

My journey to this year's American Cheese Society annual conference in Sacramento, California, started with a drive from London, Ontario, across the border to Detroit, Michigan, and a 4 and a half hour flight to San Francisco, California. I took a train from Oakland to Sacramento, and found my way to the beautiful hotel and convention centre where the conference would be held. The first thing I noticed about Sacramento was the heat! Unlike our hot and humid summers in Ontario, this dry desert heat was a welcomed change. After checking into my beautiful suite at the Hyatt Regency, Sacramento, I headed over to the convention centre to see what was going on. It was the day before the conference opened, and things were already hopping! I found my friend and colleague Kelsie Parsons, one of the conference Cheesemongers, hard at work prepping cheeses for the Emmi Roth Certified Cheese Professionals exam reception, which would take place the following afternoon. Kelsie introduced me to Jane Bauer, Education and Outreach Manager, who welcomed me with open arms. Jane helped to calm my pre-exam nerves by walking me through the exam process, and answering any last minute questions I had. Her excitement about the conference was infectious, and I walked away from our conversation even more excited about the week ahead of me.

As a graduate of Max McCalman's Master Professionals Cheese certificate course in New York, I had planned to take the Certified Cheese Professionals exam as soon as I was able. I was thrilled to learn that I had the opportunity to take the exam while at the conference. Studying my way through the Body of Knowledge was no easy feat. The exam is set up to be taken by serious cheese professionals only, and the exam itself was just as challenging as I had hoped it would be. Once the exam was over, we celebrated with a fabulous reception of wine and cheese! The CCP exam reception was a great opportunity to meet other cheese professionals, and discuss the exam.

After a quick freshening up, it was off to the New Members reception. Not only was I a first time conference attendee, and scholarship winner, but also a new member to the American Cheese Society. As a relatively new cheese retailer, the cost of doing business can at times be overwhelming. Affording the fees for the ACS annual membership was not something I could manage in previous years. It was at this reception that one of my best connections of the conference was made with another new cheese retailer, who I had recently connected with through social media. It is amazing to watch the connections that can be made simply by being open to meeting new people. After a delightful reception around the hotel pool, we made our way to the Culture Magazine party for more drinks and networking.

It became clear to me early in my week at the ACS conference that I would be able to meet and connect with countless industry professionals. The conversations that I had were unforgettable and have given me a new drive for furthering my own career as well.

During my time studying for the CCP exam, it became apparent to me how much I was enjoying the topic of Microbiology in cheese. Although I had previously signed up for a tasting session on beer and cheese pairing, I decided to switch to another session offered at the same time, and I was so glad that I did. Dr. Rachel Dutton and Dr. Benjamin Wolfe's lecture on the Microbiology of the Rind was by far my favourite session of the entire conference! This engaging duo shared their wealth of knowledge on the topic in a way that was funny, exciting, and educational. Who knew that *Brevibacterium Linens* are not actually the main bacteria in a washed rind cheese? My mind was opened and engaged in a whole new

way, and I am looking forward to building on my knowledge of cheese bacteria, and following along as Rachel and Ben continue their fascinating research.

The different sessions and meetings that took place in the dining hall were a chance for me to put faces to names and understand more fully how the American Cheese Society does business. It was neat to be introduced at the Town Hall meeting as a scholarship winner – my only regret is not learning more about John Crompton himself. Who is this man that gave so much to our cheese industry, and who I am representing as a scholarship winner?

Watching the awards ceremony from a crowded room of hopeful cheese makers was wonderful to experience. It was exciting to witness pure joy as a cheese maker is validated by winning top prize for all of their hard work, especially those in the farmstead category. My hat goes off to those cheese makers that are committed to making excellent cheese from the ground up: caring for and milking their animals day in and day out, keeping a clean and sound operation amidst the continuing challenges brought forth by the FDA, and selling their cheeses every week to a devoted local customer base. This is the work of a true artisan, and is so deserving of all the accolades we can give as an industry.

If I had dreamed my best cheese dream, even then I couldn't have imagined what the Festival of Cheese would be like; 1600 cheeses under one roof was an astonishing sight to say the least. This event is truly the pinnacle in a week of awesomeness, and one that I will not soon forget.

As a first time attendee of the American Cheese Society annual conference, I had no idea what my week in Sacramento, California would entail. As a John Crompton Memorial Scholarship winner, I was given an introduction to fellow cheese nerds and aficionados, industry “rock stars”, and American farmstead cheese pioneers, who I may not have been able to connect with otherwise. The door was opened for conversations about my path as a cheese professional, which are invaluable at this stage in my career. I will forever be grateful for this opportunity, and hope that I have given some indication of that as I write here today. Thank you to those of you that read my story and gave me this chance. The only way I can truly show my gratitude is by giving back to the American Cheese Society and supporting the cheese industry with the work that I do every day.