

Urs Leuenberger is the master cheesemaker who supplied the winning Le Gruyère AOP to affineur Gourmino

From the mountain to the top of the world



The story behind the biggest winner at last year's World Cheese Awards is an intriguing blend of collaboration, artisanal expertise, and a network of caves. PATRICK McGUIGAN ventures into the tunnels at Swiss affineur Gourmino to find out more about how it created the World Champion Le Gruyère AOP Surchoix

THERE'S A STEEL door at the bottom of the Blüemlisalp mountain range in Switzerland's Bernese Oberland that opens into a long dark tunnel. Follow the stone passageway deep into the mountainside and it brings you to a series of secret caves, patrolled by men in white coats intent on world domination.

It might sound like we've stumbled across the secret lair of a James Bond villain, but thankfully this underground base is used for a more wholesome pursuit. The cool, humid caves are filled with thousands of cheeses, from 40kg discs of Gruyère to giant wheels of Emmenthal weighing more than 100kg. These are lovingly tended by highly skilled affineurs (maturers), whose mission it is to nurture the cheeses to perfection before sending them out to cheesemongers around the planet.

Welcome to the home of Gourmino, a Swiss cheese cooperative that last year succeeded in its mission to make world-beating cheese when one of its wheels of Gruyère was voted World Champion at the World Cheese Awards in Wales, beating

4,433 other cheeses in the process.

The wheel in question was made by a small mountain dairy called Vorderfultigen, located near a village of the same name in the hilly Gantersch region of Bern, which has been making cheese since 1883.

The current owner is Urs Leuenberger – a master cheesemaker who worked for many years producing Emmenthal and also at an industrial milk processing company, before



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returning to his artisan cheesemaking in the mountains. He makes just six or seven wheels of cheese a day, using raw milk from six farms within a 1km radius. They are so close he can see their cows grazing the rugged pastures from his dairy windows.

Once Leuenberger has made his cheeses, they are sent on to Gourmino's caves to be matured. The MD of this remarkable underground operation is Roland Sahli, who explains that he was relaxing with friends in Switzerland when a call came through from Wales, where the World Cheese Awards was being held. The news was that one of his wheels was on the brink of something special.

"It was a day off and I was playing cards with friends when Denis Kaser (international marketing manager of Le Gruyère AOP) called me from Wales to tell me perhaps there was a chance that we might win because our cheese was in the final," he recalls. "I was a bit surprised for sure when we won," he adds with supreme Swiss understatement.

Part of his surprise was that another

Gruyère from Gourmino, made by a different producer, had won the World Championship Cheese Contest in the US earlier in the year. "To win both awards in the same year was absolutely exceptional," he says. "Like the grand slam in tennis."

Both the caves and the skill of Gourmino's expert affineurs are integral to the company's success. Previously four separate bunkers, built after the Second World War to store munitions, they were acquired by Gourmino in 2015 and joined up in a remarkable feat of engineering that involved drilling tunnels out of the rock between the different spaces.

"In the cellar we are 200 metres into the mountain and 250 metres below the pastures above," he explains. "So, the mountain offers us the perfect climate conditions. All year round, the temperature is around 8°C, but due to the heat produced by the ripening process of the cheeses it is around 11-13°C."

"We also have temperature and humidity controls so we can mature the cheeses in four dimensions – we can heat, we can cool, we can dry and we can add humidity – but it's the natural conditions that are most important. We don't need to use the controls so much, so we use a lot less energy."

The four rooms are kept at different temperatures and humidities for different cheeses, including Gruyère, Raclette and Emmenthal, with space for around 60,000 wheels.

To give a sense of their size and scope, Gourmino employees walk, on average, six miles a day between the four rooms, traversing tunnels lined with spruce boards made from trees in the valley, which once dried will be used as shelving for the cheeses. It takes three days for water to seep down into the caves from the pastures above after it has rained.

Urs Leuenberger's champion Gruyère was aged for over a year making it a "surchoix" cheese, meaning "high quality and long aged". His cheeses have always been well suited for longer ageing, says Sahli, due to the excellent pre-Alpine pastures that the cows graze on near his dairy. Their milk creates cheeses with a lithe texture and elegant flavour that improve with time.

"For years, the characteristic of his



(from top) Vorderfulligen dairy where the cheese was made, the doorway to Gourmino's network of cheese maturing caves, and an affineur getting to grips with one of 60,000 cheeses held on the premises

cheeses has always been a fine, supple texture, which melts on the tongue with age. The flavour profile ranges from fruity at mild maturity to slightly salty at around 15 months of age. But the cheese is always harmoniously balanced."

While caves are important, picking the right cheese in the first place is essential, adds Sahli, something that is much easier to do as a cooperative. Gourmino is owned by a group of small mountain dairies, whose cheeses are matured in the caves, so there is naturally a good relationship between the makers and the maturers.

"To realise the perfect affinage, the most important step is the selection of the cheese because not every cheese, even from Vorderfulligen, has the right quality level to mature for 15 months," says Sahli. "The master cheesemaker has to pick the right cheeses for us. What is helpful is that we are working in a cooperative model. The cheesemakers are the owners of the company, so we are practising a philosophy of open books. The cheesemaker provides us with his books and his parameters during the production process. It's a philosophy of collaboration and openness. We're all on the same team."

A year on from winning the World Cheese Awards, Gourmino's phone is still ringing with new business blossoming in the UK, Ireland and Norway. But rather than signing deals with big supermarket chains, the company is more focused on growing exports in partnership with small, independent retailers.

"They can offer the whole story of the cheese because we are not only selling Gruyère from Switzerland, we are selling Gruyère from Switzerland produced by individual cheesemakers, like Leuenberger," he explains. "We can supply cheese with a story that small retailers can tell. That's important because they need a higher margin, so they must be able to differentiate themselves from the big retailers."

It turns out world cheese domination is deceptively simple. Take master cheesemakers working with high quality milk, add a little maturation magic in the mountains and then send those cheeses to retailers who can tell the story. From Switzerland with love.

gourmino.ch/en

WHAT MAKES A WINNER

The World Cheese Awards winning Gruyère from Vorderfulligen was made in the summer of 2021 and aged for around 15 months in Gourmino's caves.

The cheese was championed by Swiss judge Christian Zuercher at the final in Newport, Wales, in

November 2022. He praised it for being "smooth in your mouth and melting on your tongue. You have a lot of flavour in it, from herbs to fruity, roasted, with a real leather note".



The cheese garnered a total of 103 points from the 16 judges in the final with a Gorgonzola Dolce from De'Magi taking second place with 98 points. It was the fifth time

that a Le Gruyère AOP has been named World Champion at the awards - more than any other cheese in the awards' history. Another Gourmino Gruyère, made by mountain dairy



Fritzenhaus in Bern, took the top prize at the World Championship Cheese Contest in Wisconsin in March 2022.