

What do the Labels Mean?

AOC, IGP, *Label Rouge*, AB... We regularly receive questions from members of the trade and from consumers who are confused by the various labels/designations used in France for food products. While the labels can be really helpful—offering insight into the quality, fabrication and origin of a product—they can also be confusing, especially since the European Union has its own, overlapping classification system. What does this all mean for cheese? We've broken down each of the labels for you below.



AOC (French: Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée) / **PDO** (European Union: Protected Designation of Origin)



The French AOC and the European Union PDO classifications regulate where a cheese can be produced and the methods by which it's crafted. When you buy an AOC or PDO cheese, you know that it has been made in a defined geographical region by traditional means of production, which are strictly regulated. For instance, for a cheese to be legally called Comté, it must be made from the milk of Montbéliarde or Simmental cows grazing in the Jura Mountain region of France, using specific cheesemaking and aging methods that reflect long established tradition and custom. As of earlier this year, the Comté AOC logo has been replaced by the PDO logo on all Comté labels.



IGP (French: Indication Géographique Protégée) / **PGI** (European Union: Protected Geographical Indication)

The IGP/PGI label is less encompassing than the AOC and PDO seals, referring only to the geographic origin of a product. This seal requires that a cheese be made in a specific designated region, but does not make reference to the production methods. For instance, while Emmental can be made anywhere in the world, *Emmental de*

Savoie has an IGP seal and can therefore only be made in the Savoie region of France.



Label Rouge (French) / **TSG** (European Union: Traditional Specialty Guaranteed)



The French *Label Rouge* seal, on the other hand, is concerned only with production methods. The label guarantees traditional means of production, but the product can be made anywhere in France. Certain kinds of Emmental, for instance, have a *Label Rouge* seal, indicating that they were made using traditional techniques; but not all Emmental is *Label Rouge*, as most of it is generic. The European Union TSG is also only concerned with production methods (it's the equivalent of the French *Label Rouge*), but does not currently apply to any French cheeses.



AB (French: Agriculture Biologique)

AB, or Organic Agriculture, is the French organic certification seal. Like the US system, the French organic certification regulates agricultural production, forbidding the use of synthetic chemicals, GMO's, etc. The AB seal can accompany any of the other labels above.

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 17-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 17-19, 2009 Booth #3316

Check out what's inside: Pairing Comté with Wine, Building a Cheese Platter with David Lebovitz, Retail Strategies for a Slow Economy, and More!

Travel in Comté-Land: La Percée du Vin Jaune

Every year during the first weekend in February, revelers gather for one of the most vibrant, yet little known, festivals in France. La Percée du Vin Jaune was created in 1997 to honor Vin Jaune, the aged “Yellow Wine” of the Jura, and to celebrate the cuisine of the region. The festival, which translates roughly as the “tapping of the barrel,” often attracts more than 30,000 visitors and is held in a different village every year. Visitors and wine-enthusiasts crowd the



© Studio Lyet / Ambassadeurs des Vins Jaunes

streets to taste the wines of 70-80 producers, who set up tasting rooms in shops and cellars around the town. Musicians and theater groups perform, and a wide array of regional foods such as Comté, local charcuterie and honey are available for tasting from streetside vendors. On Sunday, the event culminates with a ceremony led by the Ambassadeurs des Vins Jaunes, who open a 228-liter barrel of “new” Vin Jaune in the town square—the “tapping” of the yellow wine—to the cheering of crowds. The “new” wine must have aged for a minimum of 6 years and 3 months.

The 2010 event will take place from February 6-7 in Poligny. The Comité Interprofessionnel du Comté (CIGC) is headquartered in Poligny, along with the “House of Comté,” where you can explore the production, aromas and flavors of Comté. Poligny is also the home to the cheese school “Ecole Nationale d’Industrie Laitière et des Biotechnologies” (ENIL), which was established in the 1890’s. La Percée du Vin Jaune is the perfect occasion to rediscover the exceptional marriage of Comté and Vin Jaune.

