

11 Medals for the U.S. at First Jersey Cheese Awards

One hundred cheeses, from ten countries, all made from the milk of one breed of dairy cow—the Jersey.

Thirty-one of them came from 10 producers here in the United States. And when the judging was completed at the inaugural World Jersey Cheese Awards, May 23 in Trinity, Jersey, 11 medals—including two coveted Golds signifying “faultless” cheeses—plus three Best in Class awards had been awarded to U.S. cheesemakers John Miller, Steve Ballard and his son Travis, Marisa Hilardes Simoes, Chris Gray and Peter Dixon, Sam Hendren, and Lori Sollenberger.

The World Jersey Cheese Awards were an unqualified success. It was sponsored by the World Jersey Cattle Bureau, with administrative support from the Royal Jersey Agricultural & Horticultural Society and funded by a grant from States of Jersey Tourism.

The claim that this was the first and only competition featuring cheeses made from the milk of one breed—the Jersey—was uncontested.

As hoped for by its planners, the World Jersey Cheese Awards brought long-overdue attention to the versatility of Jersey milk for producing all manners of exquisite cheeses, while at the same time recognizing the skills and artistry of farmstead and artisanal cheesemakers from around the world.

A total of 39 medals—10 Gold, 11 Silver, 18 Bronze—were awarded. Entries from eight of the 10 countries represented received medals: Jersey, 14; United States of America, 11; United Kingdom, 5; Australia, 2; Holland, 2; France, 2; Canada, 2; and Sweden, 1.

“The standard was exceptional,” said head judge Christine Ashby, an independent consultant to the industry from Great Britain whose experience as a judge in national and international competitions

dates back nearly 15 years.

“It’s just as good as any cheese show I’ve ever judged at before,” Ashby continued. “The medal winners, particularly the Gold Medal winners, are true gold medal



winners. They would win gold medals anywhere.”

Judged Supreme among the 10 Gold Medal winners was Olde Remeker, made by Jan Dirk and Irene van de Voort of the Netherlands. Their 100% Jersey milk, organic farmstead cheese is acquiring an almost legendary reputation among foodies. It is marketed in the United States through an exclusive agreement with Zingerman’s of Ann Arbor, Mich.

For head judge Chris Ashby, Olde Remeker was “a true supreme. It’s a cheese that makes you go weak at the knees.”

The award for Best Use of the Jersey Brand went to Jersey Dairy for its graphically distinct labels and marketing materials, built on the unique selling proposition, “Only Jersey Dairy [product type] is made from pure Jersey Milk and Jersey Cream, from Jersey Cows in Jersey.” Jersey Dairy is owned by the Jersey Milk Mar-

keting Board, a cooperative of the Island’s dairy farmers which has been in existence since 1954.

What It Took To Be A Winner

Only one of the 16 judges—Chris Ashby herself—was qualified as an expert in the objective evaluation of cheeses. For the other 15 people participating in the judging, and a handful of observers from Colombia, Jersey and Canada, Ashby presented a master class on the morning of May 23.

Rating cheeses is not simply answering the question, “Does it taste good?” All human senses—sight, smell, taste, feel and, occasionally, hearing—are applied to answer two questions: “Is the cheese made well? What are its faults?”

When the style is known, for example Cheddar or Gouda, one must “judge to the specifications of the style,” Ashby said. “What is good cheese of *this* type?”

Scoring standards were established as a maximum of 10 points for general appearance,



Four judges, each considering a different aspect of the cheese under evaluation, from left to right, general appearance, the aroma, flavor, and body and texture. Sixteen judges were assembled for the competition, among them the Michelin-starred chefs Andrew Baird and Shaun Rankin.

15 points to the cheese’s body and texture, and 25 points for its aroma, flavor and balance. Cheeses earning 46 to 50 points, practically “faultless,” would be awarded Gold Medals. Scores of 41 to 45 points qualified for Silver Medals, cheeses that are “excellent, but not quite at their peak.” Bronze Medals were presented to cheeses with scores between 36 and 40 points. Judges were instructed to award as many, or as few medals in a class as appropriate

Even so, judging cheese has a degree of the subjective, Ashby implied, when she advised the judges to ask themselves, “Is

it something that inspires people?

