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Holstein breeding in Switzerland

Different, but every bit as fascinating

Ferme Swisskess

Improving the genetics of the entire herd



BREEDING PROFILE

BY MICHEL DOSTIE Editor

Translation by Nicole De Rouin



Swisskess Farm Focused on improving the genetics of the entire herd

Raising dairy cattle is an art," explains Heinz Kessler with conviction. "It's more than just breeding animals." It is that belief that has inspired the owner of the Swisskess farm, in Clarenceville, in the Montérégie area, to go beyond developing a single good cow family and instead focus on improving the herd as a whole. That philosophy is shared by his son Anthony, now a shareholder in the farm and in charge of herd management.

Heinz Kessler is proud of the herd he has managed to develop by sticking to his approach and avoiding the purchase of animals off the farm. Today, the Swisskess herd has 200 head, with 95 cows producing an annual average of 10 287 kg of milk, with 4.01% fat and 3.26% protein (233-252-238). The cows that are classified include 7 multiple EX, 6 EX, 42 VG and 36 GP.

A number of them are brood cows. The first to be mentioned by Heinz Kessler and his son *Anthony is Swisskess WT Anette*, VG-87 1*, the herd's first embryo donor. She is at the head of a good breeding family and has nine daughters, all classified GP or better, including *Swisskess Outside Arielle*, GP-82 3* and *Swisskess Outside Adora*, VG-87 4*. Arielle is the dam of two daughters classified EX, *Swisskess Primetime Abigail*, EX-91 3E, herself dam to three EX daughters, and *Swisskess Copper Ema*, EX-91 2E 3*, dam to one EX daughter. *Adora* has given birth to nine daughters, five of which are classified VG.

The Swisskess herd has also been able to count on Swisskess Storm Trixi, EX 6*, the first cow bearing the Swisskess prefix to classify EX. Trixi is the dam of 16 daughters, including three EX and ten VG. The group includes Swisskess Dundy Tyra, EX-91 3E, first Mature Cow in Bedford, in 2013, and Swisskess Progress Jackie, EX 2E 3*. Jackie is the dam of Swisskess Goldwyn Just Right, EX-91 2E, representing the family's third generation of EX cows. Just Right has produced four daughters, including two young cows classified VG, one at two years and the other at three. Just Right is a model cow in the eyes of the Kessler family: a good show animal, third Senior Three-Year-Old in Bedford, in 2011; a good dairy cow, producing

over 48 000 kg of milk in three lactations (238-270-239); and a prolific embryo producer, drawing buyers to the farm.

The Kesslers are also proud of *Swisskess General Sonya*, VG-87-3yr 2*. Sired by a young bull and born in 1996, *Sonya* produced 107 736 kg of milk in nine lactations. She is the dam of three VG daughters and one EX, the latter being *Swisskess Roy Sonne*, EX-91 2E, a cow the Kessler family is currently using to develop the herd. One of her granddaughters, *Swisskess Goldwyn Sunshine*, EX-93, coowned with Ferme L. Campbell et fils (Camphois), won Reserve Grand Champion in Bedford, in both 2011 and 2013, and Honourable Mention at the Brome Fair, in 2011. She is first cow of the herd to take part in shows at the provincial level. *Swisskess Outside Stara*, EX-93 4E 2*, second Mature Cow in Bedford, in 2010, is another example of the ideal cow in the eyes of Heinz and Anthony Kessler. As proof, they point to her milk production, which exceeded 80 000 kg in six lactations, her component levels, 3.7% fat and 3.1% protein, and her capacity to pass those qualities down to her offspring. *Stara* is the dam of four daughters, three VG and one EX, *Swisskess Gold Lead Alice*, EX-92, a cow that has earned a Superior Lactation.

Finally, father and son are also pleased to have raised Swisskess Rudolph Maya, VG-

The owners of the Swisskess farm: Heinz Kessler, his wife, Kathy, and their son Anthony.





Over the summer of 2015, the barn was dismantled to make room for a new building. During the construction period, the cows were housed in machine shed fitted out as deeplitter free-stall barn. Anthony is in charge of feeding the herd.

3yr. Now in her 15th lactation, *Maya* is a champion milk producer, boasting a lifetime production to date of 170 032 kg, with 3.4% fat and 3.3% protein. She is also the dam of seven daughters, all classified GP or better.

