

24 hours in Gruyères:

History, charm and a whole lot of cheese

High in the Alpine pastures and meadows, Switzerland's milking herds are busy producing one of the country's most iconic and best-loved foodstuffs: Swiss cheese. While they are hard at work, we've embarked on a trip to Gruyères to discover what makes this majestically situated village and its world-renowned dairy product so special.

By Kerrin Rousset | Once you've figured out that *le Gruyère* is the cheese, *la Gruyère* the region and *Gruyères* the town, you're ready to discover all three. With just one cobbled pedestrian street, Gruyères is a charming, medieval village straight from a fairytale with just a hint of sci-fi thrown in and probably more cheese and double cream per square metre than any other town in Switzerland. There is plenty to see, do and taste, to fill a day's visit – and your stomach.

With cameras at the ready, make your way to the top of the long, winding road that leads to Gruyères. Picturesque all year long, it's particularly magical when the sun is glistening on the rolling, green hills and the only sounds are of birds and cowbells off in the distance.

The Château de Gruyères, which overlooks the village, is rich in history and culture, thanks to a succession of 19 counts, who were in power from the 11th to 16th centuries. Before we go any further, let's dispel a myth: the “famous” fire of 1493 that supposedly decimated everything but the dungeons never actually happened, meaning there is plenty of the original edifice to see.

The Château (built between 1270 and 1282) was bought by Canton Fribourg in 1938, converted into a museum and opened to the public. In addition to viewing temporary exhibitions, you can tour the castle's interior, taking a walk through eight centuries of tapestries, furniture and murals. Be sure to explore the grounds, where you'll enjoy beautiful views over the surrounding valley.

An alien world

In stark contrast to this fairytale atmosphere is the H.R. Giger Museum, opened at the foot of the Château in 1998, and dedicated to the Swiss surrealist best known for his Academy Award winning designs in *Alien*. The museum houses an immense collection of his paintings, sculptures and film designs – fascinating to some, disturbing to others.

The Giger Bar across the road – its decor inspired by Giger's fantastical (and creepy) aesthetic – has a cavernous interior, dominated by double arches of “vertebrae” creating the vaulted ceiling. Sitting in a chair of the same design, you'll feel like you are on the *Alien* film set.

Say cheese

La Maison du Gruyère, at the bottom of the hill, is a working cheese dairy, as well as a museum, shop and restaurant all under one roof. This interactive museum is perfect for children and adults alike, and an absolute treat for all five senses. And of course, there are free samples at the entrance.

October 2009 marked 40 years since this institution first began sharing the secrets of Gruyère cheese. Master cheesemakers produce up to 48 wheels of Gruyère a day, observing the strict AOC (*appellation d'origine contrôlée*) rules. Try to go while they are busy at work (9:00-11:00 and 13:00-14:30), and be sure to visit the shop on your way out to view and purchase from its exhaustive selection of local cheeses, chocolate and meringues. My sympathy goes out to the lactose-intolerant visitor to this dairy-rich region!

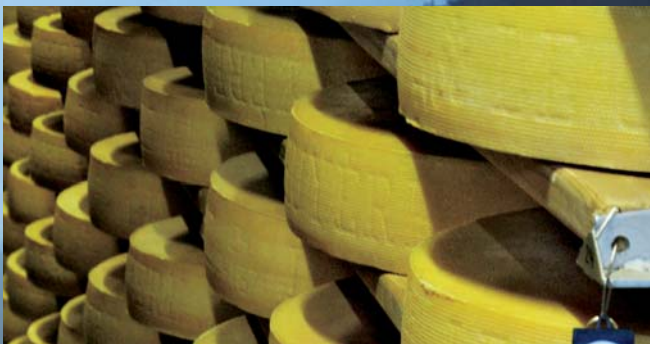
Gruyère AOC received the ultimate praise earlier this year, when it was awarded the gold medal at the 2010 World Championship Cheese Contest in Madison, Wisconsin – the largest international cheese and butter competition in the world. Swiss cheesemaker Cédric Vuille, of Fromagerie de la Brévine, took top honors for his Gruyère out of over 2,300 entries from 20 countries, with an impressive score of 98.79 points out a possible 100.

“It's very smooth, it's aromatic and it has a very clean cheese flavour,” Bill Schlinsog, one of the 30 judges, said. “It has a burst of flavour and then it settles down very nicely in the mouth.”



This dairy worker checks the cream churns

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Wheels of Gruyère cheese

© www.MyKugelhopf.ch



Thick, rich and not good for dieters:
Gruyères' famous *crème double de la Gruyère*

© www.MyKugelhopf.ch

Places to meet ... and eat!

The main (and only) street, Rue du Bourg, with its quaint houses and hanging signs, is full of restaurants offering hearty dishes made with local products. The *fondue*, *raclette*, *soupe de chalet*, *croûte en fromage* or *macaronis à la paysanne* will have your cholesterol climbing as soon as you start reading the menu.

