

Wegmans

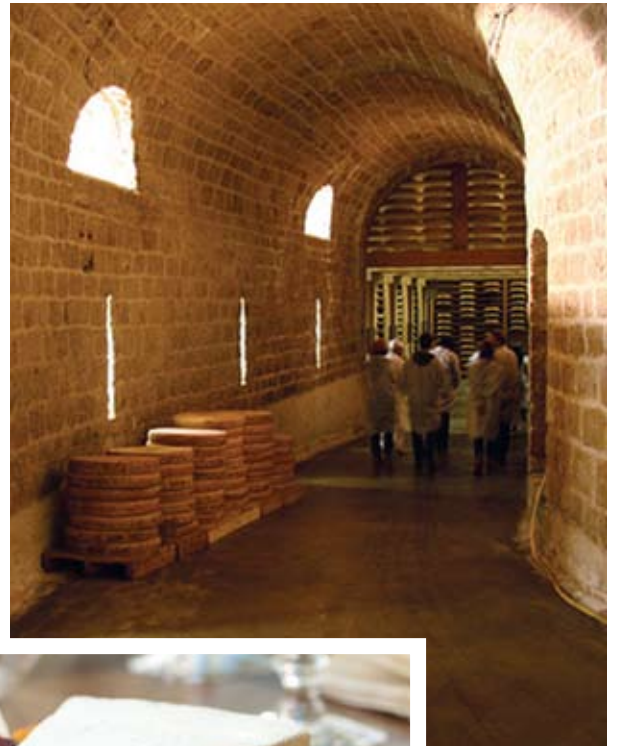
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INSIDE



FROM FIELD TO FORTRESS

Discovering France's best Bries and Comté

By Janet Fletcher

Photography by Tricia Bauman and Daphne Zepos

A Wegmans team set out across France's dairy land to source the country's finest Bries and Comté. Along the way, they met dedicated cheese artisans and discovered an innovative use for an ancient mountain fort.

For many cheese fans, France remains the standard bearer, the nation with the most exalted reputation for crafting and appreciating fine cheese. Over centuries of passing down methods, the French have perfected such a wide range of styles that even an all-French cheese platter can offer mouthwatering diversity. Soft cheeses with firm ones, mild cheeses with pungent ones, fresh creamy chèvres with crumbly tomes . . . contrast can make a cheese tray inviting. And you don't have to look beyond France to compose a balanced selection for holiday entertaining.

Earlier this year, a Wegmans team traveled to France to visit cheese artisans, tour their facilities, and gain a better understanding of how terroir affects taste. On paper, it might look like a dream trip—experiencing traditional French cuisine at lunch and dinner, followed by marathon cheese tastings—but the pace was demanding and the mission serious: to enhance relationships with France's best cheesemakers and affineurs (cheese agers) for the benefit of Wegmans shoppers.

“From April through October, the cows supplying the milk for the Wegmans Brie are dining on lush fresh pasture, rich in carotene. This prized spring and summer milk yields cheese with richer color, heightened scent and more complex flavor.”



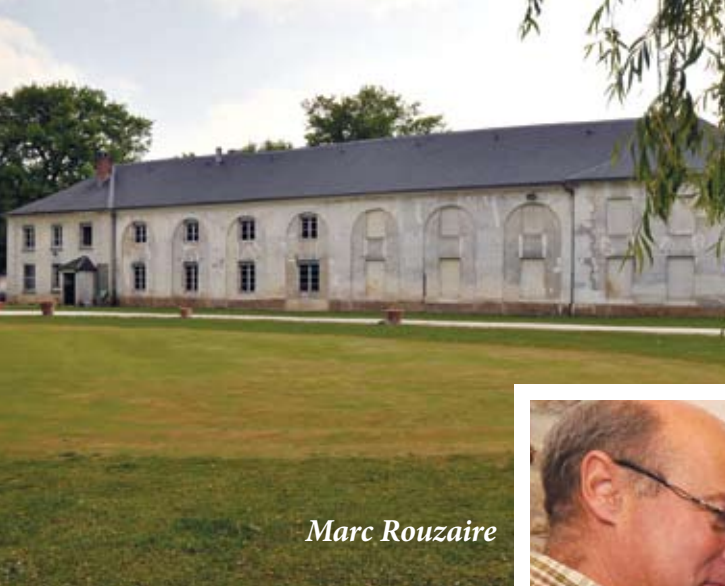
BRIE

First stop: Alsace

In a tiny village in this postcard-pretty region of eastern France, the firm of Lactalis makes Wegmans Intense Brie, one of the company's most popular cheeses. Although it is the largest cheese producer in the world, Lactalis retains some of the labor-intensive hand methods used by small-scale cheesemakers.

