Raclette

MELTING MAKES A GREAT RACLETTE SHINE

LAITERIE DE VERBIER
FROMAGES DE BAGNES 1

Watching raclette's journey from wheel to plate is a study in dramatic structure. First, the exposition: The characters and setting are established. Eddy Baillifard, a master Swiss racleur, positions a half-wheel of cheese beneath a smoldering toaster. Then, rising action: The exposed paste of the half-wheel begins to bubble. As it grows from a dispersed effervescence into popping vesicles, it begins to sizzle. "The song of the raclette," Baillifard says.

He points to the toasting surface. "When it starts to make those blisters, it starts to become caramelized—that's how you know it's ready." The climax: He swings the half-wheel out from beneath the heat, takes it in one hand, and perches above a plate as the top starts to ooze. And then, falling action: With the swoop of a knife, he pushes the gooey surface downward, and a thick wave of melted cheese shrugs itself gracefully onto the plate.

Baillifard lives and breathes melted cheese. When he's not manning raclette grills at food festivals around the world, you'll find him in his tiny Bruson, Switzerland–based restaurant, Raclett'House Chez Eddy, rocking a T-shirt that says "Elevé au fromage de Bagnes" (Raised on cheese of the Bagnes).

Here in the high-altitude Bagnes Valley, everyone grows up eating the local fromage. It's a semi-firm wheel, about a foot in diameter, aged two to three months.

RACLETTE WITH TRADITIONAL SWISS TOPPINGS: CORNICHONS, STEAMED POTATOES, PICKLED PEARL ONIONS

Made with raw, full-fat cow's milk, it's unctuous and creamy, with a golden-brown, slightly stinky rind. And it melts like a dream.

Nobody knows who threw the very first raclette party, but some claim it happened in this valley. At least, "if you ask some older people, they might tell you that," says Marc Dubosson, who makes fromage de Bagnes alongside his father, Roger, at the Laiterie de Verbier, a small dairy nearby. Dubosson recounts the local lore: "There's a legend," he says, of "a shepherd who left his cheese too close to a fire one night, and it melted."

Fable or not, historic research points to the Valais—a Swiss state sprinkled with valleys like the Bagnes, each with similar cheeses and locals with a penchant for melting—as the tradition's homeland. Here, the word raclette (based on the French racler, meaning "to scrape") was first used to describe both a type of cheese and a dish. In an early account, a sixteenth-century pharmacist in the capital city of Sion detailed his idea of a good time: "We melt in front of the fire cheeses that are fatty, sweet, and tender," he wrote. "And it is so good, that we cannot be satisfied."

The melting tradition stayed hidden in these valleys until the 1960s, when it started to catch on in nearby regions of France and Italy. Over the following decades, "raclette" cheeses popped up throughout Europe—but these were younger, ready-to-melt, pre-packaged wedges, bearing little resemblance to the Alpine wheels traditionally melted in the Valais.

French native and Leelanau Cheese co-founder Anne Hoyt didn't eat raclette growing up, but she remembers when versions of the cheese first hit French supermarket shelves in the 1980s. Today, the same styles are found across Europe. "They're very soft," she says. "You can't slice them or cube them—they're just made for melting."

Starting in the early 2000s, producers of Alpine wheels in the Valais, including makers of fromage de Bagnes, began working together to certify their cheeses with the Appellation d'Origine Protégée (AOP) label. It was finally entered into law in 2003, with the AOP grouping traditional cheeses used for raclette under a single name—Raclette du Valais in French, Walliser Raclette in the state's German-speaking towns—to help differentiate wheels made in true local tradition.

Anne Hoyt first tasted the real thing while living in Switzerland, where she and her husband, Detroit native John Hoyt, worked making wheels of raclette on a high mountain pasture during summertime. Wanting to open their own dairy, the couple decided to return to the United States, where no artisan raclette—at least in traditional Swiss style—was being made. "It was something unique," Anne remembers.

