ESSAY QUESTION: “Imagine that you are visiting the Comté PDO region for the first time. What do you hope to discover there that makes the region and cheese unique? Describe how this would benefit your current position (i.e. your job) within the cheese trade.”

By Devin Lamma, ACS CCP, 2015 Comté Scholarship Winner

“’The only way opinions and ideas can be renewed, hearts enlarged, and human minds developed is through the reciprocal influence of men upon each other.”’ Alexis de Tocqueville

When I began working with cheese, one of the first things I learned was “cheese is alive”. This revelation excited me and puzzled me simultaneously. In addition to the challenge of learning the flavors and history of cheese, this statement of it being alive sparked my curiosity to explore the world’s greatest food. In the 13 years since I’ve come to fully understand what “cheese is alive” means and teach it to others. Additionally, my Certified Cheese Professional education includes pairings, make styles, flavors, history, traditions, uses for cheese and cheese making. It is certain that we cheesemongers are connected to our products and their life cycles on a daily basis at our shops and cheese counters. Creating a deeper connection and understanding of our products and customers should always be our goal. These connections can be in a variety of ways, but I prefer to experience my learning firsthand and then strengthen these relationships through storytelling and by teaching classes.

The opportunity to visit France and study in the Jura Mountains would not only increase my knowledge, but also allow me to be a part of the “birth” of Comté. Caring for cheese in our shops gives us limited exposure to its life. Seeing it made and being with the animals offers us a chance to witness the “birth” of it. I want to be a contributor to the “birth” and life cycle of Comté and discover the unique people and land that shape a classic cheese.

I want to stroll through the alpine meadows with the Montbeliarde and Simmental cows and watch as they select flowers and grasses to eat. I want to learn the distinct chimes of the cows’ bells as my boots collect the morning dew as we partake in the ancient practice transhumance. I desire to wander through the trees and learn why the Celts named this area “Jor” for forest. I hope to feel the power of La Bise as we sit in the field and break for a ploughman’s lunch. I want to shake hands with the herdsman and cheese maker and feel their leathered palms that represent another link in the 10 Century chain of the Comté tradition. I want to touch the full and warm udders of the cows as they begin to deliver the foundation of a raw milk beauty. I’d like to experience the heat and humidity of the fruitiere as the copper kettles warm. I want to witness the milk coagulating and discover the delicate timing and skill of making Comté. I want to work side by side with the affineur as we turn, salt and brine wash the massive wheels. I long to be there as we use our triers to taste, analyse and hand select the wheels that will be enjoyed worldwide. To be precise, I want be a part of Comté’s life the way it has been a part of mine.

Ultimately, I yearn to discover every detail that contributes to Comté and satisfy my curiosity for knowing the animals, people and land. In my pursuit of the “birth” of Comté I’ll be able to put my fingerprints on history and create my own story to share. I intend to meticulously document all my experiences and relationships of the Comté making process and my journey to France. With this new knowledge and photos I can then construct a “virtual Comté” experience for my cheese classes and students. Shaping minds, palates and viewpoints with cheese tastings and classes is not only our mission as CCPs, but also serves as one of my greatest pleasures as an educator. It is through these connections with students and the transfer of knowledge during classes that my desire to have an important role in the life of Comté will be fulfilled.