

# COMTÉ News



Fall/Winter  
2023

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Association

## 2022 Comté Scholarship winner Sam Rollins' shares his experience in Comté-land!

While flying halfway across the globe to smell dried grass may not sound like the most enthralling of cheese-related pursuits – hear me out. Sticking my nose in someone else's box of hay was something of a lightbulb moment, and it re-oriented my understanding of the context for Comté, and of great cheeses in general - the way they are anchored so perfectly in their specific terroir - in a way that carried through a whole incredible summer of European cheese-related adventures.

This exciting (well, at least for me) and revelatory (again, for me) moment happened on the first day of the trip. We were at the Maison du Comté, the beautiful new museum and learning center that houses a series of interactive exhibits showcasing all the different facets of Comté production. At face value, the exhibits were nothing groundbreaking to a cheesemonger – most of us have a pretty good sense of how cheese is made, and most of us are most likely already well versed in the lore and the PDO standards for Comté. But despite all that, I was really impressed by the whole experience, the balance between specificity and accessibility. Which bring me to the grass.  
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Display boxes filled with dried grass medleys, that you could smell and scrutinize. There was an infographic to help identify each kind of plant included therein. Although I'm not much of a "plant person" generally speaking, I found this quite engaging. It makes perfect sense that a cow would care what she's eating; it makes a lot of sense that a farmer providing raw milk to a Comté would also put a lot of thought into what their cows are eating. It makes good sense that the Comté PDO would have restrictions on what can and cannot be part of a Comté cow's diet. But I was at first surprised, then charmed, then completely taken by the idea of the Comté Association specifically wanting visitors from around the world to reflect on what these cows eat. In a very literal way, the grass is the connection between the land (earth, soil, terroir) and the cheese (cows, milk, humans). The health and healthfulness of the native grass on the pastures of the Jura is of utmost importance at both ends, bringing nourishment and sustenance to the cows on one side, and to the soil on the other. The ecosystem is so delicately balanced that Comté could literally not be made if any one of those three connection points – the land, the grass, the cows – were not able to contribute to the sustenance of the other two. It is a feedback loop that plays in two directions, feeding into the maintenance of the Jura's beautiful verdant landscape while also providing the raw ingredient that has amazingly been used for the past 1,000 years to make Comté cheese.

This "aha!" connecting of the dots between the land, the grass, and the animals stayed with me throughout the whole incredible week in the Jura. Visiting farms, dairies, the astonishing Fort Saint Antoine, I witnessed constantly

how omnipresent in the minds of all our hosts those same ideas are – these are people who care not only about producing great cheese, but about nurturing and aligning and preserving a healthy ecosystem within which that cheese plays a significant contributory role. We had the opportunity to meet dedicated cheesemakers, affineurs, cheesemongers, farmers – and for all of them, that dedication applied not just to their craft but also to their evident appreciation for their own place in the ecosystem. Each was, in their own way, a form of "grass" – a necessary connection point between the earth on one side, and a hungry mouth on the other.

During a once-in-a-lifetime summer that included the Comté scholarship trip to the Jura, then to the Savoie, Piedmont, Lombardy, Switzerland, and the incredible experience of participating in (and taking 2nd place at!) the international cheesemonger competition at Mondial du Fromage in the Loire Valley, I thought back often to the box full of dried grass at the Maison du Comté. The smell of it and how it must smell to the senses of a grazing cow. The look of it and how it must have felt to the farmer working in the fields, gathering hay for the wintertime. The chemistry of it and how that contributes to the essential character of Comté's aromas and flavors. There are other cheesemakers I visited, I'm happy to say, that have a similar respect and appreciation for the whole wealth of contributing factors that play into their cheese; but there were no other cheesemakers that came close to professing that respect and appreciation as eloquently, as perfectly, as the Maison du Comté managed to do with those boxes of grass.

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**The Comté Scholarship for ACS CCPs is closing soon! It's your chance to win an expense-paid trip to the Jura Mountains of France just like Sam's! Go to [comte-usa.com](http://comte-usa.com) for the application today. The deadline is midnight December 8th!**



## **A Conversation with Courtney C. Johnson, PhD, ACS CCP, cheesemonger, Executive Director of Washington Cheesemakers' Association & member of the U.S. team participating in *Le Mondial du Fromage!***

Held annually the *Mondial du Fromage* tournament has been described as relentless test of knowledge and skill — comparable to a “cheese decathlon.”

