

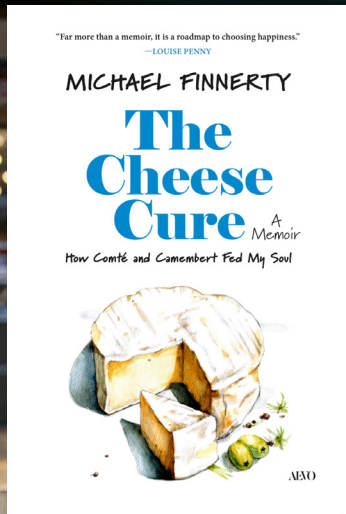
COMTÉ

News



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Comté Cheese
Association

Q&A with Michael Finnerty, BBC broadcast journalist turned cheesemonger!

Q. You had an impressive career in broadcast journalism, working in radio, at the BBC and then your own morning show in Montreal – so how did you end up in cheese?

A. I realized one day sitting alone in the cinema thinking about all the work I had to do that I needed a break from the all-consuming life of a morning radio show presenter – the job had eaten my life – so I asked for a sabbatical, flew to London, and found myself walking around one of my favorite food markets, Borough Market, where a cheesemonger had posted a help wanted ad. French Cheese ! It conjures foundational memories of a student exchange to France and how I was inaugurated, through hunger and later desire, into the pleasures of artisanal cheese.

Q. Why do you think a job as a cheesemonger really spoke to you at this point in your life?

A. It occurred to me that working in cheese would be exactly the kind of clean break from my screen-obsessed job as a journalist that I needed to gain perspective on my life. The physicality appealed to me. I was also thirsty for specialized knowledge – I wanted to get away from the journalist's superficial awareness of hundreds of issues and instead dive deeply into the magical, and, let's face it, weird world of cheesemongering, cheesematuring and cheesemaking. So many mysteries to uncover. On top of all that, when I stood back and watched the mongers in action, they were just SO cool. Could I do that?

Q. What role did Comté play in saving you from burnout?

A. Such a big role, on top of featuring in the title of my book! One day, the owner of our company came to our stall and proceeded with my manager and me, the apprentice, to sample three wheels of Comté. He got out the cheese iron, plunged it in, and drew out three carrots. We tasted; we marveled at how distinct they were: each wheel has its own life it's living, its own slight variations in flavor and texture. It was an epiphany for me because I drew the obvious parallel with myself. Had I ever stopped to assess myself, stuck the metaphorical cheese iron deep inside, withdrawn a sample and truly considered how bright my paste was tasting? I began to develop a profound connection to the cheeses, to learn about all the love that went into making them and maturing them, to take deep pleasure in feeding them to our customers. Through the months of nurturing the cheeses, I nurtured myself.

Q. What do you hope people will take away from reading your book?

A. A couple of things. I hope they will come to admire and understand the complexity of artisanal cheese and how they embody so much of the love and history that went into making them, the terroir, the climate, and the animals who produce the milk they're made from. But this is not a cheese dictionary, it's a love letter to mongering, and at its heart, The Cheese Cure is a story about re-invention, about getting yourself to a place

where you're able truly to consider all you're capable of doing – things you dismissed as beyond your ability. So many of the obstacles we put in front of us are in our mind. I treasure all the comments from readers who say it brought them to stop and think about themselves and what's missing from the pressures of the routines in their (often mostly on-screen) lives.

Q. What is your favorite experience with Comté?

A. That's easy. It was a staff tasting where my monger colleagues and I sat down for an evening of tasting different wheels of Comté made and matured from different producers. (There was also plenty of wine haha). If you ever get a chance to do this, jump at it. What a revelation! What a universe of taste! Each one so distinct, with such a profound character and yet all fundamentally Comté. It's such an awesome and continuously surprising cheese. The moral of this story is never to stop your quest to understand Comté: keep eating. Other fave: the first time I made a bake consisting of rice, kale, and Comté. Banging combo.

His book, "The Cheese Cure: How Comté and Camembert Fed My Soul" will be released in the U.S./Canada this September. Michael is still working as a cheesemonger and loving it!

