

The American Cheese Society Conference- Rally in Raleigh! Part I

Posted on [August 26, 2012](#) by [admin](#)

I was having breakfast this morning with one of WeatherVane Creamery's supporters, Gary (the one who wrote me that nice email in my last blog entry) and he asked me what I got out of the American Cheese Society Conference. Coincidentally, I also need to send off an essay to the American Cheese Society answering that very question. So here is the answer:

I got three main things out of the American Cheese Society Conference: 1.) business connections, 2.) a new understanding of the food safety issues in the cheese industry, and 3.) a basic understanding on how to evaluate and judge cheese. Let me tell you more about these things. I'll start with the business connections and next time (Part II) I will tell you about the food safety issues (I promise to try to make it a riveting read!) and about the cheese judging another time (part III).

Business connections sound dry and like a bunch of polo-shirted and khaki pants wearing business drones mingling around a water cooler laughing at mildly inappropriate industry laden jokes. And yes, the jokes were present. But this wasn't like that.

Just weeks before the conference, I met with some folks from the Dairy Business Innovation Center in Madison and they gave me a list of cheese retailers and other industry experts to get in touch with ahead of the conference to set appointments with. The majority of the list said to text them to find a time once we were in Raleigh. I found myself using the conference as a dairy expert scavenger hunt. Once there, I checked off my list one by one and was amazed at how eager and willing people were to get together and give me 30 minutes of their conference time. Both the Dairy Business Innovation Center and the conference opened a lot of doors for me. I was both honored and surprised to find people like Ari Weinzwieg from Zingerman's Deli in Ann Arbor, Kate Arding, the editor of Culture Magazine who helped establish Cowgirl Creamery in San Francisco and Jeff Jirik, the cheesemaker that founded the Caves of Faribault to be available and excited to learn more about what I am up to with WeatherVane Creamery. In fact, Jeff went out of his way to tell fellow cheesemaker Sid Cook from Carr Valley Cheese that *he* was going to be my mentor and that Sid couldn't have me!

Aside from the individuals that I met, I went away from the conference impressed at how much of a small, intimate world the cheese industry is. The American Cheese Society fosters a great and generous community. Everyone (for the most part- there are always a few exceptions here and there) was bright eyed and eager to share their stories and hear yours. The camaraderie, even amongst strangers, was unmistakable and inspiring.



Here I am with Jeff Jirik from The Caves of Faribault



With Master Cheesemaker Sid Cook from Carr Valley Cheese



With Ari Weinzwieg. In my Outlook Contacts I have him listed as "Super God"

Rally in Raleigh Part II- Food Safety

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I was registered into two food safety sessions at the American Cheese Society Conference and I wondered what would be different for retailing and handling cheese versus the things in the produce and coffee industries that I knew. I initially walked away frustrated and disappointed from the sessions. I thought that what was covered was basic and not new. I was frustrated by the “elementary” level of questions and was especially irritated by the lady who thought that it was “too much to ask” an entry level cheesemonger to be able to know and tell a health inspector the correct temperature that the cheese coolers needed to be (it’s 41 degrees, just like in the industries that I was accustomed to). In my experience, food safety is nothing to mess around with and it is NEVER too much to ask to have everyone who handles the product to know the basic considerations. We are all responsible for providing safe food. Ok, I am stepping down from my soap box now. She was set straight by the ACS panel and that is all that matters. 😊

It wasn’t until after I toured the Caves of Faribault in Faribault, MN that I started to realize why the cheese industry *seemed* to be behind the eight ball on food safety. There, I saw wheels in affinage (a fancy, presumably French-derived word for cheese ripening) caves that could spend anywhere up to 120 days until they were ready for sale. And it wasn’t until my breakfast with Gary this Sunday that I put it all together. Gary’s background includes some time as a meat cutter in the grocery industry so we both had fresh food experience with food safety. I’ll explain it to you like I did to him.

In both the meat and produce industries, product is made to be fresh and spoilage is to be avoided. One of the main safety protocols for keeping things fresh revolves around keeping things at the coldest temperature without them freezing. Another rule is to get the meat or produce into the customer’s hands as soon as possible with a relatively short retail shelf life.

With cheese, there are some different considerations. For one thing, in the cheese world, shelf life is variable and what we called spoiling is known as ripening or affinage. Just this week I had a conversation with Paul Haskins from the Wisconsin Sheep Dairy Cooperative. He explained to me that the Dante Sheepmilk Cheese that he gave me was a little older than they typically sell to market. In my former role as a Produce Manager, “old” would raise a definite red flag. In this case, however, I interpreted it (and he confirmed it) to mean that it was going to have a more pungent flavor and be “harder”, or closer to a Parmesan texture due to the moisture loss over time.

Speaking of moisture content... Some lower (under 39%) moisture content cheeses don’t need to be refrigerated at all. This includes Cheddar, Gruyere, Parmesan, and Romano. Here in Wisconsin, we fight to have our cheese curds warm for as long as possible without refrigerating them (24 hours is the current allowable time until they need to be refrigerated). This is when they taste the best and are their squeakiest.

