



Terroir Taste in Comté: Myth or Reality

Is it possible to taste “terroir” in Comté? This question was explored at the 30th annual American Cheese Society Conference, which took place in Madison, WI from August 1-3. The sold-out seminar, *Terroir Taste in Artisan Cheese: Myth or Reality*, led by Florence Bérodière (Engineer at the Centre Technique des Fromages Comtois, or CTFIC); Jean-Francois Marmier (Comté dairy producer) and Jean-Louis Carbonnier (Comté Cheese Association USA) revealed the CIGC’s (Comté Cheese Association’s) research into flavor transmission for the first time in the US, and gave the over 180 attendees a unique tasting of Comté.

There are several factors that influence flavors and aromas in Comté, such as season of production, technological parameters, the style of the cheesemaker and the type and duration of affinage (aging). Bérodière explained that microflora has a special role in the transmission of flavors. Bérodière defines microflora as indigenous micro-organisms in raw milk (bacteria, yeasts and molds) that modifies and transforms components in cheese. Generally, three microbial groups can be distinguished: microflora of interest for cheesemaking, undesirable microflora and pathogenic microflora. The desirable raw milk for Comté cheese is a milk rich in microflora of interest for cheesemaking. Recent research has shown that some lactic microflora found in a farm’s raw milk came from the farm’s hay and

were also found on the cow’s teats. In addition, genetic testing on targeted strains of mesophilic lactobacillus from farms located in different terroirs showed that those strains are specific to a particular place, with very few strains common between terroirs. Microflora is therefore linked to the soil and the hay, meaning the farm environment and the farming practices, and is specific to a place, or terroir.

Through a series of scientific experiments, the CIGC proved that specific native lactic microflora in raw milk directly influences the specific and diverse flavors and aromas that develop in Comté during the aging process. Bérodière explained that native microflora in the raw milk quickly becomes dominant in the cheese, overtaking starter cultures. She explained, “Microflora in raw milk plays a role in the development of cheese taste because it becomes dominant during ripening.” In an INRA (French National Institute for Agricultural Research) study, researchers filtered the microflora out of milk before the cheese-making process. The resulting experimental cheese (which was fabricated and aged using the same methods as Comté) had very little flavor with only basic butter aromas. On the other hand, adding the native strains of microflora from different terroirs back into the filtered milk before cheesemaking produced cheeses with very

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 650-5000 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 Winter Fancy Food Show
 in San Francisco, January 19-21,
 BOOTH #3324

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CIGC Celebrates its 50th Birthday

This summer the CIGC (Comité Interprofessionnel de Comté) celebrated its 50th birthday! The CIGC was created on June 11th, 1963 as an association of all who are involved in Comté production (the dairy farmers, *fruitières*, *affineurs* and members of commerce) in order to better master techniques, improve the product, conduct research, defend and protect the AOC's interests and promote Comté. To commemorate this historical event, the CIGC hosted a celebration on July 12th in the small village of Déservillers, the birthplace of Comté, attended by over a thousand people who are involved in the production and sales of Comté. The event featured historical retrospectives, roundtables and testimonials honoring the CIGC and its doctrine of solidarity, communication and terroir. Here's a look at some important dates in the CIGC's history pertaining to the regulation and definition of Comté.

1958: Comté receives AOC status (one of the first cheeses in France to obtain an AOC label)

1963: Creation of the CIGC; its members comprise 4 groups of professionals: the dairy farmers, *fruitières* (cheesemakers), *affineurs* (cellar masters) and members of commerce

1975: Establishment of the Centre Technique du Comté (CTC), the technical arm of the CIGC

1976: Definition of the AOC requirements, including:

- Physical description of wheels
- Montbéliarde or Simmental breed cows fed without silage
- Raw milk only
- Implementation of first quality control

1979: Registration of trademark for Comté label with bell

1979: Additional requirements for the AOC, including:

- Identification of the wheels by a green casein label affixed to the heel of each wheel

1984: Percentage of households buying Comté in France: 41.2%

1986: Launch of Comté PR campaign in the U.S.

