

# Inside the Swiss Cheese Awards

The Swiss consume more than 21 kg of cheese per capita annually By Lilian Schaer

CHEESE IS SERIOUS BUSINESS in Switzerland. With or without holes, it's one of the national symbols of the country and a product people around the world associate with the small, landlocked alpine nation at the heart of Europe.

I've always known about the Swiss love affair with cheese – as a first generation Canadian born there but having lived in Ontario since the age of three, I grew up with it as a staple in our house.

Swiss people consume an average of 21.3 kg of cheese per year, according to statistics from Swiss Cheese Marketing, a figure that's been relatively steady in recent years. That's compared to 13.79 kg per person per year in Canada.

And that's not surprising given the vast array of delicious selection to choose from. A grocery store's cheese section spans depth and variety we can only dream of here at home, ranging from popular varieties like Emmental, Gruyère, Raclette and Appenzeller to lesser known cheeses like Sbrinz, Mutschli, Hobelkaese and Tomme, as well as a wide array of local varieties made by artisan cheesemakers

in small quantities on hillside cheese dairies or in alpine villages.

Every two years, Switzerland's cheese world comes together through the Swiss Cheese Awards to select and honour the best it has to offer. The event is held in a different part of the country each time; this year, the central Swiss city of Lucerne was host of the 11th edition of the awards.

And I had the chance to be part of it all as a cheese judge.

Yes, this is a thing.

I was in Switzerland for a press tour around food security and sustainability hosted by the Swiss Agricultural Journalists' guild, and the guild was allowed to send some of its press tour participants to be part of the jury team. The opportunity for a behind-the-scenes, up-close-and-personal experience with Swiss cheese was one I wasn't going to miss.

Approximately 160 judges from 16 countries representing dairy, cheese, food service, consumers and media were divided into small teams and assigned to judge one of the 28 different cheese categories. A record 965 cheeses from 330 mak-



Twenty-eight cheeses were entered into the "Other hard cheeses and extra hard cheeses" category, which took over four hours to judge.



Once the judges reached consensus, results were manually tabulated and recorded onto judging sheets.

## INTERNATIONAL



The average Swiss consumes about 21 kg of cheese per year, not surprising giving the wide array of choice, as seen in this Swiss grocery store.



Markus Habisch of Austria and Lilian Schaeer of Canada were two agricultural media representatives on the Swiss Cheese Awards judging panel this year.



The 11th Swiss Cheese Awards featured 965 entries from 330 cheesemakers in 28 categories.

ers were entered into this year's competition.

I was teamed up with a head judge from Belgium, and three judges from Switzerland: one from the German speaking region and two from the French speaking area in the west of the country.

I somewhat naively assumed English would be our working language, since it usually is in mixed cultural groups in Europe. However, since our head judge spoke only French, that's what we ended up using – leaving my German speaking colleague scrambling to dig up his school French and sending me to my translation app a few times when I got stuck on cheese-specific French vocabulary I don't normally use when speaking the language.

Before arriving at the venue, all judges had received a detailed print and video package about the judging process and scoring the different criteria, which included appearance, taste, aroma, and texture/consistency.

All of my fellow judges came from the dairy/cheese industry and for some, this wasn't their first kick at cheese judging can, so a short crash course was in order for me, as a media rep, to keep up with my colleagues.

In true reporter fashion, I started asking questions of the head judge, a cheese industry expert with many years' experience, and he was more than happy to share some of that expertise with me.

Cheese that has holes when it shouldn't is not good, I learned, as are dents in the rind, flavour that's too salty and cracks inside the body of the cheese.

Each of us tasted all 28 of the cheeses in our assigned category – "other hard cheeses and extra hard cheeses" – cleansing our palates with freshly baked bread and mineral

water as we went along.

Yes, this was a sweet gig.

When we were finished, we had to reconvene and review all of the scores we had assigned (five being the best, one the worst) and if any one of us deviated from the others' scores by more than one point, we all had to go back and re-taste and re-examine the cheese in question in order to reach scoring consensus.

This was followed by manually tallying and recording our results on score sheets that were then submitted to the contest committee. Since our category was rather large, and as it turned out was only one of three in the "other hard cheeses and extra hard cheeses" category, a second round of judging was necessary.

Luckily, I wasn't selected to be part of that – I'd had my fill of cheese over the four hours of judging. Or so I thought.

As we finished, we learned we were now free to check out the other categories in the competition and sample as we liked. Even though I had thought I was cheesed out, I couldn't resist – and went on to taste a wide assortment of Sbrinz, Gruyère, Emmental and other fabulous cheeses.

A winner was selected in each category later that day and the following day, a grand champion cheese was chosen from amongst all entries: a special Gruyère made in an alpine region in the west of Switzerland by Maurice and Germain Treboux of the cheese dairy Alpage La Bassine from the milk of cows that were pastured on the mountainsides in the summer months.

Special thanks to Markus Rediger of the Landwirtschaftlicher Informationsdienst (Agricultural Information Service) in Bern for the invitation to participate in the Swiss Cheese Awards. 🇨🇭