MAKERS AND MONGERS

Inside the minds (and rinds) of the cheese world's brightest

An award-winning young cheesemonger builds bridges in the global cheese community

By Christina Paschen

MADISON, Wis. — Hanna Lee recently was named Young Cheesemonger of the Year at the 2025 World Cheese Awards in Bern, Switzerland, becoming the first American to earn the title. Her experience across cheesemaking, retail and artisan product curation gives her a perspective grounded in both craft and communication.

Lee's career began much like a cheese starter — small, intentional and full of potential. Her animal science studies at Oregon State University introduced her to dairy animals. After graduating in 2018, a six-month cheesemaking job in upstate New York added depth. And when she stepped behind the counter at Whole Foods Market in 2019, those early steps began to ferment into a passion for artisan cheese.

"Starting on the cheesemaking side of the industry allowed me to build a connection between the land and the animals and the finished cheese," she says.

Her previous cheesemaking experience also showed her "how much labor and passion went into the finished product," inspiring her to support the industry on the retail side and "be a conduit between food production and people's plates."

As she developed behind the counter, Lee also began testing her skills on the competition stage. She earned second place twice at the Cheesemonger Invitational in 2023 and 2025, a prominent cheesemonger competition in the United States — achievements that helped broaden her network and deepen her industry exposure.

Her second place in 2023 led to an invitation from Dairy Farmers of Wisconsin (DFW) to visit the state and learn more about its cheesemaking culture. During the trip, Lee toured dairies and met cheesemakers, gaining firsthand insight into Wisconsin's farmstead traditions and production philosophies. It was during this visit that she first met Andy Hatch, proprietor and Master Cheesemaker at Uplands Cheese in Dodgeville, Wisconsin, whose cheeses she had sold and loved for years already. In 2024 Lee reached out to Hatch hoping to work in the aging caves.

Photo by Christina Paschen/Cheese Market News

FROM CAVE TO COUNTER – Hanna Lee slices Pleasant Ridge Reserve at Uplands Cheese in Dodgeville, Wisconsin, where she spent two seasons aging cheese and deepening her connection to regenerative farmstead production.

Photo by Christina Paschen/Cheese Market News

READING THE CHEESE – Lee displays the interior of Pleasant Ridge Reserve at Uplands Cheese in Dodgeville, Wisconsin, highlighting the natural lines that develop during production and aging.

"This was a way for me to reconnect to the production side of the cheese world where I started and gain more knowledge of the land stewardship and regenerative grazing strategy they follow at Uplands," she says.

She was brought on to the seasonal team that fall to help with the production of Rush Creek Reserve, a limited-,release seasonal cheese made at Uplands.

Her curiosity and competitive experience continued to shape her growth. In this year's Young Cheesemonger of the Year contest, she says the pairing round was the most challenging.

"We had very specific parameters to work in," she says of selecting one ingredient to pair with a provided cheese and cracker.

Looking for something unexpected, she chose Trader Joe's cookie butter.

"The creamy texture played with the dense fudgy body of the Stilton, and the spices shone more than the sweetness," she says. "Judges called the pairing 'genius, unexpected and perfectly balanced.' "

Educational tools like DFW's Cheese State University also have strengthened Lee's foundation.

"It is really great to have a centrally located site with fact-checked information to point new mongers to for bulking up their education," she says, noting that the resource also helps experienced mongers confirm and expand their knowledge.

Lee values the balance of tradition and innovation that defines much of American artisan cheesemaking.

"Traditional cheesemaking techniques are definitely very important for the industry," she says. "However, something fun about working in the United States is that our cheesemakers have the freedom to tweak the recipes and create something new that celebrates their milk in new and interesting ways."

She points to cheeses like Uplands' Pleasant Ridge Reserve as examples of alpine-inspired methods adapted to local terroir.

Mentors have been central to her development. She mentions Emilia D'Albero and Courtney Johnson, who represented the United States at the 2025 Mondial du Fromage — often called the Cheesemonger World Cup or the Cheesemonger Olympics — with D'Albero earning the first U.S. gold and Johnson earning bronze for Best Cheesemonger in the World.

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Lee also credits Molly Browne, education director at DFW, as a major role model.

"The way she has built relationships and a network in the cheese community is very inspiring, and I'm learning a lot from her on how to cultivate that side of the industry," Lee says.

Another key mentor for Lee is David Myers, an American Cheese Society Certified Cheese Professional and cheesemonger at Mouse Hole Cheese Shop in Albuquerque, New Mexico. She met Myers when she started working at a small independent cheese counter in Boulder, Colorado in 2022, and though she worked with him for a less than a year, he made a huge impact on her career. Myers encouraged her to pursue competitive cheesemongering.

"My goal is to connect people to where their food comes from and inform their purchasing decisions to support the people who really depend on every customer."

Hannah Lee

"His passion for the cheese and stories of the makers is infectious," she says. "I am constantly trying to reach his level of energy behind the cheese counter."

For new cheesemongers, Lee recommends building confidence through observation.

"Be hungry for knowledge," she says. "I started by shadowing an experienced monger at my first Whole Foods counter in 2019 and listened to how they spoke about the cheese to customers."

Then when she cut cheese for precuts she'd recall the flavors they spoke of when tasting, which helped her connect flavors and descriptions to develop her own lexicon of cheese vocabulary.

"Once you feel comfortable speaking about the cheese on a day-to-day basis, you can start diving into the more technical knowledge," Lee says.

Training programs such as Cheese State University and United Kingdom-based Academy of Cheese can help, she adds.

"The customer thinks you are the expert no matter if it's your first week or 50th week on the job. It's always better to admit if you don't know something than to make it up," Lee says.

Lee is wrapping up two seasons as a cheesemaking assistant at Uplands Cheese, where she has aged cheeses and learned about the farm's regenerative grazing system. Her time there, she says, "reignited my passion for working on the cheese counter and desire to share the stories of cheesemakers with customers so we can all support the hardworking people who make the delicious cheese we love to eat."

She recently returned to her new home of New Mexico and rejoined Myers at the Mouse Hole Cheese Shop, where she hopes to build public education programs and continue meeting cheesemakers across the country and abroad.

"There really is nothing like talking to someone about their craft and seeing firsthand the dedication and skill that turns milk into cheese," she says. "My goal is to connect people to where their food comes from and inform their purchasing decisions to support the people who really depend on every customer."

With hands-on experience, deep curiosity and a commitment to sharing makers' stories, Lee continues to build bridges across the cheese world — from the fields and caves where cheeses are born to the counters where customers discover them. **CMN**

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RECOGNITION ROOTED IN PLACE — Lee holds the trophy she earned at the 2025 World Cheese Awards in one of the aging caves at Uplands Cheese in Dodgeville, Wisconsin.