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COMTÉ
*France's famous
mountain cheese*

CALVADOS

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**MACARONI AND CHEESE
IS ALL GROWN UP**



Comté

France's famous mountain cheese

BY NICKI SIZEMORE

PHOTOS COURTESY OF NICKI SIZEMORE



The road twists through a patchwork of olive and emerald pastures bordered by dark pine and gently rising slopes. Cowbells ding softly like clock chimes, muffled by an enthusiastic bird trilling overhead. Driving through the Franche-Comté, the bustle of Paris seems like another world, even though the area is a mere 2-hour train ride away. The Franche-Comté, a region in the Jura Mountains of Eastern France neighboring Switzerland, is famous for medieval architecture, Roman ruins, ancient salt mines, extensive hiking and biking trails — and cheese.

The region is home to several renowned artisan cheeses: Morbier, Vacherin Mont d'Or, Bleu de Haut-Jura, and, of course, Comté. With one of the longest histories in France and the largest present-day production of any French AOC (Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée) cheese — 50,000 tons in 2008 — Comté is unique not only in its cultural and economic roots in the region but also in its small-scale, yet high-yield fabrication methods.

a long history of cooperation

Driving into Miège, a wisp of a village, is like a trip across centuries.



With its narrow streets, ancient stone buildings and red tiled roofs, it isn't hard to picture the town as it stood hundreds of years ago, when Comté first began to be produced here. Today, Comté remains at the heart of the village's economic structure.

Comté has had an important role in village organization throughout the Jura mountains for nearly a thousand years, beginning in the Middle Ages when inhabitants began transforming milk into large wheels of cheese that could provide nourishment for an entire family during the long, harsh winters. Then called Vachelin, a single

wheel required 500 liters, or 132 gallons, of milk to produce. Too large to make at home, farmers banded together to form cooperatives, in which they would bring their milk to a village fructerie, now known as fruitière, or cheesemaker, who would craft the wheels of cheese.

This system of cooperative production continues today. Some 3,200 dairy farmers provide the milk for Comté, which they deliver daily to about 170 fruitières. Once the wheels are made, they get transported to one of the region's 20 aging cellars to mature. This cooperative system is pro-



HOW TO TASTE COMTÉ

Tasting cheese is a lot like tasting wine — each of the senses should be engaged to fully appreciate the range of flavors and aromas. Cheese educator and importer Daphne Zepos, owner of Essex Street Cheese in New York City, offers this guide a Comté tasting:

1. First, the Comté needs to come to room temperature, then sit out for another hour or more to develop all its flavors. Since Comté is a subtle cheese — “not like a brassy Pecorino” — some of its flavors will be lost if it is not at the right temperature.

2. Next, look at the Comté. Use your eyes to check out the variation of color from the rind all the way into the cheese paste. The rind should have an even color without cracks or dents and should protect the interior. The color of the interior, or paste, can vary from white to pale yellow. Summer Comté will be more yellow from the carotene in the fresh grass.

3. Bring the cheese closer to the face, breathing in the strong caramel aromas. Snap the cheese in two right underneath your nostrils and sniff. You should smell more fresh, yogurt aromas.

4. Now, play with the cheese. Feel the rind. As with a nice leather suitcase, the rind should feel like the grain of a saddle, not sandy, sticky or grainy. Smash the cheese between your fingertips to see what the texture feels like. Does it crumble or become like silly putty?

5. Taste the cheese. Put a small piece in your mouth and think of the flavor in stages. As you chew, you'll release different flavors, which you should write down. Also, examine the texture. Is it creamy or rubbery?

6. Finally, swallow. This is very important. When you swallow, all of the flavors of Comté really blossom. It's a cheese with a long aftertaste. Exhale through the nose with the mouth closed and concentrate on the aromas you experience. Each wheel of Comté is unique and will therefore offer a slightly different tasting experience.



tected and preserved by Comté's AOC designation, which strictly governs not only where Comté can be made but also by which methods it's produced.

At the Dole family farm on the outskirts of Miège, dairy farmer Emmanuel Dole shows off a muscular female with a wide girth and spotted hide — the Montbéliarde cow — explaining, “Production for Comté starts with this lady.” The Montbéliarde is the main breed authorized under AOC regulations to produce the milk for Comté. Each cow must have at least 1 hectare — 2½ acres — of pastureland to graze. The flora of the region includes over 435 plants and plays an important role in the aromatic complexity of the milk and later the cheese. During the cold months, the cows are stabled and fed locally harvested hay and fodder, producing a whiter and milder cheese.

