

Rice and wine

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Rice cultivation, which had come to Italy by way of Sicily, spread to the Po valley in the fifteenth century. Southern Switzerland drew rice as well as grain from Upper Italy, and rice was among the goods that central Switzerland received in exchange for its cattle and cheese, since it kept well and could be carried in bales.¹ Wine moved in both directions. The wines of the Mendrisiotto, the Luganese and the Locarnese supplied the local market and were carried north to Uri and the Leventina, whose climate did not allow viticulture. The wines of the Valtellina, which belonged to the Grisons Leagues from 1512 to 1797 with an interruption after 1620, went north over the Grisons passes: at the end of the eighteenth century the valley exported between 45,000 and 53,000 of the 75,000 hectolitres it produced to the Grisons, Tyrol and southern Germany.² Because wine was heavy and bulky, its trade over the Gotthard remained regional.

1 Cattle, horses and cheese

The main goods that the Confederates sent south were livestock and dairy products. From the late Middle Ages the farmers of central Switzerland and the Alpine valleys raised cattle and horses for sale in Lombardy, where the growing cities and the irrigated plain demanded meat, draught animals and dairy cows. The animals were driven over the Gotthard in late summer and autumn and sold at the border markets of Lugano, Bellinzona, Varese, Chiasso and Tirano and in the Lombard towns. The German term for this trade was *Welschlandhandel*, the trade with the Italian-speaking lands. It was in the hands of professional dealers who went directly to the Lombard markets, and in the eighteenth century it reached some 15,000 to 20,000 head of young cattle a year.³ The cattle trade brought silver into the pastoral cantons and financed their purchases of grain, salt and manufactured goods. It also created a class of drovers and dealers who knew the Lombard markets, extended credit to buyers and received payment in Milanese currency or in bills on Milan.

Cheese, above all the hard cheese of central Switzerland that became known in Italy as *sbrinz*, was the second main export. It was made on the alps of central Switzerland, matured for long periods and carried south by pack animals, as part of the exchange of cattle and cheese for grain, wine and rice that ran over the Gotthard, and over the Grimsel and Gries passes to Domodossola.⁴ Sbrinz was a transport and trading good as much as a food, since a mature hard cheese kept well and had a high value per weight. Cheese dealers from the pre-Alpine regions sometimes travelled far to reach their customers. The modern hiking route "ViaSbrinz" follows the line of this trade from Lake Lucerne over the Brünig, Grimsel and Gries passes into Italy.⁵

2 Notes

1. Wikipedia, "Rice production in Italy", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rice_production_in_Italy (consulted as a last resort): "By the fifteenth century, rice cultivation had spread from Sicily to other parts of Italy, namely to the Po Valley in the north and to the Tuscany region"; HLS, art. "Agrarmarkt" (as above): "Die Südschweiz bezog Reis und Getreide aus Oberitalien"; HLS, art. "Gotthardpass" (as above), on the exchange of cattle and cheese for grain, wine and rice. ↩
2. HLS, art. "Valtellina" (Guido Scaramellini, version of 05.01.2015), <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/007135/2015-01-05/>, for the entry of the Grisons into the valley on 24 June 1512, the restitution by the capitolato of Milan in 1639, the union with the Cisalpine Republic on 10 October 1797 and the wine exports: "su 75'000 hl prodotti ne venivano esportati da 45'000 a 53'000 nei Grigioni, nel Tirolo e in Germania meridionale". ↩
3. HLS, art. "Commercio di bestiame" (Hans Stadler, Italian translation Daniela Idra), <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/014040/>, on exports from the Confederate cantons attested from the late Middle Ages and on the border markets of Tirano, Chiasso, Bellinzona, Giubiasco, Lugano, Varese and Domodossola; German version, art. "Viehhandel" (Hans Stadler, version of 26.02.2013), <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/014040/2013-02-26/>, which defines the Welschlandhandel as "den Trieb von Grossvieh über die Pässe nach Italien" and gives annual exports of "gegen 15'000-20'000 Stück junges Rindvieh" in the eighteenth century; HLS, art. "Agrarmarkt" (as above): "Der Welschlandhandel dagegen lag in Händen einzelner Berufshändler, die direkt in die lombardischen Märkte gelangten." ↩

4. ViaStoria, "ViaSbrinz. Da, wo einst die Säumer zogen" (information panels, 2019), https://www.viastoria.ch/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Panels_ViaSbrinz_100x160.pdf: the mature hard cheese, today's Sbrinz, became in the late Middle Ages an export staple of central Switzerland on the north Italian markets, and the mule path over the Grimsel and Gries passes to Domodossola developed into a trade route; HLS, art. "Gotthardpass" (as above), on the exchange of "Vieh und Käse gegen Getreide, Wein und Reis" in which central Switzerland was involved for centuries; HLS, art. "Agrarmarkt" (as above): "Käsehändler aus voralpinen Gebieten unternahmen zum Teil weite Reisen zu ihren Abnehmern." ↩
5. ViaStoria, "ViaSbrinz" (as above), with the route Stansstad/Alpnachstad–Brünig–Grimsel–Gries– Ponte. ↩

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