

I'm sitting upstairs in Pazzo Taverna, a restaurant in Stratford, Ontario, sandwiched in between two dedicated ACS members and talented cheese professionals. There is a fresh tray of oysters that has just arrived, and we all sip various forms of Vermouth cocktails (the third and fourth of the night, for some of us.) The conversation is cheese focused, captivating, and enlightening; the company is first-rate. I am in my element. My night had begun with a text message from an unknown number; an 801 area code that I didn't recognize asking if my phone was still out of commission and wondering how my ACS conference experience had been 2 weeks previously. Without much notice, my ACS conference mentor had appeared in Stratford to visit friends and I was invited along for the ride! I looked at the glowing faces around me seated at the table and felt myself exceptionally fortunate to have found myself in a career and industry with such supportive, inspiring, and talented peers.

My conference journey started in Toronto on a much too late flight to Providence due to last minute planning on my end and the lack of seats on any earlier trips. I arrived in Providence at 12:30am on Tuesday July 28<sup>th</sup>, and woke at 6am to prepare for my first volunteer shift with the judging and competition team. I spent the day chatting cheese with cheesemakers, cheesemongers, and enthusiastic laypeople just genuinely inspired by cheese, and we collectively helped ACS staff behind the scenes to ensure the cheese being judged was cared for and kept track of. I was impressed and awed by the knowledge and experience present amongst the volunteers—unlabeled cheese was identified by sight and smell, and vast discussions were had regarding the hundreds of producers who had entered the 1700+ different cheeses into this year's competition. There was absolutely no doubt in mind that I was way out of my league, and I loved it. My first day of ACS Cheese Camp 2015 was over and I went to bed that night with a massive smile on my face.

Day two started with Festival of Cheese preparation—a frantic 6 hours of breaking down the previous day's cheese into display, sampling, and sale pieces. I felt very comfortable with the pace set in order to complete our daunting task within the day's time constraints, as the creamery I work for in Stratford operates in a similar manner: not nearly enough time or manpower to get through the task at hand leisurely, and each job is measured out to the minute. We worked in teams to break down the cheese as each judging category was rolled in to the hall sequentially. At 12:30 we broke for lunch, and Debra gave the team a pep talk and update for the afternoon shift. I was feeling optimistic having gone through at least 200 different cheeses that morning, but the Marieke Gouda girls and I all groaned when we were told that we were just shy of the halfway mark. Thankfully the afternoon shift were pumped and ready to go, and I made my way back to the hotel to get ready for my afternoon of exploring in the convention centre.

I started my afternoon with a meeting with Mary Quicke, a personal cheese idol and ACS conference veteran. I was feeling a bit lost and overwhelmed by the madness

of the conference after my two volunteer shifts and the realization that I really had no idea what I'd gotten myself into, and Mary and I chatted while attaching a rainbow of ribbons onto our conference badges (I was instructed to do this early on, as the ribbons gradually ran out as the conference progressed. I ended up with a 4 or 5 ribbon stripe; Mary's was close to 8 or 9 long and trailed low like a multi-coloured scarf as she walked.) While we decided where to go to have a drink, it seemed as though every one of the 1,200 conference attendees stopped in to say hello to Mary, and discuss various goings on in their respective worlds. I was blown away by the closeness of the community and the friendliness of everyone that I met. It truly felt like a summer camp as people expressed excitement at seeing friends again for the first time since the previous conference. I continued on my way to the Sartori reception where I met a good number of the ACS Board and enjoyed some great snacks and conversation, and then on to the pub-crawl with a few new friends from my volunteer shift teams. Things were off to a great start.

I woke Thursday morning groggily, and in view of my sluggish tempo, decided that I would skip the pancake breakfast and start with the day's various sessions instead. The morning was a whirlwind of introductions, cheese tastings, and chatting with the hugely broad spectrum of conference attendees from all realms of the cheese industry; I sat with writers from Culture magazine and members of the Wisconsin Milk Marketing Board at the Alpine cheese tasting, and other scholarship winners at lunch. We talked about our various experiences with cheese and it was interesting to get a feel for everyone's individual journey into the cheese world. One of my favourite parts of chatting cheese is finding out how we all found our way into the industry—more often than not it was a random opportunity that appeared at the right time in our lives, or for some it was a family tradition, passed on from earlier generations. I am not lucky enough to be a member of the latter group, and so I feel I benefit greatly from the ability to interact and engage with more experienced cheese professionals who help me hone and refine my foci and skills using their greater experience and advice. This was my primary goal at the conference, and I feel that I succeeded in meeting and interacting with various beneficial mentors and new friends who will help me shape my cheese career.

Though the entire conference was inspiring and eye opening, there were a few highlights that are more than memorable and they will define my ACS experience for the rest of my career. I was given the opportunity to sit down for one-on-one meetings with both Ivan Larcher and Dr. Benjamin Wolfe, and on both days my original 30-minute appointment was extended to an hour due to other cancellations. It was an honour to meet the professionals helping develop and progress our industry, and the opportunity to get to discuss my successes and failures as a cheesemaker and how I might be able to improve was incredibly beneficial. From these sessions I moved on to David Sandelman and Laurent Mons' session on aging environments, and the session on the science of artisan cheese with Dr. Catherine Donnelly, Dr. Marie-Christine Montel, and Bronwen Percival. Learning and trying to understand the science behind the outcomes and interactions on the make floor and into the aging rooms is something that interests me the most, having experienced such a profound knowledge gap with regards to these

areas at our creamery in Stratford. It was comforting (though frustrating!) to know that many share these issues, but also exciting for us to be able to work together as a community to help each other solve problems and inconsistencies throughout our various operations.

As Saturday night came to a close, I bid farewell to new and existing friends over Karaoke. I will be starting a new journey in cheese in the fall and I was thrilled to have the opportunity to celebrate the end conference and my new endeavor in such an exciting environment! I departed Providence on Sunday afternoon after exploring the cheese sale and indulging in a late afternoon foray to find oysters and white wine in the hot Rhode Island sun. A fabulous end to a wonderful week.

Back in Stratford after oysters and cocktails at Pazzo, we are eating ACS cheese at the lovely home of a cheese friend. He, unlike me, managed to transport 60lb of gorgeous cheese back to Canada from the sale after the conference, and we are happily sipping dark beers and eating cheese and various accouterments in his third floor apartment in the warm summer evening. My mentor and I are chatting deeply about his past and future plans, after having asked him what it is exactly he 'does'. He has regaled me with tales of his past year and the places he has been and the people he has met; from New Zealand to France and back to North America for the conference, many more travels, and how he has come to find himself sitting in Stratford at this late hour. He gestures to our group and says that most of all, this is what he does—he connects people. And I grin from ear to ear; thrilled at the network of people I have come to be a part of.