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# Alpine pasture season

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Alpine cheese manufacturing, 21st century (© Interprofession du Gruyère AOC, 2000s)

With its many variations and local specificities, the Alpine pasture season has its roots in a practice that has been widely documented since the late Middle Ages. Between May and October, cattle, sheep and goats are driven to high altitude pastures (between 600 m and 2,900 m) to take advantage of the extra pasture. There, Alpine herdsmen and women manage the herds and care for the animals, work on the maintenance of the pastures, fences and buildings, process the milk into cheese and other products and also welcome visitors. The practice creates economic and emotional links between the local population, the Alpine herdsmen and women and the Alpine pastures and thus contributes to the maintenance of centuries-old cultural landscapes.

The Alpine pasture season has given rise to the knowledge and skills needed to maintain the sites and utensils, as well as to a variety of social practices. These include rituals, costumes, local festivals such as the inalpe (Alpine cattle ascent), désalpe (Alpine cattle descent) and, depending on the region, mid-summer, or events where the most beautiful cow in the herd is chosen. These customs are passed on within families and through practice. While the presence of the animals in the mountains plays an important role for visitors, festivals highlighting craft practices are important event in the local calendar. For two and a half centuries, artists have been celebrating the Alpine pasture and the chalet as emblems of a life close to nature in literature, visual arts, music and on stage. The farming of Alpine pastures with livestock thus maintains a set of traditions in a living social reality, in cultural landscapes that have been worked on for a long time, in connection with renowned and recognized food production.

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Lebendige traditionen  
traditions vivantes  
tradizioni viventi  
tradiziuns vivas



The list of living traditions in Switzerland aims to raise public awareness of cultural practices and to pass them on. It is based on the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. The list is drawn up and updated in collaboration

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So, for example, the designation 'Gruyère' was added to the Académie française dictionary in 1762 to describe the cheese produced in the region of the same name. 'Sbrinz' and 'Berner Alpkäse' are described by historian Johannes Stumpf in his historical and geographic portrait of Switzerland of 1548. Meanwhile, the words 'Bagnes' and 'Conches' (Goms) were used in the 19th century to describe semi-hard cheeses from the Valais region, now known as Raclette du Valais AOP (protected designation of origin, PDO). Going even further back, 'Schabziger' and various cheeses of the type *séré/ziger* already featured at markets from the 15th century.

The development of well-equipped lowland cheese dairies in the 19th century, the First World War and the vagaries of agricultural policy subsequently put a great deal of pressure on Alpine farms. In spite of that, Alpine cheese production, often exclusively using a wood-fired oven, picked up again and experienced a revival in the last quarter of the 20th century, which continues to this day.

The world of Alpine traditions and associated cultural activities is based on local relations between villages and Alpine pastures. In May, herds are driven to the high pastures, where they stay until the autumn. And while this ascent to the pastures – which is known as 'poya' in Fribourg and 'inalpe' in Valais – is nowadays mostly done using vehicles, some farmers who care about preserving traditions still do part of the journey on foot. For the occasion, cows are crowned with decorative bells, and in some regions they wear elaborately decorated leather collars and are a source of pride for farmers. The exact date of herding is decided by each Alpine farmer, depending on the vegetation and meteorological conditions. Throughout the season, the herd is then moved to pastures at different altitudes according to grass growth.

When autumn arrives, the herd is driven back down during the 'désalpe' (descent). The cows are decorated with flowers and are adorned with bells. They are accompanied by herdsmen and women, their hands and their families, with men, women and children parading in traditional dress. While here, too, the journey is often done using vehicles, some herds are paraded through villages as part of festivities to mark the 'désalpe'. These events are a highlight in the local calendar and attract a large number of visitors.

Other farmers decide on the end of the season when it suits them and celebrate the descent with families and neighbours.

## Production in chalets

During the summer pasture season, the cattle are placed under the responsibility of a team made up of a supervisor, a master cheesemaker or master herdsman or woman, supported by employees or family members. In some regions, Alpine pastures are traditionally farmed by families. Young people also take part in the Alpine pasture season as chalet girls and boys during the school holidays. Work on the Alpine pastures and on the farm often requires the use of paid staff and seasonal workers who also come from other European countries.

Alpine pastures can be rented or co-owned (in a so-called 'consortage'). The livestock is either owned by the farmers or rented to other farmers. The milk, which these days is nearly always obtained by machine, is transformed in the chalet into Alpine cheese PDO or into fresh cheese and other specialities that are sold locally.

The vast majority of Alpine pastures are located at between 1,000m and 2,900m altitude and were cleared in the Middle Ages. They all have a name and buildings (chalets, stables, dairies, either in separate buildings or all in a single one). The buildings are constructed with local materials: wood, stones and lime. In the Alpine foothills, many chalets feature 'tavillons' (wooden shingles), while in the southern valleys, roofs are generally covered with stone. Specialised tradespeople are required to maintain and renovate these traditional roofs: *tavilloneurs* (shingle makers) and roofers ('*teciatt*' in the Ticino dialect).

