



Not Exactly Easy Cheese

New varieties of cheese – which aren't found in spray cans or as individually wrapped, neon orange slices – are another telltale sign of Chantal's new life. Join her as she continues to adjust in the Alpine land of "real" cheese.

By Chantal Panozzo | As an American, my cheese world used to consist of Mac & Cheese, Velveeta, Cheez Whiz, and if I was going gourmet, fondue in a box. And then there was Easy Cheese. The Spam of the cheese world, Easy Cheese came in a can and my grandfather loved it. After a holiday meal at his home in Chicago, he'd get out the Easy Cheese along with some crackers, and we'd squeeze out our cheese in swirly lines, like other people squeezed out toothpaste.

My cheese world was pretty much processed to perfection, but then, almost four years ago, I moved across the Atlantic to Switzerland. All of a sudden, I was living in the land of cheese and I didn't know what to do because there wasn't any Velveeta. There wasn't any Mac & Cheese. And there wasn't any Easy Cheese.

I had entered a world of Swiss cheese, which was not without pain. First, there

was my introduction to Raclette. It didn't help that the first time I smelled it, I was in a newly constructed tunnel. The Swiss celebrate completed construction projects like Americans celebrate capitalism. And so a new tunnel warranted a festival that included things like brass bands and Raclette cheese, neither of which really go well in a tunnel.

My next foray into the Swiss cheese world was via a beverage. For months, my husband had asked me, "Have you tried it yet?"

Of course, until I drank it, he would not reveal its ingredients and I had to admit, it wasn't bad; it tasted like soda. But then I found out the truth.

"Rivella is made from what?" I exclaimed.

Whey. Whoa. Whey? I wasn't even sure what that was.

Then I toured the cheese factory in Gruyères and found out that whey is just what drips off cheese and should rightfully be put in the garbage. After all, if cheese deems whey not worthy, why should I? But the Swiss crafted a popular drink from nothing other than cheese excrement, so I have to give them credit – this is a country that loves its cheese.

My 75-year-old Swiss neighbor, Frau V, was no exception to this love. About six months ago, to thank my husband and me for teaching her how to use text messaging on her new-fangled cell phone, she asked that we come over for a Raclette dinner. My husband protested, but dinner was not optional.

Later, I asked, "What's the big deal?"

My husband answered, "Do you know how much cheese she eats?"

I had no idea. But I was about to find out.

When we entered her apartment, sitting on a tray near the dining room table were at least 30 slices of Raclette, just ready for us to individually melt on her tabletop grill. I knew she wasn't married and had no children, but I figured (or maybe hoped) there were other guests. There weren't. It was a 10 to 1 cheese ratio. But I already knew my Raclette limit. And it was three slices.

On my fourth slice, which wasn't optional in Frau V's company, I tried to lessen the impact by only eating the cheese with half its usual potato and pickle accompaniments. After that, I retired my cheese tray on top of the Raclette grill, but then Frau V immediately put another slice of cheese on it.

"Nein, Danke."

"You can't be full," she told me, looking at the pile of cheese still sitting on the serving plate. "I usually eat at least 10 slices."

"But you're Swiss," I said.

"You'll have another," she said.

As my next slice melted on the grill, my stomach bubbled along with it, a strange duet. I wanted to tell Frau V that I had grown up in a world where cheese came in cans and that my stomach was still getting used to the real stuff, but she wouldn't understand. The only thing the Swiss sold in cans were vegetables. So as I scraped the melted Raclette from the grill pan and onto my plate, I took a deep breath and tried to pretend I wasn't eating it.

After the fifth slice, I hid my grill pan on the other side of the potato bowl, where Frau V couldn't reach it. She saw what I

had done though, and went to the kitchen and pulled out a bag filled with at least 20 more slices of Raclette.

"What will I do with the rest of this good, fresh cheese?" she asked.

I shrugged. I felt bad but my stomach felt worse. Frau V shook her head at her ungrateful guest and continued to eat slice after slice of cheese.

A few months after that dinner, I was finally seeing progress when it came to my new cheese world. I could eat fondue one night and Raclette the next, all while enjoying an Emmentaler sandwich for lunch. I was proud of my new cheese tolerance and so when my grandfather celebrated my Chicago visit over Christmas by opening a can of Easy Cheese, I figured, piece of cake.

Although I enjoyed making the shape of a Swiss flag with the Easy Cheese, I could barely eat the result. The cheese was a texture and taste I had almost forgotten and it took all the willpower I could muster not to spit it out onto my plate. Closing my eyes, I grabbed my soda to cover the taste of the Easy Cheese as fast as I could. This wasn't real cheese. It never had been.

"Good, huh?" said my grandpa, squeezing out some more Easy Cheese onto his cracker until it was piled so high it resembled the Matterhorn.

"Yeah," I said, trying to smile.

"Here, have another," he said, setting a cracker onto my plate.

I stared at it, that plain cracker, and it was a sad thing. Because Grandpa was passing me the Easy Cheese. And that cracker? Well, I was going to leave it naked.