The duo founded Leelanau Cheese in Leelanau, MI, in 1995 (the company has since moved to Suttons Bay, MI). At first, it took considerable effort to explain the tradition to Americans, but increased accessibility to information and raclette-melting supplies has helped spread its popularity. All along the way, the Hoyts have remained as true to Swiss cheesemaking tradition as possible, evidenced by a legion of Swiss expats who have been loyal customers

for decades. In 2016, the duo received a further confirmation of their success: a prestigious Super Gold medal at the World Cheese Awards.

Creating meltable cheese is a challenge of balancing fat, protein, and moisture. When it gets hot enough, milkfat liquefies. That helps cheese soften—but as the protein strands forming its backbone start losing structure, the fat leaches out. To prevent that separation, the ratio of fat to protein needs to be just right. A good raclette also needs a high enough level of moisture to melt; in drier cheeses, protein molecules are bonded together more closely. But if it's too moist, it can't be matured for several months—and the aging process is necessary for proper development of aroma, as enzymes break down the curd into flavorful fragments that increase in complexity over time.

Flavor complexity is what sets a truly good raclette apart. Marc Dubosson, maker at the dairy in Verbier, believes it's all about the milk; The most important part of the Raclette du Valais AOP, he says, is that it requires raw milk from cows grazing on grass or dry hay. As a result, wheels reflect mountain pasture and the seasons. "The best raclette is from the months of May, June, July," he says, "when you have the best grass and the cows are outside."

While quality raclettes are complex enough to hold their own on a cheese plate, there's no denying that melting sparks a transformation. When subjected to heat, the volatile flavor compounds in cheese—the ones small and light enough to float in the air and eventually reach our noses—travel more easily. At the same time, a toaster's smolder causes browning reactions between sugars and amino acids on the cheese's surface, creating a range of other aromas. "Melting," Hoyt says, "is the beauty of it."

The result? An explosion of flavor: fruity and hoppy scents of green pasture, infinite layers of buttery, meaty aromas from diverse raw milk microflora, pungency of the rind, and the nutty, roasted notes of the singed surface. c

Tasting Notes:

Vieux Bagnes 1
Laiterie de Verbier
Verbier, Switzerland

The flexible-yet-dense texture of aged raclette reminds us of chocolate; its flavor yields notes of ham, pine resin, and mole sauce.

Raclette pur Brebis
La Fromathèque
Martigny-Croix, Switzerland

Thanks to a boost of fat, sheep's milk raclette separates quickly on the grill—but we love the way heat draws out its flavors of barnyard, grass, fresh cream, and Brazil nuts.

Reading
Spring Brook Farm
Reading, Vt.

Made at an award-winning Vermont creamery, nutty Reading has a light pink-orange rind, hints of flowers and grass, and a pleasing, long-lasting complexity.

Fromage à Rebibes
Alpage de Mille
Prarreyer, Switzerland

Made on the summer alpage, this one-year-aged raclette has a mottled natural rind and a firm, buttercup-yellow paste. Smelling of barn floor and hay, the cheese has a strong, piquant taste, with notes of yogurt and butter.

Snowmass
Haystack Mountain
Longmont, Colo.

This domestic raclette smells savory—think onions cooked in beef fat—with a whiff of rye bread and that signature washed-rind tang. Flavor begins with a pickle-like tartness that relaxes into a buttery finish with a hint of caraway.

Mild Raclette
Leelanau Cheese
Suttons Bay, Mich.

Firm and supple, with a pale yellow rind, Michigan's homegrown raclette has notes of grass and yogurt on the nose. Its low-key flavor builds slowly, starting with pure cream and evolving into waves of barnyard and roast pork.

Fromage de Bagnes 1
Laiterie de Verbier
Verbier, Switzerland

This Raclette du Valais AOP was named best raclette at the Swiss Cheese Awards in 2014, and we understand why: It's got a sweet, fruity complexity with notes of ham and béchamel. When heated, the pliable paste oozes like a dream.

Raclette Suisse
Emmi
Kaltbach, Switzerland

With aromas of dark chocolate and prosciutto, this addictive Swiss-made wheel yields savory notes of ham-and-pea soup, peanuts, and pork belly.