Pairing Comté & Wine: Not Just for Whites



There’s no doubt that white wine makes a great match for Comté—from Vin Jaune, to Chardonnay, Riesling and Champagne, white wine has been a classic pairing with Comté for centuries. So it might come as a surprise that Comté also pairs remarkably well with red wines.

Forget the recent controversy over drinking red wine with cheese; when it comes to Comté, red wine is definitely a suitable match. In the Jura, people have been drinking the local Pinot Noir, Trousseau and Poulsard wines with Comté for as long as they’ve been pairing Comté with the local whites. The slight acidity and low tannins of these light-style red wines

complement the creamy nuttiness of Comté without overpowering its aromas. Comté also goes very well with Châteauneuf-du-Pape, Burgundy and Loire Valley wines.

Additionally, Comté is a great match for the high-end wines from Bordeaux, which are notoriously hard to pair with cheese. In the Decanter article, “Claret & Cheese,” by Rosi Hanson (July 2009), maître fromager (master cheesemonger) Bernard Antony recommends Comté with Bordeaux red wines. The article notes that Christian Moueix of J-P Moueix prefers aged Comté with older Pomerols, whereas Frédéric Engerer of Châteaux Latour favors younger Comtés with his wines. Bernard de Laage de Meux, Director of Development for Châteaux Palmer has had several unforgettable experiences pairing Châteaux Palmer with Comté, notably when Alain Senderens served Comté Millésimé with a special mushroom bread and Châteaux Palmer 1961: “It created a fabulous harmony between the light saltiness but mellowness of the cheese, with the rich aromas of the cèpes (mushroom) and the tremendous aromatic complexity of the Palmer ‘61.”

Not just limited to red and white wines, Comté can also be enjoyed with fortified wines. An aged Comté is a delicious match with sweet and floral Macvin du Jura, a fortified wine from the region, as well as with Port. In addition, cheese expert and journalist Janet Fletcher loves an off-dry Amontillado sherry from Spain with Comté, noting that its nuttiness mirrors the aromas in the cheese.

Don’t be afraid to experiment with your own Comté pairings! We’d like to hear your favorite combinations; email us at contactusa@comte-usa.com.

Pairing Notes from Belinda Chang,

Wine Director at The Modern, NYC

What are your favorite wines to drink with Comté?

I recently spent a week in Burgundy and I discovered that although the wines of the Jura are the classic match for Comté, the wines of Burgundy are terrific as well. The ripe whites of Auxey-Duresses and Meursault, the rich reds of Gevrey-Chambertin and Morey St Denis - we found ourselves ordering Comté from every cheese cart that we encountered!



Photo by Chris Guillen

What flavor characteristics are you looking for in a wine to pair with Comté?

The nutty character of Comté makes it a natural match for wines that are aged in oak. The richness of Comté also makes it pair well with fuller bodied styles of white as well as the spectrum of reds. It is a perfect cheese to share when you and your friends are all enjoying different styles of wine at the party or during the meal. I can’t think of another cheese that is so wine-friendly!

Do you have any general tips for folks picking out wines with cheese?

The old adage “What grows together, goes together” has never failed me.

Building a Cheese Platter

Acclaimed writer and cookbook author David Lebovitz moved to Paris in 2002, after working for years as a pastry chef at Chez Panisse in California. An avid cheese lover and entertainer, we asked David about his ideal cheese platter.



Photo by Louisa Chu

How do you decide what cheeses to include on a cheese platter?

I usually pick one mountain cheese when I'm creating a platter (I always choose Comté because it's my favorite!), and I'll usually pair it with a goat cheese. The flavor profile of goat cheese complements Comté, and its round shape looks nice alongside other chunks of cheese. The other cheese I would pick would be a blue cheese or Roquefort for contrast. At this point in my life, I would never include more than 3 cheeses on a platter. When I first moved to France, I would serve about 10 different cheeses and would then have a bunch left over. But you can't re-serve cheese after it's been half eaten! Now I focus on quality. I'll sometimes even do just 1 or 2 high quality cheeses, which can be more sophisticated than doing a ton of cheeses, in my opinion.