Chalet life requires an intimate knowledge of the mountains and of the herd. The team of herdsmen and women is responsible for maintaining the Alpine pasture (de-stoning; manure spreading; brush control, maintenance of buildings, installations, access routes and fences; water supplies) and also preparing the wood needed for life in the chalet, but also and in particular for cheese production. The conditions of this production and the skills it requires are different from those in a lowland dairy: the heating of milk using a wood-fired oven; managing the daily fluctuations in milk quality according to the meteorological conditions and state of the pastures; managing the lactic cultures used for curdling; and taking out and pressing the cheese using a muslin cheesecloth. These are part of the day-to-day work of producing Alpine cheese, as is the use of manual tools and simple equipment.

Since the beginning of the 19th century, the increasing competition from lowland dairies, which operate all year round, has edged out Alpine cheesemaking. However, the latter has continued, albeit with small volumes. The quality of Alpine cheeses, which is currently very high,

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has made them a highly sought-after product with a strong image and reputation. Cheesemakers have had to put in place a number of measures to adapt to food hygiene regulations and PDO specifications. Alpine cheesemakers generally learn their trade in the family or on the farm, sometimes attending a few courses, whereas lowland cheesemakers are usually professionals who have completed a full cheesemaking qualification.

The production of goat cheeses or cheeses combining cow and goat milk is traditional in some Alpine regions (Ticino, Graubünden). It remains uncommon and sporadic in other regions, despite attracting renewed interest since the beginning of the 21st century.

Many mountain pastures are also used for the rearing of livestock for meat, particularly lambs, suckler calves fed by dams, or pigs fattened with whey, a residue from cheese production.

In the past, the by-products from this activity formed the basis of chalet diets, along with bread, potatoes and maize (polenta). For their day-to-day meals; herdsman and women would consume milk, whey, 'sérac' and cream produced on site, whether in the form of milk-based soup, or with pieces of sérac. This rather narrow diet is documented until the early 20th century. Nowadays, various specialities are typical fare in Alpine chalets, including chalet soup and what is known as 'Älplermagronen' in Swiss German dialect, which consists of pasta, potatoes, milk, lardons, cheese and sometimes herbs from the chalet garden. These days, however, staff working on mountain pastures can prepare more varied dishes containing fresh products thanks to improved infrastructure.

Meanwhile, butter, which used to be such an important staple in Swiss urban diets, lost ground to imported plant-based fats from the mid-19th century. The production of cheeses with a long shelf life often requires partial skimming, which also explains the traditional production of 'crème d'alpage' (Alpine cream) and 'crème de la Gruyère' (Gruyère cream).

### History of a flagship product

Milk, which is more abundant during the grass growing season, has to be transformed to be preserved and transported. Cheese is therefore a way of postponing consumption and is a product with a high nutritional and commercial value.

In documents from Gruyère dating back to the early 14th century, we already find mention of production of 'caseum' (cheese) and séré, as well as the use of cauldrons. Incidentally, products still exist in Switzerland that resemble this traditional séré: 'Schabziger' from Glarus and 'Bloderkäse' from St. Gallen. In the 15th century,

the summer pasturing of sheep decreased and the number of cows increased. The quantities of available milk grew, allowing the production of larger cheeses. The accounts of Hauterive Abbey (Fribourg) in 1411, and those of the Hôpital des Bourgeois in Fribourg in 1445 also document the use of rennet, a substance taken from the stomach of a calf or kid, which is used to curdle milk.

The production of Alpine hard cheese is mentioned in Gruyère from the beginning of the 15th century, and is historically the basis of Swiss cheese exportation. Consequently, the regions north of the Bernese Alps specialised in cheese production and cattle breeding, both of which were able to tap foreign markets. Before, cheeses were produced using acid curdling, a traditional technology that is still used in marginal cases. In a document dating back to 1555, the convent in Engelberg mentions little soft and fullfat 'Sauerkäse' (sour milk cheese).

From the 15th century onwards, we also see an exodus of producers and their savoir-faire towards the Jura Arc, the cantons of Vaud and Neuchâtel, and to Savoie, primarily for economic reasons. The use of rennet spread from Gruyère to the regions of Central Switzerland and is documented in the regions of Schwyz, Unterwalden and the Urseren Valley from the 15th century. The products from these regions were mainly exported to Lombardy, a prime example of which is Sbrinz – an extra hard cheese, which these days is mainly produced in lowland dairies. A document from the archives of the canton of Bern dating back to 1533 mentions that cheeses from Unterwalden were transported to Brienz to be exported to Piedmont via the Grimsel Pass and the Gries Pass. The convent in Engelberg also started producing hard cheeses in the second half of the 16th century to export them via the Gotthard.