EMMENTALER AOP

TRADITIONAL SWISS

SWISS CHEESE PRODUCERS ARE TARGETING THE GLOBAL MARKET TO PRESERVE TRADITIONS AT HOME

It's not easy to grow crops in the mountains, and before scaling rocky peaks was considered recreation, there was little reason to meddle with the steep slopes. Around 6,000 years ago, however, climatic fluctuations in the Alps led to variable temperatures and high-altitude forests were unable to regenerate during colder winters. As a result, tree lines descended, transforming woods into summertime grasslands suitable for grazing. Locals found a way to adapt to the harsh environment: Families, each with a few cows, formed villages lower in the valleys and herded animals collectively at high altitudes in warm weather. Here, on alpage (mountain pastures), were huge quantities of milk to process. The best way to preserve milk for winter? Make cheese, of course.

And so it continues: On an alp near the village of Gruyère in the Fribourg region, Beat Piller and his parents awaken at dawn to transform milk into Gruyère d'Alpage and Vacherin Fribourgeois. Smoke from a wood-burning fire, which heats milk in copper vats, fills the room as Piller and his mother grab hold of either end of a cheesecloth and dip it into the vat. Using fine-tuned senses, they heat, measure, and distribute curds with machine-like precision.

In Switzerland, traditional cheesemaking serves many functions. Without the low-intensity, seasonal cow grazing that helps to regenerate and maintain them, these grasslands—hotspots of biodiversity—would begin to disappear. "Producing these cheeses helps us to maintain the environment," says Laure Rousseau-Favey, former marketing manager for the Gruyère AOP (Appellation d'Origine Protégée) organization. Not all Gruyères are made on alpage (or over wood-burning fires, for that matter); many are produced year-round in lower-altitude village dairies. These dairies are modernized, but they follow essentially the same recipe and are deeply reliant on the knowledge and experience of cheesemakers. Forty percent of the country's milk is made into artisanal cheese, and this cheese represents 70 percent of Switzerland's dairy exports—impacting employment in marginal areas. The dairies also give local farmers a reliable outlet for their milk and, Rousseau adds, "they give people a place to buy local products ... they keep communities alive."

Traditional cheesemakers have been able to stay afloat amid an encroaching transition to industrial dairying, albeit in diminishing numbers. The Swiss have long understood that the survival of small producers depends on teamwork. For the country's most famous cheeses, cooperatives and AOP groups facilitate supply chain organization and

enforce quality standards. Take L'Étivaz, Switzerland's oldest protected cheese. It may only be produced in summertime on the alp using wood fire-heated copper cauldrons, and all wheels must be aged and sold by the L'Étivaz Cooperative.

Other AOP cheeses like Emmentaler and Gruyère have slightly less centralized systems. Young wheels produced on alpages or in village dairies are typically sold to affineurs, who form long-lasting relationships with cheesemakers and often give them more money for wheels of particularly high quality. Aside from abundant space for cave aging and the capacity to work with retailers, affineurs have invaluable cheese maturation skills. Using ears, noses, and taste buds, they're able to determine when wheels are prime for sale, and which require further aging.

"It's a natural, living product," says Roland Sahli, managing director of Gourmino, an affineur that exports Emmentaler and other Swiss cheeses to the US. "Every day, something can happen new… it's not like a bakery, where you put bread in the oven and one hour later you know the result." Sahli and his team closely monitor wheels from the moment they arrive in his cave until they leave, sometimes years later.

Standing in an Emmi-owned cave in Moudon, Switzerland, surrounded by 160,000 wheels of Gruyère, affineur Jean-Marc Collomb echoes the sentiment: Each one needs care. "You know what the most difficult part of my job is?" he asks. "Each morning I have to come in here and say 'bonjour' to every wheel."

While cooperation and organization around cheesemaking originally helped mountain peoples adjust to a difficult landscape, today these distinctly Swiss qualities serve another important function. In a small, mountainous country where large-scale agriculture isn't feasible, gourmet products help Switzerland stay competitive in the global marketplace. Now, to ensure a future for time-honored cheesemaking at home, the country's producers are targeting consumers abroad.

In the US market, for example, this means reminding Americans about the difference between what they call "Swiss cheese" and real wheels and wedges from Switzerland. Swiss native Caroline Hostettler, owner of Florida-based importer Quality Cheese, remembers first bringing authentic cheeses to the US in the 1990s, to a market flooded with commodity block cheeses people think of as "Swiss."

