

Zach Berg's Winning Essay for the 2021 Comté Scholarship

1. "How did the pandemic affect your sales and your customers, positively and/or negatively? Please elaborate, using Comté as an example."

Forty computers log on to Zoom, and behind each computer is a teammate from an office in California. They have already received their box with Comté, a Michigan goat cheese, Manchego, and a Wisconsin Cheddar. "Welcome everyone to an exciting tasting! I am hoping tonight, as we taste through your cheeses, I am able to connect you to the people who make these cheeses and the places they come from, all while hanging out with your co-workers. You will see tonight that context tastes delicious!"

This introduction kicks off a typical evening at work post pandemic, launching a very different experience than serving one or two customers from across a counter in Detroit. Like everyone in early March 2020, we didn't know what we were going to do. We closed the sales floor to customers and moved all our products to the website--a goal for the entire 2020 year that we accomplished over the course of three (feverish) days. But within a few weeks of the shift to e-commerce, our customers asked for more. They missed connecting to each other--and to us. They wanted the tastings, the pairings, the stories about their food shared across a table at our monthly events. Without our space, without being able to come together--how could we give them the experience they knew and loved?

A friend suggested it first: could we assemble tasting boxes his organization could deliver to bored, stir-crazy constituents and then all gather together virtually as we led one of our signature tastings over Zoom? We thought it might work, but what we did not expect was how much the audience would love it. (Or how much we would love it!) What started off with helping a local buddy grew to shipping hundreds of tasting boxes to customers from small nonprofits to Fortune 500 companies across the country.

Comté was a stalwart of these tastings. I've sold it over my entire 13-year career, always from the same importer and fruitiere. Comté is the perfect example of the word *terroir*, a term I love to teach in my tastings: it cannot be separated from the herd, the place, the people, and the time in which it is made. When people taste it (and love it), I get to explain to them that they are tasting not just the Jura but one specific moment in the Jura--one fleeting and delicious encounter with a cheese tradition that goes back to the thirteenth century.

We have now returned to selling Comté and our other cheeses in person at our original store as well as in a new location we just opened. We have mongers at two stores selling cheeses and connecting with the customers the old fashioned way...as well as mongers working remotely from other states, hosting tastings with customers spread around the country. And whenever one of them introduces a customer to Comté, they are proud to be selling a little piece of tradition and history.

2. "What is your perception of the market for artisanal / craft cheeses (>\$15/lbs.)? Please elaborate using Comté as an example."

I believe the artisanal cheese market is exciting. I have seen a lot of shifts in the market, the way people enjoy cheese, and the value they assign to cheese.

In my early career Comté was an early favorite of mine. The cheese was delicious and I felt like I was able to speak about it with some competency. I think customers were drawn to it for a specific reason, the name. These customers sought out AOC cheeses in the same way they pursued Champagne or Bordeaux. They wanted the best and they were savvy enough to know how to ask for it.

Now, we have millennials and Gen Z shopping at cheese counters and things have changed. Luckily, the younger cheese buyers are still buying Comté but the motivation is different. I think this change follows meta trends in marketing and consumer behavior. While my youth and adolescence was marked by the rise of Walmart and Amazon, today's new consumer wants to know where things are coming from and what values they represent. Traditionally made cheeses like Comté are perfect, they represent environmental stewardship, *terroir*, history, and craft.

Another shift I see unites the generations. Cheese can go beyond taste, and be part of an experience. Consumers today don't just want a pound of cheese for the house, they want pairings, virtual tastings or lessons on how to build the perfect cheese board. With this shift in how the world consumes the product, the value really changes. Comté is now part of the story we tell while we taste through our cheeses on a zoom tasting. The price will never be the issue as people continue to believe these are not just pieces of cheese, they're an experience.