Other cheeses are still produced in Alpine farms today, such as 'Mutschli' and Tomme cheese made with cow's milk as well as very localised specialities, like 'Schlipferkääs' (Appenzell Innerrhoden). Meanwhile, the production of 'Berner Alpkäse' has moved beyond the borders of the canton of Bern, spreading in particular to Alpine farms in the Pays-d'Enhaut, the Ormonts (Vaud) and Entlebuch (Lucerne).

Around a third of Swiss Alpine pastures are currently used for cheese production. This can be explained by the opening of the first lowland cheese dairies in the first decades of the 19th century, which allowed a gradual move from seasonal to year-round production, thereby considerably increasing yields and pushing cereal crops to other land. From 1870, the development of condensed milk factories and chocolate factories started draining the milk from the Alpine foothills, while the

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dairies on the Swiss Plateau were able to produce large wheels of Emmental in a more focused and rational manner.

Many mountain cheesemakers faced competition and decided to emigrate, while the First World War and national supply policies plunged the Swiss cheese trade into a grave crisis. It was then that the Cooperative of Swiss cheese exporters was founded under the aegis of the Agriculture Division. It later became the Swiss Cheese Union. The period from 1945 to 1960 was more prosperous and was characterised by a sharp increase in production. A milk quota was introduced in 1977 by the Federal Council to curb this overproduction. Alpine cheese production then came close to extinction but a small number of farmers continued as they regained a competitive edge by producing cheese outside of the quotas of village dairies.

In most Swiss households, traditional Swiss Alpine cheeses are a staple. Local cheeses are used in the preparation of many culinary specialities, such as fondue (see 'fondue as a social event') and raclette ('raclette as a social event'). The development of tourism, and winter tourism in particular, in the Alpine valleys has made these products and dishes – from fondue and raclette to chalet-style soups, pasta and charcuterie – an essential part of the mountain experience.

### **The cultural by-products of cheese**

The boom in the market, which took shape from the 17th century and lasted until the crises of the 19th century, encouraged the development of a range of artisanal savoir-faire which was offered to farmers and herdsmen and women, who were keen to decorate their buildings and utensils: cooperage, carpentry, 'tavillonnage' (shingle making), dry stone walling and roofing, bell founding and cowbell forging, and leather working (the beautiful 18th century embroidered collars, which were previously made with wood and iron). Added to this came the sculpture of ornate cream spoons and the production of miniature animals and chalets.

The annual festivals linked to the Alpine pasture season are also many and varied. They kick off with 'poya' – or Alpine cattle ascent, and are swiftly followed by various celebrations and events called 'Mi-Eté' (midsummer) or 'Kilbi' and, in German-speaking Switzerland, 'Suufsunntig', 'Älplerfeste', 'Bergdorfer' and 'Meisterkuh'. At the end of the season, the cattle descent also involves great ceremony, and the returning of the herds to their owners is marked almost everywhere by festivities, including in the regions where high pastures are not used for cheese production, such as the Jura mountains in Neuchâtel and Solothurn. They are a prelude to

festivities such as 'La Bénichon' and St. Martin Festival and the traditional markets which mark the end of the Alpine grazing season.

The religious traditions, blessings and prayers specific to the Alpine pastures vary by region and denomination. The most symbolic involves making a sign of the cross on the cheese or cauldron. Meanwhile, oral Alpine pasture traditions are very low-key and therefore more difficult to capture. They include, for example, shared stories, customs that are passed on orally (deciding when to move the herd up the mountain), observations of nature and livestock, knowledge of meteorological conditions and technical terms in patois.

Representations of the world of Alpine herdsmen and women met with particular interest in the 19th century and acquired symbolic value over the course of the 20th century. They crop up in the paintings of the Alpine ascent in Toggenburg and the poyas in Fribourg, and in rural papercutting scenes from the Pays-d'En-haut and Simmental, many of which feature in public and private collections since the 1960s. We can also mention the countless literary descriptions which are often illustrated: travellers in the late 18th century described the dream view of Rousseauesque pastoral scenes, while the first guidebooks focused on the beauty of the landscapes, the simple life of the herdsmen and women and the health benefits of the air at high altitude. In addition, herdsmen and women have appeared in parades at various events both in Switzerland and abroad: in Vevey (at the Winegrowers' Festival since 1819), in Interlaken (at the Tellspiele from 1912), in Paris in 1856 (agricultural exhibition), then in Geneva in 1896 (at the Village Suisse), and in Paris between 2000 and 2011 (at the International Agricultural Show) and in military music shows (Basel Tattoo 2010, Avenches Tattoo 2016). This is how the venerable image of the Swiss herdsman – identified by the characteristic clothing, which would become the typical local dress for men – took shape and spread. These costumes have also become the uniforms of traditional dancing and music societies.

