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Once a year the yellow spud with white eyes comes into the limelight. This is why Pro Bauer, the Swiss farmers' marketing organisation, started the Swiss Potato Festival. Earthy Adolf Ogi not only opened the first

*Silvio Bertolami **

number of the festival in 1995, but also showed the world that even a federal councillor knows how to peel a potato.

The oval fruit of the field badly needed such deference. One year earlier we already had a disastrously low harvest, and then 1995 saw a new negative record of historic dimensions: only 632,000 tonnes, the smallest potato harvest since 1939, more than half a century ago.

The situation has become so catastrophic that last year the Potato Commission even had to reduce the minimum size of a saleable potato. Since then the Charlotte and Nicola varieties may have a diameter of 30 mm instead of the old 35 mm. For the other varieties the Commission has reduced the minimum size from 42.5 mm to 40 mm.

Sometimes it was because of a heat wave, sometimes it was due to the floods of the century or the permanent drizzle. The changing weather over the last few years has kept the fruit from under the earth in a constant state of stress. But even worse for the potato than the weather is the change in consumer habits. Some economists have described it as "an inferior product", meaning that it is an item whose consumption falls as incomes rise. Long ago Swiss people ate up to 170 kilos of potatoes per head and per year, but by 1970 the figure had dropped to 53 kilos. Today annual consumption is at 40 kilos per head – and there is no end in sight for this fall from favour of historic proportions.

Typical of Switzerland

The potato is indeed very far from being a Swiss discovery. Nor, unlike chocolate

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The potato crisis

Worshipped, burnt, then spurned

Harvests are getting bigger, sales are rising, food consumption in Switzerland is increasing. The only thing that has lost favour is the potato.



Cartoon: Judith Bäertschi

and cheese, watches and machines, was it we Swiss who gave it its world reputation. But for the last 250 years it has been our most important basic food, our main protection against famine, and the psychological symbol of solidarity in times of war. So the potato has become an indispensable part of the Swiss character, just like neutrality, federalism, armed national defence and the four national languages.

The importance of the potato in times of crisis is shown by an example from the Second World War. In the "cultivation battle", as the plan worked out by future Federal Councillor Wahlen was known, private gardens, golf courses and public lake shores, even the Parc de la Grange in Geneva and the Sechseläutenwiese in front of Zurich's Bellevue, fell to the potato plough. Production rose by 160% to 1.8 million tonnes, which meant that 150 kilos of potatoes per head were eaten every year.

Healthy and cheap

Strange to relate, the humble spud, which came to Europe from South America at the end of the 16th century, had a very difficult beginning in Switzerland. It was thought in those days that potatoes made women barren, caused syphilis, leprosy and lymph-gland tuberculosis, poisoned the soil and made people stupid. Rich parents also held the opinion that this type of food was only for the poorer classes and punished their children when they tried the forbidden fruit out of curiosity. But in the middle of the 18th century a number of aristocrats took umbrage to the fact that Switzerland had to import a third of the grain it needed. For them this was a matter of national inde-

pendence. But they did not go as far as King Frederick I of Prussia who threatened to cut off the nose and ears of any of his subjects who would not eat potatoes.

Potatoes contain just as much protein as for example soybeans, and at any rate far more than such cereals as maize and wheat. This means that potatoes are "the most efficient way of transforming material, land, water and work into food", or so say those who love them. They are also very cheap, so that all hobby gardeners can afford to grow them.

Potatoes as fast food

In spite of all its advantages the brownish spud is consumed in many households and restaurants only in processed, so-called refined form. Instead of eating boiled potatoes, home-made "rösti" and fresh mashed potato, the consumer of today bows before the American way of life, and at least a quarter of what he eats is made up of pre-cooked products, such as ready-made chips, deep-fried gratins, potato salad in aluminium cans and tinned "rösti".

They used to be worshipped, today they are burnt or spurned. For even the increasing use of ready-made products has not succeeded in putting the humble potato back in the larder of today's producers and consumers. ■