

A person wearing a blue denim jacket is working in a barn. The person is bent over, and a large bale of hay is visible on their back. The barn has wooden walls and a corrugated metal roof. The scene is lit with warm, natural light.

A GLOBAL
AMTBAS



SADOR

MEET INTERNATIONALLY RENOWNED
WHOLE FOODS' CATHY STRANGE

BY KAREN SILVERSTON

CATHY STRANGE STOOD TALL in the procession of dignitaries. Cloaked and clad in kindred hats, they waited to descend the mezzanine staircase. At the foot of the stairs, cheesemakers, mongers, retailers, and distributors breezed into the elegant room in celebratory anticipation. Sunlight beamed through stained glass family crests set into tall windows illuminating the gilded ceiling, marble floor and an immense sideboard laden with cheese. The crowd hushed as a chime signaled the start of the induction ceremony in Providence, RI, for La Guilde Internationale des Fromagers — La Confrérie de Saint-Uguzon.

President of the New World chapter and also an Ambassadeur for La Guilde, Strange was inducted not quite twenty years ago in a ceremony at the French Embassy in San Francisco. “It was like Knights of the Templar — I didn’t know what was happening. It was pretty wonderful.”

She’s global senior coordinator of cheese and specialty, including charcuterie — “We’re the vice squad” — for Whole Foods Market. She actively nurtures trade organizations: the American Cheese Society, the Oldways Cheese Coalition, Cheese of Choice Coalition, Cheese Importers Association, International Association of Culinary Professionals, Slow Food USA, and Les Dames d’Escoffier.

The American Cheese Society Lifetime Achievement Award (2015), the Republic of France Ordre du Mérite Agricole (2014), and the Consortium of Parmigiano Reggiano Coltellino D’Oro (2014) are prestigious recognitions of how she’s helped the industry.

Strange travels about fifty percent of her time and what she does reflects the personalities of millions of people. She’s proud of her work. She’s an icon and rock star in the cheese world. But talk with her and you’ll hear her fervent appreciation of others.



"It's important to me to say how much I honor all the people who contribute to cheese. I am very proud of what cheesemakers have done. There are also really dedicated cheese professionals who don't get as much recognition. Anyone who wants to take up a role and be a contributor means something to me."

CHEESE CONNOISSEUR: How did you become aware of the guild?

CATHY STRANGE: I was sponsored by one of my contacts that lives in France — Antoine Marsot, who represents very small producers. You have to be sponsored by somebody. It is an honor.

CC: How has the guild grown?

CS: Pierre Androuët started it in 1969 for the respect of cheese — to honor individuals involved in cheese and to connect people in the community. Roland Barthélemy was a good friend of Pierre Androuët and took up the reins. I learn from him every time I see him. It's become extraordinary. It's in 43 countries. Everyone honored by it is deserving.

CC: You just returned from travel — what was the highlight?

CS: Seeing Alpage Le Gruyère made over an open fire. It was near Vaud, at Esserts du Lieu in the Vallée de Joux. I felt taken back in time. It made me feel proud that cheese made for hundreds of years from raw milk right out of the cows is still honored and recognized. There are people who've been in our industry for 30 years who haven't seen that. The sterility of what we do sometimes inhibits. It was a visceral thing smelling the smoke and seeing the copper vat.

CC: You've long been respected as a cheese judge, domestically and internationally. What's your favorite part of judging?

CS: For me it's the pleasure of getting experience with cheeses I may not have seen and the ability to judge with other critical thinkers who may have a skill set different from mine.

CC: When did you first judge?

CS: Probably twenty-plus years ago at the ACS, a wonderful experience. I've always advocated for having an aesthetic and technical judge, because coming from the retail environment, the aesthetic judge is able to point out flavors that appeal to a customer. Many contests do it very differently. Each stays true to its own metrics.



*I AM
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CC: How do you maintain your skills?

CS: My benchmark is the same — I get to judge during the year with cheese graders, just to make sure that we're on the same wavelength, so I understand how they're evaluating the product.

CC: There's a unique Zen in the judging room — how do you stay centered?

CS: The day I'm judging, I don't follow a normal eating pattern. I don't have coffee or have anything that would throw my palate off. I'm very conscious of what that does.

I spend time thinking about the cheeses. I understand how many I have, understand myself and whoever my partner is, and how much time we have to complete the task. I give all the products even time and try to be very methodical.

