

certifiable expertise

Cheesemongers deserve professional status

BY SUSAN STURMAN

When presented with the complex aromas and stunning visuals of a great cheese shop, most of us are either delighted and intrigued or confused and overwhelmed. Regardless of the reaction, we need help and that's where the cheesemonger enters the picture.

The cheesemonger's role is to guide us along our journey, providing insight and information about the cheeses — where they come from, what they're made of, how to pair them, serve them, store them. "The cheesemongers are the window into the world of cheese," says cheesemaker Pat Ford, co-owner of Beehive Cheese, Uintah, Utah. "They're the storytellers. They advise on the perfect cheese for a special event."



ACS committee members meeting to work on the exam

PHOTO BY SUSAN STURMAN

Cheesemongers need to know much more than that, though. They must know how to select and judge the quality and readiness of the cheeses, how to care for them both in storage and in the case, how to properly cut and wrap them, and they must know their clientele well enough to serve their needs by providing the right cheeses at the right price, all while managing the business end of things. And that's not all: Cheesemongers must understand the temperature, aging, and sanitation requirements imposed on them by governmental regulators, often three or four levels of regulation.

According to Cathy Strange, Whole Foods global cheese buyer, "The role of dedicated, product-specific experts has been respected for centuries in the traditional shops in France and Europe. The expansion of food culture and the knowledge that the individuals who represent focus areas bring to us as consumers is irreplaceable. The connection to our food, where it originates, what it should taste like, how to take care of the products and finally how to use the product take on new meanings. It's a journey facilitated via a cheese professional. A person with the expertise to represent

the land, the animal, the producer and the cheese who will share the experience of food is essential. In a world where general skills have been celebrated, we now are experiencing an evolution where specific skills and talents are being honored. The recognition of these talents assures that the knowledge, experience and skills will continue to be cultivated and celebrated."

With all that on the agenda, there must be some great professional certification program for cheesemongers, right? Well, until this year, the answer would be no.

The American Cheese Society (ACS), Denver, Colo., premiered its Certified Cheese Professional Exam at its conference this past August in Raleigh, N.C. The first-of-its-kind exam offers professional certification intended to raise the level of expertise and service provided to both the extraordinary cheeses we are now seeing and the folks who love them. For the past eight years a team of dedicated ACS volunteers has worked closely with credentialing industry consultants to construct the program. Inspired by the qualifications available to professional sommeliers, the ACS program has been tailored specifically for cheese professionals.

Dr. Frank Kosikowski of Cornell University founded the ACS in 1983 as a national grassroots organization for cheese appreciation and for home and farm cheesemaking. Since then, the organization has grown to over 1500 members made up of artisan cheesemakers large and small, retailers, distributors, brokers, dairy suppliers, chefs and foodservice personnel, government agencies, academics, importers/exporters, writers, raw materials suppliers, and cheese enthusiasts.

The ACS has a long history of setting standards, beginning at its third annual conference in 1985 when it held its first cheese Competition and Judging. That year, thirty cheesemakers entered eighty-nine cheeses in seven categories. At the 2012 conference, 254 cheesemakers entered 1,711 cheeses in 107 categories!



*Top to bottom:
Luan Schooler of Foster & Dobbs, Portland, Ore., photo by Peter Benke
Cheesemongers at Metropolitan Market in Kirkland, Wash., photo courtesy of Metropolitan Markets
Anne Saxelby of Saxelby Cheese in New York City, photo by Susie Wysbak
Brad, Carol and Brian Wasik of Wasik's The Cheese Shop in Wellesley, Mass., photo by Jan Fialkova*

The cheesemongers on this page did not necessarily take the exam. They're pictured here to show the diversity, enthusiasm and passion of today's cheese professionals.

The cheese industry is the single fastest growing sector of the specialty food market, driven in tandem by the excellence of the products that our artisan cheesemakers are creating and the increasing sophistication and passion — as readers of this magazine know — of the American consumer.

"Cheese is an incredibly complex, intriguing and satisfying food," says Christine Hyatt, former ACS president. "The Certified Cheese Professional (CCP) designation represents a high level of understanding of all aspects of cheese from pasture to plate. Individuals who have passed the exam are uniquely qualified to serve as guides to the world of great cheese for both customers and colleagues behind the counter, ensuring a high quality cheese experience."

Making sure that each cheese remains in prime condition from the time it leaves the creamery to the time it's served on a plate is no easy matter, and the financial losses incurred by spoiled product are considerable. Poor quality cheeses instantly turn off any discerning consumer.

