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Next Generation of Artisan Cheesemakers Learn the Craft at Sixth Annual Cal Poly Farmstead Cheese Course

SAN LUIS OBISPO – It's the cheese – and more – that brought 37 successful people from nine states to Cal Poly in early October, looking to make a life change for the sake of a good Asagio or Gouda.

The sixth annual Farmstead Cheesemaking short course at Cal Poly Sept. 28-Oct. 1 brought together doctors, lawyers, actors, writers, engineers, computer scientists, chefs, and dairy producers for hands-on instruction in artisan cheesemaking and agriculture business success.

What they all had in common, said Dairy Science professor and short course instructor Phil Tong, is a passion for high-quality hand-crafted products; a taste for the challenges and rewards of start-up entrepreneurship; a desire to find a new career path; and, of course, a love of good cheese.

Tong and the faculty and staff of Cal Poly's Dairy Products Technology Center spent four days with the group, teaching them the science behind artisan cheese making.

“Interests in hand-crafting a high quality food product in the fashion of artisan cheesemakers of the world are attracting a more diverse range of people with a wide range of skills and talents into the craft,” Tong said. “This diversity brings new expertise and business savvy that can only be good for the artisan cheese sector of California's agricultural economy – it's really burgeoning.”

Cheese as a consumer good continues to be on a steady growth trend. Nationally, per capita consumption in the U.S. has grown steadily at the rate of 2 to 4 percent per year over the last 10 years. Today consumers eat approximately 31 pounds of cheese per person every year, according to Laurie Jacobson, outreach coordinator at Cal Poly's DPTC.

“That may sound like a lot, but the per capita consumption of cheese in some European countries is over 50 pounds per year,” Jacobson said. Just 10 years ago, California produced 281 million pounds of cheese; today California cheese makers produce 1.7 billion pounds of cheese – a 500 percent increase in the state's cheese production over one decade.

A recent study commissioned by the California Milk Advisory Board suggests that California cheese production could grow to 2.55 billion pounds per year by 2012. “It's a foregone conclusion that California will surpass Wisconsin in total cheese production and take over as the Number 1 cheese producing state in the United States in the few years,” Tong said.

Why all the interest in cheese? As more people select cheese as part of their regular diet they seek out more cheese varieties, Tong said. “Increasingly there is significant sales growth in many specialty cheeses – Gorgonzola, Brie, Parmesan, Fontina, Asiago,” Tong said.

“Exposure to dining through increased American travel abroad is also introducing many people to the literally hundreds of cheeses made around the world,” Tong added.

In addition, the emergence of the “cheese course” as part of fine dining in many upscale U.S. metropolitan restaurants is educating people on the world of cheese, Tong said.

These activities are also being positively reinforced by the increased availability and quality of American Artisan cheeses, he added.

Cal Poly’s College of Agriculture and its Dairy Products Technology Center are playing a vital role in educating those wanting to go into the artisan cheese industry in California, Tong said.

Over the past six years, more than 200 people have attended the Cal Poly farmstead cheese short course. Some of the biggest names in California’s artisan cheese industry started learning about their craft at Cal Poly, including:

- Sadie Kendall, "Grandmother" of California crème fraiche, Dairy Science grad, Kendall Farms, Atascadero;
- Albert Straus, Dairy Science grad, Straus Family Creamery, Marin County (www.strausmilk.com);
- Maureen Cunnie, cheese maker; Cal Poly Farmstead cheese course grad, Cowgirl Creamery, Marin County (www.cowgirlcreamery.com);
- Lynn Giacomini Stray, Cal Poly Farmstead Cheese short course grad, Pt. Reyes Farmstead Cheese, Marin County (www.pointreyescheese.com);
- John Fiscalini, Cal Poly Farmstead Cheese short course grad; Fiscalini Farms, Modesto (www.fiscalinifarms.com);
- John Fagundes, Dairy Science grad, Fagundes Old-World Cheese Company, Hanford (<http://oldworldcheese.com/>).

“When we read about our alumni from this class winning awards for their cheeses, or we see their cheeses selling in specialty food stores or served in fine restaurants, it makes us all feel good,” Tong said.

For details on this and other short courses in Dairy Science at Cal Poly, visit: www.calpoly.edu/~dptc.

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Editors please note: color photos of the recent short course, including lab activities, cheesemaking, cheeses, and an end-of-course cheese tasting are available. To receive jpgs via e-mail, contact Teresa Hendrix at (805) 756-7266 or thendrix@calpoly.edu.