

The Cheese Importers Association of America celebrates 70 years, ramps up initiatives

By Alyssa Mitchell

WASHINGTON — The Cheese Importers Association of America (CIAA) is building on the momentum of its successful retailer program and is looking to host 15 retailers at the SIAL Show in Paris in October 2016. The association also is ramping up its efforts with other initiatives under its Qualified Importer Program (QIP).

Funding for the CIAA QIP and its initiatives is derived from the assessment importers pay on dairy products imported into the United States. No corporate funds are involved, notes Dominique Delugeau, president, CIAA. He says CIAA works closely with USDA to ensure all activities meet the agency's approval for how the funds are invested, and initiatives are focused on promotion, education and research of imported cheese.

"Education and training on imported cheese is key to create awareness among American consumers," he says.

Delugeau notes that the cheese importing industry is stronger today as a result of the decision made 70 years ago to form this non-profit trade association.

"Though many of the original companies no longer exist, their contribution, leadership and cooperation helped build the association," he says. "The founders left a legacy of a viable, well-recognized organization that continues to provide insight and solutions to the problems facing cheese importers in the U.S. today."

One of the major initiatives under the QIP is CIAA's trip to the SIAL Show, held every other year in Paris. The next show will be held Oct. 15-19, 2016, and CIAA is holding a lottery for qualified retailers to win an all-expense paid educational trip to the show. To qualify, retailers should purchase at least 250,000 pounds of wholesale cheese per year or have five or more retail stores. Retailers can apply online at www.theciaa.org. Applications are due July 30, 2016.

CIAA selects retailer guests via a random lottery drawing, which will be held in August 2016. As part of the exclusive CIAA QIP-sponsored SIAL trip, the selected retailers will attend the SIAL show as guests of CIAA and participate in educational events and dinners with CIAA members. Retailers also will have VIP access to the SIAL Show where they will have opportunities to network with international food manufacturers and professionals, Delugeau notes.

He adds that CIAA's retailer guests also will have the chance to tour French retail outlets including hypermarkets, upscale cheese shops and gourmet retailers, along with the largest fresh produce market in the world: Rungis.

Delugeau says the trip's value is at least \$5,000-\$6,000. He notes that two years ago, one of the winning retailers bought two more spots for additional staff in the trip, recognizing the value.

New this year, CIAA will host an additional day trip to Geneva on the day prior to the start of the SIAL Trip for retailers who would like to start their educational journey early, Delugeau says. The trip will include a visit to the Fort Des Rousses and Fromageries Arnaud. During the day trip, the group will visit the famous Comte aging caves and enjoy local dishes and cheese from the Jura Mountains for lunch.

Delugeau notes that other initiatives under the QIP include an annual gathering at the Winter Fancy Food Show in San Francisco in January, where industry stakeholders can try cheese and socialize with cheesemakers in the United States and Europe.

CIAA also is ramping up efforts with its internship program. The organization has been visiting colleges to spread the word about the specialty cheese industry and encouraging CIAA members to offer internships.

"It can be challenging to get college students today excited about the cheese business," Delugeau says. "However, some of these companies have been able to retain permanent employees from offering

these internships.” CIAA also is working on creating a specialty imported cheese site to continue to raise awareness on the popularity of these cheeses, he adds.

Delugeau notes that through advocacy, seminars and regular bulletins, CIAA will continue to keep its members and interested parties informed of ongoing developments that affect the dairy trade community as well as maintain active contacts with government officials worldwide in order to further the objectives of the organization and its members. **CMN**