

MAKERS AND MONGERS

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



Making history: First all-women U.S. team wins medals at Mondial du Fromage competition

By Christina Paschen

MADISON, Wis. — When Team USA stepped onto the stage at the Mondial du Fromage in Tours, France, on Sept. 15, it was more than a medal ceremony — it was a shift.

Emilia D'Albero earned gold and the title of World Champion Cheesemonger — the first American ever to do so — and Courtney Johnson took bronze. Together, they became the first all-women team to represent the United States at what is often called the “Cheese Olympics.”

For an industry that spans farmers, cheesemakers, affineurs, distributors and retailers, their podium finish resonated far beyond the competition floor.

• From deli samples to Lyon cheese plates

For D'Albero, cheese always has been personal.

“Even as a child, cheese was always one of my favorite foods,” she says, recalling deli counter samples and a steady presence of Jarlsberg in the family refrigerator. In middle school, when asked to write about something she thanked God for, she chose cheese.

After graduating college in 2015, she

joined Eataly in New York, first managing culinary events and education before transferring to the cheese counter. What began as curiosity became craft. She studied relentlessly — books, classes, tastings, YouTube tutorials — determined to master the profession.

Her first Cheesemonger Invitational appearance in 2018 sealed it.

“It felt like I had finally found the place where I belonged,” she says. Currently, D'Albero serves as national sales and marketing manager at Formaticum, a U.S.-based supplier of professional-quality cheese paper, packaging and tools designed to protect flavor, texture and shelf life.

Johnson's path began overseas during a vacation to France in 2015. While shopping from small producers at French farmers markets and sharing a cheese platter in Lyon, she experienced cheese as culture and community. Back in Seattle, where she had taken a grocery job for income to support her doctoral studies, she befriended the store's cheesemonger.

“She told me about all of the possibilities of cheese: that you could build community with customers coming in for their daily shopping, that you could



Photo courtesy of culture magazine

MONDIAL MILESTONE — Emilia D'Albero, left, who earned gold, and Courtney Johnson, who earned bronze, pose with their medals at the Mondial du Fromage in Tours, France, September 2025, marking a milestone for the first all-women U.S. team.

become certified and continue learning, and that you could compete in a cheesemonger competition,” Johnson says.

After earning a Ph.D. in German with an emphasis on film and media from the University of California Berkeley, Johnson ultimately traded academia for cheese — drawn by the opportunity to teach and connect through food. That opportunity led to her heading the Washington State Cheesemakers Association from 2020 to 2025, teaching fermentation theory at Seattle Culinary Academy from 2022 to 2025, and to starting and co-owning Street Cheese, a specialty cheese shop in Seattle.

• The road to Tours

Qualifying for the Mondial is its own marathon. Competitors must advance through the Cheesemonger Invitational (CMI) and then the Invitational Masters. From there, the top finishers earn a place in Tours.

D'Albero entered CMI less than a year into her cheesemongering career. She placed second in 2021, won the charcuterie-focused “Meat Me Online” competition, and in 2025 captured first place at Masters — securing her spot on

Team USA.

Johnson competed in CMI three times, placing second in 2020 and 2022, before winning Masters in 2023. She also placed seventh in the world at the 2023 Le Concours Mondial du Meilleur Fromager, giving her valuable international experience heading into Tours.

Preparation for Mondial was exhaustive. For six months, D'Albero built detailed spreadsheets for each of nine challenges: a written test; blind tasting; exact-weight cuts done without a scale; oral presentation where the cheesemonger shares information about their chosen cheese's story and terroir; a creative presentation of a mystery five-cheese plate; a perfect “combination of tastes;” a “cheese transformation” cold dish; a cheese sculpture and a creative presentation of a themed one square meter cheese display using mystery cheeses. She practiced at least two hours daily, often more on weekends.

Johnson invested more than \$5,000 in materials, ingredients and tools, honing skills that extended beyond the counter into pastry work and large-scale display construction.

Turn to *MONDIAL*, next page



Photo courtesy of culture magazine

PRECISION AT WORK — Emilia D'Albero prepares cheese at her station during the Mondial du Fromage, concentrating on every detail.

MAKERS AND MONGERS

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

MONDIAL

Continued from previous page

Starting in November 2024, D'Albero and Johnson were in constant contact — sharing study resources, testing recipes, exchanging feedback and pushing one another forward. They're the first to admit they could not have done all this preparation on their own.

