

*Shepherd (n): A person who protects, guides, or watches carefully over something*

Daphne Zepos was a shepherd. She was a protector of tradition and a guide for professionals. I recall meeting her at my first ACS conference. In a moment of awe and speechlessness I blurted out the first thing that came to mind. "I love your shoes!" I *did* really like her shoes, but that wasn't how I imagined our first meeting. Two years later I had an opportunity to step into her shoes and become a shepherd as well.

In 2013, I was the first recipient of the Daphne Zepos Teaching Award. Her endowment provided me, and the cheese community, the opportunity to advance and grow. I accepted the role of a shepherd; my purpose to protect and guide. Once I accepted the award, I thought about how Daphne would approach my journey. Personally, I needed to make a connection between the place I live and cheese. In an area that is not considered to have an abundance of American artisan cheese, I wanted to draw attention to the potential of creating a product that embodies its taste of place.

Spanish Basque heritage is woven into the fabric of the American West, a place that I have called home since 2006. Roughly 57,000 Basque immigrants live in the western states, with 15,000 settling in Idaho alone. This large demographic is a result of a peak in immigration following the California Gold Rush during the 1860s. In lieu of mining, Basque-Americans raised sheep in the open lands of Oregon and southern Idaho, and by 1910, they spread into the western open-range. Basque Americans were shepherds, caring for their flocks and practicing transhumance. Conditions in this area proved quite suitable for the Basque tradition, and their practice of sheepherding was passed down through generations. The roots of Basque heritage guided my application vision when first applying for the DZTA Scholarship. I wanted to explore the connection between Spanish Basque tradition and the American West.

After accepting the DZTA Scholarship, I travelled to Spain to examine Basque cheese, heritage and landscape. With 4,000 years of cheesemaking tradition, the Basque region of Spain was the perfect place to understand their methods and its application to the Western United States. Cheese is an important staple in their diet and transhumance is a way of life in this agricultural society. I remember talking to a cheesemaker in San Sebastian while walking his pastures. "Big farms don't make cheese like we do in Basque country because sheep eat grains and they're more stressed, so the milk is weak. My sheep live peaceful lives". His comments stuck with me. And when I tasted his craft, Idiazabal, his sheep's peaceful days came to life in a full, balanced blend of hazelnuts, smoke and butter.

I returned from Spain with the objective to communicate the roots of Basque transhumance and artisan cheesemaking to the turophiles and caseophiles of the American West. I taught the principles of traditional cheesemaking, aging and sustainable utilization of the local environment through mantras like "peaceful sheep create peaceful cheeses". Idaho, home of the largest Basque American population, is the third largest cheese producing state in the country. It was important for me to reconnect this area, which pushes out thousands of pounds of industrial cheese, with its Basque cheesemaking roots. Through my teachings, I've inspired the notion that excellent cheesemaking is achievable in the dry, brutally hot climate of the American West if you work *with* the strengths of the environment, not manipulate it to fit your idea of cheesemaking. It's important to protect and preserve the connection we have through sustainable, traditional methods. Sharing traditions keeps them alive. As a result of my teachings, flavorful, nutritional and creative cheeses from the American West have emerged using Basque principles.

Through her endowment, Daphne continued to be a protective, guiding force in the cheese industry. At the end of my Spanish journey, I came home a shepherd, with greater knowledge of land and tradition, in addition to a fabulous new pair of shoes. Thank you Daphne.