1986: Publication of the new AOC requirements, including:

- Abandon the term "gruyère" (as in "gruyère de Comté"). The name of the AOC is now officially "Comté"

1989: Implementation of the first Quality Control Commission

1990: Adoption of new AOC regulations concerning the condition of the milk, the cheesemaking process and aging, such as:

- Rules for pasture maintenance, list of forbidden foods and fodder, condition (including hygiene) on farms, and prohibition of disinfectants on the farm
- Copper vats for cheesemaking are mandatory
- In the affinage cellar, Comté must be aged on spruce boards
- Establishment of brown bands and green bands

1992: Establishment of the "Jury Terroir" tasting panel to characterize the flavors of Comté

1994: Publication of new AOC requirements, amending the Decree of 1976:

- Limits the milk collection zone to a 16-mile diameter around *fruitière*
- Milk has to be renneted within 24 hours of milking year-round
- Minimum aging period changes from 90 days to 120 days
- The system of using brown and green bands becomes mandatory

1996: AOC Comté is registered as European Union PDO

1996: Publication of study by J.C. Monnet on the contribution of terroir to the taste of Comté

1998: Publication of new AOC regulations:

- All packaging must be done within the Comté AOC
- Limit on the HFD (water content after fat has been removed) in Comté to 54%

2002: Establishment of the "Routes du Comté"

2007: Update of AOC regulations with a focus on reinforcing the artisanal character of Comté production at every level:

- Ban on GMO's
- Milk productivity is limited to 1,215 gallons/acre
- Automated milking robots are banned

2008: Over 500 tons of Comté commercialized in the US market

2009: Percentage of households buying Comté in France: over 50%

2012: 52,208 tons of Comté sold

2013: First prospective work by the CIGC in China

Comté in the Press: New Cheese Books

Check out these notable new cheese books, featuring Comté!



Cheese & Beer, by Janet Fletcher (Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2013)

An awesome book for cheese and beer lovers, with excellent pairing tips. Comté is featured as a

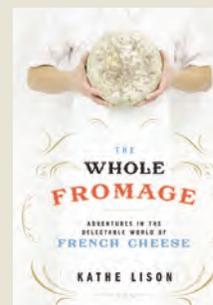
superb match for a variety of beers, including Belgian-style strong golden ales, brown ales, amber lagers, porters, saisons and more!



Di Bruno Bros House of Cheese, by Tenaya Darlington (Running Press, 2013)

"A bite of Comté lights up your mouth, filling it with salty toffee, buttered toast, and just a whiff of fresh-cut hay." So begins Tenaya

Darlington's (a.k.a. Madame Fromage's) description of Comté in this tantalizing guide to cheese, recipes and pairings, which she wrote in collaboration with Di Bruno Bros.



The Whole Fromage,

by Kathe Lison (Random House, 2013) Kathe Lison tours France and its cheeses, exploring why France is such a hotbed for cheesemaking. A

whole chapter is devoted to Comté, which Lison describes as one of the few French cheeses that has successfully been able to modernize while retaining its traditional fabrication methods.



Interview with Rob Kaufelt, Murray's Cheese

Rob Kaufelt is the owner of Murray's Cheese, one of the leading purveyors of specialty cheese in the U.S. Since he purchased Murray's in 1991, Rob has been a pivotal figure in the evolution of the cheese industry in this country. We spoke with Rob about how the industry has changed since he started, and where he sees specialty cheese heading in the future.

How did you get started in the cheese industry?

One day, back in 1975, when I was working for my dad at his small grocery store chain in New Jersey as an assistant store manager, the director of merchandising told me he had fired his dairy supervisor, and that I was now it. All my training was done on the job, and I set out to improve the dairy cases in our company by resetting them in the format of our best competitors. They had recently introduced cryovac-ed chunks of cheese as a category (e.g. mild, medium and sharp cheddar; munster; etc). The yogurt category was new; there was milk with different fat percentages; all the ubiquitous things now were new back in that decade.



When did you purchase Murray's?