Although the owners of the Swisskess herd prefer to focus on developing their own animals, they have made the occasional purchase off the farm. In 2010, they acquired *Boalcrest Goldwyn Jayde*, a heifer that was then barely six months old. Now classified EX-92 2E, *Jayde* won second Senior Three-Year-Old in Bedford, in 2013, and is a promising prospect for the herd.

Reliable genetic improvement

In developing his herd, Heinz Kessler has always given priority to proven sires and has always chosen among the best available sires for all his cows, regardless of the cost of the semen. "\$40 more for a dose of semen represents a fraction of the cost of raising a heifer to the age of two," he explains. "It's a mindset that has made a tremendous difference for our herd, which is now extremely uniform." Accordingly, breeding decisions focus mainly on conformation, which he feels is more important than production because feeding has a big impact on milk production. He especially favours good quality legs and feet, as well as good balance, since the cows are housed in freestalls and must be able to move around easily, especially to get to the feed bunk. The Kesslers also attach a great deal of

importance to longevity and, in that sense, say they are not inclined to rush their heifers to first calf. This is why many of their young cows only classify GP at first calf but later classify EX. Even now, about 70 per cent of the sires used on the farm are proven bulls, which is why, explains Anthony, there are never any holes in their pedigrees.

The Kesslers have been using embryo transfers since 2005 in order to make use of the herd's top proven cows. They explain that genetic improvement may be slower with that approach, but the results are much more reliable.

Genomics also influences the breeders' selection process, but the young bulls they choose must come from good families, especially in terms of conformation. Heinz Kessler says that although genomics has led him to deviate somewhat from his breeding philosophy, he considers it a useful tool for identifying the best animals in a family. As for Anthony, it was his interest in genomics that prompted him to take part in a group purchase, in 2013, to acquire Cleroli Snowman Caramilk, a cow that gave her owners three embrvo flushes before she was sold in 2014. One of her daughters, DPR Mardi Gras Aero, obtained the top selling price at Holstein Québec's National Sale, in April 2015.

Heinz Kessler handed over responsibility for the herd to his son Anthony so he could devote his attention to the fields and to maintaining the farm machinery. He is also the family's handyman and inventor, says Anthony, which leads to some substantial savings.



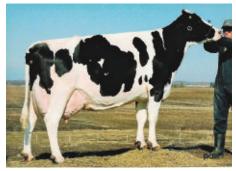
From Switzerland to Quebec

In 1979, Werner Kessler and his wife, Paula, sold their herd of 30 Brown Swiss and 10 Holstein animals and moved from Switzerland to Quebec with their family. Their son Heinz was 18 at the time. They settled in Clarenceville, buying the Holstein Venacre herd, which was then composed of 75 per cent purebred animals and 25 per cent NIP cows. Since Werner Kessler was mainly interested in dairy production, he stopped registering and classifying his animals but remained committed to milk recording.

In 1988, Heinz, who was working on his parents' farm, took charge of the herd and returned to the idea of focusing on Holsteins. He used the NIP system with the cows rather than buying animals that were already registered. In his view, with DHI, classification, and a knowledge of genetics and pedigrees, the quality of the herd is the real reward for the work accomplished. Moreover, "you get to work with good-looking cows," he adds. His dream then was to breed a cow that would be the first of the herd to classify EX. In 1995, he purchased 60 per cent of the farm's shares.

In 2012, after the parents retired – which didn't stop Werner from going to the barn every day - Heinz kept his 60-percent share, while his wife, Kathy, and their son Anthony, who graduated from Macdonald College with a diploma in Farm Management, each acquired a 20per-cent share. Although they work as a team: father, son and an employee take part in all aspects of the farm work, it is Heinz who sees to managing the fields and maintaining the farm equipment. Anthony is in charge of herd management and Kathy takes care of the bookkeeping and administrative tasks.





Swisskess Storm Trixi, EX 6*, dam to 16 daughters, including 3 EX and 10 VG, was the first Swisskess cow to classify EX.

Scope for the show circuit

In Switzerland, the Kessler family had no experience with livestock shows, since there were none in their region. In Quebec, however, the children of Heinz and his wife, Kathy, were influenced by their neighbours and their feed mill, who made room for them in their exhibit, that involvement sparked the idea of taking part in shows. In 1996, in their first experience with the young farmers' organization, the four children presented five heifers, which all placed last. "We can only do better next time," their father assured them. A few years later, when one of the good breeders in the area pulled out of the show, the Kessler family decided to take part with nine animals. It was then that their interest in dairy shows really took off. For the past five years, the Swisskess herd has also been taking part in provincial shows, with at least one animal.

