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Post conference essay

When I found out that I had received a student scholarship to the 2015 American Cheese Society Conference, I immediately began counting down the days until I would travel to Providence. The conference was easily the highlight of my year and was one of the most rewarding experiences I have had in my graduate program. From the first day, the conference was more engaging, educational, and fun than I ever could have expected.

My conference experience began with a pre-conference day trip to visit cheesemakers and farmers in Connecticut. The trip exposed me to a remarkably varied view of the cheese industry in New England, from the large family-owned cheese factory to the small farmstead operation making and aging cheese onsite. I was most excited to see firsthand the work being done at Mystic Cheese and his innovative cheesemaking pod design. This trip reinforced many of the experiences I had during the "Dairy: From Pasture to Plate" course I took at Chatham University. The dairy industry, and the cheese industry specifically, are complicated and diverse. Dairy farmers and cheesemakers operate on a range of scales and don't always conform neatly to a label of either artisanal or industrial. My pre-conference trip was a perfect prelude to the workshops and tasting sessions of the main conference.

I attended numerous sessions during the conference and they were all incredibly educational. The first session I attended was the European Tradition vs. American Innovation tasting, focusing on Alpine style cheeses. After traveling to the Jura in France to study the production of Comté, I have a particular fondness for these mountain cheeses and this session familiarized me with some American producers in a fascinating comparative context. I was also able to attend another tasting, Delicious Molds and Mushrooms, which introduced me to more scientific concepts related to cheese aging. I'm excited to potentially delve deeper into those ideas and relate them to my coursework this fall in the Applied Microbiology class I will be taking. I also attended workshops on careers in the cheese industry and the adaptation of cheesemakers and farmers to their climate, both of which were particularly beneficial to me as an aspiring cheesemaker and farmer.

I think one of the most rewarding experiences at the conference was the mentorship between the scholarship committee and scholarship winners. I was paired with Brian Keyser of Casellula, who truly went out of his way to make me feel welcome as a first time attendee. Through Brian, I was introduced to many well-known and respected people in the cheese industry. From the first day of the conference, he made sure to include me in whatever he was doing so that I was able to meet as many people as possible. His mentorship contributed enormously to the wonderful experiences I had in Providence.

Throughout the conference, I had the opportunity to meet a huge amount of people who are just as obsessed with cheese as I am. Beyond the obvious value of networking, it was simply comforting and fun to socialize with people who have similar interests to myself. I knew that I had found "my people" when I could casually mention the podcast *Cutting the Curd* and receive excited nods instead of sidelong glances or laughing. The members of the ACS were incredibly welcoming and friendly. I was shocked by how many people introduced themselves to me because they saw that I was a first-time attendee. I hope that I will be able to continue attending the conference in years to come so that I can keep in touch with all of my new cheese friends.

I left the conference confident in, and excited for, my plans for the future. I know that when I have my own farm and creamery, I will be part of the supportive community of the American Cheese Society. I also came to the conference with a goal to find inspiration for my thesis. I hoped to choose a topic that would benefit the artisanal cheese industry as a whole. Through my experiences at the conference and my future plans to be a farmer and cheesemaker in Northeastern Pennsylvania, I have chosen to write my master's thesis on the dairy and cheesemaking industry in NEPA, both historical and current, and to use my research to determine how I could best serve local artisanal producers. I think that my work could potentially serve as a case study for improving the cheesemaking landscape in underserved rural areas.

My trip to the 2015 ACS conference was more rewarding than I could ever articulate. I met new friends and industry contacts, I strengthened my plans for the future, and I ate an unbelievable amount of cheese. I couldn't have imagined a more special experience for my first conference.