

cooking clubs and food festivals: tasting your way through swiss culture at aelo swiss academy

You land with two suitcases, a phone full of untranslated messages from your landlord, and the vague hope that somehow, somewhere, you will find people. The first week in a new country is mostly logistics and loneliness in equal measure. Everyone at AELO Swiss Academy knows this feeling, because almost everyone arrived from somewhere else. And the thing that quietly breaks the ice, again and again, is not a workshop or a welcome speech. It is food.

A shared kitchen does something a classroom cannot. It puts you shoulder to shoulder with people, gives your hands a job while your nerves settle, and hands you a subject, cheese, bread, butter, potatoes, that everyone has an opinion on. This is why cooking clubs and food festivals sit at the heart of student life here. They are not extras bolted onto the program. They are how a foreign country slowly stops feeling foreign.

the kitchen as a welcome mat

Switzerland takes its food seriously, but not in the polished, restaurant-guide way you might expect. The serious stuff happens at home, in village bakeries, at market stalls, in mountain dairies. The country holds on to regional identity through what it eats: rösti on one side of the old linguistic divide, fondue and raclette in the valleys of Valais, polenta and chestnuts in Ticino, capuns and walnut tart in Graubünden. There is even a running national joke about the [Locarno aviation school](#) "röstigraben", the imaginary trench between German-speaking and French-speaking Switzerland, named after a potato dish. Food is the shorthand people use to explain who they are.

That can feel intimidating at first. If your German is a handful of phrases and your Swiss German is nonexistent, sitting down to a table where dialect flies back and forth is a lot. Here is the empathetic truth: nobody expects you to follow. What people notice is whether you try, whether you taste, whether you ask what something is. A plate of something homemade does most of the talking for you.

This is exactly the gap the cooking clubs fill. They give you a low-stakes room where the pressure to perform conversationally disappears, because there are onions to chop and potatoes to watch. You learn the vocabulary you will actually use, not the vocabulary of a textbook chapter about the airport.

inside a cooking club evening

The clubs at AELO Swiss Academy tend to run in a simple rhythm, usually every couple of weeks during term, in the academy's shared teaching kitchen or in a member's flat when the group is small. Attendance is mixed on purpose. You will find someone who grew up in a restaurant kitchen next to someone who has never held a proper knife, and that mix is the point. Skill is not the currency. Showing up is.

A raclette evening is the classic initiation. Someone brings a half wheel of raclette cheese, the kind made in Valais, where the name comes from "racler", to scrape. The wheel sits under the grill until the surface bubbles and browns, then it is scraped over boiled potatoes in long, satisfying ribbons, with pickled onions and small gherkins on the side. The smell gets into your coat and stays there for days, which older members will tell you is a badge of honor. Somewhere between the second and third scraping, someone teaches you "En guete", the Swiss German way of saying enjoy your meal, and you realize you have just been adopted a little.

A typical month in the club looks roughly like this:



1. one evening built around a Swiss classic, such as rösti or zopf, the braided Sunday bread
2. one evening where members cook dishes from their own home countries
3. a weekend market trip to buy what the next session needs
4. a bigger shared event, like a fondue night that doubles as a welcome for new arrivals
5. a planning session where the next theme is argued over, cheerfully and at length

That last item matters more than it sounds. Choosing the next menu is where the group becomes a group. People defend their grandmother's version of a dish. People negotiate about how much chili is acceptable. People discover that the quiet classmate from Ticino has very firm views about polenta.

Costs are kept humane. Most evenings work out to somewhere between ten and fifteen francs a head, pooled in cash or through a group chat payment. Leftovers are split into containers, because no one who has ever been new and hungry in a strange city lets food go to waste.

markets, seasons, and the vocabulary you actually use

If the club evenings are the heart, the market trips are the lungs. Most Swiss towns of any size keep a weekly market, and the club treats these as outings in their own right. You learn the calendar by mouth before you learn it from a book. White asparagus appears in May and June and vanishes just as fast. Stone fruit floods the stalls in August. In October the first wheels of vacherin mont d'or arrive, a soft, spoonable winter cheese sold in its round wooden box, and someone will inevitably suggest baking one whole with a clove of garlic and a splash of white wine, the way families across the plateau do on cold Sunday evenings.