So now I know why the cheese industry *seemed* behind the eight ball. I got the big, loud reminder that making cheese is an old fashioned way of preserving food. It is a living, breathing entity that doesn't ever necessarily die. Plants/produce have what is called a permanent wilting point and decomposes and meat just rots and gets disgusting. Can you tell that I don't have that meat background? I am sure they have a much cooler/politically correct word for that. And just like I needed the big, loud reminder, health inspectors might also need to get educated and the cheesemakers and the American Cheese Society are working on that. Cheese has its own rules. It isn't necessarily comparable to the other fresh food products. So now you know. And I do, too. And I completely appreciate the level of discussion that was had during my two food safety sessions at the American Cheese Society Conference.



Cheese Curds. These pesky devils defy *all* the rules! They can be out in ambient temperature for 24 hours before the health inspectors require refrigeration.

Rally in Raleigh Part III- Cheese Judging

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At the American Cheese Society Conference I. ATE. A. LOT. OF. CHEESE. I don't know how else to say it. Cheese with wine, cheese with preserves, cheese with coffee, cheese with cheese.... you get the picture. On day 5- Saturday, I didn't even have breakfast or lunch and I ate a late supper. All I ate was the cheese that was offered in my tasting sessions. And I was just eating to eat it. Sure, it was fascinating and I will be sure to one day apply the fact that Aged Cheddar goes best with Spicy/savory chutney and pickled fruit. But who was I kidding? I just wanted to eat cheese.

It wasn't until I went to the Cheese Judging session that I actually got to appreciate the art of cheese judging and evaluation. And the American Cheese Society takes their judging **very** seriously. An indicator of this is the 5 minute video that they provide on how cheesemakers should pack their cheese to ship to be evaluated. Check it out:

But this blog isn't about the actual judging that the ACS does every year to determine the best cheeses in each category in the country. No, this is more about cheese *tasting*. Like, as a serious thing.

First of all, some general tips. And I am sure there are more specific guidelines beyond this. When you put the cheese in your mouth, mash it around to all areas of your tongue "like a dog eating peanut butter" (Ha!) One of the most underrated areas to pay attention to, is the area on both sides of the tongue. Make note of how the cheese is hitting all taste buds- sweet, sour, salty, bitter, and umami. Umami describes brothy, meaty, and musky flavors like those found in mushrooms, tomatoes, and cured meats. Of course, you want to notice the texture of the cheese and breathe the aroma into the back of your throat with an open mouth. Some argue whether the cracker is a delivery system or a palette cleanser. Personally, I like it as a palette cleanser. I will even put soft cheeses on my plate and swab the cheese onto my finger and do some finger-lickin' to get the best sense of the cheese. But I didn't see anyone else do that. Call that one a Sarah-ism.

On to the formal education that I got at the judging session. We were given two score sheets for each category of cheese: a technical score sheet and an aesthetic score sheet. For the aesthetic score sheet, I tasted Tillamook Cheddar Cheese.

Sidenote: I have a love/hate relationship to Tillamook Cheddar Cheese. If I am on the West Coast, I love Tillamook Cheddar Cheese and will tell all of my friends to go to the Tillamook Cheese Factory to get their tour and sampling on. Here in Wisconsin, however, Tillamook has **NO** business here. In fact, it was what drove me to investigate cheese as a component for WeatherVane Creamery. I saw Tillamook Cheddar at Family Fresh here in River Falls when I was looking for "good" Wisconsin cheese. I was outraged when I saw it because I had just spent the last three years living in Portland, OR getting razzed about how Tillamook, which is located in Oregon, had won the Cheddar award over any Wisconsin cheeses. I had been defending our Wisconsin reputation for years and then look what I found here in Wisconsin! An outrage, I tell you. A pure and utter outrage.

Back to aesthetic judging:

For the Tillamook Cheddar, we rated four qualities- Aroma, Flavor, Texture/Body, and Appearance/Rind Development. On my score sheet there were descriptors specific to Cheddar. Things like Buttery Aroma, Balanced Salt Flavor, Evenly Moist, and Good Even Color. My score for Tillamook Cheddar? 48 out of 50. "Mild yet flavorful. Excellent butter flavor and finish."

For the technical score sheet, I judged a goat Camembert. The technical qualities rated were also Aroma, Flavor, Texture/Body, and Appearance/Rind Development except the descriptors were different and points got *deducted* instead of added. The descriptors were things like Ammoniated, Unpleasantly Earthy Aroma, Lacks Freshness, Curdy, Gassy, Grainy, and Rind

Rot. Fun stuff. I rated the goat Camembert a 43 out of 50. "Waxy, uneven layers." Turns out that I was harsher on this cheese than others in the room. *shrug*

What I really took away from this session was the tools to be able to train my future staff who will in turn train our customers on how to taste cheese and learn about the qualities of the different categories. And here are the categories in case you were wondering: Fresh Cheeses, Aged Fresh Cheeses, Soft White Cheeses, Semi-Soft Cheeses, Hard Cheeses, Blue Cheeses, and Flavor-Added Cheeses. When I asked around the conference for a good reference book, everyone recommended "The Cheese Primer" by Steve Jenkins. I have to admit that I took a look at it at the book sale there at the conference and wasn't sold on it. In fact, I got back and ordered it from the River Falls Public Library and took a closer look at it and remained unconvinced. I ended up getting a book called "The World Cheese Book" by DK Publishing. Here is my official Amazon.com review of it: *"This is one of the best cheese books for beginners that I have found. Really great photos and content. But, no Colby cheese?!"*



