



Fall/Winter 2012-2013

## The Craft of Affinage

**Affinage:** To ripen; to refine. The craft of aging and ripening cheese.  
**Affineur:** One who ages/ripens cheese and brings it to market.

### A unique history

Comté has been made for over a thousand years, but it wasn't until the mid-1800's that the role of the Comté affineur developed. For hundreds of years prior, Comté wheels were aged in individual cellars or at a local cheesemaker's facility. At the end of the Sixteenth Century, Comté began to be produced not only for local consumption, but also for trade, and traveling merchants would store the wheels in large barrels for transport. In 1860, the merchant Alix Jacquemin had the idea to build a separate aging facility where he could store and mature the wheels of Comté—improving their quality—before selling them. He built the first Comté affinage cellar, and the role of the Comté affineur was born.

Today, there are 16 main Comté affinage cellars, and the affinage process is a crucial step in the development of Comté's distinctive flavors and aromas. The wheels are regularly turned, salted and rubbed with a brine solution called *morge*. During this process, the crust develops into a protective rind that allows for the preservation and transportation of the wheels, and important biochemical reactions including proteolysis and different fermentations take place, which are essential for the resulting texture, tastes and aromas of the cheese (see Comté News Spring/Summer 2010). Comté's PDO (Protected Designation of Origin) label guarantees certain aspects of the aging process—such as that wheels must sit on spruce boards and age for a minimum of 4 months\* (a period which is critical to the cheese's distinct development)—but every wheel of Comté is unique depending on its geographical origin, the season in which it was made, and the know-how of the cheesemaker and the affineur. Each wheel will therefore have a slightly differently aging potential. Some wheels are best at 6 months, while others can be aged for as long as 20 months or sometimes even longer. The affineur must therefore use his or her know-how and skill to bring each wheel to its optimum level of quality. This involves dozens of details and areas of expertise, and close

knowledge of the cellars and how they affect the development of the cheese. "Warm" cellars (57 to 66°F), for instance, encourage faster maturation and certain flavor profiles, while "cold" cellars (less than 57°F) result in a slower maturation, different flavors, and a smoother paste.

Tasting is an important part of the affineur's job and is done daily (the average Comté affinage cellar has thousands of wheels—that's a lot of tasting!). While each affineur has his or her own specific style, the process for evaluating wheels is generally the same and involves all of the senses.

### Using all the senses

First, an affineur studies the rind of the wheel. "The coloration of the rinds—gray, orange, brown, red, etc.—reflects the ambiance in our cellars and the textures of our Comtés," explains Claude Querry, Head Affineur of Marcel Petite's Fort St. Antoine. He might also see a white chalky mold on the crust, which is a benign indicator of the humidity in the cellar.

The affineur then touches the wheel. Véronique Rivoire, Affineur/Owner of Rivoire-Jacquemin (and a descendent of Alix Jacquemin), notes, "The feel and structure of the crust—dry, dusty, gritty, greasy, sticky, soft, etc.—tells us many things about the paste [the interior cheese] and even about the physical composition of the wheel—if it's too wet or dry, or if it's balanced."

Now the affineur uses his ears. "Our affineurs are trained to listen to the Comtés," explains Querry. He holds the blade end of a *sonde*, a long, curved blade used for sampling cheese, like a small hammer, knocking the handle all over the cheese's surface. A change in pitch can either indicate holes or imperfections, or it can indicate the presence of a *lainure*, a very small crack in the cheese paste (1-2 inches below the rind) that forms when the wheel has reached its maximum maturity. As he taps the cheese, he's also paying attention to how the *sonde* bounces back, since this can reveal information about the suppleness of the cheese.

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## Comté ("con - TAY") cheese ID

### General information:

**Origin:** Jura Mountains (Massif du Jura), France

**Milk Type:** Raw cow's milk

**Cheese Style:** Artisanal, pressed, cooked, with natural brushed rind.

**French AOC (Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée) since 1958 and European Union Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) Certification.**

- Delimited area of production: Doubs, Jura, Ain, elevation 1500-4500 ft.
- Milk must be produced by local cows of the Montbéliarde (95%) and Simmental (5%) breeds. There are approximately 112,000 Comté cows.
- Minimum of 2.5 acres of natural pasture for each animal.
- Cattle feed must be natural and free of fermented products and GMOs.
- Each *fruitière* must collect milk from dairy farms within a 16-mile diameter maximum.
- Milk must be made into cheese within 24 hours maximum of the earliest milking.
- Only natural starters must be used to transform the milk into curds.
- Wheels must be aged on spruce boards. Minimum aging is 4 months, generally 6-18 months and sometimes even longer.



