

Abondance

A Case Study of Pastoral Alpine Agriculture



Trip Description

Farming communities can be isolated, but often share common challenges even with agricultural populations in distant countries. Learning exchanges can be helpful to see what challenges other communities face and approaches they have taken to address them. Conversation is critical to understanding and comparing situations and synthesizing ideas to address old problems with fresh perspectives.

This document summarizes an intensive 3-day visit in May 2024 to the village of La Chappelle-d'Abondance in the Haute-Savoie region of France. The trip was planned between an Extension agent at Washington State University in the U.S., the Haute-Savoie Territorial Forest Technician with the French National Forest Office who oversees forest and interacts with alpage allotment owners, and a local landowner in the valley.



Abbaye d'Abondance

The Study Site – Abondance in the Haute-Savoie

Alpine forage has played an essential role in the development and sustenance of the Haute-Savoie. Canons, or priests, of Saint Augustin established an abbey in Abondance in the 12th century and were influential in the development of cheese-making in this rugged, alpine region. Grass/forage was described as a gift that is miraculous in that it is renewable, but is limited and must be managed carefully. Cheese is the product that holds agriculture together in the region. Cheese has an almost religious significance in the region first because of its connection with the abbey and second because of its centrality to survival of the people and culture for the past 1,000 years.

Another significant feature of the region is its water. The Mont de Grange massif catches weather, and through snow and soil infiltration stores water at the land surface and in aquifers, feeding springs that support wildlife, sensitive habitat like wetlands, livestock, and humans.

The Abondance village, or commune, has kept up the land management structured established by the monks for the past 1,000 years.

- The surface area of the commune of Abondance is 55,84 km²
- The surface area owned by commune in the commune is 30,99 km²
- The surface area of pasture owned by commune in the commune is around 10 – 15 km² (or around 50% of that area owned by Abondance)
- The surface area of forests owned by commune in commune is around 10 – 15 km²
- Surface of rock mountain owned by commune in commune is around 5 km²
- The town is 70 km from Geneva and 15 km from the Swiss border crossing to Morgins

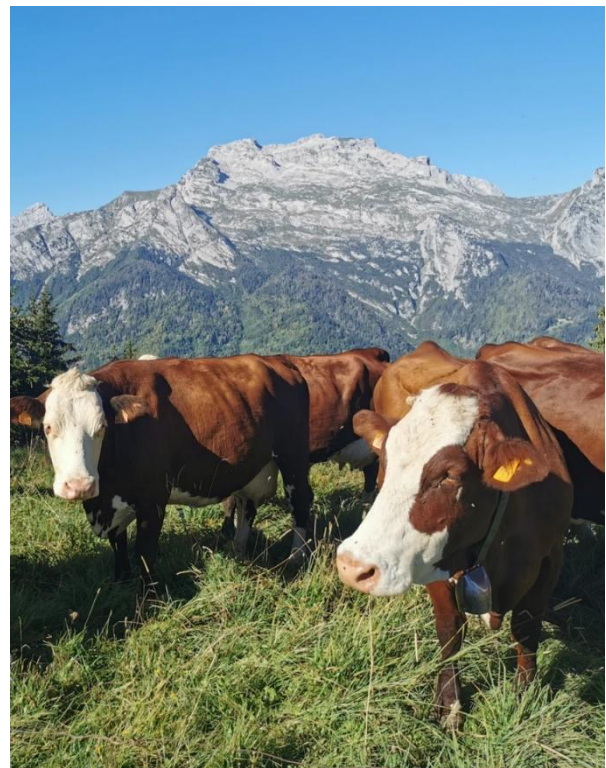
Forest encroachment is a major issue. Young family members began leaving the area for jobs near Geneva (many with Evian) in the 1960s. As a result, there were fewer farmers using fewer hectares of land. Because of this, many hillsides are covered with 60- to 70-year-old spruce, a substantial loss of pasture marking the beginning of a decline in farms and farmers in the valley.

