

### **Essay Question:**

Please answer the following question, within a word count of 600-800 words:

***“Have you noticed a growing interest in specialty cheese and Comté in particular among consumers under 40 recently?”*** In your essay, please share your thoughts on average spent by these consumers, prices, as well as examples to illustrate Comté’s specific situation within this trend.

### ***Cheese Glitter and Good Taste: The Sparkle Behind Comté’s Appeal***

I first experienced Comté in 2010 when I was 33 and studying the wines of the Jura region while preparing for my Sommelier exam. The region’s cool-climate wines and bright acidity had already hooked me, but the moment I tasted Comté alongside those bottles, it changed how I understood cheese and terroir. The cheese was warm and nutty, softly sweet, with notes of caramel and browned butter, and tiny sparkly crystals that revealed its age more than its novelty. It was the first time I ever saw “cheese glitter,” and it changed my life. That moment made me appreciate how much food traditions can teach us when we slow down and taste with intention.

Years later, during my eight years working in cheese retail as a specialty cheese sales manager, Comté was still a seasonal holiday item when I began. We didn’t carry it year-round, not because customers didn’t want it, but because it was only offered as a holiday order. But each winter, we needed to bring in a bit more. Each January, there was a little less waste. Soon younger shoppers in March, July, and September began asking if they could count on it the same way they counted on good wine nights and shared meals. Eventually, we started carrying it all year. With smart ordering, smaller wedges, and thoughtful case planning, Comté held beautifully with hardly any waste. Its long aging and delightful flavor made it a cheese customers returned to because of the taste, not the hype.

I’m fascinated by data, and when you look at the numbers, Comté’s growth becomes clear. The global specialty cheese market was valued at \$36.7 billion USD in 2023 and is expected to grow to \$53.9 billion by 2030, a 5.7% annual growth rate. In the United States, deli specialty cheese sales grew about 8% year-over-year, even as many processed cheeses struggled. Generational engagement tells the same story. A consumer survey showed that 71% of Gen Z adults ages 21 to 25 purchased specialty cheese in the previous 90 days, the highest rate of any age group. Millennials follow closely, especially in cities and young family households, where hosting and shared meals are part of daily life.

Younger cheese lovers aren’t just buying cheese; they’re making thoughtful choices about how they use it. Specialty food research shows that shoppers ages 25 to 44 spend more on premium cheeses than older consumers. At cheese counters across the U.S., this often means purchasing \$10 to \$25 wedges, or \$25 to \$50 boards for gatherings and tasting nights. Newer buyers typically begin with quarter-pound wedges priced \$6 to \$12, which is an approachable way to try something new. Once they’re hooked, they often return for half-

pound to one-pound portions for cooking projects like gratins, quiches, snack meals, or grazing table experiences and social media trends.

Comté fits this pattern well. In many specialty shops, it retails for \$20 to \$35 per pound depending on age and sourcing. Murray's Cheese lists its 18-month Comté around \$36 per pound, while many shops offer 12-month wheels between \$16 and \$32 per pound. Even with rising food prices, Comté remains a great choice for retailers because it ages well, stores well, and cuts cleanly into small, manageable portions. You can shred it, melt it, slice it, or cube it; it always performs.

Comté is also protected by both AOC and PDO certification, meaning it must be made in specific regions using traditional copper vats and raw milk from heritage breeds like Montbéliarde and French Simmental. Wheels must age at least four months in humid caves, though most mature longer, developing deeper sweetness, savory notes, and the sparkly tyrosine crystals younger shoppers and I love. Its flavor spectrum delivers milky and buttery when young, caramel-rich and shiny crystals when aged, making it equally at home on boards, in recipes, or as a daily snack.

Its popularity even shows up at home. My husband loves playing a video game called Supermarket Owner Simulator, and the first cheese you unlock to sell in the game is Comté. It mirrors real retail logic: start with something dependable, order carefully, build trust, and earn loyal customers through flavor rather than flash. Though a little sparkle can be good.

Preparing for the ACS CCP® exam reminded me of what Comté and Jura wine first taught me at the age of 33: that discipline and passion can work together quietly, without ego. That first taste opened a door I've followed ever since, and now my hope is simply to hold it open for others—one thoughtful wedge at a time.

“More people are eating better cheese than ever. And once you've tasted the good stuff, you don't go back.” —Andy Hatch