## Comté Cheese Association

will be at the next

Winter Fancy Food Show in San Francisco,  
 January 20-22, 2012 Booth #3124

# Daphne Zepos,

## Remembering A True Comté Pioneer



On July 3, 2012, we lost a dear friend and a true champion of Comté Cheese. We will never forget Daphne Zepos, cheese importer, educator, writer and international cheese authority. She was

the founder of Essex St. Cheese Company with partner Jason Hinds, originally devoted exclusively to importing Comté. Daphne was passionate about introducing Americans to quality European cheeses and was a pivotal figure in paving the way for Comté and other artisan cheeses in the US. Her knowledge, expertise and dynamism helped transform America's cheese plates, and she was an unforgettable inspiration and resource to her customers, students, and to us all at the Comté Cheese Association.

*"I first met Daphne at Campton Place restaurant in San Francisco in 1996. She fizzed with excitement as she rolled her trolley to our table and seduced us all with her passion for the cheeses on it. Our paths in cheese and friendship continued crossing until, after 2 years of trying, she finally persuaded me to be her partner in a business whose goal it was to introduce the finest Comté to US tables. Essex Street Cheese Company was born in March 2006.*

*The last time I saw Daphne, a few days before she passed away, she talked to me about her vision for a foundation in her name that would identify and instruct the next generation of cheesemongers so that they might become teachers in cheese. Although very weak, she was as passionate about it as she had been the first time we met in Campton Place all those years ago.*

*Daphne's glint, mischievous smile and vital spirit are irreplaceable. Without her star, the world is a darker place."*

*-Jason Hinds  
September 2012*

For more information about the 'Daphne Zepos Teaching Award' and how you can donate to the American Cheese Education Foundation, visit: <http://www.firstgiving.com/fundraiser/ACEF/daphnezeposteachingaward>

## Producer Profile:

# Mary Hill,

## Comté dairy farmer

Mary Hill is a 36-year-old Comté dairy producer in the village of Vevy, about 15 miles south of Poligny. She is a second-generation Comté farmer, but she spent over a decade farming in Ireland and New Zealand before moving back to the Jura to plant her roots. She discusses her farm, why she moved back to the Jura, and the young new generation of Comté farmers.



### Did you grow up on a Comté dairy farm?

I grew up in the Jura on a Comté dairy farm. My father was a founding member of our local Comté fruitière [cheesemaking facility] and my brother took over the family farm 25 years ago.

### Why did you decide to move to Ireland?

I was 22 years old when I moved to Ireland. After graduating from an agricultural college (equivalent to a Bachelor of Agriculture) I wanted to travel before I started farming. There I met my husband Don, and we had our first child Eva two years later. I wanted to see people from different

backgrounds, learn a different language and see others ways of farming. I stayed there for ten years. In 2005, we stopped farming in Ireland due to land pressure around the village we lived in. We then moved to New Zealand. I had lived and worked in New Zealand for a few years before and loved the country and the people. Farming-wise it is a well of knowledge when you are keen on pasture management and efficient ways of working.

### Why did you decide to move back to the Jura to become a Comté dairy farmer?

In New Zealand the scale of things is so huge and the fact that you produce a commodity (milk) wasn't satisfying for me. Here [in the Jura] the scale of farming is tiny compared to Ireland and New Zealand. I love the fact that I now know what is being done with the result of my work. The work is harder, but the community spirit and the pride of farming are way greater.

### How big is your farm?

I have 45 cows milking over 300,000 liters on 75 hectares. The majority of my milk is for Comté cheese, with some of it for cream, Morbier and Tomme.

### You're only 36 years old. Are there many other young Comté farmers, or is it mainly the older generations keeping the traditions alive?

Our area is really vibrant when it comes to farming; there are loads of young farmers wanting to take over farms, either from their own parents or from outside the family. There are actually more farmers wanting to take over farms than there are farms available! Our local farm association has an average of 30 farmers with an average age of way under 40.

### Why do you think that is?

Because our product is regulated, we have a good price for our milk, and the [future] prospects for our activities are looking good. We have to balance supply and demand while keeping in mind that it's a higher quality product. All of the people involved in the production of Comté are really aware of the fact that we are all responsible of the future of our product. There is a strong link here between the people and the identity of the product—really it's a matter of pride.



## Dave DeSimone: Wine Writer and Restaurateur

Dave DeSimone writes the weekly Wine Cellar column in the Pittsburgh Tribune-Review, which covers wine, food and travel. He opened his first restaurant, Bridge 10 Brasserie, in Pittsburgh in September 2012.

