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MY TURN: SUPPORTING THE BEST IN VERMONT CHEESEMAKING

On Sunday, July 25, 2010, 1,500 cheese lovers arrived at bucolic Shelburne Farms for the 2nd annual Vermont Cheesemakers Festival — an event already so renowned that it sold out three weeks in advance. The event was dedicated to Frank Hatch and Jamie Cherington, two ardent proponents of Vermont artisan cheesemakers and sustainable local farming, both of whom died in the past year. Their support for artisan foods in Vermont was pivotal, and the festival demonstrated the extraordinary foundation that they have helped lay.

Frank Hatch was chairman for nearly 20 years of The John Merck Fund, a major supporter of Vermont nonprofits, as the Merck family has had a residence in Pawlet for generations. Jamie Cherington was a foundation representative in the state, and she lived and worked in Calais.

The festival took place in a stunning setting — at the Coach Barn at Shelburne Farms. Hosted by Vermont Butter & Cheese Creamery and the Vermont Cheese Council, the festival featured over 100 types of cheese from 50 different cheesemakers — as well as locally produced wines and beers, maple syrup, honey, chocolates and baked goods — and attracted participants from New England and beyond, as well as national media.

The occasion underscored the extraordinary growth and development of artisan cheesemakers and other food producers in Vermont — at a time when

public attention is increasingly turning to artisan foods. With the greatest number of artisan cheesemakers per capita in the United States, Vermont is a leader in producing both excellent traditional cheeses and new cheese products.

Both the festival and Vermont's robust artisan cheese industry owe a great deal to Frank Hatch and Jamie Cherington. They have been instrumental in: Creating the Vermont Institute for Artisan Cheese at the University of Vermont. Established in 2004, the institute is the nation's only comprehensive center devoted to artisan cheese. It supports Vermont's artisan cheese producers, contributes to the latest scientific research and expertise related to dairy and cheese products, and encourages the sustainability of the small-farm culture in Vermont and other rural landscapes nationally and internationally. In six years, it has educated more than 1,200 individuals from 46 states and seven countries in artisan cheesemaking — including award-winning cheese producers — and the institute's research is assuring the safe and continued production and expansion of traditional cheeses.

Promoting the Vermont Cheese Trail and Vermont as “The Napa Valley of Cheese.” The John Merck Fund enabled the institute and the Vermont Cheese Council to orchestrate a highly successful public relations campaign to promote national awareness of the Vermont Cheese Trail, as a unique tourism resource, and to position

Vermont as “The Napa Valley of Cheese,” a description that has subsequently appeared frequently in national media. The Cheese Trail, Vermont artisan cheeses and Vermont cheesemakers have been featured in hundreds of stories in major print, radio, television and online media outlets.

Initiating the Vermont Cheesemakers Festival. Already a beloved institution, the festival has enormous potential as an annual event to promote Vermont cheeses and related foods, provide another glorious reason for tourists to visit the state and underscore Vermont's leadership in environmentally-sound practices that set the pace for the nation and the world.

With Frank Hatch's leadership and Jamie Cherington's enthusiastic presence, the legacy of The John Merck Fund's support for Vermont artisan cheesemakers and sustainable agriculture, is philanthropy at its best: it provided crucial infrastructure to encourage and support artisan food producers; it strengthened Vermont's small-farm agriculture and landscape; and it promoted employment, the University, the state and tourism.

All Vermonters benefit from such skillful philanthropy. We can now all build on this extraordinary legacy by buying as much of our food as possible from Vermont producers. We have the advantage that it's some of the best food in the world.

Allison Hooper is co-founder of Vermont Butter & Cheese Creamery.