

Travel and Adventure: It's the cheese, stupid

by *bendweekly*

FRANCHE-COMTE, France - "You're going where?"

VALLEY VIEW - The view from Mont d'Or, on the border between Franche Comte and Switzerland looking toward the snow-covered Alps is spectacular. CNS Photo by Joan Scobey. GRAZING THE DAY AWAY - Brown and white Montbeliard cows graze in the high Jura meadows. A single cow needs at least two acres of grass and wildflowers for grazing. CNS Photo by Joan Scobey. WORKING ON THE WHEELS - One of the 15 cavistes taps and tests each wheel of cheese by hand in the Marcel Petite cellars. Called 'La Cathedrale de Comte,' the cellar can hold up to 65,000 wheels of cheese. CNS Photo by Joan Scobey. IT TAKES TIME - These molds of cheese are ready to be drained and pressed for several hours. The wheels of cheese then stay at an aging cellar (affineur) for at least four months, and often up to 12 or 26 months. CNS Photo by Joan Scobey. Frankly, I was getting tired of saying I was going to Franche-Comte and having everyone repeat, "Where?"

It wasn't just that hardly anyone knows where it is (in eastern France, between Burgundy and Switzerland), but they were essentially asking, "Why?" And I didn't really know.

It began when a friend asked me to go to Franche-Comte, and, of course, I said, "Where?" He described a serene region of meadows and evergreen forests, valleys, lakes and tumbling waterfalls in the Jura Mountains, at the edge of the Alps.

"It's famous for cheese," he added. "And we'll be eating a lot of it."

Uh oh. How can a high-cholesterol, no-willpower foodie knowingly start out on a cheese trek? I concentrated on the pastoral landscape that warmed my heart and not the cheese that clogged it.

Our first stop was La Maison du Comte, in the lovely medieval town of Poligny. Here, in the House of Comte, the journey starts with a crash course in Comte 101.

The first thing you learn is not to say cheese in these parts; it's always Comte.

Then you learn why to show some respect: Comte has a pedigree; it was the first cheese, 50 years ago, to get a label of origin (Appellation d'Origine Controllee, or AOC) that certifies it was made according to traditional methods in a defined geographic area. Cheeses that don't meet all the strict requirements of quality can't be labeled Comte.

Exhibits and a short film take you through the process, from milking the special Montbeliard cows to making and aging the wheels of cheese. The finale is a cheese tasting, not unlike a serious wine tasting, with different aged Comtes. We learned to evaluate color, aroma, texture and taste. Yellowish Comte was made in summer when cows graze in Jura meadows on fresh plants rich in carotene; winter ones are pale, when the cows are kept in stables and eat hay. Young cheeses are creamy, older ones more grainy. And the aroma wheel of 83 different scents! Who has the nose to differentiate artichoke from wet hay or brioche from tobacco?

For some people that might be more than enough to know about Comte, but not for my friend Richard and me. There was definitely more to this sweet and hazelnutty Gruyere-like cheese than a croque monsieur could reveal.

The next morning we drove up to the high-mountain meadows, early enough to arrive for the daily cheesemaking at the Fruitiere de Bouverans, the dairy of the Marmier brothers. It's the only one in the small village of Bouverans, where there are seven farms, 288 people and 300 brown and white Montbeliard cows grazing against a backdrop of forested hills.

Taz, the brother who speaks English, is tall and lanky, and usually wears a black cowboy hat. His given name is Jean-Francois, but he prefers Taz, short for Tasmania, where he spent a couple of golden years and thinks about going back.

"We have 45 cows, and each one has to have at least 2 1/2 acres to graze on wildflowers and grasses," said Taz. "And it takes 500 kilo (132 gallons) to make one Mr. Comte. We make 13 to 20 cheeses a day."

Every morning and evening the village farmers bring their milk to the dairy for processing the same way it's been done for centuries. Swathed in plastic gowns, caps and slippers for sanitation, we followed Taz through the process and its strict guidelines: The raw milk is heated in huge copper vats, turned into curds, poured into pierced molds to drain, pressed for several hours, then unmolded and the wheels laid on boards in a cool cellar, where they are turned and salted for two to three weeks before going to an aging cellar, or "affineur."

Taz took us to his affineur, Marcel Petite, in a former 19th century underground fort about 14 miles away, a relic from the Franco-Prussian War. This is the critical process where a cheese turns into, well, a Comte. A passionate affineur nurtures each wheel for its individual "terroir" - its home soil, geography, environment - in deciding the best sequence of turning, salting and rubbing the rind as it ages for at least four months, and often up to 12 or 26 months.

Here, in the cool, dark cellar, sometimes called La Cathedrale de Comte, some 65,000 wheels of cheese from 33 dairies are laid out on spruce boards that reach the high ceiling. Once turned by hand, the 90-pound wheels are now flipped by a mesmerizing mechanized machine that moves silently up and down the long rows; 15 "cavistes" still tap and test each wheel by hand, along with the farmers who, like Taz, check on their cheeses every month.