### Have you always been a Comté fan?

I have long enjoyed Comté on trips to France over the years. More recently I had the privilege of experiencing Comté in more depth when visiting the Jura region and tasting extensively while doing research for wine and travel articles. Tough work, but somebody has to do it! It was then that I really began to appreciate the distinctive flavors and traditions behind Comté.

### Does Comté make an appearance on your menu at Bridge 10 Brasserie?

We use Comté in several popular dishes such as gougères, croque monsieur, and le plateau de fromages. And our executive chef, Shawn Carlson, has been developing a Comté consommé that's quite tasty. Comté is even melted on our house-made "Chien Chaud"... French "hot dog" [see right].

### You've built a long career writing about wine, food and travel. Why did you decide to open a restaurant?

I like to eat and drink French food and wines. Plus my partners and I believe that we can fill an important niche in the Pittsburgh market with authentic flavors from France.

### Why French food?

The French concept of terroir entralls me. I love that every nook and cranny of the French countryside has long-standing food and wine traditions tied to the land and the seasons. The traditional ways express marvelously diverse personalities and delicious, intriguing flavors. Comté, for example, is very similar to wine in that you can appreciate a lot of distinctions in different Comtés depending on where in the Jura [the cheeses] were made, the ages of the cheeses, etc. It's hard to go wrong with authentic French cuisine.

### What are some of your favorite ways to cook with Comté at home?

I enjoy it in gougères and in a croque monsieur, but I also like it in a galette with potatoes. And of course it can't be beat by itself with spicy mustard.

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The affineur may then decide to taste the cheese, although samples are taken very sparingly as to not damage a wheel. "We try to limit the number of holes in a wheel," explains Eric Chevalier, Professional Relations Manager at Monts et Terroirs. He uses the blade of the sonde to extract a 2-inch cylindrical sample of the cheese. He first observes the color of the paste and looks for any cracks or holes. He then smells the cheese. Each wheel will have slightly different aromas, ranging from lactic and fruity in younger wheels, to nutty, leathery and/or vegetal in older wheels.\*\* He pinches off a small piece and rubs it between his fingers. Not only does this tell him about the cheese's texture (is it smooth and supple, or grainy and elastic?), but it also warms the cheese before tasting. He smells again, since the aromas change slightly when warmed. Now it's time for tasting! He puts the cheese in his mouth and lets it melt on his tongue, concentrating on the flavors. Madame Rivoire explains, "Tasting serves to reinforce notions about the evolution and maturity of the paste, the cheese's ability to age longer (or not), the type of flavors that have developed over the course of the fermentation, and whether or not further tasting is needed."

The process is almost complete. The affineur patches the hole made by his sonde with the remaining cheese. He then uses the blade to mark the edge of the rind with a symbol. Each affinage cellar has its own set of

### Any favorite wine pairings?

For my money, Comté's balance of subtle, earthy aromas and rich, creamy flavors pairs perfectly with well aged red Burgundies. It also pairs beautifully with spirits such as Calvados and Cognac.

## Comté Chien Chaud (aka Hot Dog)

Bridge 10 Brasserie serves a house-made "chien chaud," or hot dog, in a buttered and toasted baguette with a Comté béchamel on top. We've recreated a version for home cooks, using store-bought dogs. The result is a French-inspired hot dog that's truly délicieux!



4 all-beef hot dogs  
1 baguette, cut crosswise into 4 "buns"  
Butter for bread  
½ cup béchamel sauce\*  
½ cup shredded Comté

- Bring a small pot of water to a simmer. Add the hot dogs and simmer until warmed through.
- In the meantime, cut each baguette "bun" horizontally to open it like a book (don't cut all the way through). Butter inside of bread. Toast buns until lightly crisp and golden.
- In a small saucepan, warm the béchamel. Add the Comté and cook, stirring, until melted.
- Place a hot dog in each bun. Top each with Comté béchamel and serve. Bon appétit!

\*For the béchamel sauce, melt 1 tablespoon butter in a small saucepan over medium heat. Add 1 tablespoon flour; whisk until smooth. Cook, whisking, 1 minute. Slowly whisk in ¾ cup whole milk. Bring to boil, whisking, and cook 2-3 minutes, until thickened. Season with salt.

symbols, which act like a language between the affineurs who work there. One mark might indicate that the wheel is ready to take to the market, another might mean it needs more time, while another might mean that the wheel has the potential to age for a really long time. The different affineurs will therefore know immediately upon looking at a wheel what its potential is.

An affineur will typically evaluate one or two cheeses in a batch—e.g. wheels that were all produced by a specific cheesemaking facility on the same day. He will then move on to the next batch. The ritual starts again.

