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U.S. cheesemakers take the world stage

On Oct. 1, the spotlight once again will shine on hundreds of cheeses seeking to be named best in class or, ultimately, best in the world. The 2009 World Cheese Awards are just over two months away, and the Sept. 3 entry deadline for submissions is quickly approaching.

The U.S. Dairy Export Council (USDEC) is a long-time supporter of the World Cheese Awards (even sponsoring a special annual prize for best U.S. cow's milk cheese) and encourages U.S. cheesemakers to take advantage of the opportunity to achieve global recognition.

A strong showing by the United States also enhances the global image of the U.S. dairy industry as a quality supplier, which works hand-in-hand with USDEC's export development efforts, says Angelique Hollister, USDEC marketing director, cheese and manufactured products.

Ten years ago, the U.S. cheese industry was viewed from abroad primarily as a supplier of processed slices for fast-food operations. Europe dominated the specialty cheese buyer's mindset - even for varieties like cheddar, says Hollister. That is no longer the case, and one big reason is the impressive performance of U.S. artisan cheesemakers in the World Cheese Awards.

The prestigious event, held this year in Gran Canaria, one of the largest of the Canary Islands, attracts cheesemakers from all over the world seeking top honors in more than 100 categories. It is the world's biggest international cheese competition and has become a proving ground for U.S. cheese artisans anxious to demonstrate their skills and showcase the depth, breadth and expertise of the U.S. industry.

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Over the past five years, U.S. cheesemakers earned a total of 221 medals at the World Cheese Awards, including 68 golds. Last year, they set new U.S. records for most medals earned (56) and most golds (16).

USDEC invites U.S. cheesemakers to take part in the 2009 World Cheese Awards and drive those records even higher, says Hollister.

Participating in the competition is relatively simple. The entry cost for one cheese is \$65, two cheeses \$55 each, and three cheeses \$41 each.

Conference organizers will coordinate and pay for the cost of shipping cheeses to Gran Canaria. U.S. cheesemakers need only fill out an entry form, pay the entry fee and get the cheese sample to an organizer-appointed consolidator in the United States.

More exposure than ever

This year's World Cheese Awards are expected to draw an even bigger crowd than normal due to two new events being held in tandem with the contest: The World Cheese Congress and the World Cheese Festival.

The Congress focuses on issues that are shaping the future of the global cheese industry. This year's main topic is the implications of the European Union's Protected Designation of Origin scheme for regional cheese varieties. But it also features several speakers addressing the way that world markets for cheese will likely develop over the coming decade, including how best to encourage the next generation to eat cheese and the future of the deli counter.

Speakers include two USDEC consultants: Regi Hise, president of Foodtrends LLC and corporate chef for cheesemaker Roth Käse, and Murayama Shigenobu, chairman of Japan's NPO Cheese Professional Association and professional fromager affineur. Both will also serve as judges for the contest.

The speaker lineup is truly global, with additional presenters from Canada, France, Mexico, South Africa, Switzerland and the UK.

The three-day World Cheese Festival features 150 cheesemakers and suppliers of other fine foods from around the world. USDEC will host a booth at the Festival, which is limited to trade the first two days and open to the public the final day. USDEC is also sponsoring the attendance of two leading cheese buyers from Japan.

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Organizers expect that more than 700 key buyers, retailers, wholesalers, cheesemakers, chefs and trade associations will attend the Awards, Congress and Festival and that more than 10,000 people, counting the general public, will visit the Festival alone.

This is undoubtedly the cheese Olympics, says Bob Farrand, managing director of Britain's Guild of Fine Food, the event organizer. More cheese and more cheese people will be together in a single location than ever before. It's a must-attend event for everyone in the business.

For more information, go to www.finefoodworld.co.uk and click on the World Cheese Awards link. There you can download a list of cheese award classes, an entry brochure, an entry form (or enter online) and other information about the three days of cheese-related activities.

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The U.S. Dairy Export Council (USDEC) is a non-profit, independent membership organization that represents the export trade interests of U.S. milk producers, proprietary processors, dairy cooperatives, and export traders. Its mission is to enhance international demand for U.S. dairy products and assist the industry to increase the volume and value of exports. USDEC accomplishes this through market development programs that build overseas demand for U.S. dairy products, resolving market access barriers and advancing the industry's trade policy goals. USDEC activities are supported by staff in Mexico, Japan, South Korea, China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Southeast Asia, South America, Middle East and Europe.