who will need 25 to 30 trees during the course of every year. "I have great respect for these trees. They were here long before us and will remain on roofs long after we have gone," he says. "I feel honoured and humbled to work with 150-year-old wood." The trees are felled in mid-November during the last quarter of the waning moon, when it is believed that the sap is at its lowest and the wood is dormant.

This protects the trees from any wood pests.

From tree to roof

The scent of wood fills the air. Ropraz is in the process of splitting logs. He looks up and points to a forest up on the slopes of Moléson. "This wood comes from over there," he says. "A swathe of trees in the forest was cut down to make space for a new ski piste. The trees were good for making shingles. The master *tavillonneur* and I were anxious, so we drove up the hill. At least we rescued six trunks." The trees were felled at the wrong time and are full of sap. "We