

Raclette for Thanksgiving

Thanksgiving is one of the most important American holidays. It celebrates family and friendship and revolves around eating a turkey for dinner on the last Thursday of November. But the first Thanksgiving Chantal spent in Switzerland, she didn't have time to deal with turkey. She had to work. So she used cheese as a substitute.

By Chantal Panozzo | “This is Hans Schneider. His *Metzgerei* is the one place in Switzerland where you can actually order a proper turkey for your Thanksgiving dinner,” said Naz Martin, president of the American Women’s Club of Zurich, as she introduced the visiting Swiss butcher, who appeared to be at least 80 years old.

“*Hallo ladies,*” he said with an adorable accent as he handed out his turkey order forms.

While the other women in my orientation programme filled out their forms, I looked at the prices and realised that having a real American Thanksgiving in Switzerland would not only cost a fortune at SFr 150 for a traditional turkey, but would actually be impossible.

Though my modern Swiss kitchen was equipped with wide granite countertops and spacious white cabinets, it also featured a freezer the size of a shoebox, and an oven so small that my American-sized cookie sheets were rendered useless. So needless to say, trying to cram an entire turkey into such a cooking device wouldn't just be painful for the turkey – but also for the cook.

Tossing tradition

I knew I'd be working all day trying to read German briefings and fixing bad English translations, so coming home to more challenging things like roasting and basting didn't seem too appealing. And there was no way I was having Thanksgiving on a day other than Thursday – that would just be wrong. Plus, no matter how close the meal got to the real American version, the view of the medieval clock tower from the window would just serve as a reminder of how far away from family I really was.

I learned the hard way that American holidays outside of America don't quite work when, three weeks after moving to Switzerland, I tried to celebrate the Fourth of July, American Independence Day. First, I had to work. Then, there were no fireworks. And finally, eating a sausage at the Swiss beer garden while watching the Italian and French soccer teams battle it out on the big screen TV didn't quite satisfy my holiday needs – especially when the night concluded with waving red, white, and green flags and victorious chants of “*Italia!*”

So for Thanksgiving, despite having friends visiting from the United States, I decided to forgo the pain and suffering that forcing an American tradition in a foreign country would create and celebrate by doing two things: wearing an orange sweater and cooking the traditional and simple Swiss dinner of choice – raclette.

Melting reservations

My American visitors eyed my electric tabletop grill “centre-piece” and red and white Swiss-flag patterned potato warmer suspiciously as they watched me set the “Thanksgiving” table after work.

“I know it looks strange, but raclette is really good,” I said, as I set out bowls of gherkins and pickled onions and put a *coupelle* (a small pan designed to accommodate one slice of cheese) at each place setting. When my husband Brian ceremoniously brought out the plate of cold raclette cheese slices, my friend Jenni clapped her hands in excitement over such a Swiss meal.

Mike, however, was not as convinced and pointed at some of the cheese slices that had black dots. “What are in those?” he asked.

“That's just raclette cheese with pepper. And the reddish slices have paprika,” I said, suddenly wondering if the whole raclette thing had been a mistake.

I filled the wine glasses and proposed a toast: “To raclette for Thanksgiving,” I said.

As our glasses clinked, our “Thanksgiving” meal commenced and I demonstrated how to make raclette: place a slice of raclette cheese on a *coupelle*, let it bubble and brown on the tabletop grill, scrape the melted goodness over a pile of potatoes, pickles, and onions – and enjoy.

My friends watched in amazement at such a meal possibility. But after their first bite, they indulged as any Swiss citizen would and together we melted cheese slice after cheese slice, forgetting all about how we should be mourning our lack of turkey and stuffing.

“I've never eaten so much cheese in my life,” said Mike as he helped himself to what must have been his eighth slice. “This stuff's awesome.”



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As we scraped the hardened cheese off our little grill plates, my mother called, reminding me that it was, in fact, Thanksgiving and I was 5,000 miles away from where my family was gathering and eating the proper pilgrim meal. When her voice gave away her disbelief that raclette for Thanksgiving could be anything less than satisfying I couldn't help but disagree. In fact, cheese for Thanksgiving couldn't have been more perfect – if only I could have finished it off by joining my family for a piece of Grandpa's pumpkin pie.

All things Swiss

Switzerland through the ages

1291: The earliest documentation of raclette – both as a cheese and as a dish – according to *GourmetSleuth.com*. The online food and cooking directory says the melted meal was originally called *Bratchäs*, and was invented accidentally by herdsmen and farmers in Canton Valais, who typically dined on cheese, potatoes and pickles around campfires or hearths. "Historians conjecture that at some point the cheese got too close to the fire and the melted cheese dish was born." The name "raclette," says *Merriam-Webster* dictionary, originates from the French verb *raclar*: to scrape.

June 22, 1963: Switzerland's first mosque – the Mahmud mosque in Zurich's Balgrist district – officially opens, after construction began in 1962, according to Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat Schweiz. The construction sparked loud protests, current Imam Ahmed Sadaqat told the UK's *Independent*. Yet "since then there have be no problems at all," he said.

Expat encyclopaedia

Cheese: One day I tried to avoid eating any cheese for lunch. I ended up at Migros with fruit and a croissant. So it is possible ... if you want to starve.

Homeland holidays: Things you now either forget entirely – "Oh right, it's Thanksgiving – sorry, Mom" – or tend to celebrate by going to work.

Meat: The price of meat will continue to shock you every time you buy it in Switzerland.

One o'clock (or 13:00, Swiss-style): This can be a very sad time for the hungry expat, when they realise that all the sandwiches from the grocery stores are gone because they failed to come at the proper lunch hour – noon. And not a minute later.

Rind: Steak. It's elusive in Switzerland. Because what you think is a juicy steak turns out to be wild boar. Or liver. Or pork. At this rate, it's going to be tough to figure out turkey in time for Thanksgiving. So maybe you'll give up like me and serve raclette.

Swiss holidays: Things you question the point of having, when they fall on a Saturday or Sunday and you don't get a day off from work.