“This is a journey of discovery for all of us.”

What It Meant To Be A Winner

To win a medal, or a Best in Class award in this first of its kind event was, in a word, “fantastic.”

Eamon Fenlon, Managing Director at Jersey Dairy said, “It is fantastic to win a prize. We were overwhelmed, we were really delighted. And it’s a great way to kick off a cheese. Imagine going to retailers with a new cheese and saying, well, we’ve just won an award with it before we even get it into the market, so it’s fantastic.”

John Miller, the Massachusetts cheesemaker who won two Gold Medals with Jersey Maid Neige en Ete (“Snow in Summer”) and Jersey Maid Fromage Frais, said, “I was absolutely blown away to hear the news of the medals.

“I have been making cheese for six years now, and commercially for four. Most of my cheeses are

French-inspired from my 10 years of living in Quebec and studying with a couple on the north shore of the St. Lawrence River just outside of Montreal. The best advice I had in becoming a cheesemaker is to follow my passion in cheese and to make the styles that I like myself. The Jersey milk and cream and French inspiration seem to work for me.”

“We are just thrilled about this,” said Chris Gray, one of the cheesemakers at Consider Bardwell Farm. The Vermont operation is far better known for its goat milk cheeses (*chevres*). The World Jersey Cheese Awards brought the operation a Best in Class award for Dorset, made in the off-season from Jersey milk purchased from Lisa Kaimen at Jersey Girls Farm in

BEHIND THE SCENES ON THE DAY OF JUDGMENT



Jersey Maid Neige en Ete, one of two Gold Medal winners for John Miller, The Farmstead at Mine Brook



Best in Class and Silver Medal winner, Jersey Dream, for Steve Ballard, Ballard Jersey Dairy & Cheese



Best in Class and Bronze Medal winner, Dorset, for Chris Gray and Peter Dixon, Consider Bardwell Farm



Best in Class and Silver Medal winner, Serenita, for Marisa Simoes, Three Sisters Farmstead Cheese

Chester, Vt. Dorset explores new territory in Jersey milk cheeses, being influenced by soft-ripened French cheeses like St. Nectaire, Raclette and Reblochon. But it its rich, buttery texture is its own, because it is made with Jersey milk.

Today was really a great eye-opener. I never realized there was such a variety of Jersey cheeses. The quality was superb. Out of the 25 cheeses that I tasted, I would be happy to have as many as 10 on the Longueville Manor cheese board.”

World Jersey Cheese Awards judge Andrew Baird, Michelin-starred Head Chef at Longueville Manor, St. Saviour

Pennsylvania’s Lori Sollenberger won a Bronze Medal with her Hidden Hills Boltenfeta, a Greek-style feta made from whole raw milk and aged four to six months in a light brine. “Critical feedback is sometimes hard to get with the cheese. I

really don’t know what makes our feta different, but we get comments all the time at the farmers’ market and from wholesale buyers about how different and special it is. I wish I did know so that I don’t inadvertently change something!”

“So I thought any judges’ comments would be helpful in my cheesemaking. It sounded like a good project, showcased the Jersey breed and I was hoping for some good feedback and, of course, advertising if I won anything.”

Sam Hendren of Clover Mead Farm in New York, said that he was “somewhat surprised” at the Bronze Medal won for his Champlain Valley Couronne. “We are a seasonal dairy and the contest came at a time when we were scraping the bottom of last year’s production and this year’s cheese was not yet ready for the world. The Champlain Valley Couronne we sent was down to the last few wheels, and I had trouble finding one that I thought actually represented the cheese well.

“We only entered because of the support the US Jersey organizations exhibited. With what I know of your association, I believe I should have expected no less than your full, enthusiastic support of our work and others like us.”

The future of the World Jersey Cheese Awards?

When asked his opinion after the awards were announced May 24, David Chamberlain, president of the American Jersey Cattle Association said, “I think this is just the beginning. I can think that next time there will be double or triple the entries. I think this is a wonderful forum and we’ll see this grow immensely.”