Music is also among the traditions linked to Alpine pasturing. The 'Ranz des vaches' has become a veritable hymn to the mountain pastures in the canton of Fribourg, while a vast choral and yodelling repertoire describes the life and emotions of the Alpine grazing season. The most famous piece is the hugely well-known 'Vieux Chalet' by Joseph Bovet, which has been translated into many different languages. The Alphorn, which was rediscovered by the Unspunnen Festival in the early 19th century, is not a customary part of the Alpine pasture season. It is, however, part of the Alpine herdsmen's procession at the 'Fête des Vignerons' (Winegrowers' Festival), and several players and bands also perform at events.

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## Chalets without cheese

Many chalets do not produce cheese during the summer season but still keep young cattle, supervised by ‘gardes-génisses’ (cowhands). In the highest areas of the Alps, herds of sheep and goats allow use to be made of the highest pastures, whereas on some slopes, a fodder complement or ‘wild hay’ can also be harvested. The work of cowhands and haymakers is less valued than that of herdsmen and women in charge of dairy cows but it plays an essential part in the maintenance of the livestock and Alpine pastures. Working seasons as cowhands or Alpine restaurant managers has allowed workers from other countries and those from various urban areas such as the ‘pêla’ (‘long-haired people’ in Fribourg patois) of the 1970s to get involved in the work of Alpine chalets.

Besides on-site cheese production, different types of farming are practised:

- production of milk transported to a village dairy or supplied to industry;
- the summer pasturing of young cattle, which gain value when fattened up;
- the summer pasturing of suckler cows or beef cattle;
- goats with cheese production, or sheep, rarely with dairy production nowadays;
- extensive farming systems with minority breeds that are becoming more important again (e.g. ‘Grauvieh’ from Graubünden, Hérens, moutons nez-noir, goats from Verzasca);
- farming of other species, e.g. donkeys, horses, pigs, llamas or alpacas, yaks;
- farms with a refreshment area or restaurant.

The Alpine inns and restaurants are a welcome addition to many Alpine farms, especially those that only keep young cattle. In some regions, cowhands also keep one or two dairy cows so that they can offer Alpine products to their guests. Le Gros Plané near Moléson, and the Alpine restaurants in Grindelwald testify to a tradition dating back to the 18th century when travellers started looking for opportunities to taste milk and cream and whey cures, especially in eastern Switzerland, were important offers in the emerging health tourism sector. Alpine chalets are also popular with mountain climbers and hunters, or as venues for mountain get-togethers with family or friends.

For the last few decades, other touristic offerings have developed in the Alpine pastures, such as educational trails, accompanied visits and hikes, show dairies and short breaks.

## Current issues and outlook

The inscription of several cheeses on the PDO register has promoted the preservation and development of this cheese production. However, at a Swiss-wide level, Alpine cheese production remains a minority undertaking (only accounting for a few per cent of total production). The farming conditions are very diverse, and each region has its own system, with private Alpine pastures, cooperatives or ‘consortages’, corporations (e.g. in Uri), concentrated holdings, or small and dispersed farms. Given the difficult conditions in the mountains, every farm finds its own solutions according to its location, its livestock and the farmers’ family situations.

Everywhere, however, problems accessing and recruiting staff are causing difficulties for Alpine farms. Difficult working conditions in chalets; problems reconciling the rules on heritage conservation and hygiene standards with rational and efficient ways of working; low profitability; and fluctuations in the price of milk and meat are also challenges to the preservation of this savoir-faire. The re-emergence of large predators (wolves, lynx, bears) and competition from populations of large herbivores (e.g. stags, ibexes, chamois and deer), growing numbers of tourists, hikers, and – more recently – cyclists, also make life difficult for farmers working on Alpine pastures.

Abandoning certain less profitable pastures should allow the best ones to continue to be farmed and their quality to be preserved. The action taken to help farmers should be part of an approach centred on sustainable development, in particular with regard to sanitation (drinking water for production, dairy equipment); access (gondola lifts, decent roads, possibility of using helicopters if necessary); the availability of staff (school times, additional work); the adaptation of calendars; the reorganisation of Alpine pastures according to altitude; and the grouping of farms. Support for farmers having to deal with the presence of large predators is also essential.

Through the international organisation Slow Food, ‘sentinel’ support groups help raise the profile of rare products. Measures are probably needed to maintain the market position of these types of Alpine products. The future of the Alpine pasture season therefore heavily depends on agricultural policy and on support for this specific form of farming, which has established itself over the centuries and which helps maintain the mountain landscapes that are loved both by tourists and local populations.

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