

# An Industry Game Changer



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**C**heesemongers are a passionate group, particularly the newest and youngest. The passion is visible in their work behind the counter as well as in the cheese tattoos on their bodies. Their passion is essential to an industry the National Association for the Specialty Food Trade (NASFT) rates as the largest single sector in the specialty food business, representing some \$3.44 billion annually in the U.S.

That passion can now be tapped; the American Cheese Society (ACS) just launched its Certified Cheese Professional Exam, an industry standard

bound to have a long-term, positive impact. Candidates who earn the ACS Certified Cheese Professional designation will have demonstrated a basic level of mastery in all domains of the industry, from raw materials through make processes, affinage, distribution, marketing, sales, regulations, nutrition, and sanitation.

The program creation process has been long; the concept was launched at the 2004 conference in Louisville, KY, when Kathy Guidi and Laurie Greenberg posited the industry needed a program akin to sommelier certification programs. Some 35 participants brainstormed and formed a planning group on the spot.

The first efforts were dedicated to research and discussion. It became clear that since ACS is the national representative body for the North American specialty cheese industry, it has the authority to offer a certification that would be recognized across the industry. By creating the certification exam, ACS would open up large opportunities for growth for its membership, particularly in the area of professional development and education.

Its principal sources of information about cheese have been the Internet, books, and learning-by-doing. In this year leading up to the first exam, candidates have formed study groups, independently and within companies. Precious few professional training programs are available in North America, and those concentrate heavily on tasting cheese, which is fundamental, but resources to train professionals in the business aspects, marketing, regulatory requirements, and best practices in sanitation are scarce. The ACS Certification Committee developed a panoply of resources for exam preparation: a bibliography that reflects many of the source documents used in developing the exam questions, a searchable database of existing training programs in North America, a handbook and webinars for exam takers, and a Body of Knowledge (BOK) document. All are available on the ACS website ([www.cheesesociety.org/events-education/certification-2/](http://www.cheesesociety.org/events-education/certification-2/)). Once candidates have passed the exam, their contact information will be posted on a searchable database on the ACS website so employers can find them.

The BOK is an outline covering 12 domains of the

industry: raw materials; cheese make processes; affinage; cheese types and categories; assessment and evaluation; storage and handling; transport and distribution; marketing/merchandising/selling; service; nutrition; and regulations and regulators. Much of what it contains is on the exam, but the two are entirely separate entities with separate sets of contributors. The BOK will continue to grow, with industry experts developing content and all new content subject to peer review. As content is developed, it will feed ACS's educational programming — webinars, conference seminar sessions and the like. The exam program will provide ACS with statistical feedback to help evaluate areas of weakness that can then be addressed.

The exam program and BOK were developed under the guidance of Knapp International, certification industry consultants with more than 30 years' experience. Under their tutelage, teams of industry experts surveyed the industry; wrote the BOK; drew up exam specifications; established candidate eligibility

requirements; developed governance structure; wrote exam questions; documented and referenced the questions; reviewed and edited the questions; reviewed the exam itself, the applications and appeals from rejected applicants; established an ACS Code of Professional Conduct; outlined recertification requirements; and set the passing score. Over 100 industry peers contributed their time and expertise to this program over the past eight years.

Response from the industry has been impressive. Nearly 200 people applied to take the exam, which topped out at 150 candidates weeks before the application deadline, and people have already been approved for the 2013 exam. A number of major industry players are sending candidates, including Whole Foods, DCI Specialty Foods, and Atlanta Foods International. The domestic sponsors contributing to the initial development are Emmi/Roth Käse USA, Affinage, Atlanta Foods, DPI, Rogue Creamery, Dairy Connection, Artisanal Premium Cheese, Beehive Cheese, The Cheese School of San Francisco, DiBruno Bros., Formaticum, Larkin, and Vermont Butter & Cheese Creamery; the international sponsors are KerryGold, Mons Fromagerie, and the Cheeses of France Marketing Council.

What will the future bring? In the near term, likely an increased level of expertise; more consistent information and education about fine cheeses for the consumer; more consistent and higher quality care for cheeses at every point on the supply chain; a greater level of authority and respect accorded to ACS when it weighs in with regulators; and vastly expanded career opportunities for cheese professionals. In the long term, who knows? Perhaps cheesemaker certification, higher levels of certification or some model of more specialized certification. The future is unknowable, but it looks promising.

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