



Spring/Summer 2012



1. Comté wheels are aged on spruce boards for at least 4 months, but often for 12-18 months or even longer.
2. The wood is instrumental to the formation of the rind.
3. A drying room adjacent to a Comté fruitière in which the wooden planks are dried.

One of the Secrets of Affinage: local wood

Comté has been aged on rough wooden planks made from locally harvested spruce for over a thousand years. Rooted in ancestral tradition and sustainable local practices, the use of planks is now scientifically proven to preserve the life of the microflora in and on the cheese, which are necessary for the formation of the rind and for the cheese's specificity of flavors. Let's take a closer look!

The raw milk used in Comté production is rich in beneficial microflora, or microscopic bacteria. The microflora enter the milk from the surrounding soils, grasses, plants and stables, and they are responsible for the resulting cheese's terroir-specific flavors and aromas (see *Comté News, Fall/Winter 2011*). In addition, the microflora form the crust, or rind, which protects the cheese and allows it to age for several months and sometimes for years.

Actilait, a technical institute for milk and milk production, has spent a decade researching the microflora on wooden boards used in the affinage, or cheese aging, process. They have discovered that on brand new wooden planks, the presence of microflora is negligible. However, on planks that have been used in affinage cellars, microflora are present on the surface and as far as 2 millimeters deep into the wood. The microflora on the wood directly reflect the microflora on the specific cheeses being aged (Mariani *et al*, 2007).

These microflora create the rind on the cheese. The wood plays a very important role during this process, as it allows the wheels to breathe. As Comté wheels age, they are rubbed with salt and a brine solution called *morge*. The *morge* creates an interface environment between the cheese and the outside air. Experiments where the wheels sat on any other material than spruce boards, such as plastic or stainless steel planks, have shown that an asphyxiating environment develops leading to significant degradation of the cheese on the quality level.

The wood planks also help to protect the cheese from pathogenic bacteria. Another *Actilait* study revealed that the ecosystem on the surface of the wood planks inhibits the growth of pathogenic bacteria such as *Listeria monocytogenes* (Mariani *et al*, 2011). This is most likely due to natural competition among the microorganisms. Based on the research, it appears that a certain level of development of the microflora is necessary for this "barrier effect" to take place. This is a concept that is increasingly being taken into account in the study of microbial ecosystems for foods such as cheeses (Imran *et al*, 2010). In addition, some of the microflora strains in Comté are also anti-*Listeria*, while the spruce boards used in Comté production have natural antiseptic properties due to the beta-Pinene that's present in the wood.

Actilait has also researched the efficacy of different cleaning methods of the planks.
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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 100,000 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.
- Comté is aged for an average of 8 months, but often for 12-18 months or even longer.



Comté Cheese Association

will be at the next

Summer Fancy Food Show in Washington DC, June 17-19, 2012 Booth #1817

Cultural spotlight: Absinthe

The Jura Massif, where Comté is produced, is a beautiful region of low mountains, pastures, woodlands and pine forests extending for about 160 miles along the Swiss border in Eastern France. The diversity of plants, grasses and microflora in the region are responsible for Comté's distinct flavors and aromas. This specificity of place defines Comté's character and is also a hallmark of other artisanal foods and wines produced in the region, from Vin Jaune, to Morteau sausages, to absinthe. Absinthe? That's right: absinthe was first produced this unassuming pastoral province in 1830, when production moved from Switzerland to Pontarlier, France.



Absinthe is made with wormwood, a variety of *Artemisia*, which is an aromatic perennial with strong floral and herbal aromas that grows throughout Europe, but is reputedly of the highest quality in the Jura region. Absinthe production peaked in Pontarlier around 1900, but production ceased in 1915 when the spirit was banned in France due to its alleged side effects (e.g. hallucinations and insanity!). This ban was partially lifted in 1998, and was totally repealed in 2005. Pontarlier is now working to reestablish its place as the world capital of absinthe.

Today, visitors to Pontarlier can explore the "Absinthe Trail," (<http://www.routedelabsinthe.com>) a map and itinerary that takes travelers from Pontarlier to the Val de Travers in Switzerland, exploring distilleries, wormwood fields and other absinthe sites along the way. Pontarlier is also the home to La Fromagerie Badoz, a Comté cheesemaking facility, and other attractions such as the Joux Castle, the Pontarlier museum and numerous restaurants and bistros where you can taste traditional Jura dishes, savor a bite of Comté and sip on a glass of absinthe.

