

Zeitschrift: The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK
Herausgeber: Federation of Swiss Societies in the United Kingdom
Band: - (1978)
Heft: 1737

Artikel: Old traditions and folklore festivals in Switzerland
Autor: [s.n.]
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-686225>

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Old Traditions and Folklore Festivals in Switzerland

By our customs, our country is split up into countless small communities, 3000 Communes of which the smallest has 11, the largest 450 000 inhabitants. These are figures which illuminate the diversity of the Swiss population in the middle of Europe.

Far from wishing to present all the many traditions in our country in detail, for which we should need many issues of the review, we should like at least to mention a few of the less well-known festivals at random. In one of our next issues, we shall give a table of dates of the various traditional events.

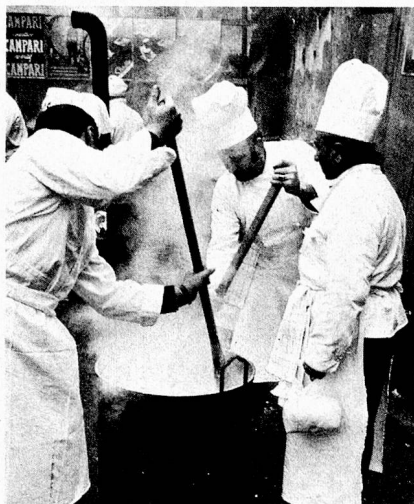
«Greiflet» in Schwyz

On the evening of Epiphany, the lads don white herdsman's blouses and circle the fountains of Schwyz in noisy procession. It is an ancient fertility ceremony.

«Vogel Gryff» in Basle

In Kleinbasle on the right bank of the River Rhine, there are three guilds, known as «Companies of Honour». The three emblematic figures of the companies are called Griffin, Wild Man and Lion. The three meet at midday after the Wild Man has travelled down the Rhine

on a raft. They dance and caper on the Middle Rhine Bridge to the beat of drums.



Risotto Meal in the Ticino

The Church being unable to ban pagan masquerades, it fixed them strictly before Lent. This meant that the people could eat well once more before fasting. This is the background from which the free risotto meal is to be looked at. It was once a social institution, and nowadays it is served to the local people in the larger localities in the Ticino at Carnival time.

«Aeschlibuebe» at Elgg (Zurich)

The «Aeschlibuebe» custom is observed on Ash Wednesday, with a morning and afternoon march by cadets. The custom originates from the days when men liable for military service paraded for an arms inspection.

Lötschental

«Roitschägggättä» (Valais) ►

Wearing fierce wooden masks and clad in goat and sheep skins, the «Roitschägggättä» romp noisily through the villages of the Lötschental on Shrove Thursday.

«Räbenlichter»

At the beginning of November it has been the custom in the Canton of Zurich to hollow out newly-harvested turnips, carve designs on the outside and put a lighted candle inside. The legend has it that the lights called «Räbenliechtle» help to ward off the powers of darkness. At Richterswil, they hold the «Räbenkilbi», a happy festival with a colourful procession.



*Lucien Paillard
in co-operation with the SNTÖ*

(Photos SNTÖ)