Le Chalet de Gruyères has a casual downstairs café, serving hot chocolate in cow-printed mugs. The unmistakable aroma of melted cheese will probably draw you upstairs to the Alpine chalet-inspired restaurant, with antique wooden objects on the walls and waitresses dressed in traditional Edelweiss-adorned outfits. Fondue is clearly the dish of choice – with pots for whole tables to share or smaller individual portions.

Another great place to indulge in fondue and regional specialties is *Auberge de la Halle*, where you can choose from dif-

ferent combinations of cheese and other ingredients like mushrooms, tomatoes and Champagne. *Moitié-Moitié*, the half and half fondue (made with Gruyère and Vacherin Fribourgeois) reigns supreme in this region.

Fondue is eaten with bread, boiled potatoes, gherkins and pearl onions. But whatever your chosen accompaniment, keep stirring the fondue in a figure eight, so it maintains its creamy consistency and doesn't separate. And whatever you do, don't let your bread fall in the pot, otherwise fondue etiquette will have you running around the table in circles or treating your fellow diners to a round of drinks. You have been warned.

Must buys

There are a handful of artisan shops with collections of wooden products and other Swiss souvenirs; though what you really want

© Background image: swiss-image.ch/Marcus Gyger

is Gruyères' eponymous cheese, the most famous product in the region. Not far behind in the popularity stakes is the *crème double de la Gruyère*, the local fresh cream, renowned for its pure white colour and unctuous texture. Extremely thick, thanks to its extraordinarily high butterfat content, the rich cream is served atop feather-light meringues and fresh berries, and well ... just about everything else too. If you would like to bring some home, you'll find tubs of cream and a whole wall of meringues, in signature red and white boxes, at Magasin Antonietti.

Around the corner

When you've had your fill of cheese, your sweet tooth might be aching for a treat too. Just two kilometres north of Gruyères is the Cailler (Nestlé) chocolate factory in Broc. From April through October, you'll be able to learn all about Switzerland's oldest chocolate brand.

For a real gastronomic voyage, take the Swiss Chocolate Train from Montreux to Gruyères in classic Pullman carriages

that date back to 1915. The full day's excursion includes a visit to *La Maison du Gruyère*, the chocolate factory and two free hours in Gruyères.

To work off these gourmet treats, a hike in nearby Moléson-sur-Gruyères is called for: if you're feeling ambitious, you can hike up to the summit at 2,002 metres, or, for the less strenuously inclined, take the funicular and cable car up for panoramic views of Lake Geneva and the Alps.

There is a wide array of summer and autumn activities on offer in this area, including mountain biking, horseback riding and kayaking, as well as endless hiking trails and visits to Alpine pasture cafés. While wintertime visitors can enjoy downhill skiing, cross-country trails, snowshoe walking and sledding.

Gruyères fast facts

Altitude: 830 metres above sea level

Population: 1,600 (2007)

Language: French

Gruyères is a historic village, just north of the Alps. It is car-free, adding to its photogenic nature and quaint feel. Parking is available outside the town gates and at the bottom of the hill. The name Gruyères comes from the French word, *grue*, meaning crane (think bird, not construction), which you'll see on flags and building facades. This was the emblem of the counts' seal and coat of arms, symbolising longevity and fidelity. The story goes that the Gruyériens were losing a battle, when all of a sudden a crane appeared in the sky, heralding good luck and reversing their fortunes. Gruyères eventually won the battle; hence why they adopted the bird in their name and coat of arms.

Gruyères: www.gruyeres.ch

Gruyère Tourist Board: www.la-gruyere.ch

Château de Gruyères: www.chateau-gruyeres.ch

La Maison du Gruyère: www.lamaisondugruyere.ch

Chalet de Gruyères: www.gruyeres-hotels.ch

Auberge de la Halle: www.la-halle.ch

H.R. Giger Museum: www.hrgigermuseum.com

Moléson: www.moleson.ch

Diary dates

July 13 & 27 and August 3, 10 & 17: Visit to an Alpine cheese-maker's chalet to watch cheese being made in Charmey
www.charmey.ch

July 25 & 31, August 7, 15 & 28, and September 5: Alphorn concert on the Rue du Bourg in Gruyères
www.gruyeres.ch

August 7: Visit to an Alpine cheese-maker's chalet to watch cheese being made in Broc
www.la-gruyere.ch

September 25: Alpine festival and descent of the cattle at 9:00 in Charmey
www.charmey.ch

October 2: Alpine festival and descent of the cattle in Albeuve
www.foirealbeuve.ch

November 21, 2010 – January 10, 2011: Noël à Gruyères (Christmas in the Château de Gruyères)
www.la-gruyere.ch