Absinthe Vieux Pontarlier

Often referred to as "Vieux Pont" for short in the Jura, Absinthe Vieux Pontarlier is crafted by Emile Pernot, a company that has been producing absinthe in Pontarlier since 1889. This historic absinthe is distilled using traditional methods in the company's 100-year-old alembics using local wormwood, Provençal fennel seeds, anise seeds and a variety of aromatic herbs. It has an herbaceous flavor with notes of anise, Alpine herbs, wormwood, and menthol.

Absinthe Vieux Pontarlier can be served in the traditional manner (referred to as the "absinthe ritual"), where ice water is slowly dripped over a sugar cube that's set on a perforated spoon into a glass partially filled with absinthe (as the sugar water drips into the absinthe, the spirit's color changes from green to opalescent white and the aromas are gradually released), or it can be mixed into innovative new cocktails. Jim Meehan, owner of PDT bar in New York City and author of *The PDT Cocktail Book*, shares his recipe for the El Burro cocktail, made with Absinthe Vieux Pontarlier, tequila and ginger beer. Serve this tippie with the Comté-Stuffed Glazed Meatballs (see right) for a spectacular new take on cocktail hour!

El Burro

By Jim Meehan, adapted from *The PDT Cocktail Book (Sterling Epicure, 2011)*

1.5 oz. Siembra Azul Reposado Tequila
1 oz. House Ginger Beer
.75 oz. Lime Juice
.75 oz. Pineapple Juice
.5 oz. Simple Syrup
.25 oz. Vieux Pontarlier Absinthe

Shake with ice and strain into a collins glass filled with ice. Garnish with a lime wheel and a piece of candied ginger



New Recipe Cards Perfect for Spring and Summer!

New Comté Recipe Cards are now available! Sharing the theme, "Small Plates" these tantalizing dishes, including [Comté-Stuffed Glazed Meatballs](#), [Comté & Shrimp Skewers](#) and [Comté Tuiles with Asparagus and Prosciutto](#), are perfect for entertaining. Download the recipes at 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. Recipe Card holders are also available for retailers upon request.

Comté-Stuffed Glazed Meatballs

These mouthwatering meatballs are glazed with mango chutney and stuffed with a delicious surprise—an oozing pocket of Comté! Sweet on the outside, moist and cheesy in the middle, they're an irresistible twist on an ordinary meatball. Take caution: they disappear quickly!

Makes: 16 meatballs

½ pound ground beef
½ pound ground pork
2 garlic cloves, minced
½ teaspoon ground cumin
½ teaspoon kosher salt
½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
1 tablespoon finely chopped parsley, plus additional for serving
1 tablespoon finely chopped cilantro, plus additional for serving
2 ounces Comté, cut into 16 half-inch cubes
1 tablespoon extra virgin olive oil
¼ cup mango chutney

1. Preheat the oven to 400°F.
2. Knead together the ground beef and pork until evenly combined. Stir in the garlic, cumin, salt, pepper, parsley and cilantro. Divide the mixture into 16 loose patties. Place a cube of Comté in the center of each patty. Fold the sides of the meat up around the cheese and roll into a round meatball, making sure that the cheese is completely enclosed.
3. Heat the olive oil over medium-high heat in a large, oven-safe, nonstick skillet. Add the meatballs and brown on all sides, 6-8 minutes total. Remove pan from heat and brush meatballs with mango chutney. Transfer skillet to the oven and bake 2-4 minutes, or until the meatballs are just cooked through. Brush again with any remaining chutney.
4. Transfer meatballs to a platter or to serving plates. Garnish with a sprinkle of parsley and cilantro; serve warm.

Bon appétit!



A Cheese Chat with the “Bonne Femme,” Wini Moranville

Wini Moranville is the author of *The Bonne Femme Cookbook: Simple, Splendid Food That French Women Cook Every Day*. She also writes a monthly wine column for *Relish* magazine and contributes to a variety of publications within the *Better Homes and Gardens* family of publications.

