The History of Cheese in Switzerland
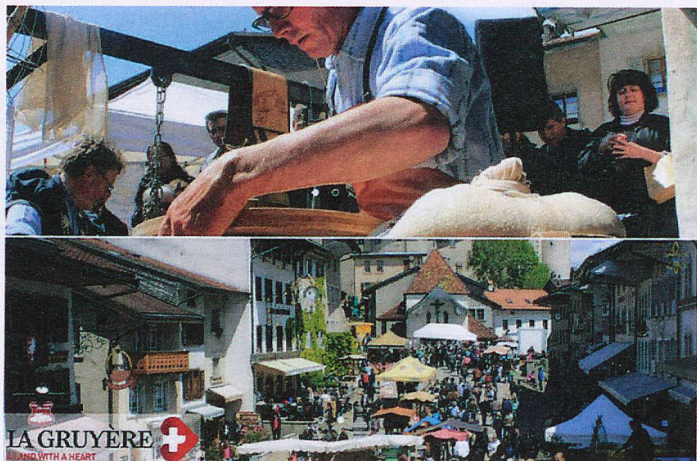
LA GRUYÈRE

Gruyères Cheese Festival

Every year in May, the Development Society of Gruyères-Moléson hosts a Cheese Festival in the heart of the medieval town of Gruyères, Switzerland. There are demonstrations of the traditional preparation of cheese and cheese tasting in the town centre. There is also country music, Alpine horns and flag throwers who create a festive, traditional atmosphere.

When you ask a foreigner what first comes to mind about Switzerland, they will undoubtedly say "its cheese!". Cheese is indeed an essential part of Swiss culture: there are now many varieties of cheeses and Switzerland produces some of the best cheeses in the world. However, the history of cheese and its significance in Switzerland remains somewhat unclear.

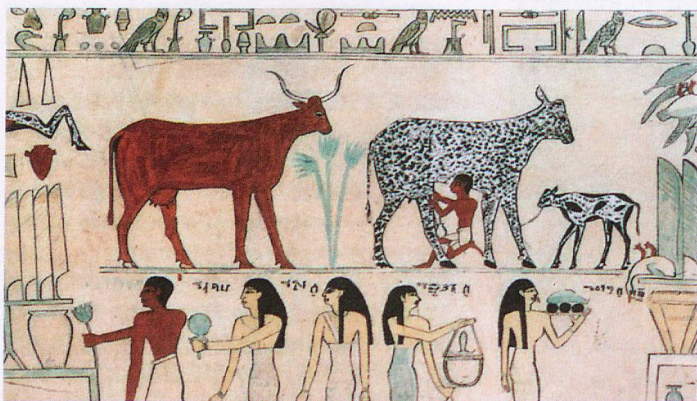### Origins of Cheese

No-one knows exactly when or where cheese was invented: although it can be said for certain that it was not in Switzerland. The origin of cheese predates our recorded history and there is no conclusive evidence indicating where cheesemaking originated: either in Europe, Central Asia or the Middle East, but the practice had spread within Europe prior to Roman times and, according to Pliny the Elder, had become a sophisticated enterprise by the time the Roman Empire came into being.

Cheesemaking

The earliest evidence of cheesemaking in the archaeological record dates to 5,500 BCE, in what is now Kujawy, Poland, where strainers with milk fats molecules have been found. Earliest proposed dates for the origin of cheesemaking range from around 8,000 BCE, when sheep were first domesticated. Since animal skins and inflated internal organs have, since ancient times, provided storage vessels for a range of foodstuffs, it is probable that the process of cheese making was discovered accidentally by storing milk in a container made from the stomach of an animal, resulting in the milk being turned to curd and whey by the rennet from the stomach. One story has it that a merchant travelling through the desert 5,000 years ago made the discovery by accident when the milk he was transporting in a bag made of a sheep's stomach reacted with the natural rennet in the stomach lining and was churned into cheese by constant jogging.

Cheesemaking may have begun by the pressing and salting of curdled milk to preserve it. Observation that the effect of making cheese in an animal stomach gave more solid and better-textured curds may have led to the deliberate addition of rennet. Shards of pottery pierced with holes found in pile-dwellings are hypothesized to be cheese-strainers: they are of the Urnfield culture on Lake Neuchatel and date back to 6,000 BCE. Other archaeological evidence of Egyptian cheese has been found in Egyptian tomb murals, dating to about 2,000 BCE. The earliest cheeses were likely to have been quite sour and salty, similar in texture to rustic cottage cheese or feta, a crumbly, flavourful Greek cheese. Cheese produced in Europe, where climates are cooler than the Middle East, required less salt for preservation. With less salt and acidity, the cheese became a suitable environment for useful microbes and moulds, giving aged cheeses their respective flavours. The earliest ever discovered preserved cheese was found in the Taklamakan Desert in Xinjiang, China, and it dates back as early as 1615 BCE.

