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Cow Fighting Fever in the Canton Valais

Where the Cows are Queens Annual Cow Fighting Events between March and September

In a little churchyard in the Valais region of Switzerland lies the grave of one of the greatest poets of the German language. Rainer Maria Rilke is buried on a steep hillside above the Rhône River; his grave is the village of Raron's main draw for visitors. In Rilke's masterpiece, *Sonnets to Orpheus* (1923), which he composed nearby, Orpheus lulls the beasts of the forest with the beauty of his singing and stills their "Brüllen, Schrei, Geröhr" [bellow, cry and roar]. But even Orpheus would have struggled to silence the din produced at Raron's other tourist attraction: cow fighting contests.

Come spring the fever of cow fighting not only grabs a hold of the beasts but farmers and spectators alike - even TV camera teams - national and international - flock to the events.

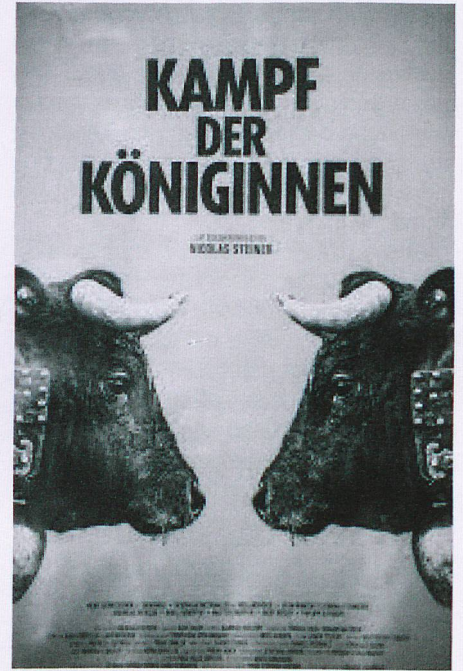
Known as a *combat de reine* in the French-speaking west of the Valais, and *Ringkuhkampf* in the German-speaking east, they start in early April and finish with the grand final in the town of Aproz. In Switzerland it is always the cows - not the bulls - that do battle and they fight each other rather than a Swiss version of the matador. Only one breed is used, the tough and compact Hérens, which are perfectly suited to mountain life. For visitors, the fights are more than an oddity, rather they offer a way to glimpse alpine life at its most traditional and authentic, a world away from the reserve and efficiency that ordinarily characterises Switzerland.

The contest in Raron feels a little like a

British agricultural show, but fuelled by wine and raclette rather than burgers and cider. The wine is local - the steep, rocky slopes of the Valais produce fine grapes such as Petite Arvine, though little is exported. Bottles are already being uncorked by 9am as the first 12 cows are led into the ring - muscular, black and glossy in the alpine sun. The breeders position their animals carefully around the sandy arena. "Marshalls in position," barks the tannoy. "Owners: release your cows."

If you've ever seen cows turned out after a winter indoors you will recognise the kicks and leaps the Hérens make when unleashed. Some snort and paw the ground, daring a challenger to approach. The first pair lock horns, bells jangling. They strain against each other, prising and pivoting to gain an advantage. Then without warning one of the cows buckles and retreats to the side of the ring as the marshalls - young men in red shirts known as *rabatteurs* - rush to prevent the victor goring the soft hindquarters of her opponent. It can be dangerous work.

Gradually the cows are eliminated, until the afternoon ends with the finals for the three weight categories. There are grumblings in the crowd as the heavyweight winner is announced: a breeder not from the Valais, but from the town of Grindelwald in neighbouring canton Bern. But honour is restored when Valais herds make a clean sweep of the middle category: after 40 minutes of haunch-quivering battle, two pairs prove inseparable, so a four-way tie is declared. As dusk gathers the spectators and trainers flock to the bars to discuss the day's contests.



What are the qualities of a champion cow? "The most important thing is technique - the next is the bond with the owner." The joyful and entertaining cattle fights attract tens of thousands of spectators each year. The tournaments take place in various villages from spring to fall and in the end, the winner will be crowned "Queen of the Queens". The prize is not only a humongous ornate cowbell; the offspring fetches whooping prices at auctions.

I wonder how much longer this tradition will last with animal rights people becoming more vocal... after all they are beginning to say that we here in good old NZ need to stop shearing sheep as it is cruel... wonder what your thoughts are?...Editor.

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