As you write in your book, you’ve been a Francophile for years. Do you remember the first time you tried Comté?

While I’m sure I enjoyed Comté in France many times when I was younger, I wasn’t aware of it by name until the summer of 2003. There was a killer heat wave in France that summer. My husband and I were staying in the Côte d’Azur in the south, and decided to head to the north, thinking it would be cooler (it wasn’t!). On our way to Alsace and Champagne, we stopped for a few days in the Jura, and I fell in love with the unspoiled region! It was there I first remember eating Comté, which was served to me with the region’s famous Vin Jaune as a little appetizer/apéritif pairing before dinner. It was love at first bite!

That’s a pairing that goes back centuries! Do you have any other favorite dishes from the Jura?

I will never forget the first time I had fondue made completely with Comté. It was in the Jura. Until then, I could never see what the fuss was about when it came to fondue. But when I tasted it with Comté, it was a revelation! Now, every time I make Comté fondue, it takes me back to that mountainside—buzzing and chirping and alive with sweet grass smells.

Back home in Iowa, was Comté hard to find?

It was very hard to find here in *Amerique profonde* until about three years ago. I used to buy it on trips elsewhere in the country and bring it home. Now, we have some incredibly passionate, committed cheese-sellers—who always have a giant *meule* of it. And we can also get it at Trader Joe’s, so we’re flush with this cheese. Thank heavens!



Sounds like you’re stocked!

I always have a major-size wedge of Comté on hand. I use it as often in my cooking as an Italian cook uses Parmigiano-Reggiano. I just love the depth of flavor and the complexity it brings to cooking—and you don’t have to use a ton of it to get those effects.

What are some ways that you use it?

I’m a huge fan of the cheese course, so Comté is always served in the mix of cheese I offer after the main course. I also use it in pasta (my French lasagna, made with Comté and a béchamel sauce, is divine). A little goes a long way in salads, too (Comté-Walnut salad with butterhead lettuce is a great sit-down starter). I was also impressed with the way chefs in the Jura combined Comté and curry. I do that in my Chicken, Comté, and Spinach Salad with Apples [see recipe below]—it has sweet curry powder in the vinaigrette. And I also have a luscious take on Chicken Florentine that uses a Comté Curry duo in a main dish, with fresh cooked spinach.

Do you have any tips for cooking with Comté?

Just use it! I’m always amazed at how well it works in many kinds of recipes—not just French. I’ve substituted it for Cheddar in things like macaroni and cheese or Rarebit sauces. I love it on pizza instead of the usual pizza cheeses. I grate it over my Bolognese sauced-pasta, I use it in twice-baked potatoes, I melt it into sandwiches. I love it in omelets. Really—it’s just a great cooking cheese, because it adds so much to a dish.

What are your favorite wines to pair with Comté?

I love a Beaujolais cru (such as Morgon, Fleury, Moulin-à-Vent, Brouilly). The fruit in these light-bodied red underscores the fruity side of the Comté. Plus, they’re just such versatile food wines that they’ll mesh well many styles of dishes that call on Comté.

Chicken, Comté, and Spinach Salad with Apples

From The Bonne Femme Cookbook (The Harvard Common Press, 2011), by Wini Moranville

While traveling in the Franche-Comté region of France I’ve enjoyed a few main-dish salads that had been emboldened with a delicate sprinkling of Comté cheese, the region’s mighty take on Gruyère. The salads reminded me a little of the way that Americans sometimes shower chef’s salads with much larger planks of Swiss or cheddar. The difference, of course, is that a little Comté (in thin, delicate strips) goes a lot farther to add deep, rich flavor than three times as much domestic “Swiss” cheese. Once home, I recalled how chefs had expertly paired Comté with curry, and it wasn’t long before I came up with this French take on the chicken-and-greens salad.

