

After an eight year break from working in cheese, I was a little nervous stepping into the Des Moines convention center early Monday morning as my first day as an OCC (Official Conference Cheesemonger) for the 2023 annual American Cheese Society conference. I was scared that I would be too rusty. I was worried that I wouldn't know anyone. I was still frazzled and underslept from the previous week's mayhem of the fourth of July. I entered the almost empty and frightfully quiet convention center with the map pulled up on my phone and stepped onto the escalator that took me down to a large area that would be transformed into our receiving and prep area. I was greeted by a man singing, "Welcome to the Dungeon!!!" in a pretty good Axl Rose- *'Welcome to the Jungle'* shrill. That was Jake, the inventory manager, and I immediately let out a sigh that felt like 20 pounds of nervous energy lifted off of my shoulders. I jumped right into receiving boxes of cheese and unloading them. We sat down as a team and mapped out our week. The team really put the 'official' in the OCC when we were issued our walkie talkies and embroidered chef jackets. From then on, the week was a whirlwind of up and down stairs, in and out of tasting sessions, "roger that", "over and out", and all the adrenaline fueled long days and early mornings.

Without being there, It's hard to fully capture the feeling and energy of being an OCC at conference. It's like being a cheesemonger, event planner, caterer, coach (and referee), and air traffic controller all at once. For those who have had experience catering large events, you catch my drift..

What really meant the world to me was meeting so many people and the feeling of inclusion. No one got upset when I mistook 'Mt Tam' for 'Red Hawk' on a tasting plate or when I cut into a Franklin Teleme too soon before the tasting session. We all worked together to pivot and problem solve. What memorable sessions and cheese experiences there were that year! Most notable were a session on rare Mexican cheeses and this cheese called 'Bolo de Ocosingo', a session called 'Mocktails and Cheese' where I led a team to pour about 800 mini mixed drinks to pair with cheeses, and 'Cheese R and D' where we broke 8 different cheesemakers into stations for a sort of speed dating style presentations and feedback on their newest creations. At the end of a long day when the last sheet pan was washed (and sanitized), The last box was broken down, and the last missing cracker component for the next day's session was located and marked, we unbuttoned the top button of our chef jackets, clicked off our walkie talkies, pounded the last of our Diet Cokes, and shared many laughs about the day and what the next day looked like.

Two years later and I have the privilege of being here, writing this little anecdote and helping to inspire and lead this coming year's OCC team. I also was brave and joined a conference committee and am excited for a few other initiatives and events during the conference. Wow.. What a journey it has been and will continue to be. Every year there is an exciting line up of events and cheese experiences and I can't wait to see what Louisville has in store for us!

So if you haven't caught on by now, well here's your push to apply to be an Official Conference Cheesemonger in 2026 in Louisville, Kentucky! The deadline to apply is coming up! January 8th! What barriers are stopping you from applying?

Q: Not sure you have the experience?

A: You do. And you will have 2 other OCC and a kick a@\* back of the house team to help and support you. Apply.

Q: Not sure your manager will be onboard with you taking the time off and write you that letter of recommendation?

A: You will be representing your place of work and most managers would be thrilled to see your enthusiasm to learn and grow in the industry. Start with a brief email to your manager and ask to follow up in person.

Q: Not sure if you can afford the time off or not able to have paid vacation time for the time away?

A: I get it. While this role pays for your way there, hotel, and some meals, not everyone has the luxury of paid time off. Again, I encourage you to speak to your manager about this concern if they are supportive of you applying.

Q: Shy?

A: I am a shy person, and this industry and especially this opportunity has been the springboard for me becoming more socially outgoing and confident in the cheese world and the food industry as a whole. The friends and connections I made and continue to make and nurture each year are mind boggling to me. Cheese people are hardworking, kind people, and know how to have fun (duh).

Q: Don't have enough time to breathe during the busy holiDAZE let alone sit down at the computer to put together the application?

A: I get that too! Carve out the time, however late at night or early in the morning. Pop on your favorite tunes (or meditation), grab a refreshing beverage (hydration is important, right??), and reflect after that you put yourself out there and continue to grow.

Apply, share this article, and encourage others to apply as well. If you need any other advice, have any questions, or would like more quirky anecdotes, I'm here for that too:

[banachaustin@gmail.com](mailto:banachaustin@gmail.com). Happiest of holidays and I hope to see you in Louisville!