

Essay by Laura Heifetz (2011 John Crompton Memorial Scholarship for Retailers)

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At 8 am on Thursday morning, I helped myself to a breakfast plate, and entered the main meeting room for the opening ceremony of my first ACS Conference, with great trepidation. Will I know anyone? Will I overcome being shy and make new friends? Will I be taken seriously as a cheese retailer? Will I understand everything in the classes and meetings over the next three days? To each question, the answer would be a huge "YES."

Left and right, I'd see familiar faces, or read on colorful name tags the names of people I'd spoken to over the years on the phone, through email and networking sites, connecting the dots. I met people who do the same job as me, from cities all over North America, and chatted about the similarities and differences of our lives. Being from Brooklyn, NYC, most were interested in my story as a scholarship winner, and why I work for a small retailer after years of larger, more corporate training. And ultimately, the reason was simple: to continue my own education and involvement in this thing we call "the cheese world."

After Ms. Pascale Tremblay, this year's keynote speaker, brilliantly summed up why Montreal was the perfect city to host the 28th ACS conference, Quebec being quite the major player in cheese production throughout the province's 500 years of history, we all dove in. I attended informative tastings, scientific lectures, a town hall meeting, marketing panels, a business meeting, receptions and soirees, immersing myself into every possible cranny that might expose me to the future steps I'll take as a cheese enthusiast. As Quebec's impeccable craft beers and ice apple wines flowed at each night time gala, I'd open up more and more, feeling at home with every sip, of course countering with substantial cheese and delicious accompaniments samples, gathering with my local distributors around our favorites as we discuss the looming holiday season ahead. The amount of work put into pulling off this conference is not lost on me; to bring together such a variety of turophiles under one roof to discuss how to grow our industry safely and responsibly, and how to share our knowledge and enthusiasm about our favorite savory treat with each other and our customers back home, is monumental.

I allowed myself one day of "vacation" (although, 3 days of sitting in meetings and lectures was a welcome respite from the daily grind of 8-12 hour workdays on the retail floor), after the Conference had ended. To explore the city, finding one of the "I Heart Cheese" graffiti pieces tucked on a side street in the Plateau, and to pick up some of the city's classic eats: bagels and smoked meat. NYC is easily beat by both of Canada's versions of these specialties. I know I'll continue to return to Montreal, and I know I'll continue to return, and hopefully some day be a major part of, the American Cheese Society Conference. I thank you all deeply, for welcoming me with open arms, and allowing me to take part in such a special event.