All five of the couple's children took an interest in shows, and four of them are interested in agriculture. Anthony is now a shareholder in the farm, and his brother Alex owns his own herd (Wowcow prefix). Their sisters Sonya and Claudia are both enrolled at Macdonald College. In 2014, Claudia took part in the Holstein Québec Breeding School, winning the showing championship and placing third overall. Heinz and Kathy's other daughter, Yvonne, is a teacher.

While the Kesslers continue to take an interest in shows, they limit themselves to the local shows in Bedford and Havelock. They see shows as a sport, or a pastime, but since the elder Kessler is somewhat competitive, as he is in sports, his drive motivates them all,

influencing their genetic selections as much as the way they feed their animals. That leads to additional costs, explain both father and son, but the extra attention given to the animals makes it worthwhile. And their determination has been well rewarded, as the family won the Breeder Banner, in Bedford, in 2012, 2013 and 2014, in addition to the Exhibitor Banner in 2014. Like all breeders, they hope to one day earn a Master Breeder shield. They would also like to see a Swisskess animal capture the title of Grand Champion at the Royal, in Toronto, but they have no intention of deviating from their breeding strategy to achieve that dream.

Likewise, Anthony Kessler, who is president of the St-Jean Holstein Club, also likes to devote some of his energy to bringing the objectives of the show world closer to those of dairy farming. He hopes to one day hear a judge justify a first place selection by saying that the cow was chosen because she was the right size.

Comfortable animals

Over the past summer, the family's free-stall barn was dismantled to make room for a new free-stall structure equipped with a deep litter system. Heinz Kessler came across the concept, which aims for better cow comfort and longevity, in Hoard's Dairyman magazine. He and his son Anthony visited different facilities that use the system and concluded that it would be worthwhile to build a similar installation for their herd. The bedding, usually wood shavings, is added as needed



Swisskess Goldwyn Just Right epitomizes the type of animal the Kessler family is looking for: a good show cow, third Senior Three-Year-Old in Bedford, in 2011; a good dairy cow, producing over 48 000 kg of milk in three lactations

(238-270-239); and a prolific embryo producer.



Swisskess Goldwyn Sunshine, EX-93, co-owned with Ferme L. Campbell et fils (Camphols), won Reserve Grand Champion in Bedford, in both 2011 and 2013, and Honourable Mention at the Brome Fair, in 2011. She is the first cow of the herd to take part in shows at the provincial level.

and mixed with the manure twice a day to promote composting. The Kesslers intend to try straw bedding as well, although straw tends to be a less attractive option as it generates less heat than wood shavings.

The bedding will be removed completely once a year and used to fertilize the 200 hectares of cropland that the family owns and seeds to grain corn (70 ha), corn silage (20 ha), soybeans (25 ha) and wheat (15 ha). The rest of the farmland is devoted to alfalfa, most of which is harvested as silage, or used as pastureland. The pregnant heifers and dry cows all have access to pasture, and the dairy cows are also put out in the evenings to graze and get some exercise.

The breeders use their crops to feed their animals a TMR that is enhanced with a kilogram of hay and a supplement. The breeders tried a two-group feeding system in the past, but since they saw no improvement in production, the herd now forms a single feeding group. They note that cows in early lactation consume more those in late lactation, because the calves the pregnant cows carry take up some of the room in their abdomens. Moreover, with one feeding group the cows are not required to get used to new companions, which reduces stress and competitive behaviour among them.

The cows receive no feed at milking. While it means that a little more work is required to bring the cows to the milking parlour, the cows do stay calmer, say the breeders.



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Holstein breeding in Switzerland Different, but every bit as fascinating

ver the past few years, a number of Quebec producers affiliated with Holstein Québec have visited Switzerland on various missions. The opportunity enabled them to discover some distinctive features of Swiss dairy farming. La Revue decided to find out more about their impressions.

First, the Quebec producers were asked to describe the features that stood out for them during their visit. Then, in a second phase, La Revue approached breeders and professionals working in the Swiss dairy industry to get their feedback and learn more about breeding and dairy production in this European country.

