COMTÉ News





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COMTÉ CHEESE ASSOCIATION | WWW.COMTE-USA.COM



Q&A with Kelsie Parsons, President of the American Cheese Education Foundation (ACEF)

Q. How did you originally get into the cheese industry?

A. A visit to my local farmers market changed the course of my life. I studied to be an art curator, but back in 2008 I spotted a 'help wanted' sign at my favourite cheese stand. I applied and got the job and spent the next couple years selling cheese at markets around Toronto.

That experience opened me to a world of wonder. I was hooked and wanted to learn the story behind each cheese, what inspired its name, and what influenced the style. I read books and blogs, took cheese appreciation classes, and cheesemaking courses. I visited and interviewed cheesemakers, interned on a goat farm dairy, and attended conferences.

Eventually I began training other mongers, wrote a newsletter, taught my own cheesemaking classes, and led evening classes for customers. Education has always been a vital part of my cheese journey.

Q. How did you first become involved in ACS? And why do you think cheese training and education are important?

A. My first experience with the American Cheese Society (ACS) was in 2013 when I took the Certified Cheese Professional (CCP) exam in Madison, Wisconsin. I loved the personal challenge of studying such a broad range of cheese-related topics. Immediately after the exam I shared a massive sense of relief and felt an instant connection with everyone else who had just completed the exam. I couldn't stay for the conference, but that experience left me wanting more.

A year later I was selected as one of the Official Conference Cheesemongers for the conference in Sacramento. I worked behind the scenes preparing cheese for tasting sessions. I was able to chat with presenters and cheesemakers. Learning first hand is such a unique experience! The conference offered more than just textbook knowledge, it offered a chance to connect directly with industry leaders and colleagues. I feel so fortunate for the experience, and I've volunteered for the ACS ever since; first on the Certification Committee and Guild Leaders Network and now also on the Board of Directors of both the ACS and the American Cheese Education Foundation (ACEF). I want to help open doors for others working in cheese.

Through education, we find our community. Through community we find that cheese can be more than a job - it can be a career. Education is a lifelong pursuit but in the early days of one's career it can help solidify that this is the right path. It instills a sense of wonder, ignites passion, and fosters a deep appreciation for both dairy traditions and innovations.

Q. What do you think more people need to understand about the ACEF? And what do you hope to accomplish in this role?

A. The mission of ACEF is to increase access to cheese education. We are the official foundation of the ACS, which means we fundraise to support educational opportunities. In the past, the foundation has supported the ACS by funding webinars, industry surveys, DE&I initiatives, and the development of the CCP exam. Now our focus is on helping people attend the ACS Conference and take the CCP and CCSE exams. In 2026, ACEF funded 31 scholarships - more than ever before. We're proud of that, but the demand for funding continues to increase, with 113 people applying for scholarships this year alone. That's what drives us to continue this work.

The ACS Conference is a formative experience for so many people, and we want to help others experience the community, the educational opportunities, and the networking that it has to offer.

This year ACEF is strengthening relationships with donors, scholarship recipients, and ACS committees. We're seeking out new grants in order to increase scholarships and other learning opportunities.

Q. What is your favorite way to enjoy Comté cheese? Do you have a favorite pairing or recipe?

A. Once, I had a Comté leek tart that was out of this world! But honestly, I like to keep it simple. I love eating Comté by itself. I just want to revel in its flavours without any pairings. The best way to enjoy Comté is really by sharing it with a friend - perhaps over a good conversation or during a long hike.

Q. Is there anything else you would like to add?

A. The scholarships that ACEF funds would not be possible without our donors and we are deeply grateful to everyone who supports our mission. Donations - large and small - are always welcome. Together, we can make a lasting impact on generations of cheese professionals.

Comté USA is a long-time donor who has generously supported scholarships through ACEF and ACS for over a decade. A big thank you to Comté for your ongoing dedication and support!



ACEF with 2026 Scholarship Recipients

Apply for the Comté Scholarship TODAY! The deadline is Dec 6th!

It's your chance to win a trip to France to learn first-hand about the cheese's history and production, as well as to explore the Comté region and its culture. Plus, this year the winner will receive a $750 cash stipend. **Visit Comte-usa.com for your application.**



Essay by 2025 Comté Scholarship Winner Michael Oliver, Head of Cheese Sales for Heber Valley Cheese in Midway, UT!

