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Scientists challenge Swiss food traditions

Will legendary salty Swiss delicacies like Gruyère cheese, cervelat sausage and silserli bread ever be the same again? Such icons of the national diet are coming under closer scrutiny following a government health campaign to reduce salt consumption.

Swiss researchers have evaluated options to significantly cut the amount of sodium chloride ("salt") contained in many kinds of food. In a recent study, scientists from the Bern University of Applied Sciences say it is possible to do this without compromising product quality or food safety. The study, conducted at the university's School of Agricultural, Forest and Food Sciences (HAFL) in Zollikofen, involved testing processed food, such as bread, meat products and prepared meals, which was reformulated to contain less salt.

Among the key findings was that bread offers one of the best opportunities for cutting sodium. As it's a staple food that people eat a lot of, salt reduction in this product category could have the highest impact on intake. Bread and pastries as a food category account for the biggest share of salt consumption in Switzerland at more than 21 per cent. Meat products are responsible for more than 14 per cent, cheese and cheese products 7.5 per cent and processed foods - including prepared meals and breakfast cereals - around 34 per cent. About 12 per cent of salt comes from unprocessed food such as vegetables, fruits, meat, fish and beverages, while salt sprinkled on food at the table or while cooking in the kitchen amounts to just 11 per cent. Some meat products, especially if air dried, are very salty, but if they are not eaten daily it has only a small impact.

Salt is a very common, cheap ingredient to provide flavour in products and people generally prefer salty food. But in many

cases subtle reductions can be made that consumers will readily accept

Salt gives bread taste and it also aids the baking process, affecting the structure of the dough, as well as its texture and colour.

Wide ranges in the doses used by Swiss bakers - from 1.2 per cent to 2.3 per cent of the final product - highlight the potential for change.

Large Swiss food companies, including Nestlé and retailers Migros and Coop, have already committed to reduce sodium content in many of their products. Coop says it uses no more than 1.5 per cent salt in its bread. In 2009, Migros began limiting salt in bread and it pledged action last year on 171 other products. In 2010, Nestlé announced that it was cutting sodium in its prepared foods by ten per cent over five years.

A recent study put the average salt intake of the Swiss population at 9.1 grams, well above the maximum daily level of five grams recommended by the World Health Organization. Health authorities say reducing the level is critical in the fight against high blood pressure that can lead to fatal heart diseases.

Some culinary traditions in Switzerland die hard. The case of Gruyère illustrates the challenges.

"Such a product, you can't change," Philippe Bardet, director of the Interprofession du Gruyère, said flatly when asked about reducing salt content in the famous cheese variety.

"It's a recipe that's protected by an AOC (Appellation d'origine contrôlée) and regulations have to be followed." With salt content ranging from 1.1 to 1.7 per cent, Gruyère on average is the saltiest Swiss cheese, although imported varieties such as Roquefort and feta have higher levels.

Salt provides flavour while

acting as a preservative to prevent the cheese from spoiling during the aging process. Gruyère is made from pressed curds that are moulded and soaked in a lukewarm briny solution for 24 hours before being laid on rough wooden shelves in cellars to ripen and mature for up to 12 months. Additional salt is rubbed onto the surface to induce the formation of a rind, according to a process detailed in 22 pages of AOC regulations.

No quick cure for high skin cancer rate

Switzerland has more skin melanoma cases than 40 other European countries, with 22 new cases recorded annually for every 100,000 people. Globally, the country has the third highest rate after Australia and New Zealand.

In presenting the cancer rates, the Health Office said excessive exposure to UV rays was the main cause of skin cancer. The Swiss have three ways of getting too much sun: they holiday in hot destinations, spend a lot of time outdoors, often at high altitudes, and they love sunbeds. While it is tough convincing people to change habits in the first two instances, sunbed use is one area that can be tackled practically. One in ten Swiss use sunbeds regularly. Worryingly, most young people interviewed for the study were not aware of the risks associated with exposure to UVA rays from sunbeds.

Following the study, the Health Office will be asking the solarium industry to prominently display notices warning about the dangers of sunbeds.

While cancer rates are high, the number of related deaths is lower than in the rest of Europe - a sign of Switzerland's good prevention and treatment methods. The Cancer league recommends regular checks of pigmentation.

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