What do you serve alongside the cheese?

I always serve fresh bread with cheese. I often say that I'm going to serve cheese with jam or fruit, but French people don't really do that like they do in America. Here, it's all about the cheese. In France, we eat cheese after dinner, but I also like to serve it before dinner, baked into gougères (see recipe below), or cut into cubes or chunks to pair with an aperitif, such as rosé or Champagne. Champagne and Comté are one of the greatest flavor combinations!

*David Lebovitz writes about food and Paris at www.DavidLebovitz.com. He has written 6 cookbooks, including *The Perfect Scoop* (Ten Speed Press) and *Room for Dessert* (HarperCollins). His most recent book is *The Sweet Life in Paris* (Broadway).*

Gougères By David Lebovitz, adapted from www.DavidLebovitz.com

- 1/2 cup water
- 3 tablespoons butter, salted or unsalted, cut into cubes
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- big pinch of chile powder, or a few turns of freshly-ground black pepper
- 1/2 cup flour
- 2 large eggs
- 3/4 cup (about 3 ounces) grated Comté cheese
- 12 chives, finely-minced (or 1 to 2 teaspoons minced fresh thyme)

1. Preheat the oven to 425°F. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper or a silicone baking mat.
2. Heat the water, butter, salt, and chile powder or pepper in a saucepan until the butter is melted.
3. Dump in the flour all at once and stir vigorously until the mixture pulls away from the sides into a smooth ball. Remove from heat and let rest two minutes.
4. Add the eggs, one at a time, stirring quickly to make sure the eggs don't 'cook.' The batter will first appear lumpy, but after a minute or so, it will smooth out. (You can transfer the mixture to a bowl before adding to eggs to cool the dough, or do this step in a food processor or electric mixer, if you wish.)

5. Add about three-quarters of the grated cheese and the chives, and stir until well-mixed.
6. Scrape the mixture into a pastry bag fitted with a wide plain tip and pipe the dough into mounds, evenly-spaced apart, making each about the size of a small cherry tomato.
7. Top each puff with a bit of the remaining cheese, then pop the baking sheet in the oven.
8. Bake for 10 minutes, then turn the oven down to 375°F and bake for an additional 20 to 25 minutes, until they're completely golden brown. For extra-crispy puffs, five minutes before they're done, poke the side of each puff with a sharp knife to release the steam, and return to the oven to finish baking.

Serving: The puffs are best served warm, and if making them in advance, you can simply pipe the gougères on baking sheets and cook right before your guests arrive, or reheat the baked cheese puffs in a low oven for 5-10 minutes before serving. Some folks like to fill them, or split them and sandwich a slice or dry-aged ham in there, although I prefer them just as they are.



The Comté Cheese Association has developed a series of seasonal "Holiday Side Dishes" recipe cards, featuring mouthwatering but easy-to-make recipes for Green Bean & Mushroom Gratin with Comté and Fried Shallots, Easy Comté & Sweet Potato Soufflé, and Comté, Cranberry & Apple Stuffing. These 4x6 recipe cards are perfect for point-of-sale displays, tasting events, classes, and staff trainings. Countertop display stands are also available. Learn more at www.comte-usa.com, or email us at contactusa@comte-usa.com to request a set!

Retail Strategies for the Slow Economy

In the face of tough economic times, cheesemongers and retailers are discovering creative solutions for surviving the down market. From marketing and promotions, staff training, customer outreach, and a focus on product care and reducing waste, cheese buyers are seeking out innovative strategies for beating the recession.