Ancient Greece and Rome

By Roman times, cheese was an everyday food and cheesemaking a mature art. Columella's De Re Rustica (circa 65 CE) details a cheesemaking process involving rennet coagulation, pressing of the curd, salting, and ageing. Pliny's Natural History (77 CE) devotes a chapter (XI, 97) to describing the diversity of cheeses enjoyed by Romans of the early Empire. He stated that the best cheeses came from the villages near Nîmes, but did not keep long and had to be eaten fresh. Cheeses of the Alps and Apennines were as remarkable for their variety then as now. A Ligurian cheese was noted for being made mostly from sheep's milk, and some cheeses produced nearby were stated to weigh as much as a thousand pounds each. Goats' milk cheese was a recent taste in Rome, improved over the "medicinal taste" of Gaul's similar cheeses by smoking. Of cheeses from overseas, Pliny preferred those of Bithynia in Asia Minor.

Origin of Cheese in Switzerland

Swiss cheese was mentioned by the first century Roman historian Pliny the Elder, who called it Caseus Helveticus – the "cheese of the Helvetians", one of the tribes living in Switzerland at the time.

For centuries, the standard type was cottage cheese, made by souring milk, and which did not keep. The technique of using rennet – a substance taken from the stomach lining of calves – to make hard cheese first appeared in Switzerland around the 15th century. Since such cheese could be stored for lengthy periods it is not surprising that it soon became part of the basic fare of travellers.

The monks who looked after the hospices at the top of some of the major passes, snowed in for part of the year, kept large stocks of it for their guests. They needed to be large: one guest who passed through the hostel on the Great St Bernard pass was Napoleon, who – with the help of his 40,000 troops – got through a tonne and a half of the monks' cheese in May 1800. (The monks had to wait 50 years before they saw any money at all for it, and it was only in 1984 that the then French President, François Mitterrand, made a token payment of the rest.)

Post-Roman Europe

As Romanised populations encountered unfamiliar newly settled neighbours, bringing their own cheesemaking traditions, their own flocks and their own unrelated words for cheese, cheeses in Europe diversified further, with various locales developing their own distinctive traditions and products. As long-distance trade collapsed, only travellers would encounter unfamiliar cheeses: Charlemagne's first encounter with a white cheese that had an edible rind forms one of the constructed anecdotes of Notker's Life of the Emperor.

France and Italy have perhaps 400 varieties of cheese each. A French proverb holds there is a different French cheese for every day of the year, and Charles de Gaulle once asked, "how can you govern a country in which there are 246 kinds of cheese?" Still, the advancement of the cheese art in Europe was slow during the centuries after Rome's fall. Many cheeses today were first recorded in the late Middle Ages or after—cheeses like Cheddar around 1500, Parmesan in 1597, Gouda in 1697, and Camembert in 1791.

Modern Era Switzerland

Once it could be stored, Swiss cheese soon became a valuable trading commodity. By the 18th century it was being sold all over Europe – even to the detriment of the local market, if a 1793 travel guide is to be believed:

"It is rather strange that cheese and butter should be so bad in inns throughout Switzerland. Even in the regions which produce a lot of milk, it is hard to get good cream for your coffee or fresh butter, because the locals find it more profitable to make cheese out of their milk."

The first factory for the industrial production of cheese opened in Switzerland in 1815, but large-scale production first found real success in the United States. Credit usually goes to Jesse Williams, a dairy farmer from Rome, New York, who in 1851 started making cheese in an assembly-line fashion using the milk from neighbouring farms. Within decades, hundreds of such dairy associations existed. Switzerland soon exported not only cheese but cheesemakers too. Many of the thousands of Swiss emigrants who settled in the U.S. in the 19th century were dairymen, some of whose descendants are still making cheese there today. Others were invited to Russia and eastern Europe to help set up a dairy industry. Some of them remained in those countries, but many eventually came back to Switzerland. It was Swiss cheesemakers who developed Tilsiter cheese, named after the town of Tilsit, which was then in East Prussia, and is now the Russian town of Sovetsk. They

brought their new product back with them when they returned home. Even today, the Swiss government provides advice and practical help in cheesemaking as part of its aid to developing countries.

The 1860s saw the beginnings of mass-produced rennet, and by the turn of the century scientists were producing pure microbial cultures. Before then, bacteria in cheesemaking had come from the environment or from recycling an earlier batch's whey; the pure cultures meant a more standardized cheese could be produced. Factory-made cheese overtook traditional cheesemaking in the World War II era, and factories have been the source of most cheese in America and Europe ever since.

Swiss Cheese Facts

Swiss people ate more cheese in 2015 than the year before, munching their way through a whopping 21.49 kilos per person, 260 grams more than in 2014. However, Iceland, Finland, Germany, New Zealand and Estonia all ate more cheese than the Swiss. The EU average was 17.2 kilos per head. Today, nearly 70% of the cheese consumed in Switzerland is Swiss-made, including famous cheese names Le Gruyère, Emmental and Raclette. Exports for Emmentaler cheese alone was 25,256 tonnes in 2011.

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