"HOLY COW" Continues to Draw Fans!



The Cornell Cinema at Cornell University in Ithaca, NY recently screened this Cannes-winning coming of age movie for their students on March 1st. The film served as the kick-off to their annual French Film Festival, as it featured a special presentation on Comté and a cheese box curated by ACS CCP Rachel Freier of Cheese Club FLX, and complimentary Comté beanies!



While the New Mexico Cheese Guild (NMCG) sponsored a viewing of "HOLY COW" for French students on April 10th, at the College of New Mexico's 2nd International Film Week organized by the Department of Modern Languages. Lissa Knudsen, President of NMCG and cheesemonger at The Mouse Hole Cheese Shop in Albuquerque, provided Comté to enjoy during the show!



Cheesemonger's Corner “Best Practices” with Austin Coe Butler, ACS CCP, Director of Education & Public Events at France in Minneapolis, MN

How did you initially get into the cheese industry?

Like many in the industry, I stumbled into it completely by accident! I worked seasonally on a goat creamery in college, but I didn't start working professionally until the COVID-19 pandemic. I had been living in New Zealand as a botanist and was grounded stateside when visiting family on what was supposed to be a 10-day trip. Eventually I got a job at a cheese shop my sister was working at and thought it would just be a summer job, but I loved it! We grew up in a family that valued good food and spent a lot of time in the kitchen, especially with our grandmother. In hindsight, my path to working in cheese, however winding, makes sense now.

What tips would you give other mongers when it comes to selling raw milk cheeses such as Comté?

It's better to be a merchant of pleasure than a crusader of virtue at the counter. The stories we tell about traditional and raw milk cheeses are important, but flavor is what really matters. You have to get an honest chunk of well-tempered cheese into a customer's hand to convey what makes raw milk cheese like Comté so special. Be generous when sampling. When you connect with a customer and get a piece of Comté into their hand to taste, Comté sells itself.

What advice would you give to someone interested in working in cheese?

Cheese is an incredible window to learn about the world. I try to live by that quote from Patrick Rance*, “A slice of good cheese is never just a thing to eat. It is usually also a slice of local history, agriculture, politics and ecclesiastical knowledge. Knowledge of it enables us to distinguish the genuine from the imitation; it adds to our appetite for the cheese and to the relish with which we savor it.” In

turn, when you learn about cheese, its origins, traditions, and science, it adds to your appetite for the world. This community is filled with talented people from diverse backgrounds who are phenomenal teachers eager to share their knowledge and feed that appetite.

What is your favorite recipe or way to enjoy Comté cheese?

I'm partial to Comté in the 12-month profile on its own or enjoyed simply alongside charcuterie or in season fruit, particularly pears and apples in the autumn. No need to gild the lily. A glass of *vin jaune*, Champagne, cider, or perry lifts the spirit as a welcomed accompaniment. Comté is supremely versatile, though, especially in culinary endeavors. It is right at home in gratins, gougères, fondue, *crêpes bretonnes* with mushrooms, and even desserts like apple pie or *tarte Tatin*. Roger Vergé** has a phenomenal recipe for a leek gratin that shines with Comté. I like to use it in recipes where there's nowhere for the ingredients to hide.

Is there anything else you'd like to add?

There's a beautiful passage in *Les Misérables* a friend drew my attention to where the beleaguered Jean Valjean arrives in Pontarlier, the capital of Franche-Comté. He's a free man but will always be marked as a convict. He stays with a priest, Bishop Bienvenue, who counsels him to stay in town and become a *grurin*, a Comté cheesemaker. He tells him that working in the “comfortable trade of *grurin* [...] would afford him a refuge” and a life of fairness in the *fruitières*. The cooperative model that Comté uses, the community and society that it is built on and sustains, is worth celebrating and striving towards. For anyone looking at the grim state of the world right now wondering how to build a better future, look towards Comté.

* Patrick Rance (1918 – 1999) Cheesemonger who has been considered responsible for saving many British specialist cheeses from extinction.

** Roger Vergé (1930 – 2015) French chef and restaurateur who founded celebrated restaurant Moulin de Mougins in Provence.