



# Cheese, please!

**Not all cheese with holes is Swiss cheese, and not all Swiss cheese has holes. Confused? Wibke Carter travels to the Emmental for *Discover Germany* to find out more about Switzerland's most famous cheese (and the secret behind its appearance).**

TEXT & PHOTOS: WIBKE CARTER

When people talk about Swiss cheese, they usually mean Emmentaler, a mild, medium-hard, slightly nutty-tasting cheese which has distinctive holes in it. In search of what is sometimes nicknamed 'rat cheese', because it is the type of temptation always depicted in cartoons featuring small rodents, I travelled to the Emmental, or 'Ämmitau' as the locals call it.

Abroad, Emmental cheese is often simply called Swiss Cheese, and takes its name from the valley ('Tal') of the river Emme, northeast of Bern, an appealing hilly landscape with bell-hung cows and inhabitants who are dedicated to preserving their customs and traditions. The region is charac-

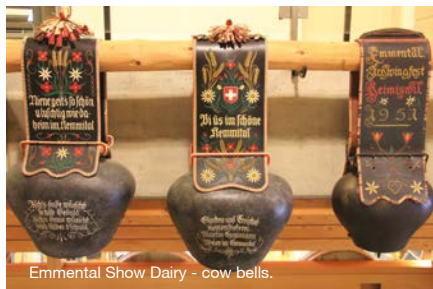
terised by picturesque villages and magnificent farmsteads, the huge roofs reaching down to the first floor at the sides, with the majestic timber arch at the gable ends and geranium-filled window boxes everywhere.

I dropped into the Emmentaler Schaukäserei (Show Dairy), where both traditional and modern production techniques were on display. In an old side building, the ancient production of the famous cheese, which can be traced back to the 13th century, was showcased. Over the fire, hangs a big cauldron filled with cheese and the purposefully low-built ceiling kept the warmth inside during the cold winter months.

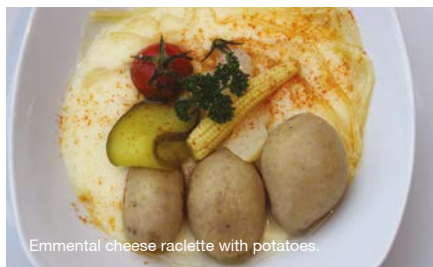
While modern techniques have caught up with Emmental cheese making, just like in the old days, the dairy product itself is still made from fresh, untreated milk from cows fed on grass in summer and hay in winter only. The use of any additives is prohibited, as is the use of genetically modified ingredients. Every morning between 6am and 8am, local farmers deliver their milk, which cannot be brought from further afar than 13 miles, as per strict regulations, to the Emmental dairies. The milk needs to be processed within 24 hours and it takes about 12 litres of milk to make one kilogramme of cheese.

"How much do you think an Emmentaler weighs?" asked guide Aika Aebi on her tour through the modern part of the Show Dairy. "Seven kilos," someone said. Aebi shook her head and moved her thumb up. "Twelve kilos," I countered. She answered in the negative again and started laughing. "Just look at yourselves." Now every-





Emmentaler Show Dairy - cow bells.



Emmentaler cheese raclette with potatoes.



Emmentaler landscape. Photo: © Switzerland Tourism

one was grinning but nobody wanted to confess their weight. "Each cheese weighs between 75 and 100 kilogrammes," revealed Aebi. No wonder, then, with this size, tradition and outstanding quality, Emmentaler cheese is known as the 'King of Swiss Cheese' throughout the world.

And what about those holes? "They appear during the fermentation process, and vary in size from that of a cherry to that of a walnut," Aebi explained. "A skilled cheesemaker can tell from knocking on the cheese wheels how many holes are inside and what maturation stage the cheese is at." A young Emmentaler AOP, aged for at least four months, tastes mild with hints of hazelnut. When fully aged after 12

months or more, it is strong to full-flavoured. Of highest quality is the Emmentaler Switzerland Premier Cru aged for 14 months in humid caves. It was the first cheese from Switzerland to win the title World Champion at the Wisconsin Cheese World Championships, among over 1,700 competitors.

Once, there were around 500 dairies in the Emmentaler, but today, only around 130 are left. Only authentic cheese from the valley has the Emmentaler AOP mark as well as the reference number of the cheese dairy stamped on the side of the wheel.

One of the many skilled Emmentaler cheesemakers is Hans Remund, who offers class-

es in the Käserei 1950. Over the span of an hour, I learned the differences between soft cheese and hard cheese, how Emmentaler has developed over the past 300 years and that recently, a cheesemaker from the Philippines settled in the valley. While we talked all things cheese, Remund showed me how to stir the milk with a ladle, then use a 'cheese harp' when it gets thicker, and at the end, pour the semi-liquid milk/cheese into a heart-shaped form. What is the secret to a good cheese, I asked him. "I don't actually have one, but I believe that making cheese is a bit like playing the piano. It comes out a bit different every time."

[www.emmentaler.ch](http://www.emmentaler.ch)

[www.emmentaler-schaukaeserei.ch/en](http://www.emmentaler-schaukaeserei.ch/en)



Emmentaler Show Dairy - cheese for sale.



Cheese making - Hans Remund explains the use of a cheese harp.