

Sitting on the tarmac in Dallas waiting for thunderstorms to pass, my hopes for volunteering the day before the official opening session of the ACS conference were dashed. Once in Des Moines, I rushed to the check-in to find that the hardworking mongers and other cheese-loving volunteers had made swift work of the day's tasks, so I excitedly scooted down to the Sartori First Time Attendee Reception – what would be the first of many, many cheese tastings.

Prior to the conference, I hopped in the Sweet Freedom CheeseMobile and took a 5-week CheeseQuest around the US to meet with others in the industry to ask pressing questions and tour their creameries and cheeseshops. What I found was that cheese folks are like kin who will (nearly without fail) welcome you with open arms, regardless of their level of success, location, or background... and the gathering at the conference was no different. The First Time Attendee Reception was followed by the official Cheese Crawl, where I met up with new friends, including my assigned buddy from the scholarship committee. That evening I was able to reconnect with CheeseQuest friends, picking up instantly where we left off, all while trying cheeses from the exhibiting makers along the way. These social events, including the idyllic opening dinner reception the following evening at Maytag Farms, (and truly the conference as a whole) are designed to allow newcomers in the cheese industry to meet peers in a fun setting alongside ACS Board members, established cheesemakers, and other masters in the field. The flow of information and support was constant throughout the entirety of the conference, as cheese professionals on all levels challenge, encourage, and connect with one another without judgement.

As a cheesemaker scholarship recipient, I had the advantage of signing up for the first slot, bright and early, the following day to meet with Jim Gage, Business Strategist-in-Residence. The one-on-one discussion we had and review of business start-up plans for Sweet Freedom Creamery was helpful, as well as the general connection with one of the most successful grant writers for the dairy industry in the US. That afternoon, I also had the privilege of meeting with Dr. Kaylegian, the conference Food Safety Strategist-in-Residence. Having attended Dr. Kaylegian's food safety class on the CheeseQuest, we were able to get down to some rapid-fire discussion on several topics of choice. Most importantly, this session will help in the further development of our Food Safety Plan to meet FSMA requirements, as well as creation of tracking protocol and software, and the necessary steps for us to take in our development of cheese not yet available in the US. I cannot stress the value of these one-on-one strategist sessions and highly recommend new startups and existing businesses take advantage of this rare opportunity to pick the brains of these experienced minds in a confidential setting.

Throughout the remainder of the conference, I crammed in as many technical workshops as possible, leaning heavily towards classes that will best guide us in our facility design and construction ("Developing a Sanitary Facility" and "From Pure Physics to Art" on proper aging space construction and conditions, taught by Neville McNaughton of CheezSorce), as well as classes included this year as part of the Safe Cheesemaking Series. Specifically, Dr. D'Amico from the University of Connecticut gave an impressive talk on "Pathogen Behavior in Cheese" which included an in-depth look at scientific analyses testing the efficacy of the generic 60-day rule, and which was followed by a session on "Product Sampling, Testing, and Environmental Monitoring" by Dr. Bukowski of Cornell. In conjunction with the panel discussion in "The L World: Listeria", it became apparent the previous attitude of fear was changing from "Listeria shouldn't be in your environment, so don't find it!" to "It's there, so seek, destroy, and prevent it from reoccurring."

In addition to the technical lectures, I was also able to sign up for a coveted spot in a tasting class, taught by sensory expert and Chief Judge of the Australian Dairy Awards, Russell Smith. Smith discussed the science behind taste, and attendees discovered their own individual thresholds for tasting salt, sweet, sour, bitter, and umami, as well as their ability to distinguish differing flavors in a blind taste test setting.

It was explained how these differences influence our food preferences and affect taste perceptions when judging cheeses.

Aside from the workshop sessions, presentations by several keynote speakers dotted the program. The first full day of the conference started with an opening session keynote by Ari Weinzweig of Zingerman's, who explored how beliefs have a major impact on the culture and attitudes of those around us. The following morning, Frank Yiannas, Head of Walmart Food Safety and Arkansas resident, gave a presentation on how changing behavior is the core of creating an environmental and culture of food safety. However, the most anticipated of these was the FDA update, given by Dr. Beru, CFSA Director of the Office of Food Safety. The FDA presentation included a briefing on FSMA, and an update on the FDA's continued review of the formerly mandated (and then paused) Non-toxicogenic E.Coli levels in cheese, as well as their ongoing analysis of the 60-day aging rule for raw milk cheeses.

The highlight of the conference was, of course, the Awards Ceremony and Festival of Cheese. At the awards ceremony, cheesemakers grouped together by geographic region. As there were no other Arkansas cheesemakers, North Carolina and Georgia cheesemakers gladly adopted me to share in the excitement. Despite not having cheeses of my own entered for judging, it was a thrill to wait breathless and hear the winners of each category. The environment was not of heated competition but an opportunity to cheer -- for the underdogs, for our favorites, for the newcomers, for our region, for our friends, for the industry leaders -- and to celebrate in all the hard work that went into their efforts.

And then to taste them! Aye-yih-yih! With reportedly more than 1,800 entries, it would be impossible to taste every award-winner, or even those entered into a single category. I gave it an honest try though, focusing on the feta and blue cheeses tables, followed by smear ripened cheeses, bloomy rinds, and (after the crowd has disbursed around it) ending with the Best In Show winner: Roelli Cheese Company's "Little Mountain". And of course, I giddily crammed my tote bag full at the Festival Cheese Shop alongside other fromage fans from both the industry and the Des Moines community. (I only regretted it ever-so-slightly when the Des Moines TSA insisted on swabbing every surface of every one of those cheeses....)

Even after the last "official" event was complete, the cheese-chat continued as new friends and compatriots reflected on the 2016 conference, shared our favorite sessions, pondered if and when we would take the CCP exam, and started to anticipate next year's event. With so many excellent session topics for cheesemakers, it was truly difficult to decide on which was most impactful (and I look forward to watching the remaining classes recorded by ACS to see what I missed!) Others reflected their wishes for a more retail-focused track, so we brainstormed session topics to propose for 2017 ACS in Denver. There was no hesitation, no pondering of "should we go?"

To those cheesemakers who may be weighing the costs and considering attending – I can attest the benefits are immediately apparent and every minute is worthwhile. Nowhere else is there such a concentration of knowledge, technical assistance, varied perspectives, experienced minds, and helpful souls in the industry.

Lastly, I give my truest and sincerest thanks to the ACS scholarship committee for believing that Sweet Freedom was worth the investment. Attending the conference was invaluable to us as a startup, as I take the gained knowledge, resources, and strengthened connections back to Arkansas with me. The experience will make me a better educator and a stronger cheesemaker; save us money in the long run as we build our company; aid us in following the successes (and avoiding pitfalls) from the shared experiences of others; as well as help us create a better, safer facility.