



ESSAY QUESTION: "What is a PDO? How does PDO status benefit a cheese, and what does it entail? How can you use PDO as a selling point? Please use Comté as an example."

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Step behind any specialty cheese counter across the country and you'll hear the mantra "tell the story." It's no wonder: we are at the height of a food movement in America. People today want to feel connected to what they eat, seeking out foods that bear the mark of human touch and speak honestly of their place of origin. Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) status guarantees the cheeses in our cases and on our customers' tables have a story to tell. For Comté, that story speaks of 1,000 years of artisanal tradition, copper vats of ivory milk warming over a fire, and brick-red and white Montbéliarde cattle grazing on verdant mountain pastures.

PDO is a designation granted by the EU to a product that is produced, processed and prepared using specific methods within a defined geographic zone. For example, PDO regulations for Comté require that it be made using the raw milk of Montbéliarde and/or French Simmental cows within an 890 square mile zone in the Jura Massif region of France. Why the emphasis on location? The concept of *terroir* is central to the institution of PDOs; that is, the idea that physical elements of a place – the climate, the geography, the soil, the water – impart qualities essential to the traditional character of a product. This is particularly important for raw milk cheeses like Comté, whose flavors and microbe profile are tied so closely to land and its ruminant denizens. The Jura Massif is known for its array of wildflowers and lush grasses that yield a complex, rich milk. What happens when you copy a recipe for Comté in Wisconsin using Holstein cows fed on grain and silage? You may end up with a palatable cheese, but you won't have Comté.

Therein lies PDO's primary benefit to a cheese – the identification and protection of those elements that are essential to its identity. This includes not only geographic zoning, but production methods as well, including aging, pasteurization, salt applications, and so on. I've given several classes about Alpine cheeses, and the highlight is explaining how extraordinary it is that we get to eat a cheese that has been made much the same way for centuries – that it is a tangible link to the past. What we enjoy now as an exquisite gourmet "specialty" food was a necessity for surviving harsh winters in the Jura Massif. To preserve their cheeses through the winter, early artisans had to develop a way to expel as much moisture as possible without the benefit of long acidification or ample supplies of salt, and so they ingeniously cut the curd into tiny rice-sized particles and scalded them over wood fires in copper cauldrons. The curds were then pressed in molds to further drive out moisture and form the large, hardy cheeses. After a salt rub, the young cheeses were stored on spruce boards to age for up to two years, providing villages with a stable, dependable and nutritious food staple to last the winter.

Aside from romantic notions of tradition and connection to the past, Comté is the center of an economic ecosystem involving some 7,600 people whose livelihood is sustained directly from its production. These people, not to mention their 130,000 cows, rely on the protection of PDO regulations that ensure their Comté will not be appropriated by industrial interests and drive them out of business and their way of life. For today's customer who wants not only a true artisan product but a social cause to support, I can think of no better reason to choose PDO Comté.