

How to Enter Like a Pro - Tips from Past Winners

Imagine yourself walking on stage to collect your competition ribbon at conference in Louisville. Now make it happen. You can't win if you don't enter, so here are a few tips from two ACS Judging and Competition pros on how to give your cheeses the best possible chance.

Be strategic about the category you enter.

Many cheeses could conceivably fit more than one category so choose the slot where your cheese is likely to show best.

"I look at previous winners over the past several years," says Sarah Marcus of Oregon's Briar Rose Creamery. "What has stood out in this category? Which category will my cheese stand out in? Sometimes I'll ask people who've been judges what category they think it fits best."

Scott Lafranchi of California's Nicasio Valley Cheese also takes category selection seriously. "We mainly look for the highest-scoring categories and try to stay away from them," says Lafranchi, whose Nicasio Square won a blue ribbon when he moved it from the competitive washed-rind category to farmstead. "It's not so much about how many entries there are but about the quality in each category," says Lafranchi.

Also think about whether your cheese meets the expectations for the category. "Our Brie-style cheeses are a little different, so we don't put them in the Brie category," says Lafranchi. "We enter them in 'soft-ripened made from cow's milk'."

Underripe is better than overripe.

It's not easy to anticipate how a soft-ripened cheese is going to develop between the shipping and the judging, but both Marcus and Lafranchi suggest erring on the young side.

"I make a lot of softer cheeses, and when I think they're amazing and full of umami, the judges say they're too oozy, with too much breakdown," says Marcus. "I've done better when I send them younger."

Ship like it's a family heirloom.

Choose two-day or (better yet) overnight shipping. It's expensive, but it's even more expensive to have your entry arrive in poor shape. Marcus uses a box inside a box. "Make sure it's well packed with lots of ice," says Marcus, "and well packed means well insulated."

Be sure your ice packs or gel packs don't weep moisture, suggests Lafranchi. And don't cram the cheeses in the box. "We've done that a couple of times," he says, "and we got marked down for the cheese being lopsided."

Fill out the entry form carefully and review it. Then review it again.

“My cheese was disqualified because I inadvertently put the name on the entry form,” says Marcus. “Oops. That’s an automatic 5-point deduction. I was doing it on autopilot and that was a big mistake. Now I triple-check all my entries.”

Consider entering for the feedback, not for the win.

“Sometimes I’ll submit a cheese I know isn’t very good but what I’m going for is the feedback,” says Marcus. “For me, that’s just as important as the score.” After switching the milk type for one of her cheeses—from goat’s milk to cow’s milk—the technical judge’s opinion was scathing, says the cheesemaker. “But the judge gave me some good pointers, and the next year the cheese got second place, and the year after that it got first place. The feedback really did help me improve.”