

I'm going to start off this essay with a joke we (my husband & I) heard while driving to the ACS conference in Denver.

“On a hot summer night in June, Lt. Custer gathered his troops together and told them he had good news and bad news. The troop asked what was the bad news? Custer said they were surrounded by Indians and were probably all going to die the following day. The troops exclaimed and asked then what is the good news? Custer replied, well, we won't have to go across Nebraska again.”

How does this relate to the conference? Well, driving across Nebraska gave me plenty of time to review the schedule, read about the classes offered, dream about meeting some of the cheese champions, setting goals for our micro dairy and thinking of future cheese we can produce. Seeing the mountains in the distance reflected our attitude in the upward tilt for our quest to produce safe, healthy and flavorful cheese. Prior to leaving our home, I was given a list from a certified Wisconsin cheesemaker of people we “must meet” at the conference. I was prepared, organized and eager.

Because we milk twice a day and make cheese, finding reliable help to fill in while we were gone was a real challenge. To our great regret, we were unable to attend the cheese tours including the fabulous Haystack Mountain Creamery and SkyPilot Farm with the incomparable Neville McNaughton. Instead, we were lucky enough to arrive in time to attend the New Member and First Time Attendee Reception. Authors, cheesemakers, retailers, board members – all in one room to celebrate cheese!

After the exhilarating keynote speech the following morning, we dived into classes of interest. Feeling we could cover more topics by dividing our time, my husband and I parted company to attend different classes that would be beneficial for our farmstead dairy. Due to that strategy, we now have notebooks stuffed with notes and helpful information that will guide us. Meet the cheesemaker was my chance to actually put faces to the crafters of the lovely cheese I had been privileged to taste. I actually knew some of them and was delighted to meet them there. And I did meet some of the cheesemakers on my list of “must meet's” but the lines were long at each table so it was ever so brief.

The second keynote speech was inspiring for building communication and effective teams. We again divided our efforts into different classes but we did try a tasting/pairing class together. I honestly didn't know there were so many different types of olives!

The Awards Ceremony is almost impossible to describe. The room was jam packed with boisterous cheering people rooting for their favorite person, cheesemaker, company, cheese, or just for the fun of it. It was absolutely awesome to be immersed in the moment of anticipation and joy evident throughout the crowd. I think I had goose bumps for the entire ceremony. I was honestly humbled by the great cheesemakers and the support team behind them. It was a magnificent experience - not to be forgotten.

Saturday was another round of classes. All the sessions offered were a beautiful blend of technical and fun classes. I must applaud the efforts of the entire team that worked on this conference. And express our gratitude for allowing us to attend with a scholarship. It would not have been possible without your help.

And the colossal end to the conference, the Festival of Cheese. Enter into a magical cheese kingdom of jaw dropping proportions spread out as far as the eye can see. How do you pace yourself? How can you taste the thousands of unique, special, one-of-a-kind cheeses in one room??? I have to tell you we searched each table for the three cheeses we entered into the competition. We found two almost right away but couldn't find the third. Finally, using our cell phones to navigate, we met at the end of one table to admit defeat. There was one gentleman eating cheese in front of us at the table we stopped at. He said out loud, “This cheese is delicious! It stands out to me among all the cheese I have tasted at this show.” We looked down and he was eating the third cheese we entered, our Urfa Chevre! It can't get any better than that for a finale.

The bad news is we had to drive home across Nebraska.