From the status of cows in the national culture to the distinctive characteristics of Swiss, or Gruyère, cheese, in addition to the important role played by government, Holstein breeding in Switzerland may, in many ways, differ significantly from that in Quebec, but that certainly doesn't make it any less fascinating.

In Switzerland, cows reign supreme

Cows are very much present in Switzerland and can be seen throughout the countryside. A beautiful sight, some Quebecers will say. Cows are even a common sight in urban areas, particularly as figurines in the tourist shops. For Quebecers, it seems obvious that cows are part of the culture of the Swiss population as a whole, not just the dairy sector.

All of the people *La Revue* contacted by email were of the same opinion. Maryline Guldin, communications and product manager for the Fédération suisse d'élevage Holstein, points out that the cow is actually one of Switzerland's symbols, like chocolate and watches, and she mentions that the animal "enjoys a high level of goodwill with the Swiss." Yvan Roulin, an independent breeding advisor, explains that that goodwill is also linked to the fact that milk, cheese and meat are typical products, widely available in a variety of forms, that are much appreciated by Swiss consumers.

The attachment to dairy cows is particularly evident at the end of the summer, when the herds that have summered in the alps come home for the winter. That event initiates a ceremony that is as emblematic as it is traditional. With folklore as the theme of the occasion, the cowherds, men and women who watch over the herds in the mountains, don traditional dress, and the cows are adorned with flowers and bells on their necks. Farmers and cows in their finery form processions that move through the town streets to the rhythm of traditional music. Most of the townspeople seem to be in attendance, confirming their connection to both the animals and the tradition. It is also an excellent opportunity to taste local food products.

Respect for older cows

Well able to recognize the value of a finelooking Holstein cow, Quebec producers were quick to notice the high quality of the livestock in Switzerland. But they were particularly fascinated – and the word is not too strong – by the respect with which the Swiss treat their older cows. As proof, they point to the applause drawn by the winner of the 60 000 kg and over class at Swiss Expo, a response that was as enthusiastic, if not more so, than the show of appreciation for the Grand Champion.

The people interviewed by *La Revue* had no trouble explaining this fondness. First, says Dominique Savary, of Ferme du Grand-Clos, named Master Breeder in Switzerland in 2105, Swiss breeders like good milk producers but are also very much interested in the morphology and functional traits of their cows. He mentions that they like

Superb scenery!

"solid cows that are able to produce through many lactations." The reason for this, he explains, is that production and rearing costs are very high in Switzerland, so producers "need to be able to amortize those costs over many lactations." An additional incentive comes from the Fédération suisse d'élevage Holstein, which rewards all cows that produce more than 100 000 kg of milk.

In the same vein, Mr. Roulin mentions that this high regard shown for cows even prompts breeders to readily give the benefit of the doubt to a first-calf heifer that might not turn out be a great milk producer. He adds that breeders will also do everything possible to ensure that an animal that has to leave the farm is treated with dignity, even if it means paying high vet fees. "So when we see a cow with a high cumulative milk yield in the show ring, we know how much care and effort was required to get her there," he explains. Although the current crisis in the dairy industry, marked by extremely low milk prices, could push producers to look for ways to reduce rearing costs, respect for animals is here to stay, affirms Mr. Roulin. Moreover, the attachment is evident among all dairy producers, not just those who breed show animals.

Proven bulls rate high

Visiting barns and attending shows has made Quebec producers aware that Swiss breeders favour proven bulls. As the representative of the Holstein Association underlines, the fact that there is a long-standing tradition of breeding in Switzerland and that breeders at committed to it means they are unwilling to risk destroying all the work they have accomplished over the years. As Mr. Roulin explains, "the herds are relatively small, and so proven genetics present a lower risk."

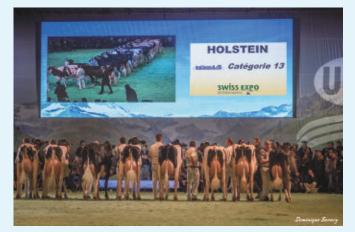
Amazing atmosphere at Swiss Expo

Our Quebec visitors to Switzerland also enthused over the vibrant atmosphere they encountered at the Swiss Expo dairy show (www.swiss-expo.com), ranked third among the top events of its kind in the world, according to Holstein international.

