

The **dairy** diaries

Before moving to Switzerland, I imagined all of the foods I'd miss after landing in my new Alpine home. Barbecue – so I devoured a huge slab of ribs at my going away party. Jif peanut butter, Jiffy corn bread, Baskin Robbins' bubble gum ice cream: they were all on the list. But now, after living in Switzerland for almost three years, what I miss most is something I had never considered: plain old-fashioned milk.

By Chantal Panozzo | There's something different about the milk here. Not only is there no sign of the one or two per cent varieties, but stores also sell it in little boxes that aren't refrigerated. You can buy a six-pack of boxed milk, nice and warm, and store it in your kitchen cabinet for up to four months. If you leave it there too long, no matter, you'll eventually get cheese.

The first month I was in Switzerland, all I could find was milk labelled *Milch Drink*, which, to my trained American eye, meant sugar in disguise, kind of like the juice boxes we Americans are brought up on. These little impostors, called 'juice' drinks, look deceptively like real juice, thanks to the fancy photos of fresh fruit decorating their boxes. But it no doubt takes five years before you take a moment to read the small print, realise you've been drinking 10 per cent juice and 90 per cent sugar, and swear off anything but the real thing until it's time to upgrade to beer.

Cold comfort

So naturally, I was suspicious of this *Milch Drink*. Especially since there was no chance of me deciphering the small print in German. If I bought the *Milch Drink*, would I really only be getting 10 per cent milk? I wasn't sure.

The label said it contained 2.8 per cent milk fat, the closest to one per cent (my preferred milk fat level) I could find. The only other option I saw was *Vollmilch* (whole milk) at 3.7 per cent milk fat.

But after experiencing the *Milch Drink*, I realised my suspicions had proven me right. It was only 10 per cent milk. The other 90 per cent was sour ... something.

Even when cold, the *Milch Drink* tasted thick and curdled. OK for tea or coffee. Bearable on Ice Flakes (Coop's version of Frosted Flakes). But no one in his or her right mind would drink it straight from a glass.

Now, when I eat cookies, I have a tall glass of gassy water or an overpriced Coke, but it isn't the same. Nothing like dunking a cookie into a Coke to turn two goods into one bad.

But the worst part is when my friends are preparing to visit from the United States and they ask what they can bring me. I sigh, knowing that even if a friend had stuffed a good ole gallon of milk in her suitcase during those pre-liquid ban

days, it never would have survived the security check anyway.

Imagine:

"Drink it," the airport security officer would have insisted as my friend took off her shoes and belt, and set the milk in its own plastic x-ray tray.

"But it's a gift," my friend would have reasoned. "Opening it now will spoil it."

"We don't care and nor are we reasonable," the officer would have replied.

And so my poor friend would have been forced to drink a quarter of the gallon, not to mention pay a charge for heavy carry-on baggage. Then, while sitting in her centre seat, she would've realised that she needed to pee. Badly.

When she arrived, the leaky, dripping gallon wouldn't only have been messy. It would have also been sour. The great American milk would have, before our very eyes, turned into ... *Milch*. Ceremoniously, we would have poured it into its rightful container – a cardboard box.

Art of substitution

A while back, I discovered skim milk. But finding this *Magermilch* is a chore. Virtually hiding on a low shelf in the corner of the milk section, you can barely even notice it with all the *Milch Drinks* screaming at you to take them home and forget about them so they can realise their ultimate Swiss dream of becoming curdled cheese.

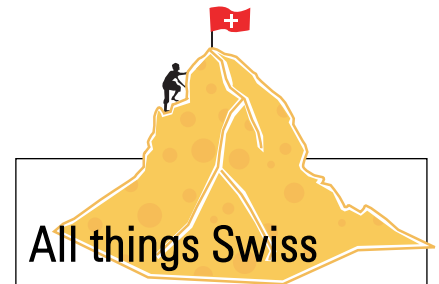
When I mentioned my joy of finding skim milk to my Swiss colleagues, they shuddered and wrinkled their noses. One of them spoke the mind of the others: "How can you drink the *Magermilch*? That is not real milk. Real milk is thick. Straight from the cow."

Then, not only was I shunned for drinking skim milk, I was shunned for complaining about the lack of gallon-sized milk containers. Again, I got incredulous stares. "People drink a gallon of milk in the States?"

I wanted to answer 'yes, and people would drink more milk here if it didn't taste so horrible'. But instead I kept quiet while they all tried to imagine milk sold in the largest drink container known to the Swiss – the two-litre. Little could they ever fathom the gallon, weighing in at almost double, with 3.8 litres.

That night, while attempting to prepare dinner, I discovered the tomatoes I had bought the day before to make toma-

to soup with had moulded. The stores were closed – naturally – so there would be no tomato soup. As I searched my kitchen for an alternative, I realised that potato soup might still be an option. After all, next to the potatoes, there was plenty of milk just waiting in my cabinet, all toasty, thick and warm. And this time, I couldn't have been more pleased.



Switzerland through the ages

July 2008: The Economist unveils the new 'Big Mac Index' – a 'Burgernomics' view of the purchasing power parity (PPP) between currencies, showing the extent to which market exchange rates result in Big Macs costing the same amount in different countries. The magazine reveals that Switzerland ranks as the third most expensive country – out of about 120 – in which to purchase the famed McDonald's hamburger. First and second place went to Norway and Sweden, respectively. ... According to a 2006 report by UBS's Wealth Management, workers in Zurich need only work for 15 minutes to earn themselves a Big Mac, with workers in Geneva just one minute behind them.

Expat encyclopaedia

Butter: A Swiss friend of mine lived in New York City for a year. Never mind what he thought of the dirty streets, imagine what he thought of the grocery stores.

"I just couldn't believe the butter," was his main comment when asked to compare living in Switzerland to the United States.

"It's just butter," he said, still somewhat in disbelief, "but they've got a whole aisle for it."

His solution to the butter-aisle madness? Shop at CVS drugstores where the entire dairy section is limited to one small fridge. And for an entire year, that's where he bought his groceries, nevermind what kind of nutrition he got as a result.

Cheddar: The lack of widely available cheddar in the land of cheese will be an eternal expat frustration.

Ice: You know, ice? Those frozen bits of water that are conspicuously absent from drinks served in Switzerland?

Little packs of ketchup: Nothing takes the fun out of McDonald's like being charged for the little ketchup packets.