Their training was guided by third-generation cheese importer Adam Moskowitz of Maker and Monger, whose support and years of coaching at Mondial proved invaluable in preparing them for the competition. His company, Maker and Monger, also sponsored D'Albero and Johnson's trip to France to compete — ensuring Team USA could take the world stage. Beyond his mentorship and sponsorship, the U.S. cheese community rallied around Team USA — offering practice space, feedback, financial support and — naturally — plenty of cheese.

"We couldn't have done this alone," D'Albero says. "Our entire U.S. cheese family helped make it possible."

The pair credit much of their success to that collective support, which carried them through long hours of preparation and even into late-night kitchen experiments in France.

Their week in France brought intensity and unexpected lessons — including what D'Albero jokingly calls "CreamGate," as the duo navigated unfamiliar French cream varieties while perfecting recipes in their Airbnb kitchen at 3 a.m.

Through it all, they operated as a unified front.

"We were a team in the truest sense of the word," D'Albero says. "I truly believe our teamwork was the secret ingredient to our success."

• Representation on the world stage

Both women understood the importance of representing the United States in a European competition long dominated by countries with deeper cheese traditions.

"There's an assumption that Americans don't know good cheese or good food in general, so it was an honor to prove on the world stage that American cheesemongers are talented, skilled and creative," D'Albero says.

Johnson echoes that responsibility: Competing internationally meant demonstrating that "our cheese culture is more developed than most assume, and that we really are doing magnificent work with cheese in the U.S.," she says.

Their all-women team finish carried additional meaning.

"While there are a great many talented folks in the cheese industry, having two women on the team and on the podium was a proud moment to show other women at home what they can achieve," Johnson says.

• The missing link in the chain

Across the dairy supply chain, both champions are clear about where cheesemongers fit — and where they too often are overlooked.

"While everyone in the supply chain is important in their own way, cheesemongers are the final link in the chain and ultimately connect customers to the product — the cheese," says D'Albero. "We care for the cheese, share the producers' stories and get the cheese onto the customers' tables."

While cheese experts have existed for centuries in Europe, the formal role of the cheesemonger in the United States is relatively new, emerging alongside the artisan cheese movement in the late 20th century. The American Cheese Society (ACS), founded in 1983, laid early groundwork for professionalization, and the creation of structured certifications like the ACS Certified Cheese Professional in the 2010s helped codify cheesemongering as a recognized craft in the United States. Yet even today, according to D'Albero, U.S. cheesemongers often are underappreciated, underpaid and their skills undervalued — despite the technical, artistic and educational demands of the job.

Both women emphasize that supporting cheesemongers requires intention across the supply chain. Producers can empower them by sharing more of their story — the "why" behind the cheese — so those narratives reach the counter intact. Distributors can strengthen the link by building real relationships, checking in on product quality, introducing new offerings and providing updated tasting notes and information. Retailers can play a critical role by investing in education, training and sufficient counter hours so cheesemongers can fully practice their craft.

Johnson points to the importance of collaboration and communication throughout the supply chain. In particular, she emphasizes the need for stronger engagement and shared feedback.

"Across the supply chain, producers, distributors and retailers can better support cheesemongers by being willing to engage in a feedback loop: taking feedback from the cheesemonger to influence the quality with which cheese is



Photo courtesy of culture magazine

CRAFTING WITH CARE — Courtney Johnson works at her station during the Mondial du Fromage, tending her cheese with focus and skill.

received at the cheese counter, to taking customer feedback into account, and to also share information across channels with the customer. The more communication and openness takes place across the chain, the more complete the information and end-product that the cheesemonger ultimately shares with the customer. And when the customer is brought into the feedback loop as well, everyone feels empowered to care about the cheese, its quality and where it comes from."

It's a reminder that excellence at the counter is not isolated — it's built on shared investment from farm to case.

• Beyond the medals

For both women, the Mondial medals represent something larger than a podium finish.

"I sincerely hope our dual win at the Mondial inspires more cheesemongers to pursue competitive cheesemongering," D'Albero says. "While it is a huge commitment, it is also hugely rewarding. These competitions push you further than you thought possible and stretch your creative muscles. Every time an American cheesemonger achieves something like this, the boundaries of traditional cheesemongering are pushed further."

Johnson adds a note of perspective: "I'm always humbled by the vast amount of knowledge in our field. There is no such thing as a 'cheese expert.' You can have expertise in one small area, but you can never know it all. That is humbling, and it is also exciting, because there is so much more to discover." **CMN**

Know a standout **maker** or **monger**?



Email Christina at
cpaschen@cheesemarketnews.com.

MAKERS AND MONGERS