Cathy Gaffney, Wegmans cheese department director, made sure her colleagues noticed that the fresh curds for the Wegmans Brie are ladled into the draining molds by hand, not pumped mechanically, as they typically are in large dairies. This is a special step taken by Lactalis because pumping can damage the fragile curds, causing loss of fat and flavor; hand ladling is painstaking but far more gentle—“a big differentiator in terms of creating a more artisan cheese,” says Gaffney.

The Brie made at the Alsace facility varies subtly throughout the year, said Pascal Vaydie, the Wegmans team's Lactalis guide, because the cows' diet changes. From April through October, the cows supplying the milk for the Wegmans Brie are dining on lush fresh pasture, rich in carotene. This prized spring and summer milk yields cheese with richer color, heightened scent and more complex flavor. Because Brie is ripened for several weeks, shoppers can still experience that grass-fed difference in the wheels available through the holidays.



Marc Rouzaire



From above: Site of the cheese tasting with owner Marc Rouzaire near Tourman-En-Brie. Local Montbeliarde cows. Cheese tasting with Rouzaire's Sandra Leperche, Wegmans' Tim McGinnis, Cathy Gaffney, and Rob Wania.



BRIE

Next stop: East of Paris

To experience another level of flavor intensity with France's best-known bloomy-rind cheeses, the team traveled to the heart of the Brie region, just east of Paris, to visit the Fromagerie Rouzaire. With third-generation cheesemaker Marc Rouzaire, the group sampled the firm's broad line, ranging from ultra-classic Brie de Meaux to contemporary creations like Grand Marnier-laced Camembert. Especially among France's tradition-minded cheesemakers, notes Gaffney, it's rare to see such innovation.

One of the challenges of selling these French soft-ripened cheeses is bringing them to consumers at ideal readiness. They must be shipped underripe so they arrive on American store shelves before reaching their peak ripeness.

The Rouzaire staff "understands the ripening curve," says Gaffney. "A lot of suppliers don't. Rouzaire knows when their product should be shipped so we can sell it at the peak of perfection." The Wegmans team liked Rouzaire's Camembert (below left) so much that they placed a special order for this holiday season.

Wegmans' own Bries

In addition to the special order from Rouzaire, Wegmans carries three more hand-selected bries, each the best in their class. Labeled as Wegmans Milky, Buttery and Earthy Brie, these cheeses still bear the name of the producer—no secrets there—but the flavor designation predominates.

Milky (mild) Brie

Wegmans Mild Brie, (the silky cheese aka Fromager d'Affinois), with cow's milk from local farms, none more than 30 kilometers away. The cows here dine on mountain pastures, not silage (fermented feed), which can compromise cheese quality.



Buttery (medium) Brie

Wegmans Medium Brie (Marquis de Lafayette) has a smooth, buttery texture and a delicate, fruity aroma.



Earthy (intense) Brie

Intense (Le Chatelain) takes the flavor up a few notches with an earthier, mushroomy flavor.



Rich & Buttery Triple Crème

From France's Burgundy region, this velvety triple crème has a faint mushroomy aroma and tastes like a cross between whipped cream and whipped butter. Perfect paired with berries.



try it with _____



Wegmans
Cranberry
Orange
Chutney



COMTÉ

Amazing cheese—hidden in a mountain fortress

A soft-ripened cheese such as Wegmans Medium or Intense Brie is a good starting point for a holiday cheese platter. For textural contrast, adding a firm, aged wheel makes sense, and many French hosts would choose Comté. This smooth mountain cheese is France's top seller, but outside its homeland, it doesn't always get the attention it deserves.

To learn more about Comté and taste what many experts consider the gold standard in firm French cheeses, the Wegmans team visited the firm of Marcel Petite, in the Jura Mountains near the Swiss border. There, in a 19th-century fort remade as a cheese-aging facility, the company oversees over 100,000 slowly maturing large wheels in a space it calls "the Cathedral of Comté."



The enterprising Marcel Petite bought the fort from the French government in the 1960s. He was betting that the subterranean venue would provide the perfect natural environment—with cool, stable temperatures and good air flow—for cheese aging. In fact, the underground space was about three degrees cooler than the facilities most affineurs use for Comté, with the result that the Marcel Petite Comté matures more leisurely and develops more nuanced flavors.

