



Manger suisse : Qui décide ?

A review by Marion Reichenbach

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Publisher: PPUR Presses Polytechniques

Published year: 2018

Language: French

ISBN: 2889152510

Length: 168 pages

Have you ever tasted a piece of delicious Gruyere produced in Switzerland? Or bought Swiss Müesli labelled with a small Swiss flag for your breakfast? Even if not, you may wonder: what makes a product, be it Swiss, German or Chinese, a product of its country? Made in Switzerland sounds obvious but let's start with the example of a cheese: is a Swiss cheese Swiss because its main ingredient, milk, come from Swiss cows fed on the Swiss Alps? What if, to improve its range of products, a cheesemaker adds figs, which can only be cultivated in warmer climates such as in Turkey, to its goat cheese: does it make the cheese less Swiss, or even not Swiss at all? Or what if, for economic reasons, the same cheesemaker imports milk from a neighbouring EU country to produce its cheeses? Surely the expertise accumulated by generations of Swiss cheesemakers contributes as much to the Swissness of the cheese as the origin of the ingredients. Chocolatiers would say know how is even more important than the origin of the ingredients, because carefully crafted exquisite Swiss chocolate bars are famous worldwide although not a gram of cacao is grown in Switzerland. And why would you even market a country as a brand? German food retailers indicate the provenance of products but do not brand them with a little flag. When you buy a mango, you buy the one you come across, regardless of whether it is Peruvian or Indian, and no flag is adorned on it.

All these questions became a hot topic in Swiss politics and public opinion during the last 10 years, cumulating in a Swissness legislation which came into force on the 1st January 2017. "Manger Suisse: Qui Décide? / The Taste of Switzerland: Who Decides?" published by EPFL Press in 2018, is a short book which retraces the political saga from the origin of the debate on Swiss eating to the enactment of the Swissness legislation. More than a mere political saga, the journey

to the Swissness legislation's enactment was for the usually mild-temperate, slow paced Swiss politics a genuine thriller full of intense debates, unprecedented lobbying and unexpected alliances between political parties and across the food value chain. The book notably explains how the Helvetic Confederation came to legislate on what is Swissness, how to quantify it, why to use it as a brand, which groups of interests were involved in shaping it with which objectives, what were the economic implications at stake, and what outcomes the Swissness legislation has on the fridge content of everyday Swiss citizen-consumers—the stakeholders who had launched the debate.

The book's introduction begins with one observation: Made in Switzerland was already established as an informal brand, mainly for manufactured goods, long before the Swissness legislation. The Swiss Made argument sold well as a guarantee of quality and precision but also nature and simplicity, as for Swiss watches or cosmetics. While the Swiss Made argument for manufactured goods was mainly used to increase their attractiveness in foreign markets, its economic justification weakened within Switzerland. After a famous case of Swiss pots produced in China, Swiss citizens raised the issue of Swiss Made as a question of identity and culture, but also, in the context of globalization and increased concern over the environment, as a guaranteed promise—in its strictest sense—of local production. Thus, Swiss citizens raised the debate with the will to keep control over what and how they consumed, following which the Helvetic Confederation stepped in to legislate on the matter.

The book's first chapter traces the history of indication of origin: towards the end of the 20th century, indication of origin emerged as a means of public protection for both producers and consumers. The year 1992 saw the liberalisation of ag-



riculture in Switzerland; a sharp political reorientation. Swiss wines were the first to be adorned with an indication of origin to support winemakers through the market transition. Wine is an agricultural product whose quality directly relates to the soil in which the grapevines are grown. To guarantee the wine's origin was also to guarantee its quality as a selling feature for the producer and as a reason to buy for the consumer. Later, indication of origin as a quality guarantee began to be used for traditional regional products. Slowly, its use increased at higher levels of the food value chain: as food retailers came to understand the economic added value of the indication of origin, labels indicating the origin of production appeared on the shelves, although they were only one marketing tool amongst others to differentiate a product. In parallel, abuses in the use of indication of origin, notably in the use of the Swiss flag, increased. However, the then-current legislation was weak and allowed no legal recourse. Acting on behalf of Swiss citizens tired of the abuses, the Helvetic Confederation initiated the process to enact a new legislation.

