

Meg Schader – 2011 ACS Scholarship Recipient

Wake Robin Farm

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ACS Conference Scholarship Essay

My husband and I are farmers who make cheese – and just a two person operation, so attending the ACS conference in Montreal was a logistical challenge, but well worth the effort. Our son picked up a lot of the slack during my whirlwind 3 day trip – which he referred to as my “vacation”. I was not able to attend the entire conference, since one of the only things our 11 year old cannot do is drive our refrigerated truck to market on Saturdays. I had to return home on Friday night in order to get our product ready for our biggest marketing day of the week, but I'm so thankful for the scholarship that allowed me to attend 2 days!

As a small farmstead creamery, we market all of our products within about 30 miles of our farm. One of the most important things I took away from the ACS conference was an appreciation for the fact that we are able to sell everything we make in our local area, even though it pushes us to produce many different products, from bottled milk to aged cheese. I've always been attracted to the concept of focusing on one cheese, perfecting it, and then shipping it to restaurants and stores, but talking to people who are on both ends of this equation shed light on the pros and cons of attempting this type of marketing. I left Montreal feeling very committed to our local market, and grateful for the loyal customer base we have, who allow us to sell our products so close to home.

Hearing Pascale Tremblay's passionate keynote address was another highlight of my experience. The three stories she told about the various cheesemakers were truly inspiring. She deftly wove the history of the land and the people together, and emphasized the power of synergy to move situations in positive, new directions. I particularly enjoyed the story of the island farmers who worked together to develop their own cheeses, branding their products with the history of the land and artwork from present day.

The tasting session I attended with Christine Chenard was an eye opening (and taste bud awakening) experience. I learned how much of our perception of flavor actually comes through the nose with her candy experiment, and trying to identify the smells in the mystery containers was a fun challenge. I also found out that I am among the 30% of the population who does not taste PTC, which was a great illustration of how individual taste preferences are.

Speaking of tasting cheese, there was plenty of that at the conference too, and I wasn't even there for the Festival of Cheese on Saturday night! I enjoyed not only tasting the different products at Meet the Cheesemaker, but also seeing the people behind the cheeses, and observing the different styles of presentation at each of the tables. I got ideas for my own market stand by experiencing, from the other side of the table, how the different approaches worked from the perspective of a consumer.

Besides that, I got to sample hundreds of amazing cheeses that I had only seen in magazines before!

Because I was a first time conference attendee who knew nobody else there, I forced myself to stretch the limits of my introverted personality in Montreal. It is always hard to approach a table of people by yourself and ask if you can join them, but everyone I met at ACS was genuinely welcoming and eager to share information in the spirit of cooperative learning. Even the Town Hall Meeting had this feeling – it was clear that we come together at ACS to help each other, because we have a common goal: to learn about, and promote, American cheese!