A conversation with Mr. Jacques Rey, one of the show's managers, explains the phenomenon. Celebrating its 20th anniversary in January of next year, Swiss Expo was inaugurated in 1996, in La Chaux-de-Fonds, by a group of young breeders in their twenties, which included Mr. Rey. Looking to do something new and inspired by Toronto and Madison, they wanted to launch a show for breeders where the dairy cow would be the main attraction, but they also wanted a friendly and engaging event in which everyone would enjoy taking part. They thought their approach would ensure that not only breeders would find the experience worthwhile, but that their extended families, friends and neighbours would want to come along as well to enjoy the fun. They found a sponsor who believed in their project and were able to put their plan into operation.

The organizers pulled out all the stops the first year; in each invitation addressed to breeders, they included 50 tickets for free admission and asked breeders to distribute them to the people around them. Thanks to the breeders who did their part, that first edition was a great success, and interest has been unshakable ever since. Breeders look forward to taking part, and come with their friends and neighbours, many of whom are also dairy producers. Because success breeds success, Mr. Rey explains, sponsors who are looking for greater public exposure get their money's worth and continue to support the event. Now, adds Mr. Rey, "They all say it's a must." In 2003, the show was moved to Lausanne, when the site in La Chaux-de-Fonds could no longer meet its needs.

The date of the event is another factor that contributes to its success, explains Mr. Rey. Holding the show in January, when farm work is less demanding, means all farmers are able to attend.



One of the classes at the prestigious Swiss Expo, an event rated the third best show in the world, after Madison and Toronto, according to *Holstein International*.

Open only to breeders of the eight dairy breeds in Switzerland, Swiss Expo now welcomes 1000 animals each year. Unable to accommodate more livestock, the organizers are sometimes required to turn animals away. Last year 130 were turned away. So how do they choose? They ask breeders to be more rigorous in their selection criteria.

Swiss Expo has thus established a reputation as a grandiose event. And the icing on the cake is that the Grand Championship is always preceded by a high-calibre cultural event. Next January, The City of Prague Philharmonic Orchestra will perform with its 60 musicians to highlight the event's 20th anniversary.

The Junior Bulle Expo (www.junior-bulle-expo.ch) is another event that drew the attention of many Quebec visitors. The show is organized by the *Club des jeunes éleveurs fribourgeois* and only young breeders are eligible to take part. The event is held in December of each year, and the judge who officiates in Toronto in November of the same year is invited to preside.





It's a party in the commune of Sâles. Led by herders in traditional dress, the cows are coming down from the mountains at summer's end.



A Red-Holstein class at the Junior Bulle Expo. Note how close the spectators are to the animals.

however, young bulls with genomic indexes are increasingly being used by breeders. Having noticed that some young sires are indeed producing the results they are looking for, breeders are putting more trust in this new technology. But, as Mr. Savary points out, Swiss breeders attach a great deal of importance to morphology, and any young bull without positive traits in that respect really has no potential for sale in the country. Mr. Roulin is of the same mind. In his view, only genomic bulls from good families (conformation, a series of show animals) are likely to be successful. He writes that bulls that have only good numbers may be used by some breeders who are more willing to take a chance, but they won't be used by most breeders. The fear of having an imperfection in a pedigree after using a young sire that didn't live up to their expectations makes many breeders reluctant to take a chance. Hench they prefer to build their breeding lines with deep pedigrees. In some cases, however, says Mr. Roulin, breeders will incorporate young genomic bulls from proven lines, such as Doorman, Bankroll or *HighOctane*, bulls that he says "are unlikely to leave a blemish in the pedigree."

Despite the preponderance of proven bulls,

Red and White Holsteins

It is a well-known fact that red and white Holsteins, called Red Holsteins in Switzerland, are very popular in the country. Mr. Roulin agrees, underlining that "the Red Holstein population [here] is one of the largest in the world." Ms Guldin tells us that there are in fact more Red Holstein animals in the swissherdbook than in the herdbook of the Fédération Holstein. Quebec producers will say that these cows are not only popular but are highly valued for their genetics as well.

Traditionally, explains Ms Guldin, producers who bred Simmental animals, red animals used for both milk and beef production, quickly became aware of the genetic improvements the American Holstein brought to the black and white Fribourg herds. Even if breed mixing was at one time inconceivable, says Mr. Roulin, red animal breeders soon saw the possibilities for genetic improvement. Conversely, they were determined to preserve the colour of their animals. Breeders have thus done an excellent job in that respect, as both here and in Switzerland the selections for red animals are not the same as those for the black.