**Q. You were one of 16 cheesemongers from around the world who competed for the title of World's Best Cheesemonger. How did you get selected?**

A. I was selected to compete in the *Mondial du Fromage* after first competing in, and winning, the U.S. cheesemonger championship, Cheesemonger Invitational (the brainchild of Adam Moskowitz): Masters.

**Q. Your teammate was Sam Rollins, a recent Comté Scholarship winner, how did you find competing with him?**

A. Sam and I have known one another for several years now; we actually work together regularly, as my shop buys cheeses from his company. I knew that Sam would do well, and I was very happy to see he placed!

**Q. What do you wish more customers would appreciate when it comes to PDO cheeses like Comté?**

A. I would like my customers to understand the traditions that a name stands for when it comes to PDO cheeses: the legacy of a craft from a certain place, as well as the guarantee of quality that the PDO signifies. Many American customers do not even know that the PDO system exists or why, so that leaves the door open for good conversations about the differences among styles that one finds at a well-stocked cheese counter.



## Cheesemonger's Corner – “Best Practices” with Nathan Aldridge, ACS CCP/ACS CCSE Education & Team Member Enrichment Manager, Gourmet Foods International, Atlanta, Georgia



### Q. How initially did you get into cheese?

A. I like to tell people that I fell backwards into cheese. Just after I had graduated from college, I was on a mission to figure out what I wanted to do with my life. Coming from rural south Alabama, I had a yearning to explore. To me the most logical thing to do was go to the largest city in America! Having worked in kitchens in high school and college, I thought I could get a cooking job easily in the city... I was wrong. Luckily, I had a friend who was an assistant manager at Murray's Cheese shop in the West Village and they offered me an interview. At first, I protested, as I knew nothing about cheese. Where I was from, we just had shredded bagged cheese and Velveeta. I was so intimidated that I almost turned it down. Luckily, I showed up with my obnoxiously positive attitude, ability to talk to anyone and southern charm and won over the manager. And ...I was like a duck in water. Being a cheesemonger was the most fun and rewarding job I had ever had. I loved every minute of it! I was surrounded by some of the most interesting, intelligent, and passionate people I had ever been exposed to in my life. My first cheese job shaped who I am today and allowed me to make some truly amazing cheese friends.

### Q. What do you think is the most common perception(s) — or misperception(s) — that customers have when it comes to Comté?

A. Comté is one of those cheeses that lives the life of what I imagine an A-list celebrity or popular sports player lives...everybody knows your name, everyone wants a piece of you, but no one knows or appreciates how long it takes, or how much work goes into achieving that level of fame. Comté has that perception to me. Comté is the Daniel Day-Lewis of cheese... if you see it on a cheese board, you know it's going to be a great board. And it has the power to lift up other great cheeses or expose subpar cheeses for what they really are. It's quite dramatic I know, but that's what great cheeses do.

When working the cheese counter, I talk to many people every day who love to feel like they are in the 'cheese club' and love to prove it by name-dropping certain cheeses. My point is that many people think Comté, and Gruyere are the same, with the same history, same milk, and same flavor. This couldn't be further from the truth, and I love whenever I get the opportunity to educate customers on the differences between cheeses so they can help us mongers spread the truth about amazing cheeses.

### Q. Are there any best practices you'd like to share with other cheesemongers?

A. I have 3 basic best practices for cheesemongers: 1) Keep it clean: Cheesemongers are the stewards of the cheese in the same way that farmers are stewards of the land. It is our job to ensure each cheese gets to the customer the way the cheesemaker intended it to taste. That means we need to minimize cross contamination, and prevent spoilage, especially if you pre-cut cheese. 2) Keep it real: Be honest with customers when talking about cheese. If Comté is your favorite cheese, then share your personal experience as to why... sharing your love of cheese could lead others to fall in love with cheese. On the flip side, if you don't care for something, don't lie, but do try to be thoughtful...you can say things like, "This cheese isn't in my flavor wheel house, but I have loads of friends who really like the flavor profile of this cheese, and here are some of their favorite pairings." 3) Keep it fun! Cheese is an amazing creation that is meant to share and creates smiles. Drop any snootiness. The more fun you make it for those buying cheese, the more fun they will have when eating and sharing cheese.

### Q. How do you enjoy Comté?

A. I enjoy Comté in many ways, but my absolute favorite way is to pair it with a nice caramelized onion spread and nestle that on top of a warm, crusty piece of bread. It's like heaven in a bite!