

# Fromage homage

## Superb Comté & more worth trip to French cheese region

**T**he French can talk about cheese until the cows come home. If you doubt that, take a tour in the Franche-Comté region with local farmer Jean-Francois Marmier, who goes by the nickname Taz.

“We need hours, days, months, years to talk about Comté” cheese, Taz said passionately.

And the fruity and nutty Comté is a cheese worth talking about — firm yet creamy, and among the most popular cheeses in France, a country where more than 600 varieties of cheese are produced.

Comté is very much a part of the culture of the Jura Mountains, a place of green hills and valleys where you can easily tap into the real, unspoiled France (in this case, eastern France near the Swiss border).

The cheese has been made here for 1,000 years using milk from Montbéliard cows that graze in the lush pastures — and it's becoming a tourist attraction.

You can visit farms with cows, dairies where the cheese is created using traditional methods and cellars where the rounds of cheese are aged. The regional tourism department has even created a Comté cheese trail, with driving route suggestions.

Taz gives tours of the local co-op dairy in the little town of Bouverans, enthusiastically explaining the cheesemaking process to visitors. The cows are milked twice a day, and the warm milk from his and a half-dozen other local farms, 530,000 gal-

lons annually, goes to the dairy.

There, the cheesemakers make magic by adding rennet, an enzyme that comes from a calf's stomach. It creates a curd resulting in a light, yellow cheese.

The Bouverans dairy, which produces 13 to 20 giant rounds of Comté per day — each weighing about 88 pounds — is just one of 170 co-op cheese dairies in the region. (Taz is one of 3,200 farmers contributing milk).

After the rounds are firmed at the dairy for two to three weeks, they go to one of 20 regional cellars to age. The most popular cheese, Comté — and the variety we usually see in the U.S. — is 12 months old. It has a nice tang somewhat akin to Gruyère, although more aged Comté has an appealing, sharper taste food lovers may prefer.

Some 65,000 wheels of cheese can be seen aging at Fort Saint-Antoine in Malbuisson. The fort, completed in 1882, is now home to the aging cellar Marcel Petite ([www.comte-petite.com](http://www.comte-petite.com)). A tour will no doubt feature a guide with a passion for cheese — the look, the smell, the taste. Yes, cheese in Franche-Comté gets

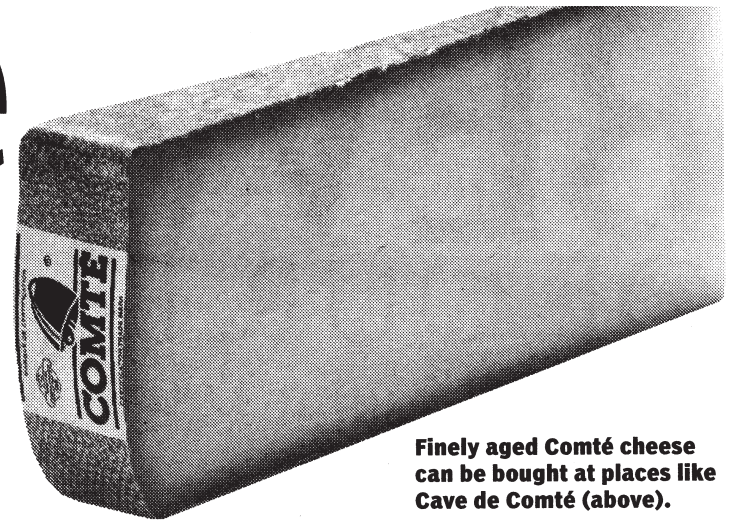
a treatment much like wine does, with aficionados using multiple senses to evaluate the quality.

They peer at it, sniff it, press it between their fingers — even listen to it — and finally spend as long chewing it as they possibly can. But unlike wine, they don't spit it out.

Lest you think the Franche-Comté region is all about cheese and farmlands, it's also about quaint towns and mountain views, lakes filled with trout, deep forests and historic attractions.

A good place to base yourself is Arbois, a sleepy little town surrounded by green hills and vineyards. It's where Louis Pasteur, inventor of the rabies vaccine, was raised and often worked, and you can visit his house and laboratory (Maison Pasteur, 83, rue Courcelles, Arbois, [www.academie-sciences.fr/pasteur.htm](http://www.academie-sciences.fr/pasteur.htm)).

Arbois' downtown includes small shops under the arches of an 18th-century arcade near the town square. A must-do is a casual lunch at Les 4 heures du Cremier, a cheese shop serving delicious sandwiches and salads and omelets featuring — you



**Finely aged Comté cheese can be bought at places like Cave de Comté (above).**

o courtesy of the Comite Regional du Tourisme de Franche-Comté