

Charuth Van Beuzekom-Loth – 2011 ACS Scholarship Recipient

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Hello, my name is Charuth. My husband and I own Shadow Brook Farm and Dutch Girl Creamery in Lincoln, Nebraska. Nebraska is just getting started in the specialty farmstead and artisan cheese movement that has swept other parts of the country over the last twenty or more years. There are only a very few small-scale operations getting started in cheese production. I like to think I have had a small part in changing this phenomenon in our state. We started our goat dairy in 2005 and made our first cheeses in 2006. As many of you know, farmstead cheese production is not for the weak of heart. Most likely, if we had known what we were getting ourselves into, we probably would never have begun. That being said, the last six years have been an amazing journey of cheese discovery. The lessons I have learned and people I have met through this business, has enriched me as a person. Even though some days I feel down trodden and exhausted, I can't imagine doing anything else.

One thing I have learned is that time away from the farm to gain perspective is truly important. I was thrilled to learn that I had received the full scholarship to attend ACS in Montréal. I really needed a little time away. Flying into Montréal on a clear day was a treat. The clear blue water was a river I learned, not a lake! Surprisingly, the landscape around Montreal is even flatter than it is in Nebraska! Old Montreal has that European feel, and the food was exceptional.

My conference experience started with a tour of the Glengarry Cheese Company. Margaret Morris and her wonderful staff hosted a delicious meal at their brand new facility. They walked us through their store, Cheese Supply Company, cheese-processing plant, and also gave us a view of their aging facility. The design was thoughtful and well laid out. I came away with some good ideas for my own facility. We also sampled great Glengarry cheese. On Thursday morning I visited with Scholar-in-Residence, Sister Noella Marcellino, Ph.D. Having enjoyed learning about her story in the movie "The Cheese Nun," it was a treat getting the chance to meet her in person. She is even more special in person than she is on screen! We looked at a strain of *Geotrichum candidum* on the rind of one of my cheeses. Her enthusiasm and passion for her work was contagious. The fascination of a world all its own, unknown to our naked eye, is lovely to behold. Later I attended the session "Growing Mold Gracefully," and again Sister Noella enthralled the crowd with a slow-motion film of a magnified cheese mite. Also in that session "the good the bad and the ugly" were discussed and how they affected our cheeses during ripening. She stressed the importance of finding our own "taste of place" or "Terroir" by using our own native strains of *Geotrichum* rather than simply using the few strains commercially available. She stressed the need for more research projects isolating more strains for use in cheese making. In this same theme, Rachel Dutton Ph.D. of Harvard, talked about the fascinating work she is doing on mapping the genetic origins of organisms on the rinds of Jasper Hill cheeses from Vermont. Wow! I feel so thankful for these people who put their hard work into doing these interesting projects that will ultimately benefit all of use in the industry.

The other pressing topics of this year's conference were the pending changes to the FDA's raw milk regulations and the recently enacted Food Safety Modernization act. I attended two sessions that dealt with these topics. The first talk was "Controlling Pathogens in Cheese Production". Dr. DJ D'Amico from the Vermont Institute of Artisan Cheese gave a very concise overview of his research, which was basically redoing studies of *E. coli* survival in aged cheese. These earlier studies have up until this point, been used by the FDA to justify the passing of the sixty-day rule for aging raw milk cheese. The results of Dr. D'Amico's research showed that under the conditions set up in their experiment the sixty days were not long enough to kill all the pathogens that had been introduced into the cheese. It was proposed that if length of aging were to be used in safety standards, studies would have to be conducted separately for each style of cheese. It was discussed that developing Risk management plans and strategic product testing, would better serve to insure safe cheese production standards.

The last session I attended “Regulators’ Research and Thinking on Raw milk cheese” was definitely the most emotionally charged. John Mowbray, US Food and Drug Administration and Andre Jean, Health Canada, discussed the current standards for raw milk cheese production in Canada and the future standards proposed for the US. The FDA’s position was only hinted at, because the raw milk risk profile is still under review in preparation for the Food Safety modernization act being implemented. Mr. Mowbray gave some ideas on what could be in store for cheese producers in the near future. Developing comprehensive preventative controls for food producers such as HACCP and Good Production Practices would become mandatory. However, he hinted that the sixty-day rule would not be reinstated and that most likely producers would be self-regulated. Some safe levels of microbiological criteria would be established, and testing protocols would have to be implemented. There will be no exemption for small producers. Which means the cost of implementing these new regulations could be high, and therefore, weigh heaviest on the small producers. Development of preference standards for each type of cheese produced; a twenty-four hour age limit for milk used for raw milk cheese production; herd health records and record keeping, and mandatory labeling requirements were just a few of the things he mentioned. Although these proposed changes are daunting, the sentiment I heard from people in the room was that basically the train was leaving and we had better make sure we were on it and not left standing on the track. I left feeling slightly overwhelmed but positive. The fact that cheese producers, cheese retailers, and a representative from the FDA were all in the same room having this discussion is a really good step.

It is always bittersweet saying goodbye to new and old friends, many I wouldn’t see again until we are all brought together once more through ACS. The connections made, and networking that takes place, is immensely valuable.

I want to extend a big thank you to ACS Board and staff for making the Cheese maker Scholarship possible. I am very grateful for being able to attend this year’s conference in Montréal. I also want to extend a warm moment of gratitude to all my cheese mentors who were so gracious with their time, answering my questions and giving me advise. Thank you!