

Sam Frank – ACS Post-Conference Essay 2016

I arrived in Des Moines for the 2016 American Cheese Society Conference on Wednesday afternoon. Coincidentally, I shared a shuttle with two other New Yorkers in cheese I'd never met before, one of which was fellow scholarship recipient, Jessica Affatato of the Village Cheese Shop in Mattituck, Long Island. This perfectly foreshadowed my entire ACS experience; my first time being so deeply and continuously immersed within the community of the American artisan cheese industry.

After I'd checked into the hotel, I headed up to the Iowa Events Center to register for the conference and already began to run into cheesemaker acquaintances from other states. I then headed over to the Cheese Shop of Des Moines where owner CJ Bienert was hosting an ACS block party. I met esteemed Wisconsin cheesemaker Willi Lehner and heard a little bit about his experiences with rubbing earth onto his cheeses. I also met Sarah Furno, one of the owners of Cashel Farmhouse Cheesemakers in Ireland and learned about her challenges of exporting her sheep's milk blue cheese, Crozier Blue, to the United States. I returned to the Convention Center for the First Time Attendee Reception. That was a great experience of seeing a lot of familiar friends and making new acquaintances, such as the herd manager for Old Chatham Shepherding Company, whom we work closely with at Crown Finish Caves.

I began Thursday with an amazing breakfast provided by the Vermont Cheese Council and heard Ari Weinswieg of Zingerman's speak for my first time. He was an inspiring business leader to listen to. I think the Zingerman's model and their success is incredibly inspiring, and I would love to imagine that working in the cheese industry across the country could fit into the picture Ari paints. I attended the session "Retelling the History of Quebec Through Cheese." One of my greatest interests in cheese is the history and anthropology behind it, and as a typical American, I know very little about the history of Canada, making this session especially enlightening. After that was the Annual Business Meeting Lunch and Iowa Cheese Caucus. It was a pretty significant part of my ACS experience, as that was where I was announced as an ACS Scholarship recipient, as well as the 2016 Daphne Zepos Teaching Award recipient. I even took a photo with a giant check, a real once in a lifetime experience off the bucket list. That afternoon, I attended a Scholar-in-Residence appointment with Dr. Mark Johnson of the Wisconsin Center for Dairy Research. He and I spent the majority of our time discussing undesirable flavors due to histamine-producing bacteria in grass fed, raw milk cheeses, as well as the best methods to prevent contamination and growth of *listeria monocytogenes*. After having a meeting with Rachel Juhl to discuss the logistics of receiving the DZTA, we headed to Meet the Cheesemaker. It was very humbling to see so many incredibly cheesemakers in one room and to be able to talk to them around the cheeses they made. Too many great people to name. I ended the night with an informal and very enjoyable DZTA party. This was also an incredibly humbling experience to receive so much support from people I know and respect, as well as people I had only just met.

I began the day on Friday with an amazing session: Sheep Milk, Sheep Cheese, and Thistle Rennet. Dr. Mariana Marques de Almeida gave a very informative presentation on the production of traditional cheeses of the Iberian Peninsula. The production of torta-style cheese is so different from every other cheese style I'm familiar with. I was able to speak with her one-on-one immediately following her talk, and she showed a lot of enthusiasm for my DZTA vision. She is going to connect me with producers in Spain and Portugal to visit and learn from during my trip. That afternoon was the *riveting* FDA update. It was pretty satisfying to find out that the FDA's own research found that raw milk cheese production in the United States is not so

surprisingly very safe and clean. That afternoon I listened to a talk about designing the ideal cheese aging environment, which is rather relevant to my job at Crown Finish Caves to say the least. It's always good to hear another perspective, as the cave design they were promoting was much different than that of CFC. That night was the ACS Competition Awards Ceremony. Crown Finish Caves took home two second place ribbons! One for Bandaged Goat, a goats milk cheddar produced by Montchevre that we bind in cloth and rub with lard and age about six months. The other was for Gatekeeper, a soft ripened cheese made from sheeps milk, cows milk, and cream at Old Chatham Shepherding Company that we age for 2-3 weeks.

First thing Saturday morning I checked out the Des Moines Farmers Market with my good friend, Vito Forte, who makes cheese at Meadow Creek Dairy. We were both incredibly impressed with the scale of that farmers market. I have never seen anything like it. Hundreds of vendors and thousands of visitors. The Union Square Saturday farmers market doesn't begin to compare. Good start to the day! I followed that with a Sensory 101 tasting session, arguably the most informative session I attended at ACS. I feel strongly that I need to pay more attention to my palate, and this session helped me better understand how to identify the different flavors on my tongue. This is a pretty good step in the direction of palate development for me, to say the least. The brunch later provided a mind blowing sampling of the country's best fresh, cultured dairy products. I especially enjoyed an award winning butter made in my home state of Washington by Cherry Valley Dairy that I was not familiar with before. That afternoon I took a fermentation workshop with one of my heroes and fermentation revivalist, Sandor Katz. I really appreciate how he plays down rigid structure in home fermentation, a concept that's hard for a lot of cheesemakers to jump on board with. My last session was perhaps my favorite. It was delivered by the 2015 DZTA recipient, Tom Perry, and it was pretty fascinating. He cohesively conveyed the history and usage of starter cultures in cheesemaking and how it changed over time into the modern commercial cultures we predominantly use today. He also highlighted the work of certain American producers that are striving for American, native-microbe-driven cheesemaking. I now have some seriously big shoes to fill. I describe the Festival of Cheese as the most overwhelming experience of my life. Being in a room with every cheese entry for the 2016 ACS Competition is pretty awe inspiring. If only one could be hungry forever in that room. It's simply physically not possible to taste everything you want to taste. I believe my favorite cheese I tasted that night was Bleating Heart Dairy's Ewelicious Blue.

On Sunday, I concluded my ACS experience by running in the DZTA 5k fundraiser. We were the last ones standing at ACS. That was a great way to finish my first ACS; experiencing everyone coming together and having a good time to promote stronger cheese education for the industry. Overall, I was incredibly blown away by the spirit of the American Cheese Society and the experience I had. Nothing is comparable. I am so grateful to be a part of such a great and interesting community and a flourishing and innovative industry.