

August 1: Switzerland's Day of Celebration

By Simon Watkinson



PHOTO COURTESY OF OLIVIER MICHE

The legendary founding of the Swiss Confederation on the Rütli meadow (Grütli in French) on 01 August 1291 by representatives of the alpine areas of Uri and Schwyz and the forested glades of Unterwalden, is enshrined in Swiss folklore.

The Rütli document came about because the proud, independent people farming the remote, high valleys of Uri and Schwyz, joined with those of Unterwalden in refusing to be subjected to life under oppression. During the 12th century, following the clearing of central Switzerland's dense forests for agricultural and settlement purposes, the noble dynasties of Habsburg, Zähringen, Savoy and Kyburg established towns such as Bern, Fribourg, and Winterthur. From there they ruled the increasingly prosperous countryside. Then the Habsburgs' unsuccessful attempt at controlling much of Switzerland resulted in popular revolts against entrenched monastic power bases across the entire Habsburg realm. To safeguard against future uncertainties, a number of Swiss communities renewed old partnerships and forged new ones. The Rütli alliance was one such agreement, and was a declaration that an attack on any one of its partners would be an attack on them all.

Though the Rütli document doesn't mention a lasting political entity and excludes any declaration of basic human rights or privileges, it came to symbolize freedom to the Swiss. The name they gave themselves after 1291 – Eidgenossen – translates roughly into English as "comrades bound by oath in a co-operative" and remains significant, as Switzerland still calls itself the Eidgenossenschaft. In dictionaries the word Eidgenosse is listed as a synonym for "Swiss".

BRUNCH IN THE COUNTRY

As the roots of the Rütli declaration are predominantly agricultural, it seems fitting that the increasingly popular Brunch At The Farm on Switzerland's National Holiday, 01 August, is now an established tradition. Since 1993, farming families have been opening their homes to welcome hundreds of guests of all ages. In 2007, 420 farms across Switzerland welcomed around 200,000 visitors for a hearty brunch buffet of cereals, meats, cheeses, milk and honey with other regional and home-made specialities. Costing from CHF 18 to CHF 30 (with children under the age of 15 paying CHF 1 for every year of their age), this is great value, with the added bonus that the kids can learn about the sources of their food.

Seven brunches took place in Geneva last year, and this huge mobilization of effort was perhaps best summarized by Michael Schumacher, who - according to the website of the Geneva farmers' association, AgriGenève - said that brunch hosts had once again proved that they could easily go into turbo-drive to satisfy an increasing demand.

Reservations are necessary if you want to do a Brunch At The Farm, which will be hosted at several hundred venues all over Switzerland from 9:00 to 13:00 on Friday, 01 August 2008. In the Canton of Geneva, brunch will be laid on at five locations this year. (See the end of this article for addresses.) Details of how to get to brunch venues by public transport are available at www.brunch.ch (just right-click Exploitations 2008 and select GE in the Canton box).

WORKOUT

Having enjoyed possibly your best breakfast ever in the most convivial surroundings, you can then think about how to burn off all those extra unwanted calories. Perhaps the guided bicycle tour on 02 August will appeal to those eager to learn more about Geneva's cultural heritage (visit www.samediduvélo.ch).

For art lovers, a stroll of no more than 4km around Geneva with an art guide on Sunday 03 August might be of more interest. This will also incorporate three visits of about 45 minutes each to artists' studios (see www.dimancheapied.ch). However, the more energetic, who might be eager to let off steam and burn off the carbohydrates could consider a speed-walk, run, roller-blade, or fast cycle around Geneva on this same day, especially as a circular route consisting of 25km of main roads will be closed to motorized vehicles to allow the more environmentally-friendly, man-powered modes of transport to be kings of the road. Along the way, various stands promoting culinary and cultural highlights, as well as sports attractions, will satisfy both hunger and hobbies.

FÊTES DE GENÈVE

With so many festivities and celebratory events occurring during the Fêtes de Genève - which take place from 31 July to 10 August 2008 - Geneva is definitely the place to be. The Tropical Village Festival will be worth visiting if you like salsa and margaritas. This festival offers free concerts, DJs and plenty of opportunity to swivel your hips and sample the traditional cuisine of Latin America. A bar selling wine, beer and cocktails and a stand for tattooing and face-painting should satisfy all age groups. Most

events take place at the Baby-Plage along the Quai Gustave-Ador. Further details are available at www.villagetropical.ch.

HOLIDAY

Interestingly enough, 01 August was only made an official national holiday in 1994, following a public vote on 26 September 1993. This date was inspired by the mention of "early August" in the Federal Charter of 1291. On 01 August, all Swiss municipalities, villages and towns celebrate their national day. In the city of Geneva, the festivities will be held at the Parc des Bastions. There will be speeches from Geneva officials, patriotic events (such as the throwing of national flags), paper lantern parades, children's fancy dress competitions and fireworks.

When I asked my Swiss mother-in-law, whose ancestors are from the cantons of Vaud and Berne, what 01 August signified to a Swiss national she replied, "As Switzerland's official national holiday, August 1st is important to the Swiss because it represents the roots of this democratic country. On this day, we can commemorate the actions of three courageous men at la Prairie du Grütli who laid the foundations for our democracy. Owing to these great acts 717 years ago, Swiss nationals can have a say in matters of concern and are called to vote on various pressing issues several times a year. This makes us feel that we have a stake in the future of our country. Long may it remain so!"

Such sentiments are worth toasting as the first crackles of fireworks resound at this year's Fêtes de Genève.

This year, Moscow is the host city of the choreographed firework display on Lac Léman, which will commence at 22:00 hrs on 09 August.

PHOTO COURTESY OF OLIVIER MICHE



BRUNCH AT THE FARM ADDRESSES

MADAME SARAH MEYLAN

13 Route de Vandoeuvres, 1223 Cologny

Tel: +41 (0)22 736 80 34

mobile: +41 (0)76 396 80 34

MONSIEUR MARC JAQUET

17 Rte des Carres, 1252 Meinier

Tel: +41 (0)22 750 15 22

mobile: +41 (0)79 291 44 65

FAMILLE CHOLLET, THÉRÈSE & JEAN-JACQUES

85 Route de Gy, 1251 Gy

Tel: +41 (0)22 759 15 92

UNION PAYSANNES GENEVOISES, SECTION PERLY-CERTOUX:

CLAIRE-LISE & WILLIAM RUMLEY

5 Chemin des Catons, 1258 Perly-Certoux

Tel: +41 (0)22 771 14 80

mobile: +41(0)79 782 56 10

DOMAINE DES CRÊTS, ROXANE & ACQUES POTTU, MALVAL

1283 Dardagny

Tel: +41 (0)76 320 22 24

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