After all this, each cheese still has to pass a test for excellence to get a green band for Comte Extra (15 or more of 20 points) or a brown Comte band (12 to 14 out of 20); those under 12 points don't qualify for labeling.

In a region so focused on one food, count on having it in more guises than you can imagine.

One day we followed a winding road up to a tiny, narrow, three-centuries-old Alpine chalet, aptly called La Petite Echelle (The Little Ladder) in a remote and peaceful meadow 3,700 feet high in the Juras. Its owner, a shepherd, cooks rustic meals for hikers and guests who come by. At his backyard picnic table we learned how to eat a quintessential fondue (pierce the fork through the obligatory crust) but couldn't pry out the secret ingredient.

Another morning we had a cooking lesson with chef Thierry Moyne at his restaurant, La Balance met et vins. We made (then ate) Comte spring rolls, miniature Comte loaves and shredded Comte tuiles. Every Friday, two people can join the kitchen staff to help prepare and serve lunch, then return as guests for dinner; it's an eye-opening, hands-on restaurant experience.

At our last dinner in Franche-Comte, one of the region's finest chefs, Romuald Fassenet, showed us what an imaginative master can do with one cheese in his Michelin-starred restaurant, Le Bec Fin. Among the tasting menu highlights were a Comte "milkshake" with the lobster and a Comte mousse for desert.

It was a boffo finale to an odd trek through small villages, medieval towns and forested mountains, but in the end we saw a special corner of France through the eyes of a cheese: Its life, its history, a bit of its soul.

Now, when people ask about Franche-Comte, I just say, "It's the cheese, stupid."

IF YOU GO

Michelin's Green Guide to Burgundy/Jura has a number of touring routes through the countryside, as well as descriptions of other interesting places to stop in Franche-Comte.

La Maison du Comt, Avenue de la Resistance, Poligny, phone: 011-33 (0)3 8437 7840, fax: 011-33 (0)3 8437 0785, e-mail maisonducomte@comte.com, Web site www.comte.com (French or German). This Comte headquarters can organize visits to English-speaking dairies and aging caves, and map a driving route through Franche-Comte.

Where to stay: Logis de France, an association of 3,000 small, modest hotels and inns, has dozens in Franche-Comte. They are all reasonable, clean, simple and attractive, but bring your own amenities. In Franche-Comte, check out Arbois, Poligny, Salins-les-Bains and Pontalier. Web site www.logis-de-france.fr.

Hotel De La Cloche, 1 place Grvy, Dole, phone: 011-33 (0)3 8482 0606, fax: 011-33 (0)3 8472 7382, e-mail la cloche.hotel@wanadoo.fr. A centrally located, 30-room Logis de France; rooms from about \$100.

Residence Sander, 26 rue de la Republique, Salins-les-Bains, phone 011-33 (0)3 8473 3640, fax: 011-33 (0)3 8473 3646, e-mail residencesander@wanadoo.fr. A Logis de France in an attractive town; 13 rooms with kitchenettes from about \$75.

Chateau de Germigney, Rue Edgar-Faure, Port-Lesney (Jura), 800-735-2478, Web site www.chateaudegermigney.com. A delightful 16-room manor house, member of Relais & Chateaux, in a seven-acre park with lovely gardens and a pool; rooms from about \$165-\$340.

Where to eat: La Petite Echelle, Rochejean, phone 011-33 (0)3 8149 9340, e-mail famillebournez@aol.com, Web site www.lapetiteechelle.com, open May 1-Oct. 30. Fondues are about \$15, fruit tarts about \$4. Call or e-mail the Bournez family for reservations and directions.

La Balance met et vins, 47 rue de Courcelles, Arbois, phone 011-33 (0)3 8437 4500, e-mail contact@labalance.fr, Web site www.labalance.fr. Menus of Franche-Comte specialties from about \$40, an

eight-course tasting menu is about \$73. Contact the restaurant about the cooking program.

Le Bec Fin, 67 rue Pasteur, Dole, 011-33 (0)3 8482 4343, Web site www.le-bec-fin.com. Chef Romuald Fassenet earned a Michelin star for his inventive cuisine. Sample it a la carte, or on menus from about \$40-\$80, and an eight-course tasting menu for about \$105. The chef is moving the restaurant in October into his restored inn, La Mont Joly, in Sampans, near Dole, with a new name but the same telephone and e-mail address.

Comte is available at Trader Joe's grocery stores and Whole Foods Markets, and online from Zingermans, a gourmet deli in Ann Arbor, Mich., that gets specially selected, 12- to 16-month-old wheels from Marcel Petite; phone 888-636-8162, Web site www.zingermans.com.

Getting there: Dole is a good entry to Franche-Comte. France's high-speed rail line, TGV, makes the trip from Paris to Dole in 2 1/2 hours.

Joan Scobey is a freelance travel writer.

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