I bought Murray's in 1991. My grandparents had a mom and pop store in Jersey in the '20's, and I was interested in reviving the concept as well as in rescuing a neighborhood treasure. Back then it was a cheese shop that sold lots of canned tomatoes and dried pasta to the largely Italian neighborhood.

Louis [the owner] had some European cheeses, such as Parmigiano Reggiano and Pecorino Romano, mixed in with more commodity things. The cheese was often bought off the back of a truck by guys who peddled it at a cheap price.

After you bought Murray's, how did you select new cheeses?

In the early days I was stuck behind the counter so I relied on

distributors, who would bring cheeses to sample, and on picking people's brains to learn about new cheeses. When I finally had enough revenue, I began traveling here and abroad finding cheeses myself. Today we do mostly direct importing.

Have you always carried Comté?

Of course! Comté has always been one of my favorites. It's been part of our product selection for over 20 years. It's popular for its versatility (it's great for cooking, melting, snacking and sandwiches), and it's approachable and complex all at the same time.

Last year you opened Murray's Cheese Bar, a restaurant devoted to cheese. What are some of your favorite ways of serving Comté?

As a chunk by itself, or melted on soups, omelets or a grilled cheese sandwich.

Where do you think the specialty cheese industry is headed?

The industry will shake out from farmers to retailers to distributors, and, as with most things, only the best will survive. More supermarkets will have better cheese departments, as Kroger has begun to do with us [Murray's cheese selections will be featured in hundreds of Kroger stores]. More attention will be paid to cheese in cooking. Health and safety issues will occupy more time; i.e. compliance. New ways of packaging and labeling will emerge. More stores will put in caves. More cheese will be sold; it will become more mainstream.



New Recipe Cards!

A new batch of Comté Recipe Cards is now available, featuring recipes from leading chefs! The "Chef Series" includes: **Fresh Corn Polenta with Comté & Crispy Brussels Sprouts** from Chef Ryan Hardy (Charlie Bird restaurant in NYC); **Comté Soufflés** from Chef Jason Berthold (formerly of RN74 in San Francisco); and **Comté with Sweet Hazelnuts** from Rachel Freier, head cheesemonger at Murray's Cheese Bar. These restaurant-worthy dishes can easily be tackled at home and are sure to impress family and friends.

The new recipes can be viewed at www.comte-usa.com or <http://Facebook.com/Comte> USA. Recipe Card packs—perfect for displays and promotions—are available to retailers, distributors and educators. Convenient Recipe Card Holders are also available. Email us at trade@comte-usa.com for more information or to request copies.

Comté with Sweet Hazelnuts

Adapted from Rachel Freier, Head Cheesemonger at Murray's Cheese Bar
"I pair these Sweet Hazelnuts with an older Comté, but they work just as great with a younger Comté!" explains Cheesemonger Rachel Freier of Murray's Cheese Bar in New York City. Serve the hazelnuts alongside Comté on a cheese platter or on a dessert cheese plate for a delectable start or finish to any meal.

Makes about 1 cup

- 1 cup hazelnuts, or other nuts such as pecans or walnuts
- 1/3 cup maple syrup
- 1/3 cup honey
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- Pinch salt
- Comté for serving, cut into slices

1. Preheat the oven to 375°F.
2. Spread the hazelnuts (or other nuts) on a baking sheet and toast until lightly colored and fragrant, about 6-10 minutes. If you're using hazelnuts, wrap them in a kitchen towel and let them steam for a minute or two. Rub the hazelnuts in the towel to remove most of the skins (you can skip this step if using pecans or walnuts).
3. Put the maple syrup, honey, vanilla and a pinch of salt in a small saucepan and bring to a boil. Remove from heat, and add the nuts.
4. Transfer the mixture to a bowl and let cool to room temperature. Cover and refrigerate until ready to use (the nuts can be refrigerated for up to a month). Pair the sweet hazelnuts with slices of Comté on a cheese platter or cheese plate. **Enjoy!**

New Comté Scholarship for ACS CCPs!