Marketing and Promotions

The economic recession was a topic during the American Cheese Society conference in Austin this year (August 5-8). In the seminar, "Economic Strategies for a Down Market," panelist Anna Wolfe, Editor of *Gourmet News*, described ways in which retailers such as Fairway Market, DeLaurenti Specialty Food & Wine, and Sickles Market are magnifying their marketing efforts and developing promotions to attract customers. From ads in local newspapers and magazines, to commercials on local radio stations, to public radio and television sponsorships, retailers are seeking new avenues to drive traffic to their stores. Once in the store, heavy signage, specials, and cross promotions have helped to push cheeses. According to Wolfe, other creative promotions, such as partnering with local festivals and events, or offering discounts on gift cards during the holidays, have also been successful.

Staff Training

Wolfe also noted that retailers are emphasizing staff training. Some stores have had to cut back on employees, making it more important than ever that each person is well educated about the cheeses and that they're given incentives to sell. Training sessions, classes and mentorship programs are great ways to keep staff informed, efficient and happy. Also, from offering small perks such as longer breaks, to rewarding high sales, an engaged, motivated staff is more likely to boost sales.

Customer Outreach

One of the (many!) downsides of a down economy is that consumers become less trusting. Creating customer loyalty therefore becomes paramount. According to Wolfe, stores such as DeLaurenti Specialty Food & Wine are sending out monthly newsletters to their customers featuring new products, store news, recipes and upcoming events. The newsletters draw customers back as well as provide useful information. Free events are also a great way to draw a crowd and keep them there. Kowalski's Market in Minnesota offers a free cheese class at one of their locations each month. Social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook are also becoming increasingly popular as a way to connect with customers, used by retailers such as Whole Foods, Murray's Cheese, Oxbow Wine & Cheese Merchant and the Bedford Cheese Shop.

Product Care

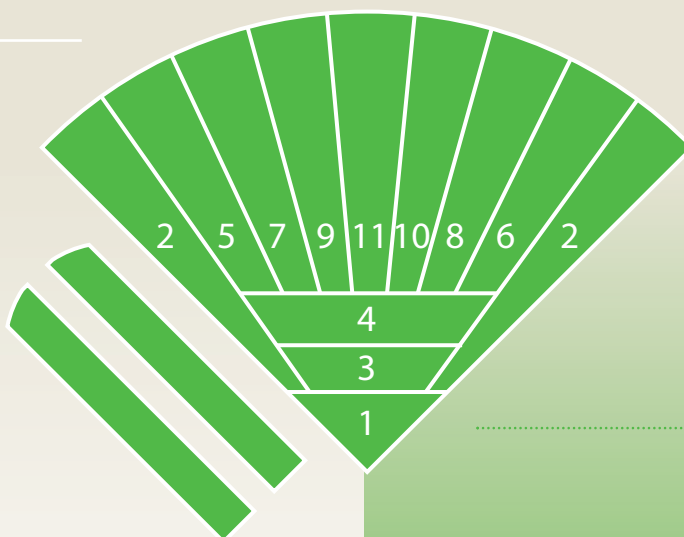
More than ever, reducing waste and preserving quality is essential. According to retailers, customers are still buying cheese, but buying smaller quantities and being more selective about their purchases. Careful handling and storage can ensure that no cheese goes to waste, and that the customer receives the highest quality product at each purchase.

Caring for Comté

Reduce waste and preserve the quality of your Comté by following these tips:

- Buy just what you can sell within 2-4 weeks and sell out (Comté arrives ready-to-sell; the longer it's held, the higher risks of diminishing quality and losses in profitability).
- Store Comté at 45° F to 55° F in waxed (or butcher) paper. If stored in a walk-in, keep the cheese in the box and store away from fans.
- Don't leave displayed cheese in direct sunlight, under bright lights or under condensation vents.
- Follow the cutting diagram to avoid wasting any Comté.
- For pre-cut cheese, cut little and often. Cut pieces should be 2-3 days old maximum when they're sold.
- If you are concerned about the cheese quality, contact your supplier immediately.

For more information about caring for Comté, or to request tip sheets for your staff, visit www.comte-usa.com or email us at contactusa@comte-usa.com.



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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