

A Cheese of HISTORY and COMMUNITY

Comté from France's Jura Mountain is iconic but was born from necessity.

BY HANNAH HOWARD



COMTÉ IS AN ICONIC CHEESE. It's been made in more or less the same way for a thousand years and counting. It's a cheese that's hard not to love—creamy, roasty, nutty, complex, versatile and very possibly addictive.

"It would be more accurate to call it Comtés, rather than Comté," was a sort of refrain I heard when I recently visited the home of the cheese on the French side of the Jura Mountains, a mountain range located north of the Western Alps, following the course of the border of Eastern France and Switzerland.

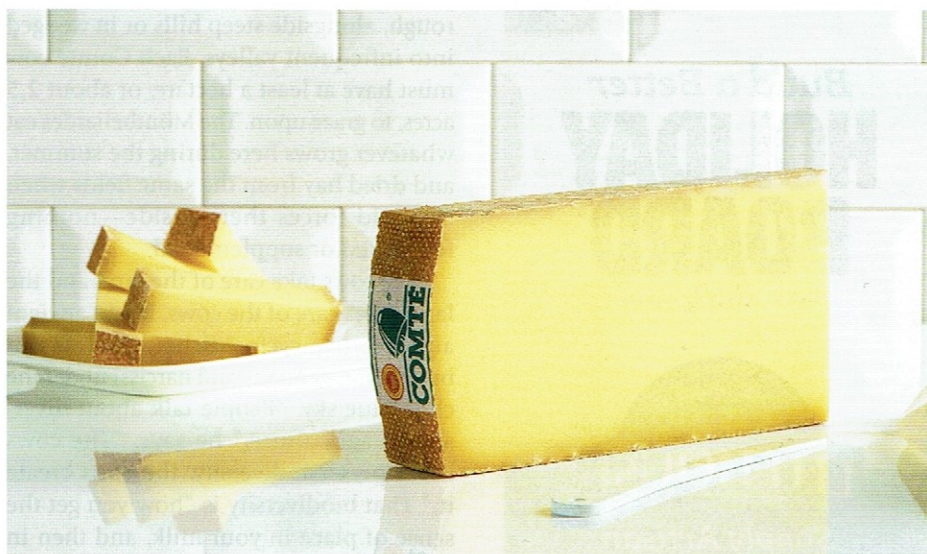
While all the wheels share a specific *terroir*, a history, and the same carefully PDO-protected cheesemaking process, their artisanal craftsmanship means each one is unique. Comté may be aged for just a few months or several years. Its milk may come from a farm farther up a mountainside or in the dip of a valley. As I tasted my way through dozens of wheels, I noticed that each had a slightly different flavor and texture, and also that they all shared an unmistakable balance and deliciousness.

Mountain Cheese

Comté was born from necessity in a specific place 10 centuries ago. The Jura mountains are craggy, tall, studded with wildflowers and pines—think of the book *Heidi*. Little grows during the frigid winters here. Milk sours quickly, but big wheels of aged cheese could feed a family, maybe a town, for most of wintertime.

Comté is by its very nature a communal cheese. Because dairy farmers had small herds and making cheese is so laborious, neighbors pooled their milk and consolidated the work of crafting cheese, as they do today. Making one 90-pound wheel of Comté requires 400 to 450 liters (100 to 120 gallons) of raw milk, or the milk from about 20 happy, healthy cows. Cows must be milked daily, so farmers built cheesemaking facilities at various locations along the mountains, as carrying milk long distances just wasn't a practical option. It's still not, and the strict Comté regulations stipulate that fresh milk—less than 24 hours fresh—must travel no more than 25 kilometers (16 miles) before being transformed into cheese.

"Because it is made in an artisanal and traditional fashion, Comté expresses the unique characteristics and culture of the Comté mountains," says Jean-Louis Carbonnier, who works with the Comté



PHOTOS COURTESY OF COMTÉ

Cheese Association. Among other things, Comté is made exclusively with the milk of Montbéliard (and Simmenthal) cows. These cows graze on vast pastures, except during the harsh months of winter.

