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LIFE | FOOD & DRINK

The Pinnacle of Cheesemongering. Seriously.

Competition aims to help make cheese the new 'it' foodie category



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Neal Kennedy's creation for the 'Perfect Bite' competition at the Cheesemonger Invitational is made with French Chabichou du Poitou goat cheese dipped in Valrhona 68% dark chocolate and coated with Effie's oat cakes. STEVE REMICH ...



By CHARLES PASSY

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New York has more than its share of corporate, political and civic leaders. But it can rightfully claim only one “big cheese.”

And, no, it isn't Mayor [Bill de Blasio](#).

Last weekend, it was Nick Bayne, a 30-year-old Astoria resident who took top honors in the 2015 Cheesemonger Invitational. The New York-based competition, first held in 2010, pits those who make cheese their life's work against one another in a sometimes geeky skills contest.

The goal of the event, say organizers and participants: to celebrate one of the world's oldest and most revered foodstuffs, especially as cheese vies to become the next “it” foodie category, the 2015 equivalent of, say, wine, craft beer or gourmet coffee.

A key way the event promotes cheese is by elevating the art of cheesemongering, a job that is part caretaker, part educator and part impresario. (It has nothing to do with actually making cheese.)

“We're trying to give these people rock-star status,” said Invitational founder Adam Moskowitz, a New York cheese importer and hip-hop fanatic who emceed last Saturday night's invitational finals with the flash and brio of a club DJ.

Only in this case, the “club” was a cold-storage facility in Long Island City owned by Mr. Moskowitz. And the “clubgoers” were 53 competing cheesemongers representing several states, along with several hundred cheese enthusiasts, who paid \$75 apiece to watch the proceedings and feast on an all-you-can-eat spread ranging from the classic (Parmigiano-Reggiano) to the rarer (Stichelton, an English blue).

Mr. Bayne, who works at the Bedford Cheese Shop, a gourmet emporium with locations in Brooklyn and Manhattan, got ahead of the pack early with his highly rated entry in the “perfect bite” test—essentially, a challenge to create a palate-pleasing, cheese-based appetizer for the judging panel of cheese professionals. Attendees got to taste them too.

Mr. Bayne's offering featured a 12-month-aged Gruyère—“a really versatile cheese,” he said—atop a savory-spiced shortbread cookie, accompanied by a pear-and-anise jam and pickled cherry.

But competition was fierce among the cheesemongers, who showcased their skills as if participating in some kind of alternative-universe beauty contest. One contestant's "perfect bite" candidate boasted Chabichou (a French goat cheese) dipped in Valrhona 68% dark chocolate, coated with Effie's Oatcakes.

Another's entry was described as Marin French Schloss (a washed-rind cheese) dressed up with a savory-sweet combination of "house-made malted-hazelnut oatcake, coconut-milk dulce de leche, black-cherry confit and crispy jamón serrano," a dry-cured Spanish ham.

There was even a public-speaking portion in the finals of the competition, which involved delivering a minute-long monologue about a favorite cheese.

James Gentry, a competitor from New Orleans, championed an artisanal Italian provolone that he said far outclassed the supermarket variety: "This provolone will rock your (expletive deleted) world."

For his part, Mr. Bayne waxed poetic on a fairly obscure Spanish cheese, Torta de Barros, throwing in historical references to the Franco regime and comparing its unctuous, creamy texture to a pudding.

Beyond their speechifying abilities, finalists were also judged on how well they could slice cheese, wrap cheese and pair it with beer.

Mr. Bayne caught the crowd's attention for bringing together Sixpoint Brewery's Bengali, a hoppy, made-in-Brooklyn brew, with a rich, California triple-cream cheese.

"The hops cut nicely through the butterfat," he said after the event.

Victory came with a \$1,000 cash prize, a high-end cheese knife and a paid vacation to visit cheesemakers in the U.S. But like his fellow cheesemongers, Mr. Bayne played down the one-upmanship aspect of the event, seeing it instead as an opportunity for cheese geeks to build community.

Cheesemongers may not have the recognition that baristas or sommeliers do just yet, Mr. Bayne said, but he believes their day will soon come, because of the crucial role they play as educators.

“We’re on the leading edge of the food revolution,” he said. “We’re able to make people think about cheese in ways they never were before.”

There is no disputing that cheese is gaining in popularity. In 2014, Americans consumed \$3.7 billion in gourmet cheese and cheese products, an 8% increase since 2012, according to the Specialty Food Association, an industry trade group.

In New York, several cheese-centric stores have opened in recent years—including Milk & Hops in Manhattan and Campbell Cheese & Grocery in Williamsburg—and proprietors take pride in being the first to offer certain harder-to-procure cheeses.

But product knowledge was only one of the skills being tested at the Cheesemonger Invitational.

Joe Green, a competitor from the Grafton Village Cheese retail store in Brattleboro, Vt., said he got unexpectedly tripped up in the slicing challenge: Competitors had to cut cheese so the wedges would fall within a prescribed weight range. Mr. Green said he had difficulty eyeballing the cheese correctly, and tended to overcut.

Mr. Green’s final takeaway from the invitational: “I think I need new eyeglasses.”