

What Happens Before the Cheese Hits the Table

The American Cheese Society Judging & Competition is both a technical evaluation and an aesthetic celebration of American-made cheeses and cultured dairy products. Held over two intensive days each May at Huntington Bank Stadium on the University of Minnesota's Minneapolis campus, the event represents the culmination of a year's worth of work for cheesemakers across the country.

In 2025, **1,592 cheeses and cultured dairy products** were entered across **123 categories**, with **407 medals awarded**. But long before judges take their seats and the first cheese is cut, an enormous amount of preparation happens quietly—and meticulously—behind the scenes.

What unfolds in the days leading up to judging is an intricate, highly choreographed effort involving dozens of trained volunteers and ACS staff members, all working together to ensure that every entry is treated with fairness, care, and respect.

The Cheese Arrives

In the days leading up to judging, delivery trucks arrive steadily throughout the day, each one filled with carefully packed boxes destined for the competition floor. Hundreds of shipments must be received, unloaded, and processed—often within tight delivery windows—to ensure product integrity is maintained.

And yes: **so much cardboard. So many ice packs.**

Behind the humor lies a serious responsibility. Every box represents someone's craft, their milk, their aging rooms, their risks, and their pride.

Check-In, Inspection, and Triage

Once a shipment arrives, it enters a controlled and organized intake process. Volunteers check in each entry, confirming paperwork and logging the cheese into our ACS entry tracking system.

From there, each cheese undergoes a visual inspection. Volunteers carefully assess packaging and condition, record the cheese's temperature upon arrival, and note any irregularities or concerns.

If something appears outside acceptable parameters, the entry is routed to a **triage station**, where experienced staff evaluate whether it can safely and fairly proceed to judging. This step is essential to maintaining both food safety standards and the integrity of the competition.

Throughout the process, **sanitation and temperature control are paramount**. Gloves are changed frequently, surfaces are sanitized, and cheeses remain in cold storage whenever possible.

Anonymity and Organization at Scale

Once cleared, each cheese is assigned a **coded entry number**, removing all identifying information to ensure a blind judging process. Judges never know who made the cheese, where it's from, or how large the producer might be.

From there, cheeses are sorted onto racks corresponding to their specific judging categories. In 2025, that meant **123 speed racks**, each representing a subcategory.

This organization allows cheeses to move swiftly and seamlessly from cold storage to a temping area and finally to judging tables when called. When judging begins, the right cheeses appear at exactly the right moment, in exactly the right order. No small feat at this scale.

A Collective Act of Respect

By the time judges take their first bites, each cheese has already passed through dozens of careful hands. The logistics, coordination, and physical labor required to make Judging & Competition run smoothly are nothing short of extraordinary.

It is all done with one shared goal: **to honor the work of American cheesemakers** by ensuring every entry is handled with care, fairness, and professionalism.

Before the ribbons, before the score sheets, before the applause, there is cardboard, ice packs, clipboards, speed racks, and a small army of volunteers working behind the scenes so that, when the cheese finally hits the table, it can truly shine.