

Free water debate fizzes in restaurants

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Instead of Carolyn's Bodensee Bulletin

As you probably know, Carolyn and Mani have left their home in Paraparaumu to hibernate - or would you rather call it summernate? - in Switzerland, in their second home, in the corner between the Old Rhine and the Bodensee. At the time when this Helvetia has to go to the printer, we haven't been able to establish contact with them; we hope nothing serious has happened to them.

We try and fill Carolyn's page with articles we have kept in the bottom drawer for a while; I hope they are not too stale - and I hope we can bring Carolyn's Bodensee Bulletin again in the next Helvetia. *tb*

Free water debate fizzles in restaurants

Contrary to popular belief, there is no law obliging restaurants to provide water free of charge. A free carafe or glass of water may one day be a thing of the past in Swiss restaurants. Both in and outside Switzerland water is now regarded as an important source of revenue for restaurateurs.

Everyone's had the experience: ask for water in a restaurant and you will almost always be asked to decide between "sparkling or still". Although this appears a straightforward question, it is also clear that what will be served will come in a bottle and will not be free. It is still possible - if you don't mind being regarded as a skinflint by fellow guests or the waiter - to ask for tap water. But whether it comes free of charge is uncertain.

More and more restaurants are charging for tap water in different ways. Some don't charge the customer if another beverage is consumed; some put it on the bill according to a flat rate, and others charge between SFr2.50 and SFr6 for a carafe and SFr2 for a glass.

Many people think that establishments are obliged, by law, to provide a free glass of water if requested. This, say the authorities in the western canton of Fribourg, is an "urban myth". Fribourg legislation contains nothing on the subject - like all other cantons with the exception of Ticino, where the restaurateur "must provide water free of charge when serving a main meal".

That said, the restaurant isn't exactly free to do what it wants because a federal law makes it obligatory to put up a sign that is "clearly on show and easily readable" about service prices. This is seldom the case for tap water.

Anticipating possible disputes with disgruntled customers, the Swiss associations representing cafés and restaurants at both cantonal and national levels strongly recommend their members to be disciplined and stick to the law.

The associations also emphasise that serving tap water creates costs for the restaurateur - the purchase of carafes, extra washing up and more work for staff. They also note that in some countries, notably Italy, there is a fixed charge for place settings.

The time when a carafe of water was spontaneously brought to the table as a welcome gesture is perhaps disappearing. But in the long term, will it really save the profession by charging for a simple glass of water?

One thing is certain: the "free water" debate is taking place around the world. The practice of making people pay for tap water has been developing, with nuances, in many places - and people are sitting up and reacting.

Fashionable restaurants and the mayors of several big cities - including San Francisco, New York, London and Venice - have launched a campaign to encourage consumers, and in particular customers of cafés and restaurants, to return to tap water. The debate is inseparable from the mounting global criticism about the massive increase in consumption of bottled water.

In Switzerland Jacques Neyrinck, a politician from the centre-right Christian Democratic Party, has presented a parliamentary initiative demanding a ban on water sold in plastic bottles and encouraging the drinking of tap water. *from swissinfo*

The Challenges of farming in Jura

Let's have a look at farming in the Franches Montagnes in the canton Jura.

The land is fairly flat - on 1000 m above sea level. It does not rain a lot - only about 1000 -1200 mm per year. What makes it worse is the fact that the water simply disappears into the ground and the chalk underneath. Where the layer of soil is shallow, cows and horses sometimes break through and find themselves a few meters deeper in a hole. Occasionally, a layer of clay prevents the water from disappearing; there we find a bog or wetland. The summers are short, only 4 or 5 months.

A great part of the land, the less productive land, is communal; the rest, the more productive land, is individually owned. The farmers grow barley and oats and make hay on their individual land and send their cows and horses onto the communal land for grazing. The farmhouses are dotted on the boundary between the privately owned and the communal land to give the cows access to grazing - and the farmer access to his private land. Of course the number of grazing animals is limited; a farmer who owns more land and can therefore produce more hay for winter is entitled to send more cows onto the communal land.

Anybody interested in swapping his New Zealand farm for a farm in the Jura? *tb*