

Tim Johnstone – ACS Post-Conference Essay 2016

“Cheese is a moving target” is a common saying in this industry. Generally, it refers to the changing characteristics of milk throughout the calendar year, as well as the dynamic nature of the industry as a whole. The axiom may be true, but for a few days in Des Moines in late July it did not feel that way. For a few days the world of cheese felt nailed down, confined within the halls of the Iowa Events Center, and open to anyone with a curious mind and taste buds.

Which is not to say the experience was not overwhelming. I recommend to anyone attending the conference to put serious advance planning into what goals one wants to achieve, what areas of knowledge one most wants to advance, in order to maximize his or her time. There is no way to do it all or taste it all. But, with a little strategy going in, you can give it a damn good try.

The conference opened on a philosophic note with a keynote address by Ari Weinzweig about the power of beliefs and how they shape our interactions with the world. It contained many insights for the cheese industry and beyond, but I was most struck when we were asked to share our “beliefs” about our jobs with our tablemates, how little they had to do with profits, with the dollars and cents of a successful business. Make no mistake, those are important, downright integral, to the attendees being there (except for, perhaps, a few hardcore hobbyists). But the beliefs that were shared revealed that profits were seldom the *reason* someone had chosen his or her path. The beliefs were more akin to those of a vocation than just a company. It was a refreshing way to begin the conference.

Almost without exception, the breakout sessions and lectures were informative and well-delivered. Of particular emphasis this year seemed to be food safety and FSMA compliance. These lectures were very detailed, and struck a proper balance between scaring you with horror stories of recalls and arming you with practical tips and tricks to immediately tighten safety protocols. More than anything, these seminars cemented the idea that food safety requires constant vigilance and evolution. There is no nirvana to reach where, once a system is in place, food safety is ensured and never to be thought of again. It requires constant training, reevaluation, and adaptation as a company changes. It’s a daunting task, but one that was explained nicely throughout these lectures.

Though I work for a cheese producer, I attended two courses that were delivered by, and geared towards, cheese retailers. I found these to be very entertaining and helpful, as my position requires quite a bit of customer relations. Though one may not want to make it a primary focus, I recommend all attendees get out of their lane for a little bit and check out a seminar that may not, on its surface, appear completely relevant to one’s own career. Taking a dive into the concerns and challenges facing cheese retailers really helped broaden my scope of understanding the industry as a whole. For artisan cheese, each step along the chain from the milk the animal produces (and really, the grass that feeds that animal) to producer, to distributor, to cheesemonger, to table is crucial to the success of the whole enterprise. Becoming more familiar with the interconnectedness of that chain is time well spent at cheese camp. It’s also a good opportunity for networking, which needs its own paragraph...

Networking. The big N word. Some people were born under stars that allow them to do so effortlessly. Others, introverts like me, can find themselves walking about in a stupor wondering “Am I doing this right?” if not careful. My non-expert advice is that yes, networking is very big aspect of cheese camp, but don’t put too much pressure on yourself to conquer the industry on your first go; if you’re a first time attendee, know that many of the people there have relationships going back years if not decades.

Be friendly, be yourself, introduce yourself every time you sit down to a table, and the rest will take care of itself. ACS did a tremendous job organizing a full slate of events like the Maytag Dairy Tour and the Cheese Trivia Night that make it very easy to put yourself out there. Take advantage of those opportunities; cheese people, it turns out, are very friendly people.

One portion of the ACS experience I thought could be improved was the FDA Update delivered during one of the luncheons. This talk consisted primarily of food safety statistics delivered in very broad strokes, read directly from a PowerPoint. Considering the importance of the subject matter – as I stated above, food safety and FSMA was one of the BIG focal points of the conference – I felt as if this material could have been much more instructive. In the future, at the very least, I would recommend providing the PowerPoint information either as a printout or a link, and reserving that time for a Q&A session with a FDA representative. Friends don't let friends suffer from PowerPoint abuse.

But this was a very, very small exception to the general rule that the conference was exceptionally well-run, informative, and invigorating. I could write a whole essay on maximizing your cheese intake at the Festival of Cheese, the capper of the conference. But instead I'll merely advise you to save room for Bossa, a sheep's milk cheese from Green Dirt Farm in Missouri, which for me, was the revelation from the conference.

If you're reading this I can only assume you're an enormous curd nerd like me. I sincerely hope you get the opportunity to have an experience like the one I had in Des Moines, where the world of cheese, the moving target, stays still for a few days. It's an energizing and exciting time for American artisan cheese, and I returned home extremely grateful for the small part I get to play, and determined to play it better.