

Workshop 3: Retailers, Consumers and new Agriculture

Swiss consumers want agricultural products from environmentally and animal-friendly farms, but only a small proportion of them are prepared to pay higher prices than for imported products.

Things are looking up for Swiss consumers.

- In the face of the challenge posed by the German discount stores Aldi and Lidl that have opened in Switzerland, at the large Swiss retail distributors Coop and Migros prices are plunging headlong week after week, cheap lines are being offered one after another and the consumer has the creeping feeling that he or she has been paying over the odds until now, in particular for foodstuffs.
- On the one hand, our agricultural sector is under threat from the WTO and free-trade agreements with the USA, while on the other, the consequences would appear to be a greater choice and lower prices for consumers.
- The German discount stores in Switzerland will succeed in attracting Swiss consumers to their doors this year. Although this will not be the top purchasing event in the grand super-supermarket, it will lead to top prices in a smaller range.

And what about the high quality products from environmentally and animal-friendly farms that are demanded by the spoiled Swiss consumers? Are these aspects suddenly forgotten in the face of lower prices, as has happened so far with cross-border shoppers through whom Switzerland loses around Fr. 1.5 billion per year?

Unfortunately it must be assumed that a certain proportion of Swiss consumers choose to go for the lower prices and merely pay lip-service to the importance of the environment and sustainability.

The consumers would be well advised to remain loyal to Swiss products, since BIO and SUISSE GARANTIE labels guarantee that the agricultural products that are also sold in the large retail chainstores have been monitored and are safe, as well as being of high quality.

It will be up to farmers themselves and their unions, as well as consumer organisations, to preserve their existing clientèle and to expand it by explaining to Swiss consumers why home-produced food can never be sold at world trading prices. Furthermore, a few years ago the Swiss electorate voted in favour of the so-called agriculture article in the new Swiss constitution and solidarity with sustainable agriculture in Switzerland should start to bear fruit.

Products that have a registered AOC (appellation d'origine contrôlée) or IGP (indication géographique protégée) have great potential. The number of visitors to the Swiss Open-Air Museum at Ballenberg throughout the year indicates that the Swiss population really values tradition and original products, even if this preference is often subconscious. Unfortunately these AOC and IGP labels are not well known among Swiss consumers, and in particular the fact that these products are manufactured in compliance with stringent conditions and in a clearly defined geographical area using prescribed raw materials, as well as being protected from counterfeit. Consumers will also be prepared to pay the "Swiss" price for a genuine cheese (e.g. L'Etivaz AOC) or a genuine sausage (e.g. Vaudois sausage IGP). From the point of view of foreign trade protected origins can also be used as a powerful marketing tool.