

Zeitschrift: Helvetia : magazine of the Swiss Society of New Zealand
Herausgeber: Swiss Society of New Zealand
Band: 77 (2011)
Heft: [6]

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I'm writing this after we've just had the pleasure of Hans and Theres Scherrer's company. They will be back in Wellington soon. It's always so nice to get those links between people, time and place - my own concepts of Switzerland are enhanced by the stories Kiwi-Swiss tell of their journeys and their family connections, past and present. Just ask Hans how many cousins he has!

They visited on one of the cold days. We're seeing wildly between high summer and near-winter. The other day, Mani was helping Roman fix the flashing on his roof - and it was almost too hot to be up there. The next day, we had a hail and rain-storm, with marble-sized hailstones shredding my newly-shooting bean leaves - and thoroughly testing their roofing skills.

The same storms have made harvesting brother Hans' cherries a "pick-or-miss" affair. We got it just right - it was a glorious day, and a glorious crop, but they were already showing signs of the rot setting in from the rain the day before. By the time we had filled all our trays, Inge had turned out a *kirschentorte* - and we sat around the outside table drinking champagne and eating cake. It's a hard life!



Brother Hans' cherries

The picking wasn't without incident though. Picture this - the trees are on a hillside field; Hans is picking while sitting in a plastic chair, since he's still a little frail. The branches are so heavy he's surrounded by fruit, and peering out through the leaves. You guessed it - crack! the chair broke and he tumbled onto the ground. The gasps from Margrit and me quickly turned to relieved giggles when we up-righted him and found no harm done (except to the chair).

Home to the production line! Sorting, juice-making, and voilà - bottles of cherry brandy and our version of the Bündner *röteli*. We used the kirsch we'd "imported" from the Blenheim cherries as a base for the Thaler cherry juice... delicious! The Züst family *hof* is just above Thal, on the edge of Canton Appenzell. It looks out to a magnificent *burgstock* - dating back to Roman days, Mani says. I still find it amazing that there are these present parts of history right in our everyday lives!

My other decadent pleasure has been lying in the deckchair and sniffing the air. Holunder-blossom

over me and the kiwifruit vine flowering nearby made for a real nose-treat. Every bee for a hundred miles had smelt it too - the sound was like standing by a hive. It had me wondering about smells though, and the meaning of the synthetic smells of household cleaners. They make surfaces shout "I'm cleaned!" - perhaps to impress the rest of the household? Yet what does clean really smell like? Is it the air after a thunderstorm with that indescribably mineral smell? - or bed-linen after airing in the sun?

And the other thing about cleaning products - "anti-bacterial"! Here we are worrying about bacteria that are resistant to antibiotics - and squirting stuff around for them to evolve resistance to.

You can guess we're very conscious of bacteria here at the moment. The new EHEC strain of e-coli in northern Germany is a combination of two known varieties, and has already killed nearly 30 people. The only Swiss affected are people who ate "something" in northern Germany, and no-one here has died. They're now convinced it hasn't come from Spanish cucumbers, and German bean-sprouts have been identified as the culprit. But the impact on farmers has been huge! Millions and millions of all sorts of veges cannot be sold, because people have stopped buying. Russia has banned all imports of vegetables from all over the euro-zone. That smells to most people like a non-tariff trade barrier to benefit *their* farmers - but it just reminds us how vulnerable we food-exporting nations are to any health-scare - whether it's valid or not!

Around here the big debate is nuclear power. The Bundesrat wants to phase it out, and the Ständerat is debating that. Industry is worried about whether there is security of supply with renewables. Of course it will be bound to go to referendum, so the debate will go on - which is in contrast to Germany who announced a week later than Switzerland that they were going to phase it out but there it's already a done deal!

Another Swiss-wide debate is urban sprawl. We really notice it up the Rhein valley. Towns are joining hands along the road - just a paddock or two separating Heerbrugg from Au, where once there were whole farms between. It's such wonderful fertile land too. Planners and communities are struggling with the issue, because most town land-use is already dense, by our standards anyway. On one drive we found ourselves "tut-tutting" at the disappearance of a green space - but then going "oh no - how could anyone live there?" when we saw a block of apartments squeezed in between another block and a hill-side, and old buildings replaced by newer higher ones. And that is the dilemma!

I'm glad our role in solving these big problems is just to put the world to rights on a regular basis, around the table, with a bottle or two between friends. Without our combined and regular attention, I'm sure it would all be in a much worse state. So - "Prost - Cheers!"