I entered the Comté Scholarship twice. The first year I was runner-up, and I almost left it there. Thankfully, a little stubbornness and some cheese glitter made me try again.

Before leaving for France, I said I hoped to bring home a feeling. I did, but it was bigger than I had imagined. Five days in the Jura changed something in me. I saw how completely cheese belongs to daily life there, from people walking into a village cheese shop and leaving with armfuls of cheese, to farmers, cheesemakers and affineurs each doing their part while depending on one another. Conversations with the CIGC director helped me understand how deeply that spirit of cooperation and equity runs. I felt it at the fruitière, in the pastures, around the table and inside an incredible aging cellar with 100,000 wheels quietly aging around us. More than anything, Jura kept telling me to slow down. Listen to the cowbells and church bells in the distance. Stay at the table. Ask another question. Taste the cheese and smell the air.

I came home with a deeper love for Comté, but even more for the people and way of life that make it possible. Everyone who welcomed us made me feel incredibly cared for, and the people I traveled with became friends I believe I'll have for life. I am still trying to carry that feeling of connection, community and slowing down home with me. If another CCP is wondering whether to enter, my advice is simple: try. Be yourself. Tell your story. You may come home with more than you ever dreamed possible.

For more information about Comté, visit: **www.comte-usa.com**



Cheesemonger's Corner with Madelyn Varela, Certified Cheese Professional and Content Creator (@cheezytalkwithmadelyn)

1. What inspired you to become a cheesemonger? And a cheese influencer?

To be honest, it all just kind of happened. I wanted to become a cheesemonger because I had been a cheesemaker for several years and loved it, but I knew I was about to burn out, with the early mornings, late nights, etc. But I loved cheese and wanted to stay in the industry. So, I transitioned to the retail side, where my knowledge of cheesemaking helped me sell cheese pretty effectively. Now, becoming a cheese influencer was never something I expected or set out to do. Soon after becoming a cheesemonger, I realized a lot of our customers were intimidated by cheese. When I tried to help a customer, I was always met with "I'm just looking," so I decided to start making videos about the cheese in our case. Eventually, these videos started reaching a much wider audience. I saw that the way I talked about cheese really resonated with a demographic that would not usually buy specialty cheese -- and that's how @cheezytalkwithmadelyn came to be.

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

You have to accept the fact that you will constantly be learning about cheese because there is so much to learn. New stuff about cheese is always coming out. Also, make sure to grow your cheese people network. Engaging with the broader cheese community outside your own counter is a great way to learn and grow. Don't be afraid to lean on your cheese people, share knowledge, taste cheese together, and learn something newwith each other. Be curious, open-minded and kind; that will take you far in this industry!

3. What do you think is the greatest misperception when it comes to raw milk cheese such as Comté?

That the cheese would be the same if it were made with pasteurized milk, because it absolutely would not be! I love pasteurization. It has saved many lives, but when you make a cheese with raw milk, it's just not comparable to a cheese made with pasteurized milk.

Raw milk cheese like Comté is so good because you can truly taste the land it came from. All of the herbs, flowers, native grasses, and microbes that the cows that produced the milk for the cheese ate all get translated into the cheese, leaving you with complex flavor profiles that cannot be achieved with pasteurized milk because, when you pasteurize milk, you're effectively creating a blank slate in the milk for better or for worse, and aged raw milk cheese is generallysafe due to the aging process. After seeing Comté production on the Comté Press Trip and witnessing all the care that goes into making the cheese, right down to the care of the cows, Iwould never be concerned about getting sick from it.

4. What is your favorite way to enjoy Comté cheese? Or favorite experience related to Comté?

I really just like to sit down with a good piece of Comté, savor it, and appreciate all of its unique flavors because no wheel is ever the same.

5. Is there anything else you would like to add?

If you are a monger, one of the best ways to sell a cheese like Comté is to sample! You can talk all you want about the genuinely beautiful stories behind the cheese, but nothing sells cheese more than tasting it, even when it's a pain to keep slicing samples. Get it into as many mouths as possible; even if they don't buy a piece that day, they can experience the cheese and remember it for later.

Click **here** to see Madelyn's recent profile for People Magazine!