

Zeitschrift: Helvetia : magazine of the Swiss Society of New Zealand
Herausgeber: Swiss Society of New Zealand
Band: 60 (1994)
Heft: [8]

Artikel: Too many cooks spoil the broth
Autor: [s.n.]
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-945569>

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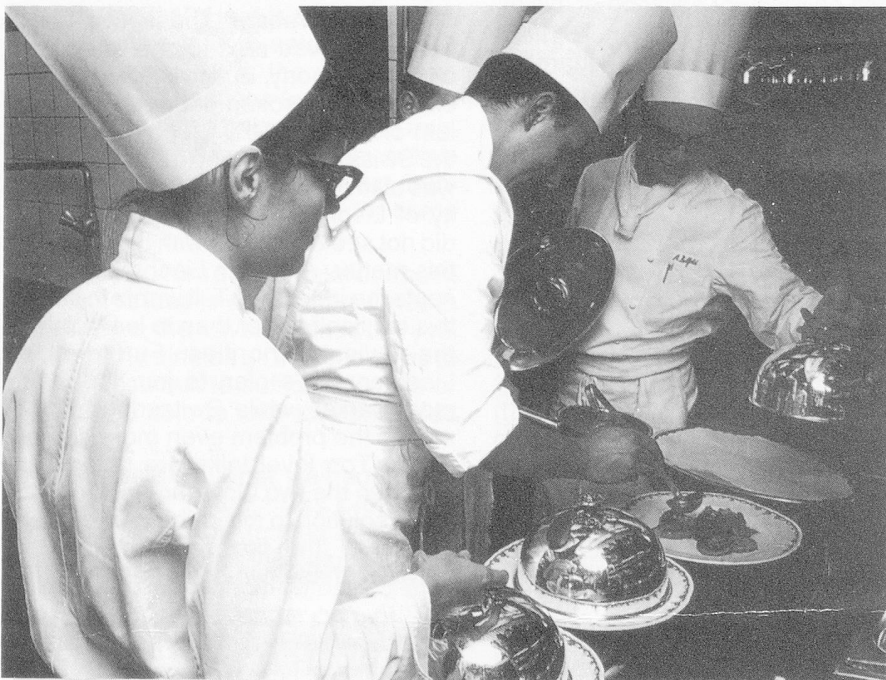
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TOO MANY COOKS SPOIL THE BROTH



Oversupply, an on-going turnover low, the absence of manpower from former Yugoslavia, future value-added tax (VAT) without concessionary rates, slow-moving deregulation and a lasting structural shift: The Swiss restaurant business is certainly not having an easy time of it. No wonder that an upswing is still far off on the horizon.

Problems are weighing too heavily on the shoulders of the industry, which nevertheless contributes SFR 22 billions towards the prosperity of the Swiss economy, representing around 7% of the gross national product.

People wishing to dine out in this country certainly do not need to go hungry since Switzerland, with its approximately 27,000 restaurants, bars and tea rooms, boasts among the highest number of eating houses in the world per capita with one such establishment for every 240 inhabitants. From an economical point of view, this average figure is clearly much too low. For what is the guest's "meat", is the restaurateur's "poison". This density results in half-full pub lounges - a situation which has only been aggravated by the weaker economy. Out-of-house consumption has decreased noticeably in recent years. More and more frequently, beer and wine is being purchased from the discount shop on the corner and enjoyed in the privacy of the home. As a result, many restaurant owners are now finding themselves courting the favour of fewer and fewer guests.

It therefore comes as no surprise that the Federation did not exactly jump for joy when the panel of experts for road safety at the Federal Ministry of Justice and Police recently proposed

that the legal alcohol level for car drivers should be reduced from 80 to 50 millilitres. They fear that this measure could bring with it a further drop in sales in the key drinks business. The catering industry's umbrella organisation is now demanding "that the effectiveness of this measure be examined in depth". They want proof that a reduction in the legally tolerated alcohol level for drivers would lead to a "significant improvement" in road safety.

The restaurant trade is also far from satisfied with the breweries. These prefer to contest their share in the market by offering discount prices to retail outlets, where beer can often be bought at a lower price than that paid by the restaurant owners. While Coop, Denner and other major retail chains benefit from increased sales, the restaurant trade - the most important distribution channel - comes away empty-handed.

Switzerland still has a web of rigid bureaucratic structures standing in the way of any upward business trend. Bars selling alcoholic drinks are particularly affected in this regard. The authorities' power to lay down exactly where and when a restaurant may be opened hinders a rapid reaction to a shift in customers' wishes.

A countless number of eating houses are only able to keep their heads above water by living off their capital. They are no longer in the position to invest in the premises or staff, and are frequently even forced to dispense with replacing their equipment. The small restaurants with up to five employees - which nevertheless account for two-thirds of all Swiss catering establishments - are particularly badly hit in this regard. Since the

end of 1990, they have had to resign themselves to negative turnover figures.

The new regulation which aims to virtually exclude all workers from former Yugoslavia from the Swiss labour market means that a personnel shortage is now foreseeable in countless restaurants, particularly as regards to low-qualified staff. But favouring instead Spain and Portugal, as the Federal Government advocates, is not so easy. While the Iberian Peninsula was once the traditional recruitment area for unqualified workers, now that these countries are reaping the economic benefits brought by EU membership, many Spaniards and Portuguese no longer regard toiling away in a Swiss kitchen as a desirable goal in life.

There is, however, a faint glimmer of hope that the industry will once again be able to increasingly fall back on Swiss labour in future: Since 1991 the restaurant business has seen a growing number of young people signing up for apprenticeships. Of course, the fear of unemployment among the Swiss youth will without doubt have been a contributory factor leading to the decision to seek out a place as an apprentice in a restaurant or hotel. On the other hand, the image campaign initiated some years ago by the catering industry will by now have gradually gained a foot-hold. However, as long as the basic conditions fail to take a turn for the better, turnover continues to drop and margins remain meagre, an upswing in the restaurant trade will be a long time in coming.

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