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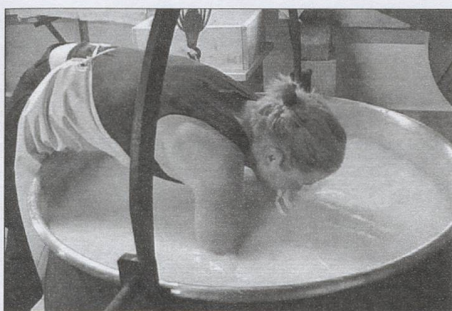
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# Bringing the alpine cows home

Following ancient tradition, thousands of alpine herdsmen and women move their cows, pigs, sheep or goats to the Alps at the advent of summer. But contrary to popular myth, this work is no longer exclusively the domain of bearded Swiss toiling in the mountains. Increasingly, alpine herding is being taken on by people from neighbouring countries, who now account for about a third of the workforce.



Sarah Fasolin making cheese

Sarah Fasolin, a Swiss who spent three summers between 2003 and 2008 working as a herdsman in the Bernese Alps, describes a typical day: "The day begins early, at five. First you bring the cows in from the pasture, milk them and let them out. Then you start with the cheese making, which lasts until about noon. After that you clean out the cowshed, then turn and work the 8-13kg wheels of cheese in the cheese cellar. Then it's time to check on the cows, now far up the mountain and to bring them down around 4pm for a second milking. Then you let them out again, and the shed has to be cleaned again. Then you feed the pigs. At around 8pm, or later, you're finished."

Fasolin decided to capture the phenomenon of an authentic Swiss industry being propped up by imported labour. Focusing on the relationship between the

Swiss farmers and their foreign herders, she spent a summer filming on the Oltscherenalp and the Balisalp in the Berner Hasli-



Balisalp

tal. The end result was a 99-minute film, "The Cheese Makers - Foreign Alpine Herders in the Bernese Oberland", which she submitted for her Masters degree in Social Anthropology. In October 2010 the documentary was awarded first prize at the Festival of Scientific Films in Bern. It has been shown in cinemas since 2011.

## The 'good old times'

In days gone by, when Swiss had larger families, a family's younger members would go up into the Alps in summer to care for the cows and make cheese. The rest of the family would stay in the valley, harvesting wheat and bringing in hay for winter. As families became smaller, younger members also began to leave the mountain valleys to take on other, often better-paid, work. Ever since the 1970s, the Alpine economy has found itself in a crunch, bereft of the necessary manpower. The demand for outside help in summer continues to increase.

A diverse lot, workers hail from Germany, Austria, Italy and even Poland. Some are single, while others are couples or

young families. All come to the Swiss Alps for between two to three months to take on this strenuous work at a modest salary.

Swiss hikers occasionally grumble about non-Swiss working at what they consider a quintessentially Swiss job, but without those foreigners, ever more of this Alpine tradition will disappear. The economy of the Alps is on the move - globalisation has also reached the Alps.

## Alpine economy

Switzerland has 7,300 alpine enterprises. This number is continually decreasing due to consolidation and relinquishment of holdings. In 2010, almost 400,000 animals were taken up the alps. No records exist of how many people spend the summers on top of the alps, but it is estimated at 14,000. A third comes from abroad, predominantly Germany, Austria, and Italy. In areas with many private alps, such as Central Switzerland or the St Gallen Oberland, there are fewer non-Swiss working.



Alpaufzug

The salaries for herders and cheese makers vary. The recommended wages of SFr155-200 a day for herders and SFr135-175 a day for cheese makers are not always adhered to. Private and smaller alps cannot or don't want to pay these wages. *swissinfo*