Makes 4 main-course servings

1 1/4 pounds boneless, skinless chicken breast halves
Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil, plus extra for brushing the chicken
1 tablespoon white-wine vinegar
1 tablespoon mayonnaise
1/2 teaspoon sweet curry powder
3 ounces baby spinach
2 ounces Comté cheese, cut into matchsticks
1 tart red apple, such as a Washington Braeburn, cored and thinly sliced
1/4 cup walnut halves, toasted and chopped



1. Preheat the oven to 350°F.
2. Season the chicken breasts with salt and pepper and brush lightly with olive oil. Place the chicken breasts in a shallow baking dish and bake until the internal temperature registers 170°F on an instant-read thermometer, about 20 minutes. Transfer the chicken to a cutting board to rest until cool enough to handle.
3. Meanwhile, in a small bowl combine the vinegar with salt and pepper; stir until the salt dissolves. Whisk in the olive oil, mayonnaise, and curry powder.
4. Slice the chicken crosswise into bite-size slices. Place the spinach, Comté, apple, and chicken in a large bowl. Toss the salad with the desired amount of dressing (you might not use it all). Divide the salad among four plates, and top with the chopped toasted walnuts.

(Continued from page 1)

They contaminated boards with a massive population of pathogenic microorganisms and tested the two most common cleaning methods used in cheesemaking: scrubbing clean with mild water (under 95°F), or placing the planks in a high pressure cleaning booth at 180°F. Both methods proved to be equally as efficient in eliminating the pathogenic microorganisms. However, scrubbing with mild water had the advantage of better preserving the beneficial microflora on the wood's surface. As the researchers noted, "It appears that by leaning on the empirical savoir-faire of master affineurs and the mastery of the traditional methods for cleaning and drying the [wood] planks, that we will be able to maintain and perhaps even reinforce the inhibitory effect."

The spruce affinage boards are thus very important to maintaining the specificity of Comté. Not only are they part of the traditional methods of production, but they protect specific microflora that are indispensable to the taste and sanitary qualities of Comté.

Sources :

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The CIGC Part 2: Jean-Jacques Bret

In the last installment of this series (see Comté News, Fall/Winter 2011), we learned about the history and structure of the CIGC (Comité Interprofessionnel du Comté). Now let's meet the director of the organization!



Jean-Jacques Bret, Director of the CIGC

Jean-Jacques Bret has been the Director of the CIGC since 1983. He describes his role as being the representative of the collective interests of all the actors in the Comté cheesemaking process, from the dairy farmers, to the cheesemakers, to the affineurs and distributors. The CIGC is in charge of all matters pertaining to the Comté PDO. It is responsible for

safeguarding and advancing the interests of all its constituents. Since the association is under the control of the professionals in the field—the dairy farmers, *fruitières* (cheesemakers), *affineurs* (cellar masters) and members of commerce—Bret must maintain a continuous dialogue with the Comté professionals through a steady stream of emails, phone calls, and monthly meetings. As Bret asserts, these communications are crucial to the functioning of the collective organization.

In addition to managing the day-to-day operations of the CIGC, ranging from technical services and research, to quality control

and monitoring, to communications and advertising, Bret also oversees the evolution of the specifications of the Comté PDO. This is a challenge that requires a very thorough dialogue around the main issue: how to integrate modernity without losing an identity. As Bret explains, "The actors involved in the production of Comté have a profound attachment to their area, so visceral that they could not imagine a future anywhere else than in the Massif du Jura. They are thus deeply motivated to supporting a sustainable growth of their trade, from modernizing their tools when appropriate, to expanding to new markets, to listening to consumers." Bret oversees the decision-making processes (all decisions must be made with a *full consensus*, which promotes long-term stability and growth), and he makes sure that all proposals and decisions are made in accordance with French and European law.

After almost 30 years of working with the CIGC, Bret remains amazed at the values of the PDO, which have allowed it to thrive in the face of industrialization and external pressures. By staying true to its terroirs and its commitments of quality, craftsmanship and solidarity, which have been handed down by generations, he believes the PDO can face any future that lies ahead.



New! Updated Comté Brochure

The "1,000 Years of Artisanal Cheesemaking" brochure has been updated with new content and a fresh design! This 16-page brochure describes the production of Comté from the dairy farm, to the cheesemaker, to the aging cellar, and also features cooking and pairing tips, nutrition information, tips for buying and storing Comté, facts about the PDO, and more. The brochure is perfect for promotions, trainings, seminars and classes. You can download the "1,000 Years of Artisanal Cheesemaking" brochure at www.comte-usa.com, or contact us at trade@comte-usa.com to request copies.

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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