

2017 ACS Post Con Essay by Heather Glass, Marquette Food Co-op

Being an owner and employee of a community owned food cooperative, I am always applying what we call in the co-op word “the seven principals” with intention to how I conduct myself professionally. The seven principles are as follows; voluntary and open membership, democratic member control, autonomy and independence, a focus on education, training, and information, cooperation among cooperatives and concern for community. I saw every one of these principals demonstrated in an exemplary way while attending the annual American Cheese Society conference in Denver Colorado.

Starting with voluntary and open membership, the ACS is an organization that people in many facets of the cheese industry can choose to join. I met people from all over the country and the world for that matter. I am so thankful to have access to the information, webinars, support, and camaraderie that the ACS cultivates. I feel like I am a part of something bigger, and am honored to be associated with so many inspiring people.

Democratic member control is demonstrated by the board of directors that are elected each year, and the scholarship process is decided in a democratic manner. My economic participation is fulfilled by paying my yearly membership fee. Autonomy and independence is celebrated throughout the ACS. Large producers rub elbows with small family dairy farmers. Corporations and co-ops send their cheese buyers and mongers to learn and develop themselves.

Difference is celebrated, but the overarching theme is collaboration. I often saw what would be considered “competitors” in the market problem solving, laughing and networking. While accepting the best in show award for Tarentaise, representatives from Spring Brook Farm stated “We are all in this together”. Those words rung true to me, a common co-op mantra “stronger together”, echoed in my head. It all came full circle.

I was surprised that I ended up enjoying meals and conversations with many regional producers that I order cheese from. Meeting their families, and hearing stories of how they got started gave me a unique window into their world. Not to mention I could meet producers from all over the country at the “Meet the cheesemaker” event. The festival of cheese was mind-blowing! I’ve never been surrounded by so much delicious cheese in my entire life!

The most prolific influence the conference had on me was all the educational opportunities. I live in a rural area and don’t have the opportunity to communicate with other people in the cheese industry often. I am responsible for my own education and there is only so much you can teach yourself. Learning from and communicating with the best, brightest, and most innovative people in my industry was one of the most inspiring experiences I have had since I’ve become a cheese monger. I learned about cheese as an economic and social driver, the nuances of grass-fed dairy, the science behind cheese crystals, pioneering pairings, emotional intelligence in the workplace, and examining the artisan cheese industry through the lens of craft beer. My confidence in talking about the cheese industry is stronger than it has ever been, and I believe my customers are benefiting from this. I will be sharing my notes and playing sessions that were recorded for my cheese counter staff to keep the information flowing.

The first day I arrived at the conference I was overwhelmed and nervous, but the welcoming and approachable attitude of ACS members and staff made me feel right at home. I got to meet some of the people I most admire and hope to model my career after. I would have never been able to make this life changing experience happen if it weren't for the John Crompton Memorial Scholarship and all the people who donate to the fund and work on the scholarship board.