Before he died, Marcel Petite trained a hand-picked successor, Claude Querry, in the craft of affinage, or maturing young cheeses. Querry doesn't actually make the cheese, but his contribution is critical. He and his staff brush, turn, and pamper the hefty wheels from their infancy until they are 10 to 20 months old and ready for sale. Dozens of artisan cheesemakers in the area send their 10-day-old Comtés to the Fort Saint Antoine to be "finished" in Querry's capable hands.



From top left: Comté wheels inside the curved walls. The fort's moated entry. Jura mountain view. Master affineur Claude Querry offers Comté to Wegmans Pittsford store manager Bob Farr.



COMTÉ

Discriminating importers of Marcel Petite Comté

The Wegmans team visited one of these cheesemakers with Jason Hinds and Daphne Zepos, the discriminating importers of Marcel Petite Comté. Beginning with fresh raw milk from Montbéliarde cows—the only breed that thrives in these rugged mountains—the cheesemaker cultures the milk in a large copper vat. When curds form, they're transferred to molds, drained and pressed, then salted to encourage a rind to form. For the next 10 days, the cheesemaker air-dries the wheels on spruce planks and washes them frequently with a brine bath harboring the ambient bacteria—“the DNA of the aging cellar,” says Hinds. Over time, those bacteria help produce the aromas and flavors that give the wheels from each Comté cheesemaker a distinctive signature.



Daphne Zepos



From top: Comté importer Daphne Zepos. The milk is mixed in these copper vats. Jason Hinds of Neals Yard Dairy. The fort holds over 100,000 wheels of Comté. The area's dairy cows.



Jason Hinds



Grazing on wild mountain pastures

But the fundamental flavors of Comté originate in the land, not the cellar, claims Query. During the spring and summer, the cows graze on wild mountain pastures containing more than 450 types of grasses and herbs—a far more diverse diet than the cultivated pasture on which other cheese cows live, and a diet that indisputably enhances the milk.

“It is difficult to understand the term ‘terroir’ until you experience it,” says Robert Wania, Wegmans Regional Coordinator for cheese (Virginia/Maryland), who was on the trip. “I have a new perspective on how cheese flavor can be affected by the area that the milk comes from.”



Depending on the cheesemaker, the maturity, and the season, Comté can express many different aromas, from bacon to warm butter to roasted hazelnuts. Working with Querry, who knows the fingerprint of each cheesemaker, Wegmans can identify the characteristics it seeks—delicate or pungent, nutty or sweet—and obtain wheels to match.

Back home in Rochester, Wegmans Pittsford store manager Bob Farr reflected on some of the trip's take-home lessons. "It's fascinating to see what goes into making world-class artisan cheese," says Farr, "from the carefully monitored pastures to the closely guarded recipes to the personality of the affineur."

Lush mountain grasses nurture the cows that provide the milk that becomes the cheese, an age-old sequence that requires the cooperation of many people. Seeing the landscape, hearing the stories and tasting the cheeses with the people who made them gave the Wegmans crew a glimpse of the artistry behind each handmade wheel.

"This is why we travel," says Gaffney. "We want to bring these traditional cheeses to life for our customers."

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FROMAGERIE BERTHAUT

Saving a 600-year-old cheese recipe

Dining in Burgundy today, you can count on finding a luscious Epoisses on the cheese tray. But that wasn't always the case. This pungent washed-rind cheese, with origins in the 15th century, all but vanished in the difficult years after World War II. Only two farms still produced Epoisses when Robert Berthaut undertook to revive it in the 1950s. He surveyed the old-timers to learn the method, then began to produce Epoisses himself in a garage by the family home. Today, the Berthaut firm, run by Robert's son, Jean, produces more than a million wheels of Epoisses a year, each one hand-washed twice a week with Marc de Bourgogne, a brandy distilled from the local grape pomace.

Jean Berthaut can still recall the aroma of Epoisses aging in the cellar beneath the family home. "He knows exactly what it should smell like at every stage of ripeness," says Gaffney, "and that insight has helped make the Berthaut Epoisses the best."

From top: Cheesemaker Jean Berthaut. His father made Epoisses in the family's garage (right) when Jean was a child. Ties to home: This ancient turret on the town's surrounding wall is illustrated on every package of Berthaut Epoisses.



Above: Daphne Zepos, Jason Hinds, and Claude Querry showed the Wegmans team how to serve a traditional Comté fondue with fresh baguettes and local produce. Below: Sliced Comté with Marcona Almonds and Fig Cake.

