

A working day...

Michael Landis of Food & Beverage Educational Services

Q. What in your background prepared you for your current role?

There is no straight line taking me to where I am today as a cheese educator and judge. I spent four years in the US Marine Corps in Italy, where I began understanding more about food and wines. I worked in many different industries, including recreational diving, photography and food and beverage. The structure and organisational skills I acquired as a young marine, a strong natural curiosity and a desire to have fun brought me to where I am today. Of course, the fact that I love to teach doesn't hurt either.

Q. Why did you decide to get into this area?

Getting a cheese on a menu, in stores and in the mouths of consumers is paramount when you are promoting a brand. Early on, I was involved in writing recipes, working with chefs who used my products and attending consumer shows sampling my products. I always loved learning about characteristics of the cheeses, so pairing them with beverages was a natural progression. What I couldn't have foreseen was the explosion in artisan cheeses as well as craft beers, ciders and wines. People are interested in discovering these new culinary avenues and I get excited at how instrumental my education is in expanding people's horizons.

Q. How do you think the US cheese market is evolving?

The growth of speciality cheese in the US is amazing. There are new cheeses made based on old recipes, where the local terroir takes over and a brand new cheese is born. There are several factors contributing to this growth. American consumers are now excited about the higher quality and uniqueness of cheeses.

Another factor is the growth of craft breweries in the US. Just a few years ago there were about 500 breweries and today there's over 6,000. The small, hand-crafted element and higher quality at a premium price are aspects of the craft beer world that fit with the direction that American artisan cheese makers are going.

Q. How has your job changed over the past few years and why?

Teaching cheese and pairings has become easier now than it was in the past. About 15 years ago, I was introducing an expensive Italian washed rind cheese to a class and one of the deli managers said they couldn't sell this cheese in their store. Today, that very cheese is in just about every deli around the country, and they don't have trouble selling a \$9 piece of cheese. What I hear today is: can I get that cheese in my deli? It's about customer education and a willingness to pay a premium price for a premium cheese that made the change.

Q. What has been the most interesting thing you've encountered when cheese judging?

I've been judging cheese for 10 years and the quality and diversity of cheeses have dramatically changed for the better.



This year at the International Cheese Awards in Nantwich, they created a US category. The judges were thrilled at the high quality and flavours they encountered with these cheeses, and American cheese makers took home 45 medals and four trophies for their cheeses this year.

Q. What do you consider your greatest challenge/achievement?

As much as the American artisan cheeses are gaining in popularity, there are still customers that are afraid of aromatic cheeses or cheeses with mould. I use a mild Limburger in my "Introduction to Cheese" courses so students can taste a mild washed rind cheese. I still have students that will not try it, even when people around them in the class tell them it tastes like toast with butter on it. They just can't get past the aroma. Getting people to expand their horizons is my greatest challenge.

On the other hand, helping people discover a great cheese or cheese pairing for themselves is a very rewarding achievement. I also really loved being the American Ambassador for North American Cheeses this year at the International Cheese Awards in Nantwich. Representing the brand new USA Category of Cheese at such a storied institution is an honour. Being asked on the Supreme Judging panel at International Cheese Awards was a milestone, to say the least.

Q. What does a typical day look like for you?

A typical day of teaching cheese starts with the idea that each cheese has a story. We experience a specific set of flavours and characteristics, we learn about the influences of terroir and milk, and we learn about the process of making the cheese. That's what we do all day – discover cheeses. The best part is helping people discover flavours and descriptors for each cheese and creating a vocabulary for them to use to help a customer find the best cheese for them.

Q. Outside of work, what are your hobbies/interests?

Scuba diving is one of my favourite activities. I also enjoy hiking. I also have two golden retriever rescue dogs at home that have an insatiable appetite for swimming. **Dii**