Agricultural Activities

- Raising and grazing milk cows, distinguished by alpine pastures, or “alpages”, and haying in the valleys
- Raising other small livestock (rabbits, chickens) on pastoral homesteads, as well as goats, pigs, and some horses
- Breeding Abondance bulls to maintain the breed genetics and standard
- Cheese-making, which has been a key to survival and economic viability
- The town, the local cattle breed, and the local cheese all share the Abondance name

Change in the Valley

- The farm population was more or less stable until the 1950s
- In 60s many youth left for city jobs in Geneva with Evian; this is considered an era when industrialization/modernization really started to impact the Haute-Savoie
- There were also many economic changes that happened since that time. For example, we were told it used to be you could get a book of stamps for one egg, and now you can get one stamp for one egg



Abondance cattle grazing. Photo credit: Etablissement Public de Formation Agricole à Contamine-sur-Arve

- The farms were smaller then, each farm would have a maximum of 10 cows for milking and cheesemaking, some rabbits, chickens, a pig for fat and oil, and the bigger farms a horse; while some kept bulls
- It is said that everyone knew each other then, and there was a constant mixing and sharing. This created a very social aspect in the 1960s and before
- Now it is different. For example, as the population has increased, the school population has decreased; it is more visitors, not families living there. The newcomers from Switzerland and the UK sometimes don't integrate, and don't speak French; then cultural fabric is steadily lost



Real estate advertisement along the road in La Chappelle-d'Abondance

Farm Numbers

- Estimates of folks we talked to suggested there is now somewhere between 10 and 50 farms operating (or around 30-50 farmers), among a population of 1,800
- In the 1960s this was opposite, with 95% of the population farming, according to those people we spoke with
- For example, around Lake des Plagnes, there used to be 15 farms and now there is only one. If you look at the hillsides you can see old pastures covered by 60 to 70-year-old spruce, but this unfortunate and illustrative dynamic is not pointed out to visitors.



A hillside that was formerly a pasture approximately 60-70 years earlier, coinciding with youth departure to take jobs in town and changes in the agriculture economy

Economics and Marketing

- Economically it is very difficult to maintain the profitability of a farm, let alone start one, and the farmers pointed this out
- Costs of production have increased dramatically since 2020, and the economics of milk and cheese are very difficult. Farmers pointed out some observations:
- The subsidies are needed but they create dependence
- Increasing milk prices won't work, because it is a temporary fix, a band aid
- Who buys the milk or cheese at the higher price, do they buy as much?
- Some farms have formed associations, or 'accounting groups' of farmers, cheesemakers, and sellers. This helps them market their product overseas including in the U.S. and Japan
- Increasing costs creates an imperative to increase either production or the price of milk/cheese. If price can't be increased, pressure builds to increase production which is limited by land area, breed productivity, and AOC regulations regarding feed. Farms have to find ways to increase sales to cover costs, which may lead to conflict in maintaining breed and AOC standards by creating pressure to use some feed outside the valley or modify cow genetics to increase milk output. Farmers can get stuck between a rock and a hard place, and society needs to help offer policy and economic solutions



Abondance cheese served with breakfast at a local restaurant

Farming and Tourism

- Farming is both in conflict with tourism and dependent on it to varying degrees
- Tourism competes with the farms for flat space for haying, it drives up the cost of inputs, and creates potential conflict in the alpine regions
- Winter used to be the only time tourists would arrive, but now with hiking, running, and mountain biking there are tourists in the summer too
- Farmers use the mountains to work, and tourists to recreate and the conflict wears farmers down
- If they had to pay, farmers in some cases couldn't afford to purchase their own cheese
- Some prominent trailheads don't include information about grazing, alpages, farmers or livestock in interpretive exhibits, a conspicuous absence for such important parts of the pastoral landscape, especially when the farm may be in site of the trailhead



Interpretive exhibit at the Lake de Plagnes trailhead

- Tourism does draw visitors who are interested in cheese, good food, and very likely farming as well if they had a chance to learn about it

Appellation d'origine contrôlée

- This is a critical innovation supporting viability of farming in the region. Without this, farming may not exist anymore at all in the region
- The process of developing the AOC for Abondance cheese in the 1990s "...made us farmers understand our product better", the value of its distinctiveness
- The AOC naturally limits supply/production of Abondance cheese to about 30-40 producers, thereby increasing the value of the product



Bertoud at a local restaurant in Abondance, served in the required Bertoud dish.

The dish 'Bertoud' was developed from Abondance cheese, and can only be served in a trademarked dish, bringing attention to this special food. Does it bring sufficient attention to the farmers themselves?

