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Erika Hänni is one of 36 hosts in the scheme. Photo: Caroline Bishop

Farmers' wives offer taste of Swiss rural life

Caroline Bishop · 25 Aug 2015, 15:21

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With most expats in Switzerland living or working in urban areas, few get the opportunity to experience traditional Swiss life in the countryside. But Swiss Tavolata hopes to change that by offering people the chance to have lunch on a farm. As the initiative celebrates its first birthday this September, Caroline Bishop takes her seat at the farmhouse table.

Erika Hänni loves her cows. That's obvious from the way she greets each by name and with an affectionate pat in the alpine pasture where they are grazing a short drive from her farmhouse.

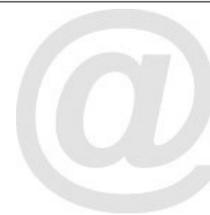
A visit to the field, which overlooks a stunning mountain vista in the Bernese Oberland, is a daily routine in the life of 48-year-old Hänni, who runs the Hofen natura-beef farm with her husband Niklaus in the village of Reichenbach im Kandertal 40 minutes train ride from Bern.

It's a life she clearly loves, saying "it makes me happy every day", so she's pleased to now be able to share it with visitors to her farm as a Swiss Tavolata host.

Hänni is one of 36 rural women across Switzerland hosting paying guests at their farm for lunch under the scheme which launched on September 9th last year.

Once or twice a month Hänni welcomes up to 12 guests to the beautiful 18th century farmhouse she shares with her family and prepares them a three-course homecooked meal using products cultivated on the farm.

Each host offers their own set menu, which has been sampled and approved by the scheme's regional



coordinators. At least 75 percent of the produce used must be produced on the farm or sourced locally, making it a highly personal experience.

Hänni's guests feast on spelt crispbreads and wild garlic pesto, veal stroganoff with homemade knöpfli and vegetables, caramel parfait with preserved plums, plus salad, herbal teas and sirops made from herbs she grows in her garden.

Hänni, who "loves to cook", joined the scheme after seeing an advert in the local paper.

The lunches bring in valuable extra income, but her principal motivation for participating is the enjoyment she gets out of showing her guests around.

And there's plenty to see, from the low-ceilinged wooden farmhouse to the donkey in the garden and the cow shed where the manure from four cows kept back from the pasture produces biogas captured in a giant inflatable bag – another way the farm makes money.

She also enjoys having her own business, independent from the farmwork she shares with her husband and son.

"I think it's good that women do Tavolata," Hänni tells The Local.

"In big restaurants it's always men who are the head chefs, but in the home it's usually the women who do the cooking."

Authentic travel

Anna Barbara Eisl-Rothenhäusler, who founded Swiss Tavolata with Brigit Langhart, says these women are a perfect fit for the scheme.

"They know how to cook – normally they do the cooking for lots of people each day – and also they know the rules of hygiene and health that they must follow."

Inspired by a similar Italian scheme, Swiss Tavolata wasn't initially intended to focus specifically on rural homes, but it developed that way after Langhart and Eisl-Rothenhäusler – who have a background in food, marketing and publishing – formed a partnership with the Swiss union of female farmers and rural women (USPF) to find hosts.

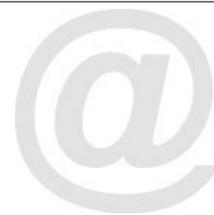
"I think it's very important that we showcase these people," Eisl-Rothenhäusler tells The Local, because normally you have no contact with farmers in Switzerland if you are travelling around."

She feels the scheme fits well with the current trend for authentic, untouristy experiences as demonstrated by the huge popularity of Airbnb and the fashion for farmers' markets and farm shops.

"People want to have things that are really authentic of that country when they travel," says Eisl-Rothenhäusler.

"Perhaps it's also about being voyeuristic... we want to see how people live, to discover the life of rural people. Normally [guests] all want to know how they live, and how it works on the farm."

Guests book and pay in advance on the scheme's website, choosing their location, host and date from those



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available.

As with most things in Switzerland, it's not cheap, but the set price of 96 francs (including wine and booking fee) per guest allows the host, who receives 85 percent of the fee, "to earn a reasonable hourly rate," stresses Eisl-Rothenhäusler.

"Once she's in a routine she can earn between 30-50 francs an hour, and I think that's right. If not, there'd be no point for her to do it."

To date the 36 hosts have welcomed around 1,000 guests between them.

"It's not bad," says Eisl-Rothenhäusler. "People are very interested, but... you must plan this at least a couple of days in advance. It's a bit different to going to a restaurant spontaneously."

Success may be modest at present, but organizers hope to grow the business to include up to 500 hosts in a few years time, Eisl-Rothenhäusler tells me.

That may depend on how well the scheme can reach international visitors. To date, most guests have been Swiss, with just a smattering of other nationalities including Chinese and Russian.

While not all the hosts speak English, Eisl-Rothenhäusler doesn't think that's a barrier for foreign visitors.

"One can communicate by hands, by smiles," she says. "It's an experience that touches all the senses."

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