

Alex Armstrong
DZTA Vision 2023

I am walking back to my hotel after a long, arduous yet delicious day of evaluating cheese at this year's ACS Judging and Competition. I am amazed at the quality of cheese being made today and how far many producers have come since I started in cheese back in 2013. I reach into my pocket and find a tiny morsel I saved from the best cheese of the day: Alpha Tolman from Jasper Hill Farm. Twenty years of trapping sunlight underground in a matrix of lipid and protein has been manifested into a complex symphony: caramelized pineapple topped with toasted hazelnuts; beef shank with brown butter; fried onions and dried alfalfa, all supported by a long and smooth texture dappled with tyrosine. *Incredible*. I would say I was surprised had it not been for the last 10 years of sensory education which has brought not only this cheese but all American cheeses to a whole new level. I am humbled, reminded of how my journey in sensory evaluation began at Jasper Hill Farm almost 15 years ago and how my experience as a DZTA scholar inspired my work in promoting and developing sensory education in the U.S. and abroad.

Back then, I had been a sensory evaluator and educator with Jasper Hill Farm, working diligently to create and promote a program to better understand the quality of our cheese and improve the efficacy of our work throughout the supply chain. For me, sensory analysis – the deliberate examination of cheese through taste, touch, smell, sight and hearing– had become an invaluable tool for informing our work and helping us make decisions that supported our community, improved cheese quality and created the very identity Jasper Hill is known for.

Many industry professionals have contributed to our working knowledge of sensory analysis, but historically, our community consciousness around these practices has felt in some ways disjointed or isolated. While there is an argument to be made around proprietary practices, so too is there an argument for coming together to share knowledge and elevate the quality and standards of cheese as a whole. They say a rising tide raises all boats, and by the same token, an empowered cheese community makes better cheese. As a sensory evaluator myself, I could think of no better way to bridge the gap between communities than through sensory education.

Whether studying cheese microbiomes, heritage breeds, or diversified feeds and pasture lands, it comes down to whether or not we can assess each of these qualities in the cheese itself. How do we know that the cultures we add to the vat are developing a desirable aroma or are even present after ripening? How do we know that grass-fed milk really makes better cheese? It is fundamentally the question of "how do we know" that gets answered by and through sensory analysis.

For my DZTA project, I wanted to learn how different cheesemaking communities use sensory analysis, and about how their methods and practices developed through the generations. I was curious how I might adapt what I learned to create resources and educational opportunities to help industry professionals here in the US. Moreover, I needed to learn how these different cheese producers had integrated and used sensory analysis to preserve traditions, develop best practices and use their sensory lexicon and language to communicate to the world what makes their cheese so important.

Using the 2023 DZTA scholarship, I traveled to the Alps to some of the oldest cheesemaking communities in Europe where I focused on one of the oldest cheesemaking traditions in Switzerland: Gruyère. I partnered with Columbia Cheese, and connected with experts Guy Arpin of Fromagerie Le Cret and Caroline Hotstetler of La Gruyère AOP. Our journey took us from Geneva to Gruyère where we drove alongside Lac Léman to the home of Le Gruyère AOP 1655: Fromage Gruyère S.A. I chose to explore Fromage Gruyère SA precisely because these master refiners have been aging cheese at the heart of Gruyère for over 100 years and have preserved a tradition of selection for almost 1000 years.

I came to fully understand the intrinsic traditions based in sensory analysis through grading and selecting for Le Gruyère AOP 1655 with Guy and the affinage team. Equipped with years of practice and distinct culture around a singular profile, affineurs are able to carefully discern the subtle characteristics and qualities that allow for a cheese to age to full maturity and become a true expression of Gruyère. You can literally taste the connection between a long standing heritage of high quality pastured milk, expertise in the creamery and careful selection through the affineur. The result is a masterpiece of flavor indexed to the people, place and history of an entire agricultural community and tradition in Gruyère and it is through their continued practice in sensory evaluation and education that they are able to preserve this tradition and support their community.

From Switzerland, I continued my journey in the sensory realm and made my way by train to France where I reunited with Jules Mons. Jules and I had the opportunity to work together in affinage at the Cellars during 2020 and have been colleagues ever since. Under his tutelage, I participated in the Mons Formation course work and got a behind-the-scenes look at developing curriculums around cheese education. Specifically, the Mons Formation had been incredibly successful in creating international curricula with corresponding international professionals to create a strong foundation of education for professionals around the world. While they have many courses on all aspects of cheese, I focused on sensory evaluation specifically to learn how to teach about the organoleptic qualities and tools for evaluation important to the cheese industry.

Having learned about singular style from Gruyère and how to develop a meaningful curriculum, I decided to finish my project by learning about the praxis of sensory analysis which can truly be found only at Neal's Yard Dairy. I made my way through the Chunnel to the UK, meeting Yvonne and the team at NYD who were just about to embark on the Northern Run. For me, NYD is the epitome of sensory evaluation in practice but also the best example of how sensory evaluation as a whole can be used to support an industry, create a community and revive traditions. While on the Northern Run, I learned about the deep and intrinsic relationship between producer and affineur where both establish the identity of their cheese through grading and selection. Together they are oriented towards understanding their quality as it expresses the terroir and work of the cheesemaker and builds upon the foundation of British Territorial cheeses. Their work has not only protected the communities of British cheesemakers but also saved cheeses, traditions and communities from being lost forever. This was all made possible by their collective commitment to quality through the lens of sensory analysis and continues their progress toward protecting and improving these cheeses.

Learning these historical methods of sensory analysis helped me in my journey to being

a sensory evaluator in countless ways. I was able to use what I learned to create a robust curriculum consisting of both virtual and in situ tastings, grading rubrics and lexicons, calibration seminars and producer lectures for cheesemakers in the US to learn about methods of sensory evaluation. This set of tools, now coined the DZTA Sensory Toolkit, has helped both large and small farmstead cheesemakers establish a unique sensory program tailored to their own traditions and practices and helped integrate sensory analysis into their business and to the industry as a whole. Likewise, we have a dedicated curriculum on sensory analysis training in partnership with the Mons Formation, the Academy of Cheese and the newly formed Daphne Zepos Teaching Academy.

Through these trainings and in implementing this toolkit, we have made efforts to create a global vocabulary and set of standards that have effectively raised the quality of cheese worldwide and helped propel the cheese industry into a new era of efficacy, quality and sustainability. Together we have created an accessible and robust training program to help both beginner and veteran cheesemakers protect and preserve a vast working agricultural landscape and bring the quality of all cheese to the most delicious the world has ever seen. For a community that has changed my life, I am honored to have the opportunity to contribute what I have learned and continue to work to support cheese professionals all over the world. Cheese is life and it is only after tasting it do we truly understand why it is a life worth living.