"As a cheesemaker I need to make the best product I can and then trust the cheesemongers," explains Ford. "The more trained and professional they are, the more complete the experience. Thus the CCP program. One of our challenges as a cheesemaker is we get a cheesemonger who is doing a great job for us but who then moves on. With the help of the CCP program, I'd like to see those cheese professionals make a good enough living so they can make a career of it and stick around for a long time."

the exam

The exam covers the gamut and includes raw ingredients and cheese make processes, storing and handling, selecting distributors, marketing and communication, nutrition, regulations and sanitation. A candidate must have at least 2,000 hours experience working with cheese to qualify to sit the exam. Passing the exam certifies the candidate has a breadth and depth of knowledge sufficient to work in any domain of the industry, thus





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ACS BEST IN SHOW

At the 29th annual American Cheese Society Judging and Competition, held in August in Raleigh, N.C., the cheeses that garnered the top spots were:

Best in Show

Flagsheep, a clothbound Cheddar made from sheep and cow milk by Beecher's Handmade Cheese, Seattle, Wash.

2nd place

Crema de Blue, a cave-aged Blue made from sheep and cow milk by Valley Shepherd Creamery in Long Valley, N.J.

3rd place

Roth Grand Cru Surchoix, an extra aged Gruyère-style made from cow milk by Emmi Roth USA, Monroe, Wisc.

assuring consumers of his or her comprehensive knowledge.

Over 100 industry peers have contributed their time and expertise to this program over the past eight years. Setting its own standards is a bold step. "Offering the first Certified Cheese Professional Exam is a major milestone for ACS and the cheese industry," says Hyatt. "It signals a level of maturity in our industry and a desire to acknowledge the skills and professionalism of those who work with cheese throughout the supply chain. It also represents the collective vision and hard work of many in our industry to see this through to fruition — something to celebrate, indeed!" The ACS is supporting cheese professionals preparing for the exam by providing webinars, educational seminars at its annual conference, and a wide range of resources on its website, including a searchable database of cheese education programs across North America.

Cheese professionals across the

country have formed study groups to share their expertise, and not a few nailshave been bitten in anticipation of this new challenge. Nearly 200 people applied for the 150 seats available in the 2012 exam, and candidates came from as far as Australia to take it. A major supporter and participant in the program is Whole Foods. "Whole Foods Market and its team members support the recognition of the cheese professional," says Strange. "We're proud to participate as American Cheese Society members and appreciate the status this qualification brings to our stores".

what does it mean?

For cheese professionals, the CCP credential will open pathways to a bona fide career. Greg O'Neill, ACS president and co-owner of Chicago's Pastoral Artisan Cheese, Bread & Wine, which won the 2012 Specialty Food Retailer of the Year Award, points out, "Certification is going to be a big help

in recruiting employees, as more and more cheese retailers and other industry players will view it as a 'mark of approval' when filling key roles.

In an economy where one receives literally hundreds of resumes when posting a job online, the value of a CCP makes a candidate stand out and also speaks to the amount of training we will need to provide and perhaps whether one can come in at a more senior position than we might normally be willing to start an unproven individual. I have a senior manager who really wants to take it. I view the exam — and us paying for it — as a retention tool as well."

[EDITOR'S NOTE: See *Pastoral Artisan Cheese, Bread & Wine* on page 22.]

For cheese retailers, there is the recognition that ACS CCPs have demonstrated comprehension of all aspects of the business and their commitment to professional development. "One reason it's important is because certified cheese professionals around the country are 'speaking' the same language," says Emilio Mignucci of DiBruno Brothers

in Philadelphia. Retailers "will be much more credible if aligned with this program. It also helps to know that if you're hiring this certified individual you'll be getting all of the skills needed to operate a full-scale cheese program from soup to nuts. The second reason is you'll have someone on staff who can train incoming cheesemonger wannabes to solidify your team as your business grows." ACS Certification must be renewed every three years, by demonstrating a strong commitment to continued professional development and service to the industry.

For the cheese industry as a whole and particularly for the ACS in its role as advocate for farmstead, artisan, and small-scale cheesemakers as they work with regulators, the program is a positive. "Regulators are generally very happy when industries take a proactive approach to setting standards and education," says Marianne Smukowski, dairy safety applications coordinator at Wisconsin's Center for Dairy Research. "The dairy industry has always been very proactive in ensuring that we

produce safe and wholesome products, and in educating ourselves and the public. This certification program from the ACS is another example of that continuing effort."

What does this mean for you as a consumer? Watch for the ACS Certified Cheese Professional logo to appear in the window of your local cheese shop. It will give you confidence that inside you'll find a wonderful array of delectable products and a cheesemonger who has the knowledge you expect. "We're excited to have two of our key staff taking the inaugural exam and we have others queuing up for 2013!" says O'Neill. "Our staff views the certification exam as a way to prove they have the 'chops' in an industry where it has, to this point, been difficult to quantify. In the event they pass the exam and receive the certification, we will certainly tout it both internally and externally."

This expertise, extending from the raw ingredients to the consumers, will ensure the best possible care for artisanal cheeses and the people who love them. **CC**

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