The Comté Cheese Association is excited to offer a new scholarship opportunity for American Cheese Society *Certified Cheese Professionals*™ (ACS CCPs). This scholarship, for the second year, is open to cheese experts who have passed



the Certified Cheese Professional™ Exam. ACS CCPs have the unique opportunity to win an all-expenses-

paid trip to the Comté region of France to learn first-hand about the cheese's history and production, as well as to explore the region and its culture. To apply, ACS CCPs must submit an entry form and short essay by December 2, 2013. The 2013 essay question focuses on Comté's aromatic diversity, and 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; Owner of Pastoral Artisan Cheese, Bread & Wine; **Cathy Strange**, Global Cheese Buyer, Whole Foods Market, Inc.; and **Max McCalman**, Maître Fromager of Artisanal Premium Cheese Center, Author and Cheese Writer.

For more information, and/or to receive a copy of the Scholarship Entry Form, please email us at trade@comte-usa.com.

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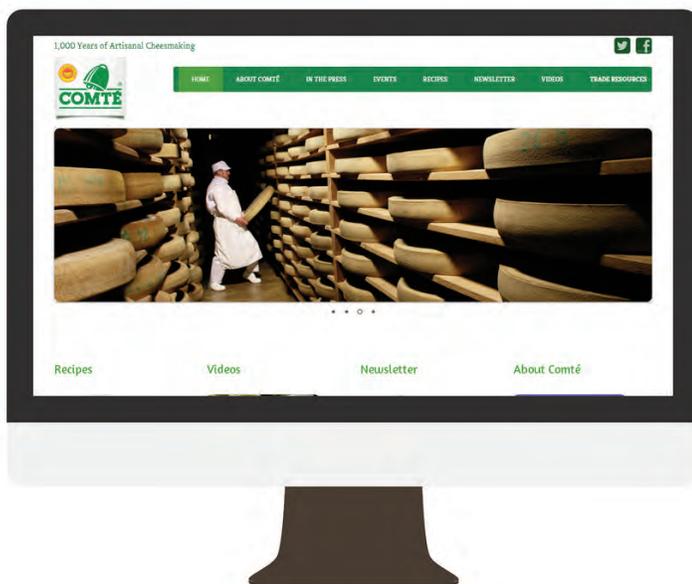
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different flavors. As Bérodié noted, "A different native microflora leads to a different array of tastes in the cheeses."

To illustrate the impact of terroir on the diversity of flavors and aromas in Comté, the ACS seminar featured a comparative tasting of three Comté that were the same age and from the same affineur, but that were produced at different fruitières (Tourmont, Villers-sous-Chalamont and La Baroche). Each Comté had strikingly different flavors, ranging from dominant aromas of cooked onion and vanilla (Tourmont), to white chocolate and citrus (Villers-sous-Chalamont) to roasted hazelnut and walnut (La Baroche).

Jean-Francois Marnier ended the seminar by describing the specific practices carried out by Comté dairy farmers, cheesemakers and affineurs (cellar masters) to improve the link and transmission between microflora and a taste of place, such as: paying utmost attention to the quality of hay and pastures; milking twice a day every day without a milking robot; careful washing but no sanitization of milking equipment or udders in order to preserve microflora of interest for cheesemaking; storing milk at 53°F; making small batches of cheese; and aging for a minimum of four months with careful monitoring of each wheel. These and other vital practices and mindsets are integral to producing cheese that is reflective of a terroir.

The quality of the hay and pastures and the microflora in the farm environment are therefore important terroir elements, which the cow transmits into the milk. The farmer's practices, and the choices made at the fruitière (cheese-making facility), are thus the pathways for terroir flavors in Comté, which the affineur process reveals.



Do you have an idea for a Comté News article? Is there a topic you'd like us to explore further? Send us your ideas at trade@comte-usa.com!

New Website

The Comté Cheese Association will be unveiling a newly designed USA website this winter! The website (www.comte-usa.com) will feature an easy-to-navigate and clean new style with content for both trade and consumers. Members of the trade will have access to point-of-sales materials and resources, and the website will also feature Comté recipes, information about the Comté region and its production, videos, news, events, and more. **Stay tuned!**

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 for POS materials and free downloads.

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