

I got exactly what I'd hoped from ACS: an immersive experience in current dairy know-how, and the kind of networking that only occurs when hundreds of cheesemakers are brought under one roof.

The "slow arts", as Odessa Piper so adequately addressed us, I think benefit more from face-to-face exchanges more than most disciplines. Perhaps it has something to do with cheese and dairy farming being so based on direct experiences and being so personal. I mean you don't get into this business for easy fiscal gain. So to break even or become profitable takes a lot of hard work but also ingenuity, the kind inspired by sharing of information through friendships. So networking is vital in a unique way. In my own practice, I think this is not the cheese *I make* but just an accumulation of past experiences and current support networks of others who've generously shared their practices with me over the years; in tasting, in stories, in teaching environments.

ACS for me just grew and expanded that network for me. And happily shored up my belief that it was not just my own experience: that there exists a vivid community out there that shares struggles and yes, helps each other become better businesses and cheesemakers through friendship and caring. In so many ways, and especially in light of an adverse regulatory environment, we have each other's back. And ACS did a stellar job facilitating face-to-face networking in a very real way for me.

Getting to chat regulatory affairs with a board member cheesemaker, hearing solutions on wood shelves from those who live ten states west of me but work on a similar scale, meeting folks who have 10, in one instance 20 years, on me in the caprine department when I'm just transitioning to working with goats, and then to have those folks be giving enough to bear me breaking out smelly wedges in the hallway while we talk Geo strains - these were just incomparable discussions only ACS could foster.

To come back to the regulatory environment, I must say the Food Safety, Milk Quality and FDA related programming helped me a great deal as a cheesemaker. When I got back and someone asked what my experience was like, I said something along the lines of, "like ServeSafe but 3x over and much, much better food and drink." But earnestly, I feel armed to the nines with useful perspectives and information on all the precautions that go into making a great wheel and how to deal with the growing inspections. I learned not just what to do the very day the FDA comes knocking, but play-by-play on how a visit could play out from those who'd experienced it. For me, this went a long way to cut through some of the fear-mongering about food safety and inspections and make them seem manageable. Similarly, it was intriguing to see that even the regions producing some of the best cheeses in the world can struggle with milk quality and facility issues.

It's hard to tell so shortly out of the conference just how many changes will result from the learning ACS immersed me in but I was able to immediately make a few and more will surely follow. That means a lot to me because anytime I train, the key is getting actionable takeaways that can be implemented on the farmstead level.

And what the hay, I haven't even mentioned unique *taste* learning experiences. To walk away from a room full of Comté, that is an experience so rarified I took a picture of plates left behind! And nights and nights of tasting cheeses that don't make it to my state, all of these things will indelibly inform my practice. Another one of my kooky cheesemaker tenets is that every honest wedge improves our palette and in turn our practice. I'm still working down my collection of ACS

wedges. Each night I taste one and some of them are so exciting I dream of how that milk got there, and how will I make a cheese like that.

In short, thank you so, so much for selecting me. It's hard to express in words how grateful I am for having had the experience. I gained immeasurably from the experience and look forward to sharing my newfound knowledge with my creamery in the days ahead. And I hope to share a very tasty, more perfect wedge with you all come Sacramento.

Yours in cheese, Paul.