

BACK TO THE LAND

Switzer

In Switzerland's burgeoning agritourism industry, farmers-turned-entrepreneurs are increasing the profitability of local food production and ensuring that family farms remain a celebrated, vital part of Swiss society.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY LAUREL KALLENBACH



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Milk cows on Christian Egli's farm enjoy a view of Hohgant mountain in Switzerland's Emmental region. ■ Rows of organic sage grow on the Rhône Valley's steep slopes. Farmer Maurice Masserey supplies herbs to the Ricola company. ■ In Appenzell, a boy leads goats to the high mountain pastures during the Alpabfahrt celebration. PHOTO COURTESY APPENZEL TOURISM ■ Antique houses and barns at Ballenberg Swiss Open-Air Museum, in the Bernese Oberland, preserve centuries of agricultural life.

Cowbells clang as flower-wreathed heifers parade through the streets of Stein, a tiny Swiss village in the Appenzell cheese-making region. Dressed in traditional costumes, farm children and yodeling cowherds drive the cows toward the *Viehschau* (cattle show) judging area for the “Miss Stein” bovine beauty contest. But the contest isn’t just about pretty faces—honorable mentions go to cows with the best udders and highest milk production.

On this Tuesday afternoon, I’ve joined crowds of people jostling to watch the cows. “Schools are closed today, and the whole town is here,” tour guide Antonia Brown Ulli tells me. She lives in Stein and is wearing a traditional *dirndl* dress for the occasion. “This is one of the village’s biggest annual festivals.”

I’m comforted to see these age-old cow herding traditions still being heartily celebrated. As in most developed nations, family farms in Switzerland have been struggling over the past few decades—one-third fewer farms exist in Switzerland today than in 1990. It’s difficult to make a living as a farmer, and many young people are swapping rural life for urban careers. However, renewed interest in eating local foods—especially those produced organically (called “Bio” in Switzerland)—is starting to revive small family farms, which can supply fresh, in-season food to cities via farmer’s markets.

A new local food-inspired idea that’s gaining traction in Switzerland (as well as here at home) is “agritourism,” a growing industry in which visitors spend time at a farm, observing farmers and food producers in action and sometimes helping with farm work. This infusion of tourist money and enthusiasm can energize small farms—especially those near breathtaking locations such as the Swiss Alps, where travelers flock anyway.

“Agritourism gives farmers a leg to stand on,” says Barbara Thörnblad Gross, a professor at Inforama, a 150-year-old Swiss agriculture school. “To survive, 40 percent of farmers augment their farm income with other jobs.” Many student farmers are learning how to operate rural bed-and-breakfasts and farm restaurants, or to provide milk or honey spa treatments. And agritourism doesn’t just benefit farmers. It reconnects visitors with their food sources, encouraging local eating and shopping. When you sip just-pressed apple juice from a Swiss orchard, you enjoy flavors that juice processed in a factory and shipped from afar simply can’t mimic. Lend a hand milking goats, and you gain a whole new appreciation for the work and artistry that goes into producing cheese.

FROM PASTURE TO PLATE

Diners wait weeks for a dinner reservation at the Château de Villa, a 16th-century castle with a restaurant and wine cellar in Switzerland’s French-speaking Valais region. What lures them—and me—is the region’s famous raclette—a cheese made from the raw milk of cows grazed in alpine meadows within yodeling distance of the Matterhorn.

Raclette is served melted. The raclette-maker selects a half-wheel and places it under a burner until the surface bubbles. Then he scrapes a portion of the gooey cheese onto a plate with a swipe of his knife and sends it to my table, where I eat it with boiled potatoes, rye bread, cornichons and pickled onions. Each of the meal’s five courses features a different cheese accompanied by a local wine. Between courses, I study a Valais map and pinpoint each cheese’s valley of origin.

OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Large wheels of raclette cheese age at Champasse Farm in Switzerland’s Valais region. The edges are labeled “Euseigne,” the name of the nearest village. ■ Fresh-foraged mushrooms are for sale at the Bern farmer’s market, where farmers and hunters gather to share the local harvest. ■ An Emmental farmhouse and church overlooks picturesque views in the village of Schangnau. ■ Herders in traditional Appenzell-region costumes parade their cows to the “Miss Stein” contest.