The second chapter presents the different actors in the Swiss food value chain. Though some were less exposed to the public eye than others, all the actors had an interest in shaping the new legislation on indication of origin. First the producers: to guarantee the quality of their products and thus to increase their attractiveness above that of imported goods, the producers aimed for a strict legislation. Second in the food value chain, the food processors aimed for a new legislation that would leave them flexible enough to remain cost efficient. Third, the food retailers aimed for a legislation from which they could benefit from the added value of indication of origin but also be able to accommodate consumers by emphasizing other selling features like cheapness or organic production. At the end of the food value chain, consumers wanted a legislation strong enough to guarantee the inherent promises of the indication of origin label.

The third chapter comes to the heart of the subject and explicitly narrates the political process behind the new legislation: the considerable legal uncertainty on the use of Switzerland as an indication of origin and notably the use of the Swiss flag as a brand, the scandals which launched the public debate, and the different power plays which ensued. Very soon, consumers and their representatives lost foot in the discussion and played only a minor role in shaping the new legislation. The first drafts tended to a quantification of the product's Swissness based on cost price and degree of transformation, a deal largely favourable to the food processors who were well prepared to defend their interests. However, the solution achieved no consensus and as the discussions continued a shift occurred: producers found their voice and advocated for a quantification based on the origin of the ingredients and the location of the main transformation

process. To everyone's surprise, the producers received the support of one food retailer giant against the promise of flexibility and allowance of exceptions. One by one, other giants in the food value chain rallied behind the proposition once an exception deal specific to products with strong economic stakes was secured. The Swissness legislation was approved and enacted by the Helvetic Confederation on the 1st January 2017.

Stating that the objectives of the Swissness legislation were achieved, the book's authors go on to explain the newly-defined concept of Swiss eating with concrete examples. With the Swissness legislation, the brand Swiss Made is now defined and thus better protected. The inherent promise of the indication of origin, labelled with the Swiss flag, is precisely quantified by two conditions: firstly, for any Swiss product, 80 percent of the weight of the raw ingredients must come from Switzerland, according to the availability of the ingredients in Switzerland; and secondly, the main transformation process must happen in Switzerland. Major exceptions include coffee and chocolate which can still be considered Swiss Made if the whole transformation process is done in Switzerland even though none of the ingredients come from Switzerland. With this exception, the Helvetic Confederation recognizes the importance of know-how and the economic stakes of the Swiss Made argument for these two products. The case of water is also very specific: when used to dilute a juice for example, its origin is not important. But if the water is a main ingredient of the drink like in the case of beer, then it does. As a result, a Swiss beer can be Swiss even if its only ingredient coming from Switzerland is water.

The authors conclude by positioning the enactment of the Swissness legislation in a broader citizen-consumer perspective and the myths associated to it. In a world more and more globalized but also in the context of a stronger rural-urban dichotomy, Swiss citizens sought to regain power to define and decide what they were eating: they are dubbed citizen-consumers because, by their decision to buy or not to buy a certain product, they favour specific production features. They nowadays think of how they consume, not only what they consume. With the indication of origin, they sought to reconnect their consumption to local markets and support "their" agriculture. Even though Switzerland has perhaps one of the world's most direct democracies, there was still a whole world of difference between the initial will of the consumers and the final legislation, which brings to question the real bargaining power of the consumers... and their own illusions. After all, direct marketing—the most direct way to consume locally and connect with local producers—still represents only 5 percent of the Swiss market, ensuring that the use of a Swiss Made label is mostly advantage to intermediate actors of the food value chain.



"Manger Suisse – Qui Décide? / The Taste of Switzerland – Who Decides?" benefits from the inherent qualities of the collection *Savoir Suisse* (Swiss Knowledge) edited by EPFL Press, a collection designed precisely to highlight research work to the wider public: simple, didactic, well-written, and in French. Due to the linguistic specificity of Switzerland, little research work relevant to the French-speaking Swiss public is available. Thus, to publish in French helps the popularisation of science in Switzerland but also creates a clear limitation, because the quality of the *Savoir Suisse* collection would justify a larger distribution. Moreover, the collection's authors are often either directly involved in the said research or direct actors in the matter under discussion, which enhances the content of the books, making the work feel close. Furthermore, each book in the collection focuses on a very specific topic in Swiss society rather than exposing larger, more general topics. Regarding the content in itself, its Swissness is significant. However, the uniqueness of the case deserves interest and raises larger questions related to food, agriculture and society in other countries.

Information about the author:

Marion Reichenbach is a Swiss PhD Student at the Faculty of Organic Agricultural Sciences, University of Kassel. Her work focuses on the effects of urbanization on dairy production, chiefly in terms of feed efficiency, in the emerging megacity of Bangalore, India.