"I had to explain to some very well-known chefs why my Gruyère cost three times as much as what they called Gruyère," she says. "What we brought in was on a whole other level."

Today, the learning curve isn't quite so steep, but Hostettler thinks the

Swiss still struggle with branding. From 1914 to 1999, the Swiss government strictly controlled its country's cheese production and distribution through a cartel called the Swiss Cheese Union. Under that system only Emmentaler, Gruyère, and Sbrinz could be produced, so cheesemakers had little need for marketing. When the Union dissolved due to corruption charges, makers of those cheeses had to compete for the first time in an open marketplace, find niches, and rebuild their reputations.

So far, the strategy of Swiss producers in the international market has been honesty: emphasizing the unique mountain pasture, expertise of producers, stringent environmental regulations, and GMO-free feed. But as competition grows, so does the need for innovative marketing. The Swiss seem to understand the value of their products, but they don't like to talk about it. "I think we are too humble, almost," says Hostettler says.

So, in the country's folklore, cheese is the ultimate metaphor: abundant yet precious and as valuable as gold but meant to be shared; a symbol of wealth and bounty but also a reminder of the importance of modesty. Is it the job of the humble producer to brag about his finely calibrated skills and senses, about his small dairy perched in a dreamlike mountain landscape? Or can the cheeses—massive in size and boasting rich, lingering flavors, punctuated by wild flowers, herbs, and smoky fires—speak for themselves? c

Tasting Notes:

L'Étivaz AOP
Vaud, Switzerland

It's often compared to Gruyère, but limiting the production of this cheese to the wood fires and copper cauldrons of the summer alpage guarantees that the milk's fruity, grassy aromas reflect the specific pasture where cows grazed.

Sbrinz AOP
Central Switzerland

Parmigiano-Reggiano gets all the hype, but this extra-aged hard cheese earns top marks with connoisseurs. Unlike the Italian variety, Swiss Sbrinz is full-fat. By the time it reaches peak maturity at 24 months it boasts layers of crystalline crunch dispersed in a paste that crumbles and grates while retaining a surprising amount of fudgy creaminess.

Appenzeller
Appenzell, Switzerland

A rich, complex classic dotted with small holes and famous for robust flowery aromas. Lacking an AOP, producers keep the recipe secret; it's said that only two people know what's in the herbal brine rubbed on the outside of wheels during aging.

Emmentaler AOP
Emmental, Switzerland

Imitated endlessly but never quite replicated, these massive 200-pound wheels have many factors to thank for their perfect holes. Namely: artisan producers, affineurs who move wheels strategically between humid and dry caves, and hard-working *Propionibacterium*. A lack of saltiness or sharpness means that hazelnutty, sweet flavors—which deepen with age and linger on the palate—shine through.

Raclette du Valais / Walliser Raclette AOP
Valais, Switzerland

When fresh, this washed-rind cheese has a buttery taste and mild acidic tang. Melting it fireside releases the cheese's intense fruity aromas, with notes of bouillon and raspberries—it's best enjoyed atop boiled potatoes and cornichons.

Vacherin Fribourgeois AOP
Fribourg, Switzerland

Perhaps the creamiest of all classic Swiss Alpine cheeses, its fondant-like texture makes it essential for fondue. The flavor is rounded and nutty, and grows earthier with age.

Tête de Moine AOP
Bern, Switzerland

To savor this cheese—thought to look like the head of a Bellelay Abbey monk—shave off ribbons using a special cutter known as a girolle. Not only does this expose the monk's bald spot, it releases the spicy and fruity flavors within.

Vacherin Mont d'Or AOP
Jura, Switzerland

Conventionally produced in the winter when cow's milk has a high fat content, this beauty is encircled in spruce bark and aged until custard-like with earthy, mushroomy aromas that mingle with hints of meat and smoke. Serve at room temperature or gently baked to slather on bread or potatoes.

Gruyère AOP
Fribourg, Switzerland

Dense and creamy, these sweet and salty wheels grow more robust with age—nutty flavors deepen as crystalline granules form. Wheels develop distinct personalities and aromas that range from chocolate to mushrooms to caramel to buttered toast.