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Doing what the Swiss do best

Julie Eagleton indulges the twin pleasures of cheese and chocolate on a gastro rail trip through alpine Switzerland

Mild, semi-salty, salty or prime quality? Dark, milky or white? Then there's the dilemma of which to try first. I was sitting snugly aboard the "Chocolate Train", and after studying a selection that would make Willy Wonka's eyes glaze over, I settle on a discrete nibble of Cailler blanc. The cheese will have to wait.

The perfect green cones of the Swiss Alps drift by as we climb up from Montreux heading into the mountains towards the picture book medieval town of Gruyeres. I will be visiting the cheese dairy there to find out the secrets behind the production of the world famous wheels of Gruyere. Then another short ride onward to visit the sleepy town of Broc and the Nestle chocolate factory. A lover of both vices, I really wasn't sure which stop I was looking forward to the most.

The Belle Epoque elegance of the old Pullman Express carriages provides the perfect setting for a gentle meander through Switzerland's chocolate box scenery. Sturdy wood panelling, old brass lamps and faded jade velvet demand an Agatha Christie novel or two. Nearing Gruyere I take another peek at my goody bag and feel my taste buds tango.

The town came to be known as Gruyeres in the Middles Ages. Noblemen used a white crane (a "grue") as an emblem on their red flags, hence the christening of the region. The production of cheese made several fortunes and the lucky ones became known as cheese barons. Since the 12th century, the cheese with its subtle and sophisticated taste has been produced in the region.

My extremely personable guide Nathalie meets me off the train and as soon as I step foot onto the platform, the sweet smell of Gruyeres welcomes me like a long lost friend. Even though the train station is a good 10 minute walk way from the dairy, there is no chance of getting lost as long as you follow your nose.

Before long, I am standing in front of what can only be described as a library of cheese wheels. A huge vault with towering shelves and shiny robotic arms lift and file away life-belt size circles of cheese. This is where the cheese comes to mature, anywhere from 5 to 10 months and beyond.

Obviously it starts with the cow which consumes an average of one hundred kilos of fresh grass and 85 litres of water every day which then allows it to produce 25 litres of milk per day. This is the unpleasant part - rennet (calfs stomach) is added to coagulate the



milk and is then firmed up by applying heat. It takes fifty minutes for the liquid to turn into a solid mass and I watched transfixed as the cheesemaker stirred huge copper kettles and then began cutting the curd from a solid mass into smaller particles. The grains and the whey separate and the contents of the vat minus the whey are then poured into the ready made moulds. Casein marks are added identifying the day and month of production and then the wheels go through a 16 hour pressing period, followed by a 20-hour salt bath. After this, the robots go to work in the maturing vault.

Scientists who have studied Gruyeres claim to have smelled 75 different scents from one single piece of cheese including freshly mown grass, hazelnuts, wood shavings, mint and violet.

Two hours later and time for dessert, we hopped back on the Chocolate Train for a short ride to the neighbouring village of Broc. At the beginning of the 20th century, Switzerland's share of the world chocolate export market was 55 per cent. The F-L Cailler factory in Broc, now Nestle, was one of the largest producers of chocolate. Until recently the whole factory used to be open to the public, but now only a very small section can be viewed by visitors.

After a twee 15 minute introductory film, you're free to wander around some interesting displays such as old Cailler posters and chocolate boxes before you are allowed to view the "conching" process. Glimpsed through a small window, white coats glide around supervising the conches which are basically machines designed to liquify the chocolate. Fans of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* would be disappointed as there wasn't a chocolate waterfall in sight, but after a few minutes of watching the swirling chocolate flanked by pink bubblegum pipes, thoughts of Oompa Lumpas did begin to surface.

The best was yet to come in the form of the tasting room. Row upon row upon row of chocolate in every different shape and texture one could dream of, were laid out on little silver plates for all to sample. Now will it be Cailler noir or Callier au lait?

Need to know

[La Maison Du Gruyere](#), tel. +41 26 921 8 00

Nestle Factory, tel. +41 26 921 5151

Julie Eagleton was a guest of the [Lake Geneva Region Tourist Office](#)

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