

ACS Conference Essay
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08/25/15

The theme of this year's American Cheese Society conference aptly encapsulated how I felt on my first day—nervous yet excited, eager yet slightly apprehensive, much like the first day of camp. I felt then, as I feel now, so lucky to have been selected to receive the cheesemaker's scholarship offered through the American Cheese Society. Before the conference even started, I felt the responsibility of taking full advantage of all it had to offer, and to approach my first conference with an open mind, and a willingness to learn.

I plunged right into the sessions and seminars, wanting to glean as much as I could from the industry giants I was surrounded by. My favorite seminars were ones that enhanced knowledge I had already started to cultivate, but hadn't quite connected all the dots. Ben Wolfe and Veronica Pedraza's interactive combination of science and story in "Delicious Molds and Mushrooms" stands out as being one of the most unique learning experiences I participated in at the conference. Together, they delved further into the biodynamic nature of the cheese rind than I had thought possible. They engaged the attendees by including a cooking portion and multiple tasting elements that complemented the facts presented before us. Another favorite session I attended was Emily Shartin's "Inside the Affineur's Cave." Her presentation lended an international voice to the conference, and reminded everyone in the room of where affinage comes from, and how we as American cheesemakers and mongers can draw from centuries of experience elsewhere to enhance and improve upon American originals.

A seminar that I loved but that could have been improved upon was "Adapting to Climate." As a cheesemaker in a state that has been in a severe drought for the last four years, I went to the session hoping to hear from a panel of farmers representing diverse climates. The three panelists, while all extremely intelligent and insightful, came from very similar climates—green, lush, seasonally based. This is a seminar that had so much potential to reach a wider audience, one that is struggling in a seemingly endless drought, but only just fell short. Despite this, it is still a seminar that left a great impression on me because the panelists were full of passion for what they do. More importantly, they were eager to share with a group of strangers their strategies, successes, and failures in managing seasonality and pests.

A great takeaway from the conference is the absolute necessity for effective communication. In "As the Wheel Turns," Vince Razionale and Adeline Druart related the significance of the daily variances in affinage—the minute changes that differ one batch from another, and one cheese from another. Communicating these variances is key to establishing positive relationships with the mongers and distributors representing your product on a daily basis. No one group is more

important than the other, and by working in harmony, the cheese is elevated above all else (as it should always be.)

An obvious highlight of the conference was the awards ceremony. Being from California probably skewed my excitement level, as I was surrounded by so much raw energy. Louella Hill provided the bear flags, and I waved mine furiously any time a California cheese won an award (especially from Cowgirl!). The ceremony gave me the chance to discover new cheeses, and to rejoice in the success of first-time and long-time winners alike. In an industry that is founded on trial and error and collaboration, celebrating wins together reminds us all of why we work in cheese. This kind of passion can only be shared by those inspired by the perfect encapsulation of earth and animal, one of the oldest forms of food preservation—cheese.

In the day to day, the cheese world can feel very far away. By attending ACS, I was given the opportunity to integrate myself into a network of professionals and, now, friends that I feel confident I can reach out to at any point for support, advice, or even just to say hi. I am especially appreciative of Susan Miller, who guided me through my first conference. She made an indelible impression on me, and set an example to all the cheesemaking scholarship recipients by giving back to the organization that supported her when she was a scholarship recipient herself. The ACS conference allowed me to put in the time to actively build my career, glean all that I could from an incredible group of industry leaders, and inspired me to come back with a foundation strong enough to guide future new members.