

Jessica Affatato – ACS Post-Conference Essay 2016

If I could earn a dime for every time someone cocked their head, looked at me quizzically and asked me “What is a cheesemonger?” then I would be a very rich lady indeed. Completing our mortgage paperwork and filling in the field for occupation as “Cheesemonger” sent the underwriting department into a tizzy. Cocktail parties are always a source of new questions. “You do what?” “Is that a real job?” “Did you make it up?” And I try to answer the question as best I can before their eyes begin to glaze over. Starting with that I’m passionate about and specialize in selling cheese seems confusing or incredibly exciting but more often than not begins and ends with something like “Oooh! I like cheddar. Do you like cheddar?” The conversation wraps up before I can get into the details of why I love what I do, my passion for the cheesemakers, the history of our products, the anthropological reasons why cheese was made. And then I’m left on my little cheese island reading obscure works about cheese history.

I submitted my application for the John Crompton Scholarship on a wing and prayer. Maybe I could get to the American Cheese Society conference and learn some new techniques. Maybe I’d get to eat some delicious cheese and go back home. And then I found out I won, attended ACS, it exceeded every expectation and then some. I went to Iowa hoping I would find some tasty morsels instead I found a community and I’ve never felt more accepted.

Attending the American Cheese Society’s conference in Des Moines was like a life raft, a beacon that I was not alone in my passions. From the seminars to the events to the late night discussions over many, many drinks, I found my people – these incredible men and women who devote their ambitions, care and time to an ancient craft, making honest food, and selling it with care to people across the country. We are so much more than just makers and mongers, we are a community of people who support each other in all of our endeavors and dreams.

I flew into Des Moines on Wednesday, the day before the conference officially began. After an epic day of travel delays I finally dropped my bags at the hotel and walked to the conference center. There my cheese nerd heart was ready to pick up my registration and excitedly dig into the conference materials. I was also, quite happily, given a tub of mascarpone cheese and chocolate cookies. This I took to be a sign that I have made some excellent career choices.

That evening was the new members’ reception, and there I spent the only 20 minutes during the entire conference I felt awkward or didn’t belong. After an uncomfortable few minutes repeatedly circumnavigating the reception I randomly struck up a conversation. And then another. And then another. I spoke about the technical details of rennets and the effect of Brexit on Stilton with a gentleman for Germany. I talked with a shop owner and cheesemonger from Fargo about the complexities of running a shop and what cheese were special to our own regions. That evening I stayed up with two fantastic women from California and Minneapolis who spoke to me as an equal, whose opinions and thoughts were wonderful and in-depth, and who were interested in what I thought about the cheese industry. In one evening I spoke more in detail about the artisanal cheese industry than I had with any colleague back home in a year.

The next few days were a flurry of activities and excitement. I attended tastings comparing charcuterie, panel discussions on financing solutions, and technical discussions about cheesemaking. I spoke with movers and shakers in the industry. I tasted more cheese than I could count. I met the

families who make some of my, and my customers', favorite cheeses. More than anything, the opportunity to tell these makers how much their product means to me, how well it sells for us, and how much my customers appreciate it, was more impactful than any panel discussion I could have attended. That connection is why I do what I do. To be the representative to the customer for these incredible products, to tell their story and support them is the best job in the world. That is being a cheesemonger.

In the weeks since I've returned to New York I've spoken with cheesemakers from Maine to Arkansas, cheesemongers from North Dakota to North Carolina and everywhere in between. I am more focused and engaged than ever. I am energized because I have been given the gift of tapping into this community of artisans. I have come away from ACS Des Moines changed for the better. The event serves as an underscore for everything I stand for.

When I was confirming my attendance registration I requested my registration badge not read for the company I am currently working but rather for the company I am working to open. It was my first public declaration connecting my name to my future endeavors. After ACS, what was once seemed a dream beyond my grasp now feels tantalizingly within reach.