

In memoriam

A tribute to Dr. Owen R. Fennema, the consummate professor 1929-2012

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On August 1, 2012, food science and technology lost one of its greatest contributors. Professor Emeritus Owen R. Fennema passed away, losing a battle to cancer. There is no doubt that nearly every person who has studied food chemistry has heard the name “Fennema” because it is forever associated with one of the most definitive texts in food chemistry, “Fennema’s Food Chemistry.” In this work, Dr. Fennema assembled a team of co-authors who were experts in their selected fields. The genius of the work by Dr. Fennema is in the breadth and depth of the topics that are covered. In the first three editions (it is now in its fourth edition with a fifth edition planned for 2015), Owen personally proof read each of the chapters, working with the authors to ensure the coverage was complete, accurate, and appropriately broad. Who was this man who most assuredly defined the field of food chemistry through this monumental effort?

Owen Fennema was born January 23, 1929 in Illinois, the son of a dairy plant owner. After graduating from Kansas State University, he completed a MS degree at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in dairy processing. Following an Army stint and four years at the Pillsbury Company, he returned to Madison to complete a PhD in Food Science and Biochemistry in 1960. He subsequently joined the Department of Food Science at UW-Madison, and 36 years later, after advancing through the ranks, serving as chair of two departments and on numerous college and university committees, Owen retired. During his tenure, he authored several hundred papers and book chapters, advised 15-20 undergraduate students each year, served as major professor to at least 40 MS and 20 PhD students, and received numerous awards and honors.

Owen’s primary professional society home was the Institute of Food Technologists (IFT), but he was also an elected Fellow of the Division of Agricultural Food Chemistry Division (AGFD) of the American Chemical Society (ACS) in 1990. In 1995 he received the AGFD’s highest award, the Award for the Advancement of Application of Agricultural and Food Chemistry. Nonetheless, clearly his professional home was IFT where he made numerous contributions, including serving as its president from 1982 to 1983; as its treasurer from 1994 to 1999; and as editor-in-chief of IFT’s peer-reviewed journals from 1999 to 2003. During his tenure as Editor in Chief of the journals he completely reversed the downward slope in quality that was threatening the journals. Put simply, Owen transitioned IFT’s journals into the 21st century and began a long climb to respectability among food science scholars. His contributions to the successes that IFT’s journals are enjoying today cannot be underestimated.

He was honored in the profession by receiving four of IFT’s 11 awards, the most of any single individual since IFT’s founding in 1939 and the only person who received two awards in one year. In fact, since independent juries were evaluating of nominees, this led to the “Fennema Rule” that an individual could not receive two awards in one year. To top off the awards, Owen received IFT’s most prestigious award, the Nicolas Appert Award, for lifetime achievement and excellence in food science. Of course these were not the only awards he received. One that I think pleased Owen very much and was a very fitting tribute to this humble man was the honorary doctor degree from Wageningen University, Wageningen, the Netherlands, in 1993. How appropriate is it that this Dutchman should be awarded an honorary degree from a Dutch university.

Owen was truly a worldly man as evidenced by his many contributions to international food science, not the least of which was his service to the International Union of Food Science and Technology (IUFoST) to which IFT is an adhering body. He served in various capacities in the organization, gave lectures around the world, and served as major professor to numerous international students. From 1999 to 2001 Owen served as the first President of the International Academy of Food Science and Technology.

During his professional life Owen developed wood working and carpentry as an avocation. This led to taking up leaded glass design and construction, an art form in which he was a truly gifted artist. Many of his works are hanging in UW-Madison buildings and in private homes of friends and acquaintances.

In this tribute, how does one sum up the contributions of one man, a man of such enormous intellect, impact on his chosen field of study, intrinsic leadership, and humanitarianism? The answer is, “It is impossible.” What we can do is recognize his contributions and be thankful that we had him with us, that he made our journey easier and more pleasant. Since Owen was a loyal Green Bay Packers fan, it is fitting to use a quote from the coach himself, Vince Lombardi, who said, “The quality of a person’s life is in direct proportion to his commitment to excellence.” Dr. Owen R. Fennema indeed was committed to excellence and his contributions were monumental.