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Mineral water industry has thirst for fight

Business leaders and politicians have formed ranks to stop campaigners turning off the tap to Switzerland's SFr900 Million bottled water industry.

A powerful new lobby aims to prevent a global wave of adverse public opinion to bottled water crashing onto Swiss shores. The industry has suffered from a "back to tap water" environmentalist campaign.

Green groups have managed to influence public sentiment in the US, Canada, Britain and France by highlighting the double pollution peril of plastic bottles and transporting water around the world.

Some restaurants, keen to demonstrate their green credentials, have even stopped serving bottled mineral water – a product once viewed as a healthier and more sophisticated alternative to plain tap water.

The Swiss home market has not been hit as badly by such environmental campaigns as the Swiss are big recyclers and most of the water does not have to travel far from local sources.

However, that did not stop one parliamentarian from launching a motion to ban bottled water in Switzerland, which was easily defeated.

A new lobby group, IG Mineralwasser, was launched to protect the Swiss mineral water industry. The lobby's main focus is to nip US-style anti-bottled water campaigns in the bud.

They argue that mineral water comes in bottles because it must by law be bottled at source and cannot be transported to its destination by any other means. Carefully avoiding any reference to enhanced health qualities, they say this rule gives mineral water an advantage over tap water, as tap water can be treated in various ways. The IG Mineralwasser lobby group has a mandate to work on behalf of the entire Swiss industry. However, judging from the muted reaction from Greenpeace Switzerland, there seems very little chance of that happening. As most mineral water consumed in Switzerland comes from local sources this does not have much of an ecological impact in terms of transport pollution.

from swissinfo

Mr Chips says goodbye

Swiss businessman Hansheiri Zweifel knows a few tricks of the trade when it comes to making and selling potato crisps - or chips as they are known in some countries.

Zweifel, aged 75, has just retired from the family firm in Zurich after 50 years.

The Zweifel story doesn't begin with crisps but originally with cider and apple juice. Hansheiri can still remember his father saying after the Second World War that the company needed a second source of income because the family cider business was slowly declining and beverages like Coca Cola and beer were fast gaining ground. Wine was also being imported again.

Zweifel senior had a cousin, Hans Meier, who had started producing crisps in 1950 in the village of Katzenrüti. When he died there was no family member willing to take over, so the Zweifels stepped in, but not before mulling over the idea.

"After some hesitation, my father said: 'Crisps...well why not? We could buy it. Crisps make you thirsty. Cider is good when you are thirsty, so they go together'."

By that time, Zweifel had studied food engineering, although he remembers with a chuckle that in his last year at school he had wanted to become a "philosopher or an author".

"I always said to make good crisps with fresh potatoes was not difficult. Every idiot can do that. But the real art comes after March and April when the potatoes start feeling spring. It has the same consequences in potatoes as it does in human beings; they get a little bit excited and this excitement starts building up sugar. That means that if they are not kept in the right conditions and monitored once a week, the end result is brown crisps."

As Zweifel steps down after half a century at the company, he still sees potential in the crisp market, noting that annual consumption in Switzerland is around one kilogram per capita compared with three or four in Britain and the United States.

The company produces 70 million bags of crisps a year at a production site near Zurich – nearly ten bags for everyone living in Switzerland. The most popular flavour is paprika; paprika crisps represent 56% of the company's turnover.

The company has a market share in crisps in Switzerland of about 70%.

There are 150 company drivers selling the firm's products daily at 30,000 outlets in the country.

Every hour about six tonnes of potatoes are processed. 3.6 kg of potatoes produce 1kg of crisps.

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