Three Distinct Steps

The Jura Mountains are picture book pretty. Tall pines stretch up and up into the cloudless blue sky. At my feet are wildflowers that include sunshine yellow gentians high as my thighs; snow-colored narcissi; Queen Anne's lace; something purple and spindly; fragrant herbs; nettles that sting my ankles as I walk through them; tall grasses. "This specific mountainous area is responsible for a diverse

flora of 576 species, specific culture, skills and traditions," Carbonnier explains.

There are three separate groups responsible for creating Comté: the dairy farmers who care for the brick red and white Montbéliarde cows that provide milk, the cheesemakers or *fruitières* who turn that milk into cheese, and the *affineurs* who age the cheese to perfection. The system is truly cooperative; no company completes the whole process from start to finish.

Most often, dairy farmers in the U.S. and around the world sell their milk to cheesemakers (or elsewhere), then call it a day. Not so here. "We don't just milk cows, we make Comté," says Anaël Michaud, a dairy farmer in Reculfoz, a pinprick of



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a town by the Doubs River. This means tremendous care is taken at every stage of the process. Each cheese is traceable back to the cellar where it was aged, the *fruitière* where it was made, and the farmers who milked the cows.

"My dad had 20 cows, and I have 30," Michaud explained. Like many Jura dairy farmers, his family has been here for so many generations they have lost count. There are about 2,600 farms providing milk for Comté, most around this tiny size. Michaud's son is beginning to take over the farm, so that dad can focus on teaching the kind of small-scale farming he practices, which is all about sustainability and biodiversity.

We wonder around his pastures, dense with rainbows of wildflowers and tall grasses. The cows glance up, their bells ringing as they feast on what lies at our feet. In the Jura, most of the terrain is rough, alongside steep hills or in wedged into infrequent valleys. Each Comté cow must have at least a hectare, or about 2.5 acres, to graze upon. The Montbéliardes eat whatever grows here during the summer, and dried hay from the same fields when the cold forces them inside—nothing fermented or supplemental.

The cows take care of the land and the land takes care of the cows. It's an ancient and effective cycle. Michaud points out buttercups, gentians and narcissi under the clear blue sky. "People talk about diversity in agriculture," he says. "The cows don't preserve diversity, the cows create it." That biodiversity is "how you get the sense of place in your milk, and then in your cheese."

Rich diversity makes healthy cows, and healthy cows make delicious milk, which makes superb Comté. "You need to love the trees, the land and the cows," Michaud tells us. They'll love you back.

Perfectly, Carefully Matured

Yet although the farmers, cheesemakers and cheese agers do most of their work independently, close cooperation and collaboration is essential for crafting and selling Comté. The cheesemakers don't get paid until their wheels pass taste tests many months after they are shipped to one of 13 *affineurs* in the region.

One of these *affineurs* is The Cellars of the Fort Saint Antoine, also called The Cathedral of Comté. The enormous Fort St Antoine, built in the late 1800s for the

Franco Prussian wars, was turned into a Comté aging facility, or *affineur*, half a century ago when Marcel Petite realized the cool, humid conditions of the cut and vaulted stone, covered with a thick layer of soil, would provide the ideal conditions for "Affinage Lent" (slow maturing).

From inside the mighty military fort, one may think there are infinite wheels of Comté cheese, that one could walk forever through the 90-pound beauties, stacked to the top of soaring ceilings on spruce boards for careful aging. The smell: stinging ammonia and briny sea. The place is humid and dark, the better for ripening cheese to perfection. In the dim light, the wheels nearly glow.

The Comté is not endless after all. The cheeses stop at about 100,000, depending on the day. After maturing for between four months and two years, they are ready to be devoured. Some are shipped to the UK, the U.S., Paris. But many end up right where they began, in the Jura Mountains. Locals feast on Comté for breakfast, lunch and dinner. It's the pride of their land, and remarkably delicious.

"We find a way to share," said Hubert Borel, an *affineur* at Saint Antoine. "The farmers can make a living, the cheesemakers can make a living and so can we. If we do it right, everyone is happy."

Each batch of cheese is handmade and aged on locally harvested spruce boards for a minimum of four months. The average age of each wheel is eight months, but *affineurs* also offer wheels up to 24 and 36 months. They taste each wheel multiple times to determine its fate—will it be enjoyed relatively young or set aside for extra maturing?