Restaurants like Château de Villa that are dedicated to regional, traditional foods aren't the only way travelers to Switzerland can sample local foods. Farmer's markets in cities such as Bern and Zurich are flourishing, and farm stands often pop up along roadsides during harvest time. And more and more, if you like a particular local food, you might be able to visit the farm directly. Continuing my raclette odyssey, I head to Champasse Farm, where owners Francois and Claudia Morend-Gaillard are among a new generation of farmers who welcome visitors to watch them make raclette. In their dairy, they heat the cows' milk to make curd, pour it into molds, bathe it in brine, and then age the cheese. Just outside is a glorious view of the Hérens Valley, which I enjoy while sampling—and buying—fresh raclette. The Morend-Gaillards estimate that 5 percent of their customers are tourists; they hope that number will increase next year after they build a tasting room and restaurant.

LIFE ON THE FARM

It's bedtime at Bruffhof Farm in the Emmental region, and my friends and I arrange our blankets and sleeping bags in fresh troughs of hay in the tractor loft. Bruffhof, farmed by Franz and Rita Schwarz, is part of Switzerland's 170-member Sleep in Straw program, in which visitors pay a modest fee to bed down in the barn. If you choose, you can help with farm chores such as gathering eggs or picking vegetables while you're there.

The straw is surprisingly comfy (though it tends to catch in your hair) and breakfast the next morning features Rita's homemade bread, jam, muesli, the farm's own honey and cheese, and yogurt from a neighboring farm. I have an unforgettable *Heidi* experience, and the Schwarzes earn some extra cash to keep their farm business running.

Because so many of Switzerland's farms are in scenic areas, farm stays are a great option for hikers or cyclists who want to meet the locals. And not all agritourism overnights involve straw or sharing quarters with cows or farm equipment—in their farmhouse in the Appenzell region, Doris and Armin Fässler of Eggerstanden have created a cozy apartment they rent to guests by the week through the Swiss Holiday Farm Association, made up of more than 200 farmhouses nationwide. Guests can help milk goats or learn to bale straw. The apartment includes a kitchen and is perfect for families. "It's important for children to learn where their food comes from," Doris says in German.

Want to immerse yourself in farm life? Farm volunteering is an inexpensive vacation option if you're willing to pitch in. A number of Swiss farms participate in the World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF) network, an organization that connects volunteers with farms in 50 countries. Generally, volunteers work four to six hours a day as farm assistants in exchange for free room and board. During free time, volunteers climb mountains or hop on the über-efficient trains and buses that whisk travelers around the country.

Somewhere in Switzerland, there's always a food or farm-life festival—another way of promoting locally made products. November heralds the Bern Onion Market, where regional farmers display more than 50 tons of onions in artistically woven plaits and different colors. In the Italian-speaking Ticino area, the Grape Festival is an excuse to share wine vintages in the town center of Mendrisio. Many villages celebrate *Alpabfahrt*, the procession of cows as they return home in fall from the high mountain pastures. And then there's the Sheep-Shearing Festival in Savognin, the Chestnut Festival in Ascona, the National Swiss Yodeling Festival (held in a different city every three years), and the Cow Patty Golf Festival (*Chüefladefäscht*), in which people bogey cow patties off the Riederalp mountain. Silly or serious, the festivities continue age-old customs that celebrate Swiss agriculture.

Freelance writer LAUREL KALLENBACH specializes in sustainable travel and has shopped local farmer's markets from Singapore and Jerusalem to her own hometown of Boulder, Colorado. As a child, she had a *Heidi* obsession, which explains why she can't get enough of farm-fresh Swiss cheeses.



TOP TO BOTTOM:
The winemaking village of Salgesch is surrounded by mountains and terraced rows of grapes. The town's wine museum marks the beginning of a 4-mile vineyard hike. ■ The Franz-Josef Mathier winery in Salgesch is one of hundreds of Rhône Valley vintners.



RESOURCES

Rural Tourism
Switzerland
www.tourisme-rural.ch

Sleep in Straw network
schlaf-im-stroh.ch
(click "English")

Swiss Holiday
Farm Association
bauernhof-ferien.ch

SwissTrails
swisstails.ch

Switzerland Tourism
myswitzerland.com

WWOOF
International
wwoof.org