

History of Gruyère AOC



The origins of the cheese name Gruyère date back to 1655 when *gruère* depicted the district of the canton of Fribourg in Switzerland where the cheese is made. Gruyère is a picturesque area in the alpine foothills with lush pastures which surround the lovely village of Gruyères, a Medieval market place.

But let us now explore the origins of the famous cheese

The chronicle of the Charmey valley, where various Gruyère and alpine Vacherin cheeses have been produced and refined within living memory, mentions the presence of Celts, Helvetians and Romans in those areas. The Romans are well-known for their expertise in cheese production. One of the legends has it that the Emperor Antonin the Pious died of indigestion in 161 AD after having eaten too much cheese made in the Gruyère area.

From the early Middle Ages on local people have let their cows graze on these pastures for which they paid in cheese and *sap sago*.

Guillaume, the first Earl of Gruyère, together with his nephew canon Ulrich founded the Cluniac Priory of Rougemont. A charter set up in 1115 granted the Priory certain privileges like being supplied with cheeses produced in the Gruyère Alps. The abbey was supposed to provide the material:

vats, sieves, cheese wheels In the alpine cottages the milk from the cow herds of Gruyère was made into cheese, but only during the growing season.

In Fribourg the cheese trade is said to have started in 1249. The sons of Rodolphe de Gruyère freed their subjects from Gessenay from the charter of 1115. They set up a document that mentions the production of a fatty cheese in those alpine areas for exports, which allowed people of that place to earn some money from their trade. Another document dated July 1328 also speaks of the Gruyère cheese: It was Earl Peter III's will.

On 21st February 1342 when the village of Gruyère was granted the so-called *Ohmgeld*, a duty imposed on wine, the tax to be paid on butter and cheese was fixed. Gruyère cheese was being exported to the markets of Vevey and Geneva. Owing to better road systems the cheese was later found in market places as far away as Lyon, Paris and Italy.

Up to the end of the 15th century the territory of the area was dominated by the Earls of Gruyère, a feudal and well-known family, and vassal of the House of Savoy. For a century there were hardly any documents or news about the cheese. The cheese trade did not seem to have encountered any major obstacles at that time.

At the beginning of the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) exports of Gruyère cheese were soaring and the state of Fribourg implemented the first protection measures. During that period of time preliminary steps to protect the origin of products were being taken.

In 1740 tradesmen submitted a request to the notables of Fribourg suggesting a «G» label for Gruyère cheeses of quality (produced in the alpine foothills). In those days the production of Gruyère cheese was estimated to be between 25,000 and 30,000 quintals or 2,500 to 3,000 tons.



In 1762 l'Académie Française added the word Gruyere to its dictionary and described it as a kind of cheese made in Gruyere.

In 1764 the government of Fribourg granted the cheese traders and exporters the permission to mark their cheeses stored in the village of Gruyere with the seal of the crane in return of government taxes. This procedure continued up to 1798. The 18th and 19th centuries were difficult times. The canton of Fribourg was exporting its human resources since people were lured away by higher wages in the canton of Vaud and Neuchâtel, in the Savoy area, in Franche-Compté and the Jura. That started off a period of imitated cheeses and freely invented trade marks of the Gruyere beyond national borders.

In 1856 at the agricultural competition in Paris two exhibitors from Fribourg were awarded gold medals for their Gruyere classified by one member of the selection committee as the best cheeses worldwide and excellent products from cows of Fribourg. Those awards boosted Gruyere consumption, and from the 1860ies on the cheese was even shipped to English and Dutch colonies on the Indian sub-continent.

In 1864 a French-Swiss trade agreement was signed which aimed at modifying products to be shipped to faraway places so that they had a longer shelf-life.

Towards the end of 1860 the canton of Fribourg had up to 254 Gruyere production sites (alpine places included), 193 of which belonged to an association.

In 1873 R.Schatzmann published. Le manuel des fromageries (the cheese makers manual).

In 1888 the canton of Fribourg founded the first milk producers organisation in the French part of Switzerland; from 1890 on the milk co-operatives have been required by the government of Fribourg to regularly revise their articles.

Without any protection of the declaration of origin, the Gruyere cheese became the victim of counterfeit products and had but its prime quality to justify itself. The fight for its origin started when Switzerland joined the Madrid Agreement of April 14th 1891 which stipulates that any product bearing a wrong mark of origin on which one of the countries or a place of the country under this agreement is directly or indirectly



mentioned as the country or place of origin, then such products shall be confiscated at the borders of each of the said country.

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member and others, may only be used for goods produced in those areas, or else have to bear an annotation.

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An international convention on the protection of marks of origin and standardized methods of analysis was signed on June 10th 1930 in Rome. Unfortunately, this strategically important decision was soon revoked by the French dairy organisation in Besançon on February 14th 1931.

On June 19th, 1931 Émile Savoy, Member of Parliament for the canton of Fribourg, handed in an interpellation concerning the Convention of Rome (1930) and the mark of origin for cheeses in an effort to protect the Gruyere cheese. The MP put special emphasis on the protection of the various Gruyere marks so that the cheese would be able to maintain its long-standing and well-deserved reputation. In 1935 Bernard de Gottrau also stood up for the Gruyere cheese when he declared that the French claim, according to which the term Gruyere was of French origin, could not be substantiated.

On July 2nd 1992 the Charter of Gruyere was set up. It describes the production areas of the Gruyere cheese:

the canton of Fribourg, Vaud, Neuchâtel and Jura as well as the district of Courtelary, La Neuveville, and Moutier in the canton of Berne.

The organisation Interprofession de Gruyere (IPG) was founded on June 2nd 1997 as a follow-up institution of the Swiss Union for the Cheese Trade and is supposed to coordinate the production, supervision and sales of the Gruyere cheese. The organisation includes milk producers, cheese makers and people in charge of the maturing process who



jointly strive to ensure quality, origin and promotion of the Gruyere cheese.

This historical background shows that the Gruyere cheese has been able to keep its excellent reputation for centuries. Up to these days the one and only protection of the Gruyere cheese has been its first-class quality.