



**April 18, 2024**



**📍 CHICAGO**

# Swiss Cheesemaker Wins World Championship Cheese Contest 2024

After three days of rigorous technical evaluation, Michael Spycher from the canton of Bern was named **World Champion Cheesemaker** for the 4<sup>th</sup> time, having won the title previously in 2008, 2020, and 2022. Spycher's Hornbacher cheese scored an impressive 98.98 points out of 100, and beat more than 3,300 entrants from 25 countries in this year's championship, held in Madison, WI. Overall, Swiss cheesemakers earned 8 Best in Class awards.



*Michael Spycher and his wife Monika at the World Cheese Championship Contest award ceremony 2024.*

The World Championship Cheese Contest is the largest technical cheese competition in the world. Winning such an important contest for the dairy industry for the fourth time shows Spycher's extraordinary dedication to the craft of cheesemaking, thanks to which we get to enjoy high-quality Swiss-made cheese here in the United States as well.

During his trip to the awards ceremony in Milwaukee, WI, we had the opportunity to ask Mr. Spycher a few questions about his victory, the production of his winning cheese, and his experiences in the United States.

*SWISS IMPACT: Congratulations on your fourth victory in the World Championship Cheese Contest! How does it feel to know that your cheese is the best among the over 3,300 entrants from 25 countries?*

*Michael Spycher:* It's unbelievably beautiful—and it is quite literally incredible, because we still can't believe it. But we are very proud that our small-scale raw milk cheese has won the title for the fourth time. Behind it all are 13 farming families who work hard every day on their farms and produce the best raw milk with great dedication. It is not a matter of course that our cheese stood out so much

Sl: Tell us more about yourself and how you got into the craft of cheesemaking.

MS: I grew up in a small village cheese dairy in Oberaargau (canton of Bern) and was introduced to the craft of cheesemaking from an early age. I was already interested in refining raw milk as a boy. After training as a cheesemaker, I gained experience at various companies throughout Switzerland, including as a cheesemaker on an alpage. Today, I have been running the Fritzenhaus dairy together with my family for 23 years.

I am fascinated by everything that can be made from milk. In addition to cheese, there are also many other foods that can be produced from milk. The concern of my farmers and myself is to secure the livelihood of the inhabitants of our broader region. We are convinced that remoteness brings many advantages, especially for the production of the best matured raw milk cheeses: healthy meadows, short transportation routes, healthy cows, to name just a few.

Sl: Your previous three victories were with your Gourmino Le Gruyère AOP. This time you participated with the Gourmino Hornbacher "little brother" produced in Fritzenhaus, your mountain dairy in Emmental. What makes this cheese so unique?

MS: The basis of our raw milk cheese is the excellent quality of the raw milk, which comes from happy cows that are allowed out to pasture every day. This also results in the flowery aroma. The home-made whey culture gives the cheese a balanced taste and at the same time an unmistakable DNA.

Sl: You traveled to Milwaukee, WI, in April 2024 to participate in the award ceremony and accept your award in person. Is this the first time you took part or did you also participate in previous years? Tell us about this experience.

MS: Except in 2020, when we were unable to travel for well-known reasons, my wife Monika and I always collected the prizes ourselves. We always tried to combine our trips with visits to different farms or cheese dairies. We noticed that although the farms are larger in the United States, the challenges are similar. Of course, the award banquet is always the highlight of the trips and we were able to exchange ideas with colleagues from all over the world and enjoy the moment. For us, the few days in the U.S. are always a bit of further education, because we get to see what products our colleagues in other countries are making. It's also a bit of a vacation, because it gives us the opportunity to switch off for a few days and devote our time to other things.

Sl: Speaking of the U.S., and Wisconsin in particular, there is also an important cheesemaking tradition here in the United States. According to official data from 2022, the average American consumed close to 42 pounds of cheese per year, which is only slightly less than the average Swiss person (50 pounds per year). How important is the U.S. market for Swiss cheese producers like you?

In the overall context, a market like the U.S. is of interest to us small Swiss producers. Thanks to our quality products, which we can always sell with a true, authentic story, we can attract interest and demand from a defined group of consumers in the United States. We have also noticed that American consumers, or cheesemongers, are very interested and inquisitive. During visits to our cheese dairy or cheese cellars, we find that our American guests are very well prepared and ask specific questions – so we have to be careful not to give away our secret.

But fortunately, we don't know our secret ourselves – so the risk of "spilling the beans" is not so great.

*Sl: Do you notice differences in taste preferences between Swiss and American consumers when it comes to cheese?*

*MS:* In principle, it is difficult to compare the two cheese cultures with each other. The long maturation of our raw milk cheese specialties allows us to offer consumers a unique taste experience. Coupled with the authentic history of our products, we can offer them a unique and delicious product.

However, it is clear that there is demand for Swiss cheese among American consumers, especially for the stronger raw milk cheese specialties which are aged for longer. This is simply something that distinguishes Swiss from American cheeses.

*Sl: Have you tried any American cheese while visiting the United States? Which one is your favorite or surprised you in particular?*

*MS:* Of course we enjoyed American cheese specialties during our various trips. We were able to visit several cheese dairies on the current trip and on previous trips – it is difficult to choose a favorite. But it is fair to say that there are also some insider tips in the U.S. as to where very good cheese is made. This is also shown by the density of medals at the World Championship Cheese Contest, where the Americans won medal after medal in the various categories. For example, the third-place overall winner this year was a cheese from Pennsylvania.

*Sl: Where can we buy Hornbacher, now the world's best cheese, here in the United States?*

*MS:* We at Fritzenhaus take care of the cheese production, and the distribution in the U.S. is coordinated by our affineur Gourmino. Gourmino distributes our cheeses and other Swiss cheese specialties in various specialty stores as well as in upscale restaurants throughout the country. Interested cheese lovers should contact Gourmino AG directly at [info@gourmino.ch](mailto:info@gourmino.ch). I am sure they can put anyone in touch with the right cheese store.

*Sl: Mr. Spycher, thank you for your time and congratulations again on your great success!*