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CHEESE IS FOR SHARING

Towards the end of September, when the cool morning mist rises again from the mountain valleys, it is time to bring the cows down from their alpine summer pastures. Time also for the traditional "Chästeilet" – the distribution of the cheese – in the Justis (pronounced "Yoostis") Valley near Sigriswil, high above Lake Thun.

Farming folk possessing mountain rights converge from the surrounding villages. Many bring with them their "Tragräg" – a wooden rack used for carrying the cheeses on one's back. Everyone heads for the "Spycherberg" and the four storage huts where the

cheese made from the milk produced that summer has been kept.

Lively conversation develops as friends greet each other and discuss with expertise the quality of the fine, flat cheeses piled up in lots of 100 to 150 pounds each. The steward asks for silence, delivers a short speech and then proceeds to the fair and even distribution of the cheese.

From a herdsman's cap he draws lots, small pieces of wood each bearing the name of a right-owning farmer: "Matter Hans, Sauser Fritz, Amstutz Gottfried . . ." are some of the names one may hear. Each farmer who has been

given his share marks his own cheeses with a crayon.

A festival follows. Tables are put together, the meadow is transformed into a dancer floor. Singing and yodelling gets under way and the flag throwers swing into action. When late in the afternoon everyone makes their way home down the valley, it is a colourful procession. The top-yielding cows from each alp are crowned with garlands, ribbons and a milking stool between their horns. The farmers follow behind, their "Tragräg" packed with cheeses and personal gear. When the serene clanking of the cowbells finally subsides, the alp remains still and silent – until the return of spring.



The whole family, quite naturally, wants to have a good look at the cheese before it goes home. Picture by courtesy of SNTO.



The top yielding animal is decorated with garlands. The beautiful "lady" is then led homeward in procession. Photo by courtesy of SNTO.

The steward distributes the cheese. A tally — token drawn from its owner's hat precludes subsequent argument. Picture by courtesy of SNTO.



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