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Thoughts on Cheese Camp

Where do I begin with my experience? When I returned to Utah after the conference and was asked the question, “How was Montréal?” my answer tended to be, “ask me again in a week and I think by then everything will have sunken in.” I honestly don’t know where to start with my first person account of my conference experience because I am still remembering forgotten details that I liked about it. I believe I was in a cheese nerd haze the whole conference and haven’t really snapped out of it yet. Did I really go to Montreal, or was that just something I made up?

I have been anticipating this conference since the moment I submitted my scholarship application. The anticipation, combined with my über cheese nerdiness (seriously, not only am I a cheese enthusiast, but I am also in graduate school to study cheese chemistry, can we say nerd?), didn’t exactly allow for a clear frame of mind. Seeing people that I either read about, or have read their books, from both the science and foodie world, left me in a cheese euphoric state. Hearing these people speak, and the potential of meeting them, was a tremendous bonus. I wanted to do all of the tastings and sessions, and choosing which ones I did go to became somewhat of an unwelcoming task. But alas, I had to choose. Oh woe is me.

Being a graduate student of cheese chemistry, I was very excited that there were many science related sessions. From sensory evaluation to milk microbiology, I was comforted by the fact that I wasn’t the only science geek attending the conference. Hands down my favorite session was Catherine Donnelly and Heather Paxson’s *Raw Milk Cheese Today: How Did We Get Here?*. Both presenters did an incredible job creating an open learning environment for all branches of the cheese industry. In addition, the overall presentation had a very positive outlook on the future raw milk cheese. With a very tense topic, both Catherine Donnelly and Heather Paxson gave their scientific (natural and social) stance on what can be done with raw milk and raw milk cheese today without overlooking the realities or creating any confusion. I was captivated by both presenters’ calm and collected way of approaching raw milk cheese politics.

I took many notes during the sessions, tastings, and meetings that I attended. After looking through all of them, I noticed the reoccurring theme of food safety. At the Town Hall meeting, Dr. Art Hill of the University of Guelph said, “We need to start moving away from the raw vs. pasteurized fight, and start focusing on food safety.” I felt that Dr. Hill’s statement is a good summation on how the handmade cheese community, both maker and retailer, can move forward in the modern world without losing its ethics and morals. I understand that the raw vs. pasteurized is a touchy subject, but Dr. Hill made a very valid and important point. If the energy that is used defending raw milk cheese is instead directed on how it is made safely, then attention won’t be solely on raw milk’s risks, but more on its benefits. Being a cheese science student and a member of the “younger generation”, I felt as though this is area that I want, and frankly should, become involved in and hope that others do as well.

Montréal was everything I hoped it would be and more. I left with an ache in my stomach from eating way too much cheese and my mind overflowing with information and ideas. All in all, my thoughts on cheese camp? Well, I can’t wait for next year.

Jess Perrie
August 15, 2011