Grants and subsidies

Another feature that stood out for Quebec breeders visiting Switzerland is the high level of government subsidies granted to Swiss farmers. The subsidies obviously assure breeders a better income, but at the same time entail a considerable amount of work to comply with their various requirements.

The experts consulted confirm that Swiss agriculture is indeed highly subsidized. One of the correspondents, Mr. Francis Egger, an officer for the Union Suisse des paysans, the country's main advocacy organization for Swiss farmers, says that in Switzerland they talk about direct payment rather than



A few of the animals from the Grand-Clos Master Breeder herd.

subsidies. He explains that these payments, which make up 20 per cent of farmers' revenue, pay for the non-market benefits of Swiss agriculture, such as safeguarding the environment, preserving the landscape, and preventing the depopulation of remote rural regions (important in mountainous areas). In that regard, Mr. Roulin mentions that "through their daily work, farmers contribute a great deal to the beauty of the landscape, and the direct payment is related to that. Tourism, ecology, biodiversity, etc. are words that are particularly significant for the majority of Swiss citizens. There is also a political commitment to maintaining community life in mountainous or remote areas." The payments are offered for all types of production, but dairy production, which represents more than 20, if not 30, per cent of the country's agricultural production, is the largest sector to benefit from the payments.

The payments also compensate for the difference between the milk prices paid to producers and their production costs, which, as Ms Guldin points out, ensures the sustainability of agricultural production, soil management and some level of local provisioning in the country. All our correspondents agree, however, that farmers would prefer to get a milk price that covers their costs. It is important to mention that the industrial milk price currently paid to European producers is causing some serious problems. The abolition of milk quotas by the European Union and domestic overproduction, combined with excess supply on international markets and the loss of the Russian market that was supplied by other European countries, are all factors contributing to the downturn in the

Great photos

La Revue Holstein Québec wishes to thank Mr. Dominique Savary, Master Breeder 2015 in Switzerland in addition to being a photographer, for kindly providing the photos that illustrate this article. Readers who are interested in the pictures can contact him through his Internet site or his Facebook page at the following addresses: www.grandclos.ch and https://www.facebook.com/ferme. du.grandclos

industrial milk price. For a small country with a strong currency, as is the case in Switzerland, market liberalization is not, according to Mr. Roulin, a real solution. On that point, he thinks that "many producers in his country would like to see the return of the quota system."

To be eligible for these direct payments, Mr. Egger explains, a number of conditions must be respected, such as specific manure use guidelines, protection of biodiversity, etc. Breeder Dominique Savary adds that the payments are also linked to rigorous specifications regarding animal welfare, such as open housing and daily access to pasture. Mountain grazing is also encouraged.

Ms Guldin and Mr. Egger explain that a significant part of these direct payments is contingent upon the new rules of the World Trade Organization (WTO), dating from 1983. The payments have been incorporated in the Swiss Constitution, which stipulates that

agriculture must provide general functions and services. These include:

- ensuring reliable supply;
- maintaining the farmscape;
- conserving natural resources;
- preventing the depopulation of remote rural regions;
- promoting production methods that are in harmony with nature and compatible with and respectful of animal life.

Swiss cheese

A considerable portion of Swiss milk production is used to make Swiss cheese, called Gruyère in its country of origin, but the milk must meet certain requirements. Quebec visitors were much impressed by these conditions, which, among other things, prohibit feeding silage to the cows and stipulate that 70 per cent of forages fed must be harvested on farm and contain no preservatives other than kitchen salt, in addition to conditions relating to milk guality, animal comfort and winter grazing. Automatic milking systems and growth stimulants are also prohibited when the milk is intended for Swiss cheesemaking, and producers are moreover required to make two deliveries per day to the cheese dairy. Similar conditions apply to other dairy products with a protected designation of origin (PDO) as well. Obviously, everyone agrees that producers complying with these requirements must be compensated with a higher milk price. Production and pricing are managed by a joint representation group made up of producers, cheesemakers and ripeners.



An alpine pasture hut, a typical sight in the highlands of Switzerland.



A group of exhibitors at Expo Bulle, the national Swiss Holstein and Red Holstein show organized in collaboration with the Swiss breeding federations.