\*By PDO law, Comté must be aged for at least four months in one of the region's special aging cellars and must also be packaged in the region to obtain the Comté label. After this time, a wheel may be sold and stored in a cellar outside of the region, but the affinage process has been completed.

\*\*There are 83 terms or descriptors that correspond to the most frequently found aromas in Comté, grouped into 6 families: Lactic, Fruity, Roasted, Vegetable, Animal, Spicy. This is depicted in the Comté Wheel of Aromas: <http://comte-usa.com/index.php?/archives/2-Comte-Aroma-Wheel.html>



## Comté Scholarship for Certified Cheese Professionals™

The Comté Cheese Association (CIGC) is thrilled to announce an exciting scholarship opportunity for the American Cheese Society's first-ever Certified Cheese Professionals™ (ACS CCP™s)! The winner of the scholarship will win an all-expenses-paid trip to the Comté region to learn first-hand about the cheese's unique history and production, as well as to explore the region and its culture. To apply, ACS CCP™s must fill out an entry form and answer a short essay question. The essays will be judged anonymously on the

basis of knowledge and creativity by a panel of three judges, who will select the winner. The judges include: **Greg O'Neill**, Board President of the American Cheese Society and Owner of Pastoral Artisan Cheese, Bread & Wine; **Cathy Strange**, Global Cheese Buyer for Whole Foods; and **Max McCalman**, Maitre Fromager for Artisanal Premium Cheese Center and acclaimed cheese expert. For more details, email us at [trade@comte-usa.com](mailto:trade@comte-usa.com). All entries are due by December 1, 2012.

### New Comté Cooking Video Series!

The Comté Cheese Association is producing five short cooking videos highlighting recipes made with Comté. The short videos feature easy-to-follow steps for creating mouthwatering recipes, sprinkled with cooking tips and information about Comté. The videos will be available on [www.comte-usa.com](http://www.comte-usa.com), Facebook and You Tube. The cooking videos are fantastic for consumer education as well as for promotions, seminars and tasting. Email us to find out more! [Trade@comte-usa.com](mailto:Trade@comte-usa.com)



## New Recipe Cards Celebrate Classic Dishes from the Comté Region

Our new Comté Recipe Cards feature classic recipes from the Comté region of France! Transport yourself to the Jura Mountains with dishes including: Comté Fondue, Comté & Ham Crêpes and Salade au Comté with Apples and Beets. These recipes are perfect for fall and winter. Download the recipes at [www.comte-usa.com](http://www.comte-usa.com) or [Facebook.com/ComteUSA](https://www.facebook.com/ComteUSA), or email us to request hard copies for your events, sales promotions and staff trainings: [trade@comte-usa.com](mailto:trade@comte-usa.com). Recipe Card holders are also available for retailers upon request.

### Comté Fondue

Comté fondue is a staple on restaurant menus all over the Comté region. Eating fondue at La Petite Echelle, a mountain inn and chalet in Rochejean, is a unique experience linking food to history, tradition and terroir. The three-centuries-old inn is a stopping point for hikers and shepherds, serving traditional dishes by candlelight (there's no electricity). The fondue, which is the highlight of the menu, combines Comté with local Jura wine, foraged wild mushrooms and local mountain herbs for a true taste of terroir. But you don't need to be in the Jura Mountains to enjoy Comté fondue. This mouthwatering version can be mastered in any home kitchen and will give you a taste of the flavors and convivial culture of the Jura, no matter where you live!

#### Serves: 4

1 pound mature Comté (preferably 10-18 months), shredded (about 5 cups shredded)  
2 tablespoons cornstarch  
1 garlic clove, peeled and halved  
1 cup plus 2 tablespoons dry white wine (preferably Jura wine, if possible)  
Freshly ground black pepper  
Good quality crusty bread, cut or torn into bite-sized pieces

- In a large bowl, toss the shredded Comté and cornstarch until well combined.
- Rub the inside of fondue pot with cut sides of garlic. Discard garlic. Add wine and bring to boil.
- Reduce heat to medium-low. Add a quarter of the Comté and stir until melted. Continue stirring in cheese, a quarter at a time, until melted. Cook, stirring, until fondue is completely smooth and richly coats the back of a spoon. Season with freshly ground black pepper.
- Serve the hot fondue with crusty bread for dipping.

#### The Comté Cheese Association

provides you with everything you need for a successful selling program, including: recipe booklets, brochures, aprons, demo toothpicks, training tools and more. Visit [www.comte-usa.com](http://www.comte-usa.com) for POS materials and free downloads.

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