

The Real Swiss Cheese

by: HG Holladay

When one travels to a foreign country, there are certain expectations about that country's culture: In France, one expects excellent food and snobbery. In Italy, one expects even better food but also sass. In Germany, one expects beer and sternness. And in Switzerland, one basically expects Germany but a little more west. Or, at least I did.

Natalie, Rebecca, Kayla, and I were sitting awkwardly around a dinner table filled with eight other Swiss girls. They were all laughing and talking (in German mainly, but alternating between English) while we simply sat and smiled and stared at the glasses of wine they had placed before us. As private school attending Americans, we didn't know how to act around (be sure to whisper!) alcohol. It just added another facet to our awkward.

Like we normally did for a weekend trip, we had woken up at 2:40 am in our London flat in order to catch the number 36 night bus, so we could get on another bus that took us to the airport for our 7:10 flight to Zurich, Switzerland. After landing, we took a train into the heart of Zurich. Once we arrived in Zurich, we met Natalie's friend Elena who did a foreign exchange program at Natalie's high school. Natalie thought our time studying abroad would be a great time to go visit her old friend in her actual home country! Elena was letting us stay with her for the weekend, and she took us to her friends house to have "traditional Swiss dinner." It felt so nice to be in a real house again after two months of hostels! But because of the long day of travels, and my natural state of awkward, this dinner was not starting off well.

Most of Elena's friends had also studied in America, so everyone spoke pretty good English. They all danced around the kitchen like old friends do, preparing dinner while we stood there watching not knowing what to do. They sliced cheese, washed potatoes, prepared a salad, and put everything into its respective bowl. Her friends alternated be-

tween English and German like they were switching between channels on a TV. To us, perfect, accented English. Between themselves, English when we could hear the story, German for sharing secrets (not that we would have known who they were talking about). But that didn't make our evening any more awkward than the normal amount of that comes with two groups of strangers eating dinner together. I was actually finding it interesting to listen to the German. Eventually they told us to sit down so we wouldn't be standing awkwardly anymore.

They lined the middle of the table with cheese, salad, bread, cherry tomatoes, and potatoes. In the middle of the table sat a contraption that was completely foreign to me. It kind of looked like a pancake griddle, but it had two layers with grooves on the bottom. "What the heck is this?" I asked. The girls laughed and explained it was for melting cheese.

Elena silenced the room to clear up our obvious confusion.

"We are going to have a very traditional Swiss dinner," she said, in an accented English.

"Real swiss cheese melted over potatoes." They were very quick to emphasize the 'real' in the swiss cheese.

"It's the kind without the holes," one pointed out.

"I'm so confused why Americans did that," another said.

But hole-y cheese or not, I could not be more excited: cheese and potatoes are two of my favorite food groups. To engage in this traditional dinner, we placed little blocks of real swiss cheese in a little scoop, then placed the scoop inside the machine. It then melts the cheese, and you pour it onto potatoes. It was one of the best meals I've ever had: full of starch and deliciousness.

Throughout the meal, we talked about our different cultures, each asking questions about the other.

"What is your university like?"

“How do you like Europe?”

“How did you like living in America?”

“What differences have you noticed between here and London?”

“Did you like the cheese with holes in it, or no?”

Between a few awkward silences, we continued discussing differences in cultures. We were able to learn so much about our different cultures, just by discussing little things like our hobbies and daily routines. But by discussing the differences in our lives, I was able to see the similarities. We were just a group of twenty year old girls who all face the same problems: boys, school issues, over bearing parents, and even more controversial issues like religion and alcohol. We were from different continents, but we faced these same issues, and these issues don't change just because the language does.

When Elena's friends would just randomly start speaking German, it was actually really cool to listen to and watch them interact. German is such a harsh language that I had often just assumed all German speaking people would be harsh, too. These girls showed me that no matter what language we speak, we are all the same. We all face the same issues. We all laugh with our friends at inside jokes, and enjoy making new friends, and both feel a little awkward when silence takes over the table. Just because they speak German does not mean they are as harsh as the language sounds. I never thought about the similarities I had with other cultures, only our differences. But by realizing our similarities, the differences in our cultures are so much more interesting. I have learned to appreciate the differences between cultures not because we are different, but because we are the same.

Who knew you could learn so much from real Swiss cheese?