The market is also where your language practice becomes real. Vendors are, on the whole, patient people. They will wait while you assemble "ein Kilo Kartoffeln, bitte" or stumble through a French greeting, and they will forgive you when Swiss German arrives and you catch perhaps a third of it. You learn words like "reif", ripe, and "fein", fine or lovely, because they are attached to things you can taste, not things you memorized.

There is a quiet lesson in economics here too. Cheese at a market costs more than cheese at a discount supermarket, and the club debates this openly. Sometimes the answer is yes, the raw-milk wheel from the alpine dairy is worth the extra francs, especially when the maker is standing right there. Sometimes the answer is no, and the supermarket's moitié-moitié blend, the half gruyère, half vacherin combination that forms the backbone

of a classic fondue, does the job perfectly well for a group of twenty. Knowing the difference is a small skill, but it is a real one.

festivals worth building a semester around

Food festivals are where Swiss culture shows up in full costume, and the club keeps a loose calendar of the ones worth the train fare. Some are loud and crowded. Some smell of woodsmoke and hay. All of them involve eating standing up, which is apparently a constitutional requirement.

| festival | where and when | what you will eat |

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| Zibelemärit | Bern, fourth Monday of November | onion tarts, onion braids, sugared onion figures |

| Fête des Vendanges | Neuchâtel, long weekend in late September | local wines, festival food, parade-day treats |

| Fasnacht | Basel (and Lucerne), after Ash Wednesday | flour soup and onion tart, often all you can get |

| Désalpage | alpine valleys, September into October | raclette from stall grills, alpine cheeses, dried meats |

| 1 August brunch | farms across the country, national day | farm eggs, bread, cheese, honey, rivers of coffee |

A few of these deserve a word of warning, offered kindly. Zibelemärit, the great onion market of Bern, starts early and cold, and by mid-morning the old town is a joyous chaos of onion-shaped trinkets, confetti battles, and children armed with paper hammers. Go with the flow or go home tired. Fasnacht in Basel famously begins at four in the morning with the Morgestraich, when the city lights go out and glowing lanterns drift through the dark to the sound of drums and piccolos. It is unforgettable and it is loud. If noise overwhelms you, there is no shame in watching from a side street or arriving for the afternoon instead.

The Désalpage processions, when the cows come down from their summer pastures wearing flowers and enormous bells, are the gentlest of the bunch. You stand in a village in Valais or the Bernese Oberland, the air smells of hay and manure and woodsmoke, a stall grills raclette for passersby, and a farmer's bell rings an octave lower than anything you thought a cow could produce. Members usually describe this as the day Switzerland made sense to them.

One more belongs on the dream list even though it will not reward most current students: the Fête des Vignerons in Vevey, a winegrowers' celebration staged roughly once a generation, last held in 2019. It is a reminder that these traditions run on longer clocks than a semester. You are joining something that will outlast your stay, and that is part of the comfort.

when the fondue seizes: the part nobody photographs

Now for the honest part, because nobody's kitchen life is as photogenic as the festival brochure. Food fails. The club has watched more fondue seize into a rubbery ball than anyone cares to admit. The fixes are genuinely useful to know: keep the heat low, stir in a slow figure eight, and if the cheese still tightens, whisk in a spoonful of cornstarch dissolved in a little white wine or lemon juice. The old rule about not drinking cold water alongside fondue is tradition rather than science, but hot tea is a safe companion and nobody will ever scold you for it.

Rösti goes wrong too. Grated potato turns grey if it waits too long, and every club has tasted at least one batch that was charcoal on the outside and lukewarm in the middle. The recovery, pressed into a pan with more butter and patience than seems reasonable, usually works. And when it does not, there is always bread, and there is always the story, which gets retold at every fondue night for the rest of the year.

The point of telling you this is not slapstick. It is that failure in a cooking club is cheap, shared, and funny, which makes it the best kind of practice for the bigger failures of settling abroad. If you can laugh over a pot of seized cheese with people you met six weeks ago, you can survive a lot of other first attempts.

shy, broke, or eating differently: there is still a seat

A word to the