

Original article published in the Bündner Woche, December 16, 2025, p. 27

Research in Graubünden

New Paths for Mountain Agriculture

Research and practice draw on regional knowledge



Mountain agriculture plays an important role in the Safiental.

Image: Mathias Kunfermann

An Innovation Center is currently being established in Tenna in the Safiental, aiming to open up new perspectives and opportunities for mountain agriculture in Graubünden. Rebecca Göpfert from the Institute of Environment and Natural Resources at ZHAW has been accompanying the project since its beginnings and explains: “With the Innovation Center, we do not want to preserve mountain agriculture as something museum-like, but to make it future-proof, through new operational approaches, well-thought-out value chains, and innovative products that build on the raw materials and resources available in mountain regions.”

The center is part of the Regional Development Project (PRE) Safiental and is supported by an association. Since June, the Innovation Center has been in the implementation phase, and the administrative office is currently being set up. The goal is to create a place where agriculture, research, and processing work closely together directly in the mountain region. The core of the future infrastructure is planned to be the Alpine Food Lab at Hotel Alpenblick. Here, farmers will work together with Agroscope, ZHAW, and other partners to develop and test new products. Göpfert emphasizes: “It is important that we keep the entire value chain in mind, from cultivation and processing to marketing. Mountain agriculture also plays a key role in biodiversity, so this must always be considered. New products should be site-adapted and sustainable.”

Initial pilot projects are already underway. Agroscope is testing the cultivation of lupins in the Safiental and the Surselva and is developing hybrid products that combine plant-based and animal protein. A first cream cheese has already been tasted. “Adding lupins makes the product more sustainable and environmentally friendly,” explains Göpfert. A second project focuses on mountain vegetables and their refinement, particularly through fermentation. For a region with more than seventy percent organic farms, such methods open up new perspectives, ranging from preservation to marketable specialty products. These initiatives are complemented by local ideas such as mountain potato chips or the revival of old arable land. Ecological and economic viability are always kept in view.

Another central theme is knowledge transfer. Graubünden has more than 150 valleys, and many farms operate in isolation. The Innovation Center aims to bridge these distances and act as a platform. “It is important that people with shared interests can connect,” says Göpfert. In this context, science does not see itself as setting the agenda, but as a partner: “It should not be science that delivers the solution. Ideas should

emerge together.” Climate change is also altering the framework conditions: longer growing seasons, new crops, but at the same time more drought and extreme weather events. For the innovation center, this provides additional motivation to work together with farms to develop new solutions and make mountain agriculture more resilient and diverse.

Rebecca Göpfert and Daniela Heinen



Rebecca Göpfert. Image:
ZHAW, Frank Brüderli

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The Research Group Tourism and Sustainable Development at IUNR operates an external ZHAW site at the Center da Capricorns in Wergenstein. It implements projects in nature- and culture-based tourism, strengthens rural regions, and promotes exchange, cooperation, and sustainable development.

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