

HANDWERK UND MUNDWERK

An exhibition by Mongolian photographer Sunderiya Erdenesaikhan as part of the SMARt (Sustainable Mountain Art) programme at Station Ritz, Niederwald, 29.12.2023 to 15.09.2024

During her master's degree at the University of Arts and Culture Mongolia, Mongolian photographer Sunderiya Erdenesaikhan travelled her home country. She visited nomadic families and documented how they produced their traditional dairy products. Having grown up mainly in the capital Ulaanbaatar, she realised how little urbanised young people in Mongolia knew about their grandparents' way of life. With the help of her photography, she wanted to introduce young people in the city to the old traditions. When she was given the opportunity to travel to Switzerland for a three-month artist residency as part of the SMARt programme after completing her studies in 2023, she discovered something the two mountainous countries had in common: both Mongolia and Switzerland are known for their dairy products. She decided to make the production of traditional foods in Valais the focus of her artist residency.

On the Riederalp, not far from where she lives in Bellwald, the "Verein 1606 Alpmuseum" runs the "Alpmuseum Nagulschbalmu". The aim of the association is to provide an insight into alpine farming in earlier times and to continue to use the alpine hut, the oldest residential building on the Riederalp, in its original function. Every week during the summer and autumn months, Roberta Brigger, a trained alpine dairywoman, demonstrates how cheese and butter used to be made on the alp. In the living room adjoining the hut kitchen and in the lovingly furnished museum, she tells her guests about everyday life on the alp. Soniya Erdenesaikhan accompanied Brigger for two days and was fascinated by the charisma of the Valais woman. The calmness and concentration with which she stirred the milk in the soot-blackened cheese vat over the open fire, checked its temperature with her arm and finally lifted the cheese mass out of the vat with the cloth stretched between her teeth and both hands fascinated her just as much as the numerous tourists who attended the cheese-making show.

In contrast to cheese and butter production, which Erdenesaikhan had already learnt about in her home country, making rye bread was a new experience for the artist. The history of rye in Valais can be traced back almost 2000 years. Rye was the main cereal in the mountain villages of Valais because it is undemanding and hardy. The village of Erschmatt is known for its traditional rye cultivation on the Zälg terraced landscape and for its variety garden. With guided tours and workshops, the "Erlebniswelt Roggen Erschmatt" association brings the production of rye bread from grain to bread to life. At the invitation of the association's president Edmund Steiner, the photographer was able to accompany a workshop with a school class.

In the variety garden, where old cultivated plants and accompanying flora are planted and seeds are preserved, the artist learnt from agronomist Laura Kuonen how rye cultivation promotes biodiversity and why the preservation of biodiversity is particularly important in view of climate change. A walk to the Zälg terraced landscape above the village also made it clear that maintaining and passing on the rye tradition is not just a question of nostalgia or tourism marketing, but also a question of preserving a unique cultural landscape characterised by rye cultivation.

What motivates people like Roberta Brigger or Edmund Steiner to put so much time and passion into maintaining and passing on old traditions? On the one hand, it is the desire to preserve and pass on the traditional craftsmanship that they experienced in their childhood, as well as the associated knowledge and experience. The mechanisation of agriculture and the industrialisation of food production have meant that younger people, even in rural Upper Valais, have largely lost touch with farming and food processing. On the other hand, they are also motivated by the joy of craftsmanship, the desire to lend a hand. It is the elementary need described by the philosopher Eduard Käser that one's own actions have a direct impact, that at the end of the day a result is visible, that there are two wheels of cheese or a row of fragrant loaves of bread. This experience is a quality of craftsmanship that has largely been lost in our working world.

But should we be careful not to romanticise the old days of poverty and hard work, and instead ask ourselves what we can carry over from traditional production methods into the present day? From the conversations with Brigger and Steiner, it is clear how respectful and economical our ancestors were with the natural resources available locally. Expiry date and hard bread? Not an issue! Everything was utilised or at least fed to the animals.

The simple equipment easily belies the amount of knowledge and experience that went into the traditional production processes. In addition, both alpine huts and bakehouses were used communally. In Erschmatt, this beautiful tradition has been preserved to this day. During the Old Year's week, baking takes place in the 400-year-old oven. Fire and leaven are passed from one family to the next. In Goms, too, historic bakehouses have been restored in recent years and put back into operation by village associations. Community activities, combined with the preservation of cultural heritage and cosy get-togethers - all this is once again appreciated by many people. The photographer was also present in Bellwald when the fire was lit, dough was kneaded and bread was baked in the bakehouse.

Sunderiya Erdenesaikhan was thrilled by the beautiful images of the bakery and the alpine hut, the handmade equipment, the hard-working hands and the expectant faces of the children. But of course she realised that the cheese and rye bread that the majority of Valaisans consume today are no longer made on the alp and in the village bakery. She therefore visited three small local businesses that specialise in producing quality products from local resources. In the exhibition, she contrasts the cheese kessi from the alpine hut and the old communal oven in Bellwald with the gleaming copper tanks and polished chrome steel appliances of the new alpine dairy in Grengiols and the village bakery in Fiesch. Next to Brigger in a woollen skirt with a linen blouse and apron are pictures of the organic mountain cheese dairy in Gluringen, where employees dressed in white with rubber boots, plastic aprons and hairnets are filling and labelling yoghurts. It is these small businesses that carry on local traditions - with modern machinery and the support of skilled labour from Eastern and Southern Europe - and where tradition also gives rise to something new. While time seems to have stood still in some of the pictures in the exhibition, others make it clear that it has not.

Sunderiya Erdenesaikhan's photographs show how traditional crafts and culinary heritage are cultivated, lived and passed on. In other words, craftsmanship and the art of the mouth, because as we know, the latter is not just for eating, but also for passing on experience and knowledge. And last but not least, the images demonstrate that our culinary heritage can be successfully carried into the future if tradition and innovation go hand in hand.

Luzia Carlen, exhibition curator