

When I told friends that I was planning to go to the American Cheese Society conference, many laughed and said, “What do you do at a *cheese conference*?” I guess they all imagined that it would be some sort of Comic Con situation, with a bunch of nerds standing around in foam cheese hats. But of course that’s only part of the story!

I found myself at an incredible gathering of 1000 consummate cheese professionals from around the country. It was a week when anyone I met in the elevator, no matter their age, profession, or hometown, was someone I could have a great conversation with, because we all love cheese and have something to learn about it from each other. I was honored to have the opportunity to speak with so many smart, caring and accomplished people.

The organized events were no less spectacular. I got to tour three completely unique and fascinating cheese-making facilities. Roelli is a 4th-generation family business that is innovating in eco-conscious and efficient cheese making and aging systems, including convection-cooled caves and waste water recycling. Hook’s Creamery produces dozens of different styles of cheeses, mostly excellent blues and cheddars, in a tiny, 19th century facility in beautiful, historic Mineral Point. And Bleu Mont Dairy is a wonder of off-the-grid resourcefulness, with a hand-built underground cave full of superbly pungent cloth-bound cheddars and sheep’s milk and washed-rind wheels.

Back at the convention center in Madison, I attended 4 fantastic tasting sessions, led by dairy scientists and other experts. I learned how to identify off-flavors in cow’s milk (ranging from oxidation to fermented feed). I tasted Comte from 3 different regional producers in the Jura region of France, each using the same recipe but with completely different flavor profiles, due to the unique feed and microflora on each farm. I absorbed an intense amount of information about the production of traditional Mexican cheeses and washed-rind cheeses.

Rest assured, I also took advantage of the plentiful opportunities to taste scores of other cheeses. At the Meet the Cheesemaker event I encountered some fantastic new cheeses and producers that I plan to bring in to my store, and got to catch up and compare notes with some producers I already purchase from. At the dizzying buffet called The Festival of Cheese, I zeroed in on some Quebecois and small batch cheeses I might not otherwise get to experience.

Finally, I was surprised to find myself emotionally moved at the Annual Business Meeting. The presentation of the Daphne Zepos Teaching Award to Jess Perrie brought home to me that the ACS is no ordinary professional organization. The commitment of its members to the art and science of cheesemaking, the spirit of volunteerism and lifelong learning, and the appreciation that its members have for each other – this is something I never quite experienced at media and technology conferences in my “old” career.

However, I never did get that giant foam cheese wedge hat. They were for sale, but my suitcase was already full of the “Only in Wisconsin” New Glarus beer that I needed to bring home for my husband/business partner Chris, who worked doubly hard while I was away having a cheesy good time.

I am extremely grateful to the ACS, the ACE Foundation, and their supporters, who provided me with the scholarship that allowed me to attend the conference. It was a professional experience of a lifetime, one that has empowered and inspired me, even more than ever, to sell the heck out of some great American cheeses!