

Essay Question:

Please answer both of the following questions, essay combined must be 600-800 words:

“In your experience, what have you found to be the most common perception(s) — or misperception(s) — that customers have when it comes to Comté? What is your most memorable interaction with a customer related to Comté cheese? And why was it so memorable?”

There is a widespread appreciation for Comté, due of course to its deserved reputation as one of the great icons of traditional cheesemaking; to its versatility in cooking, baking, and plating; and to its nuanced yet approachable, sophisticated yet something-for-everyone flavors. There are many people – myself included – who name Comté as one of their favorite cheeses. There are many people – myself included – who eat Comté often. There are many people – myself included, up until the past couple years – who have only ever had the opportunity to enjoy one label of Comté, because it was the only one distributed in their region.

The greatest perception – or misperception – that customers have when it comes to Comté, is one that I’ve personally long shared, until recently: the perception that they/I “know” Comté. I mean, that they/I *know* Comté.

My own experience with Comté as a monger was, for many years, based entirely on a delicious 12-month aged profile from Seignemartin, which was the only one available to our shop through our supplier. I reveled in the cheese’s flavor and texture. I marveled at its consistency from wheel to wheel, and noted the small differences from season to season. I read about Comté production and affinage, and I watched videos of milking, of cheesemaking, of brushing and flipping and tapping and tasting, and I thought I had a great understanding of what went into the finished product that I lovingly displayed in the cheese case. And then and then and then – I had the opportunity to try a different Comté, from another affineur, at a different age. I was shocked, and delighted: while it was still immediately recognizable as Comté, it was so remarkably different too. What I had assumed were universal attributes, were in fact a demonstration of one particular affineur’s style. What I had assumed were “the” flavors that one could identify in a bite of Comté, suddenly doubled in number. I had a new, different, and freshly appreciative idea of how great Comté is – not (only) that it is made with incredible consistency, but that within the bounds of that consistency, lie untold worlds of possible flavor, in manifold possible combinations.

I currently work at a small cheese shop that is in a position and a region that allows it to carry at least two, and sometimes four or five, different profiles of Comté at a time. One of the great joys of talking with a customer who is new to our shop, is to gauge their familiarity – and their expectations – with Comté, and then to select an affineur or an age profile to sample to them that changes their perception of the cheese forever. Not a hard task, really, and not a reflection of any skill of my own as a monger; it is really astonishing just how much singular character is imbued in each cheese according to the micro-region the milk was sourced from, the make, and the skill in selection and particularities of affinage. As it is with all the best cheeses, it is the Comté doing the talking, not me.

One of the great joys of talking with a customer who is a regular to our shop, in turn, who has perhaps already developed a taste (a hunger, even) for a diversity of profiles of Comté, is to share with them the moment of opening a new wheel, from a season or an affineur we are unfamiliar with. There is a curiosity, a suspense, a breathless expectation that we all experience as the wire pulls through the wheel for the first time. After months or years of maturation and development, there is the promise of something special in every unopened Comté. That first bite from a freshly opened wheel is always electric, and always

memorable. One particularly memorable moment revolved around one particularly suspenseful breaking down of a new wheel: On a busy December day, with plenty of customers there to witness and engage in the process, we unwrapped a 3-year aged Comté we had been saving for the occasion. It was disconcertingly mite-riddled on its surface, worryingly dusty and dry, but uncracked and solid. With caveats to the audience to keep their expectations low in the face of this crusty, craggy mystery, we scored across the wheel; we fit the two-handled wire into the scoreline; and we carefully, tentatively pulled the wire through, unsure what the paste would reveal inside. When it opened, everyone in the room almost gasped - it had a glowing, almost golden color, and pristine dense interior, studded with sparkling crystals, and the cheese's aroma was immediately heady and seductive. And then we all, collectively, tasted shavings from the cheese. The glowing golden color of the cheese shined in all our faces – it was magnificent.