

Gigi Berardi – ACS Post-Conference Essay 2016

From the opening reception sponsored by Sartori Company to the closing keynote by Sandor Katz, participating in the American Cheese Society's conference, *Cheese in the Heartland*, was an absolute delight. I found everything – sessions, networking, book signings, receptions, awards ceremonies – to be perfect in every way. The conference was beautifully organized and executed; the camaraderie was tremendous. To a first time attendee, the numerous events could have been overwhelming, but mentors, staff, and instructors helped me to easily navigate my way through the schedule.

My very favorite events were the networking, the keynotes, my various one-on-ones, especially with Marc Bates and Jim Gates, and these sessions: The L Word: Listeria, Blues of the Midwest, Open Networking with Cheese Milk Producers, and Sandor Katz's closing words on cheese and fermentation.

I must admit it was very humbling to meet so many notable hard-working and excellent cheesemakers. It was particularly exciting to taste their cheese, and then to celebrate their success in winning awards from the Society. I took every opportunity to talk with them. Invariably, they were generous and genuine – a wealth of information.

Of course, the highlight of the conference was the cheese itself: the cheese at the receptions, the cheese at the trade tables, the cheese in the competition. Whether it was 40 wheels at a reception, or thousands of pieces of soft and hard cheeses at the Festival of Cheese – tasting so many cheeses will be an experience that I will never forget.

The cheese tasting was as much educational as it was gastronomic. I quickly learned to pace myself, and focus on specific qualities of the different kinds of cheese. I was drawn to the goat and sheep cheeses (the cheeses I make, as well as cow-milk-Comté). I was looking for hard cheeses with a good texture and good flavor, and soft cheeses with sweet aftertastes. Still, those constituted only about 20% of the cheeses I tasted.

How to navigate my way through the numerous aisles of cheese? I looked for traits and defects, using my own checklist of sensory and physical characteristics. I listened to others, I talked to the cheesemakers, *I learned so much!*

Thank you again for the singular opportunity to experience *Cheese in the Heartland*. It was thoroughly unforgettable. I hope I continue to learn – I have lots of homework!