Young Farmers

- There seems to be different perspectives between young and old as to whether young people are interested in agriculture, though we cannot comment on the overall balance of available farmers in the area
- We observed many enthusiastic young farmers in town, and at the regional agricultural school: *Etablissement Public de Formation Agricole à Contamine-sur-Arve* (<https://epl.contamine.educagri.fr/>)
- As an example, one young farmer, son of a local shopkeeper, had interned with one of the farmers we interviewed, had worked as a chef, in a cheese cellar, and is currently working as the milker and cheesemaker at a local alpage. He is a good example of a young person putting together their own training opportunities to work in this field. There were numerous students working at the agriculture vocational school, and eager to work at the school's alpine farm (<https://alpagecoledesulens.wixsite.com/website>)



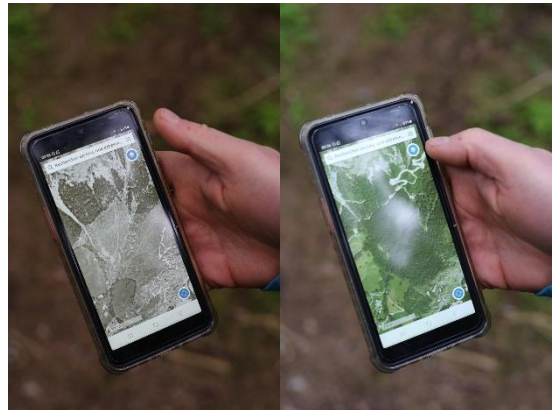
The regional technical agriculture school. And an image of a student managing grazing animals posted to the agricultural school's "Alpine Farm" educational facility website.

Challenges

- The costs of starting new farms for young people is very high
- Established farmers don't think young people want to farm or make cheese
- The current commune pastures and alpages are occupied and there is no space for new farmers to begin
- Tourists are not aware of the challenges faced by farmers, and there is not enough interpretive exhibits to help them learn
- Visitors and farmers see the area differently: visitors see it as a place for recreation, farmers as a place for work and livelihood
- Farmers don't think the visitors or others would care if they disappear. They may be both right and wrong, depending on the visitor. Some may be receptive and want to help.
- Production costs are out of anyone's control. Structural fixes must be developed in Paris.

Weaknesses

- There are no interpretive exhibits that point out the forest encroachment and loss of pastures. This is a dramatic change, but the untrained eye cannot see it
- There is very little information available about farming available to the visitor generally. No guidebooks talk about farming, only food (ironically), hiking, and historical sites
- Farmers are too busy and inaccessible for visitors to learn from them.
- There are few cultural exhibits or educational opportunities to maintain local culture such as working with wool, traditional communal oven baking, cheese-making carving (traditional doves) or other traditional crafts



Satellite imagery of forest cover on a hillside near La Chappelle-d-Abondance. The image shows a dramatic expansion of forest cover and pasture loss.

Opportunities

- Artisan products could be utilized better to tell the story not just of the food, but the farming culture.
- Farmers may be wrong in their perception about visitors' interest in farming. Is there an opportunity to support more agritourism operators who can facilitate visitors to learn about traditional and current farming culture? Perhaps a farming family member could do this?
- Erect a great stone at the entrance of the village which quickly explains the importance of Alpage life.
- Several farmers in the Department, some of them younger farmers, were interested and eager to share more about their business operations and work. Perhaps that enthusiasm could be harnessed to help in education and cultural exchange.
- Given the forest encroachment, measure the closing evolution over the last 70 years with all consequences negative and positive.

- Create educational exhibits about these forest dynamics for visitors, being explicit about the difficulty of farming, costs, and so forth.
- Develop materials calculating or illustrating the value to the commune of the farmers as cost-effective partners in land management, and the providers of benefits through farming culture, cheese-making, and related traditions.
- Support clubs or associations to preserve and share traditional practices such as baking in a communal oven, fiber arts, cheese-making, carving, and others.
- Create a fund to which farmers can apply competitive for equipment and infrastructure investments to help them contend with high production costs and frequent equipment replacements due to rugged terrain.
- Press tour operators and tourism guide companies to include information about farming in guidebooks; develop local experiential learning (farm stays, farm tours, hands-on cooking classes) to teach about farming culture in the region.