Each morning and evening, Emmanuel and his two brothers collect the milk from their 54 cows and bring it to their local fruitière, who, by law, must transform the milk into cheese within 24 hours. On average, each fruitière has 19 members, or local dairy farms, located within an 8-mile radius. In Miège, the fruitière is conveniently located just yards down the road from the Dole farm, in the heart of the small village.

In the facility, clouds of steam from three copper cauldrons and a sweet,

yogurt-like aroma of warm milk and cultures fill the air. The cheesemaker, dressed in all white, walks briskly from cauldron to cauldron, dipping his fingers into the curds to check temperature and consistency. Even with the modern temperature gauges, stainless steel tubing, plastic draining molds and fluorescent overhead lighting, it isn't hard to picture him going through the same motions with the same attentiveness hundreds of years ago. Every day, 365 days a year, the Comté cheesemakers craft the new wheels of “white” cheese, which they store for three weeks before the wheels are transferred to one of the region's special aging cellars.

from the cellar to the cheese plate

A steep ride through thick evergreen forests leads to Fort des Rousses. Originally a vast military fort built by Napoleon, it was sold in 1997 to affineur Arnaud Jurafleur, who converted the underground vaults into a Comté maturing facility.

Entering the underground cellars is jaw dropping — 55,000 wheels of Comté stretch from floor to ceiling in the immense vaulted stone chambers, casting deep shadows in the dim silence. The cold, damp air smells strongly of cheese — nutty, sharp, pungent and sweet. Like a good Bordeaux, Comté needs to age before developing



its full aromatic potential. The law requires it be aged for at least four months but is often aged for nine to 18 months, or even longer. It depends on the particular wheel and the aim of the affineur.

Since each wheel is slightly unique depending on its terroir and the season in which it was made, the affineur and his small staff must taste the wheels regularly — they often taste about 200 wheels a day. They'll then transfer the wheels to different temperature cellars if needed to either speed up or slow down maturation. A machine regularly turns the 80-pound wheels and rubs them with a brine solution, which forms the protective rind.

After it's aged, the texture of the Comté will have gone from grainy and elastic to smooth and creamy, and its aromas will have emerged. Comté's subtle nature belies a diverse range of potential aromas. The Comité Interprofessionnel du Comté has identified 83 common descriptors that correspond to the aromas in Comté, which vary from wheel to wheel, depending on the region where the cheese was made, the season it was produced, the style of the affineur, and the time it spent aging. A younger Comté, for instance, will typically have more fruity and lactic aromas — butter, fresh cream, soft caramel — whereas older Comtés have nuttier and sharper aromas — roasted nuts, citrus, toast.

Comté's subtlety and diversity makes it an extremely versatile cheese, and in the Jura, it's not hard to find it at nearly every meal. The region is known for its mountain cuisine — wild game, morel mushrooms, fresh trout and smoked meats. Specialties include poulet au vin jaune (chicken and morels in a creamy sauce made with local wine), potato rosti (a large potato pancake), fondue, escalope de veau belle comtoise (breaded veal baked with thin slices of ham and Comté), saucisse de morteau (a smoked pork sausage) and bresi (cured beef that's thinly sliced like prosciutto).

Comté is melted into the region's fondues and vegetable gratins, tossed into salads, paired with the local char-



THE COMTÉ GRADING SCALE

Before a wheel of Comté can be sold to the market, it must first be evaluated according to several criteria, including *flavor* (the aromas and taste of the cheese), *paste quality* (referring to the interior, or non-rind portion of the cheese, which should be homogenous in color and texture), *opening* (the eyes that can appear in the paste, which should be minimal but well-defined if present) and *presentation* (wheels should have a regular form and a yellow to brown rind without spots). The wheel is then graded on a scale of 1 to 20. Wheels that score over 15 points are given the green Comté band. Those that score between 12 and 15 are given a brown Comté band. Those that score under 12 are not allowed to bear the Comté seal.

cutterie, baked into breads and biscuits, and served with nuts or dried fruit for dessert. In a perfect example of "what grows together goes together," it also makes a spectacular match for the unique wines of the region, from the creamy Chardonnays to the sherry-like Vin Jaune, made with the local Savagnin grape.

A drive across the countryside leads to Port-Lesney and the Château de Germigney, an 18th century manor that has been a member of the Relais

and Châteaux Hotel Group since 1999. The elegant décor and manicured gardens are a reminder that beyond its farmland and cellars, the Franche-Comté offers an array of pleasures yet to be discovered. It's a marvelous setting to savor a spectacular meal in the hotel's Michelin-starred restaurant, finishing with a few slices of aged Comté, fresh walnuts and a glass of Vin Jaune. Nothing could be simpler or more satisfying, a flawless combination wrought by centuries of tradition. CC

