

FARE

Discoveries and Dispatches from the World of Food, plus Agenda and More

The Real Thing

IT WAS HARDLY THE stuff that dreams are made of: processed cheese on packaged whole wheat bread. But for the five-year-old me, consuming it was a momentous experience. Of course, I didn't know then that the sandwich I was eating was made with "cheese product". I would have to grow up before I discovered what a truly great grilled cheese sandwich tastes like.

That epiphany came recently, in fact, after a visit to the Jura Mountains, along the French-Swiss border. There I was seduced by comté, France's largest-selling Controlled Appellation of Origin (AOC) cheese. As with any new crush, I learned all I could: that semifirm comté is born of the distinctive milk of the region's Montbéliarde cows, whose diet includes wild orchids, daisies, dandelions, and more than 400 other plant varieties; that it's produced in the *fruitières*, or cooperative dairies, that have dotted the landscape of the Franche-Comté region for centuries; that the Montbéliardes' milk is partly skimmed and heated gently in copper-lined

Cheese *affineur* Michel Tyrode tending to wheels of comté in Pontarlier, France.

vats before being combined with rennet; that the resulting curds are broken into fine grains, put into molds for pressing, and set on spruce boards for a few weeks of aging before being entrusted to an *affineur*, who oversees the further maturing of the cheese.

In one *fruitière*, Maison Marcel Petite Fort St-Antoine, a converted barracks in Pontarlier, France, that has been refurbished as an aging cellar, I stood awe-struck before thousands upon thousands of pale yellow wheels of comté. Inside each of them, the earthy, funky, yeasty, effervescing process of fermentation was at work. It is in such cellars that comté develops hints of chocolate, nutmeg, apricot, tobacco,



hazelnut, pepper, and caramel. The emphasis in the making of comté is not on uniformity, as with some AOC cheeses, but on individuality. A young cheese may smell like butter, an older one like fruit and spices. But, no matter the age, comté is a celebrated melting cheese, used in France for everything from fondues to soufflés and potato gratins.

After returning from France to New York City, where I live, I bought a wedge of aged comté—in fact, a product that had been finished at the very same Fort St-Antoine cellars I'd visited—and carried it home. On my counter lay a loaf of fresh sourdough bread. It was time to make grilled cheese—grown-up grilled cheese, *real* grilled cheese. I dropped a dollop of butter into my skillet, sliced the bread and the comté, and cooked it, watching as the cheese melted and released a delightfully grassy, nutty aroma.

One bite was all it took; I knew I'd achieved perfection. Like even the humblest grilled cheese sandwich, this one, in its transcendent simplicity, amounted to much more than the sum of its parts.
—*Cara de Silva*

RECIPE

The Ultimate Grilled Cheese Sandwich

SERVES 2

The secret to making a perfect grilled cheese sandwich (above) is cooking it over low heat, which brings out the subtle flavors of a cheese, and slathering the bread with butter, which crisps it in the pan. Comté, with its semifirm texture and nutty taste, is great for grilling. For a source for comté, see page 89.

- 4 **tbsp. unsalted butter, softened**
- 4 **1/2"-thick slices sourdough bread**
- 1 **8-oz. piece comté cheese, grated**

- 1.** Spread butter evenly on both sides of each slice of bread. Put half the cheese on one slice and half on another. Top each with remaining bread slices. Heat a 12" cast-iron skillet over medium-low heat.
- 2.** Add sandwiches to skillet and cook, flipping once with a metal spatula, until golden brown and crusty on both sides, 18–20 minutes. Transfer sandwiches to a cutting board and slice in half with a knife. Serve warm.

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