CC: Do you prefer your own knives?

CS: I bring the appropriate knives — never my full set. I have quite a few for different style cheeses. I'm really careful because they're sentimental, and they're expensive. The knives the Neal's Yard Dairy team gave me decades ago, from my very first foray into specialty cheeses, were the first I judged with, and really special to me.

CC: How did you enter the food world?

CS: I was living in Tennessee, and moved back to North Carolina to be closer to my mother when she got sick. A friend who played on college teams I played on had a friend who happened to be managing a restaurant in Durham. She said, "Why don't you just come and work with us?" When I got there, I fell in love with the food and with the people.

CC: You've no trace of an accent — how are you connected to the South?

CS: I'm very in touch with that part of the country. I was born in Brooklyn but the South is where I lived my young and adult

life. I majored in education at University of North Carolina in Greensboro. At Florida State University, when I worked as a physical trainer — the conditioning coach for the tennis team — we were in a league with Tulane. That's when I discovered New Orleans food. Then I worked at University of Tennessee at Martin. I love Southern foods, so I'm glad there's an appreciation in the U.S. for Southern foods right now.

CC: Were you always hooked on sports?

CS: I loved athletics so much and I still do. In high school we had only golf and tennis, so I decided on tennis. In college, I played basketball four years, volleyball three years, tennis one year, and



softball one year. I also played All-State in softball and basketball. When I was training with a professional basketball team, I played exhibition games until I got injured.

CC: What did you do at the restaurant?

CS: Anything and everything. The owner was the chef. I started doing the salads. You do the dishes, the salads, you assist, and you do anything that's needed. I worked my way into cooking, then front of the house, and ended up managing the wine list and the wine selections. I learned the respect for raw ingredients and what they bring to every dish.

CC: How did that affect your life?

CS: My passion and lifelong friendships evolved. I really credit the people I met in the restaurant. My mother was not happy that I left working at a university and went to work in food. Though in the end, both my parents said the food business reflected my personality and they were very happy it was such a good fit for me.

CC: How did you get into cheese?

CS: Through my restaurant experience, respecting every product, I learned about cheese. I have a personal quest for education and I had the advantage of discovering the possibilities of food without being directed. Food is a series of

experiences that I get to integrate into my own personality. That's a key thing, because you and I could experience the same thing but incorporate it into our being differently.

After the restaurant was sold, one of my best friends, Mary Booth, steered me to the wine department at Wellspring Grocery, a specialty store in the North Carolina Research Triangle Park area. We had a really sophisticated cheese selection. We supported the best products in the world, more like an old-fashioned Dean and DeLuca or Balducci's as they were — Zingerman's would also be close in terms of quality.

I was in the second store in Chapel Hill, N.C. In the same year, 1991, Whole Foods Market acquired Wellspring. That was the best thing that ever stumbled into my life other than working in the restaurant.



CC: How did your early experiences influence the way you work?

CS: In training for athletics, you're regimented in your schedule and in the ability that you're expected to perform, and there is the camaraderie of a team environment. Being in the restaurant developed the same skills. Regimentation and deadlines around different activities are what you face in retail — and that was the nature of those early experiences of performing one service. Working with people, you try to partner to move to common goals.

Cheese Memories Light The Corner Of Her Mind

Everyone who has a relationship with cheese remembers isolated travel moments that are milestones — like a first date, according to Cathy Strange. She recounts five such moments:

1 *Where:* Paris
What: Pierre Androuët's cheese shop
Why: Entering an environment with the cheese as a dedicated vision changed me. It opened my eyes to the level of appreciation other cultures have for the product.

2 *Where:* Jura Mountains, in France
What: The first time I went to a Comté maturation cellar — the Fort des Rousses.
Why: You're surrounded by all this deliciousness and how beautiful it is on the side of the French Alps.

3 *Where:* Italy
What: Just seeing, for the first time, Parmigiano-Reggiano made. Two very body-builder-type guys hand lifting hundreds of pounds of curd.
Why: Knowing it had been done that way for thousands of years. I'm a history buff, too, so I thought about what was that like 500 years ago. The family had that cheese on their table. Their cows were a half-mile away.

