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ACS Post-Conference Disquisition

The conference was a blissful break from head-down summer cheese production. Elbow-deep in seemingly endless summer milk, my thoughts had become increasingly more basic. The day before I left for Montreal, after a three-week cheesemaking bender to compensate for time off, I stood over a vat of milk and thought simply, “Just take out the water and get it on the shelf.” I returned to the vat a week later, rested and invigorated with better perspective on the broad picture of artisan cheesemaking and mongering in America.

Most valuable were the conversations, with experts from all aspects of production and promotion, tirelessly willing to talk about cheese. On day two, I was able to corner Neville McNaughton between sessions, to ask his opinion about a tomme-ish cheese that’s been rolling around in my head. By the time the elevator opened on his floor, I had scribbled the first draft of my recipe, complete with target times and pH’s. I went straight to see Robert Aquilera from Fromagex, in his dreamy haven of cheesemaking goods to dig through the piles of forms. He sent me home with a stack of samples to try. The first test batch is now 20 days old and looking mighty fine.

A few days in, I sampled out my products for the “Meet the Cheesemaker” evening event. Beyond connecting with mongers and distributors from all over, I also received valuable feedback from the retail world. They loved the cottage cheese, but couldn’t carry it with a 30-day code date. Couldn’t it make it to 45 days? The packaging is beautiful, but the lids don’t seal well enough for distribution. Now, back on the farm, our QC team is testing out better packaging technique for a tighter seal and extended shelf-life.

The constant chatting about my cheeses has since led to several promising follow ups with sellers in Chicago, NYC, Mid-Atlantic and Texas to name a few. After meeting Max from Artisanal at an evening event, he called me up last week while passing through Indy. A safari tour of our farm was followed by a particularly enlightening discussion about cheeses appropriate for winter milk on fermented feed. After a warning about the tough selection committee at Artisanal, he encouraged me to leave my spring goudas in the cave until they get good, and give it a go. The last morning in Montreal I visited la Basilique Notre-Dame with Tirza, our regional specialty foods coordinator for Whole Foods. I snuck a cottage cheese sampling into our croissant breakfast as we talked about cheese styles that she would like to source domestically and the practical challenges of selling fresh cheeses in a grocery store setting.

And then there were the sessions. Sister Noella and Rachel Dutton enlightened us with details of the complex interrelationships occurring in our cheese rind ecosystems. A few seconds of Noella’s video of a cheesemite (projected to cover a wall) was impactful enough that it continues to make cameos in my nightmares. I approach cave hygiene with renewed enthusiasm. Alan Saylor provided level-headed advice on how to deal with FDA inspectors and what to expect from an audit. There was even an FDA inspector right there in the room, having a cup of coffee and appearing very human. He confirmed that he really just wants to keep the food supply safe and it would be a whole lot easier if producers would just follow the darn rules. That does seem reasonable.

I ate a great deal of cheese. I’ve had trouble explaining to coworkers upon my return as to why eating so much cheese is a critical part of my occupation. As I was reminded in a tasting session: if you taste, and pay attention, you learn how to make better cheese. You start to recognize flavors and understand what causes them, gain sophistication in words to express what you sense and appreciate more specifically

why a great cheese is great. Each morning we were greeted by a spread of cheeses on the breakfast table, followed by a similar display at lunch, with tasting seminars in between and a more elaborate cheese event in the evening. These were all apparently designed to get us in shape for the Festival of Cheese. By Saturday evening I was, in fact, well prepared to skillfully pace myself through four hours of intently tasting somewhere around one million cheeses. I was reunited with old favorites from my former neighbors in Vermont, introduced to delightful cheeses from my new neighbors in the midwest, and humbled by the array of intensely awesome Canadian offerings. I hovered by the plate of Grey Owl from Fromagerie le Detour, briefly considering moving my life to Quebec just to be closer to this cheese.

And Montreal is lovely. The Quebecois I encountered were welcoming, truly enjoyed good food and were graciously gentle in their disapproval of US political systems. It was with great difficulty that I stepped on the departing plane Sunday morning, but with equal ardor I stepped off on Sunday night, back in IN ready to get going on making cheese, better.