"Each wheel of Comté has its own texture and set of aromas," says Carbonnier. "In general, the texture of Comté is firm, but silky, and distinctive from other pressed cooked cheeses. Comté is low in salt with aromas that are very diverse and refined. Over 80 descriptors have been identified and can be used to describe Comté." As we tasted, we noticed flavors and aromas of caramelized onion, butter-scotch pudding, hazelnut, sweet cream, coffee, leather and prune.

A board represents each of the three groups and oversees and supervises the process from beginning to end. Over dinner with Valéry Elisseeff, director of that governing body, the CIGC (Le Comité Interprofessionnel de Gestion du Comté),



PHOTO COURTESY OF COMTÉ

WINE BRAISED CHICKEN WITH COMTÉ & CREAM

This recipe comes from Jean-Louis Charbonnel, Comté dairy farmer. Chicken legs are braised in Jura wine with a hearty splash of cream and plenty of Comté. The surprisingly light cheese sauce is the perfect match for the ultra tender chicken. Serve the dish with rice, mashed potatoes or plenty of crusty bread for soaking up the sauce.

Serves 4

- 4 bone-in chicken thighs and 4 chicken drumsticks
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 1 Tbsp butter
- 1 cup dry white wine (preferably Sauvignon)
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup chicken broth
- $2\frac{1}{4}$ cups grated Comté, divided
- 1 cup heavy cream
- Chopped parsley, for serving (optional)

- Season the chicken legs with salt and pepper. Melt the butter in a large straight-sided skillet with a lid (or a Dutch oven) over medium-high heat.

- Add the chicken pieces, skin side down, and cook until browned, about 8-10 minutes. Turn the chicken over and pour in the wine. Bring to a boil, and cook until the wine is reduced by half, about 5 minutes.

- Pour in the chicken broth and bring to a simmer. Cover and cook on low until the chicken is very tender (a knife should slide easily through the meat), about 25-30 minutes.

- Transfer the chicken to a plate. Pour the heavy cream into the skillet with the pan juices and bring to a simmer. Cook until reduced by about half, about 10 minutes. Remove the skillet from the heat and slowly stir in 2 cups of the cheese. Season with salt and pepper.

- Return the chicken to the skillet (or transfer it to a baking dish and add the sauce).

- Sprinkle the remaining Comté over top. If you'd like, broil the chicken until the cheese is melted and the top is browned in spots, about 2 minutes. Sprinkle with parsley before serving.

we savored multiple courses featuring Comté paired with the gorgeous, funky wines from Jura. "When you buy Comté," he says, "you are not only buying cheese, you are buying history. You are tasting community."

Looking Ahead

Carbonnier wishes "all cheese lovers had the opportunity to visit the Comté region, sip fresh, creamy Montéliard cow's milk on a farm, and savor a variety of Comtés in an affineur's cellar!" I can't help but agree. But even to taste Comté in the U.S. is to discover the Jura mountains and its traditions.

While the cheese is deeply rooted in tradition, the makers also look ahead to the future. Innovation is intimately linked to preserving and fostering traditional practices based on solidarity and respect for this cheese's land. "Innovations that facilitate the work of the people have slowly been introduced, as long as they don't interfere with the essential gestures of the farmers, the cheesemakers and the affineurs, and the hand-crafted nature of Comté," Carbonnier explains. "For example, robots are now broadly used in affinage cellars. However, it is important to note that milking robots are banned and the size of farms and fruitières are quite limited."

The Comté PDO has long been involved in the protection of the local environment. It encourages extensive farming and the floral diversity of perennial pastures; it supports practices that are favorable to endangered animal species and migratory birds; it encourages farmers to have sustainable practices in their farms and fields.

The best way to eat Comté is probably to savor some on its own or accompanied with Vin Jaune from the Jura or Crémant du Jura, sparkling wine from the same region. (If you don't have access to Jura wine, a light-bodied red or crisp Champagne will do the trick beautifully.)

Comté is also versatile in the kitchen; it melts gorgeously and lends a rich, complex flavor to a wide variety of dishes. It's perfect melted in a fondue, baked into a gratin or stirred into a cheese soufflé. Use it in frittatas, quiches, macaroni and cheese, paninis, polenta and even shaved or diced in salads. Comté also helps to bind sauces and give them body. Just take a minute to close your eyes and taste the Jura. **CC**