4 *Where:* Roanne, France
What: Dinner at Troisgros. I went with two people much more foodie than I am. We were all so excited. It was pretty incredible to be at the table. Michel [Troisgros] went to school with Hervé Mons.
Why: Their cheese cart was like heaven, everything delicious, and overwhelming after an amazing meal. I felt I couldn't have another bite of cheese. We waited, and then couldn't resist another bite. It was out of this world — a grand slam.

5 *Where:* On a mountain in Spain in the middle of nowhere
What: All the cheese was in a cave and so were the bottles.
Why: It was a real cave. The bottles had labels that were handwritten. Some were a hundred years old.

Through that, everyone learns. I hope that's a reflection of some of the things I learned from my father: try to be as nice and kind as possible to people. If people respect you, that begins a good relationship.

CC: Your family is very proud of your father.

CS: My dad was a pretty dynamic man. He was in the army in Special Forces, part of the very first Project Delta. He was very proud of that and so were we. His success enlisting in the military at age sixteen and working his way up to Lieutenant Colonel is unheard of. It taught me at an early age that you can do anything.

CC: In a world that's predominately men, how did you develop your self-confidence? In 2014, when you were awarded the Golden Knife, you were the first woman — and non-Italian — to receive it.

CS: I think you can't get caught up that something is all men, and just balance that with the awareness that you have something to contribute. The physical skills and mental acuity developed in athletics helped build confidence. When I came up, NCAA was basically only men. Now it's different, one of the greatest evolutions that we have lived through. I'm really proud women are being supported at the level they are. Everyone will have bumps in the road. But you just have to understand small things. If there's a roadblock, climb over, go around or get under it rather than beating your head. Understand the power of education, collaboration and advice of people who know more than you. Decide how you want to address it and enlist others so there's a shared effort.

CC: How do you entertain at home?

CS: I always have cheese at home. It's expected but that's not why I do it. I do it because I love it. I always balance it by the seasons, the weather, and what's tasting good right now. I like to have a combination, minimally three cheeses, sometimes a few more. When I entertain, I try to bring not exactly what they like, but something close to what they like, and maybe a little different. I do it all. I love making salads. I like the plates and silverware to be cold. I clean as I go. By the end, the kitchen is pretty clean. I like doing little tastes and I serve cheese at the beginning, throughout the meal and at the end.

CC: Do you have a signature dish?

CS: Two! I do really good pastas — I worked in an Italian restaurant. I buy things that look good that day, and any combination of things in the refrigerator can inspire me. I can make a fresh tomato sauce. I'll also do a pasta with porcinis or chanterelles. Also, I'm really good at fajitas and my nieces say I make the best guacamole. I do a dry-rubbed meat that I use for fajitas.

CC: Any myths you'd like to dispel?

CS: The myth that raw milk cheese is dangerous. It is healthy, supports our immune systems, it's delicious, and



complex. The caveat is any food in any environment has to be made in a safe way. There are products much more dangerous out there than cheese. Any product — cheese or other food — not produced in a safe environment is dangerous. For me, respect for the process starts with making sure the animals are raised in healthy environments, and transporting milk in a thoughtful way. As a matter of fact, cheese should be considered a saint, given it has supported us for thousands of years.

CC: How can we maintain tradition in the face of continuous change?

CS: To respect that change is a good thing and not to fight it is a way to look at and manage that. History has a lot of great things it can share with us, and also in history we can see our shortcomings. Those who succeed have the ability to understand and manage things from the past with a vision of making things better in the future.

It wasn't always better in the past. The quality of our milk is much cleaner, the knowledge of the cheesemaker much higher. They're microbiologists, very smart, for example, in controlling the temperature in maturation, in the environment. They bridge the gap in how to use new systems to support traditional methodology. Just because it's old doesn't mean it's great; just because it's new doesn't mean it's good. It's how they integrate those things.

CC: Is there a disappeared cheese you'd like to see brought back?

CS: I have my endangered species list. You think because you see a cheese, the makers are able to make a livelihood. The reality is many of these are endangered and we need to keep up our awareness and support for these cheeses. Laguiole, for one — is truly delicious. Salers is super-endangered. People don't remember that Lancashire was on the brink of disappearing. Crocodile Tears is endangered — it is very hard for Judy [Schad, cheesemaker and owner of Capriole in Greenville, IN] and her team to produce by hand. Raw milk cheese in general — I'm putting all raw milk cheeses in that endangered list. **CC**