



Customer Spotlight: Old Europe Cheese

Looking to expand their business to U.S. markets, Industrias Lacteas Asturianas (ILAS) of Spain, began Old Europe Cheese from scratch in 1988 with the purchase of the McDonald Dairy Plant, located in Benton Harbor and formerly owned by MMPA.

ILAS recruited third generation cheese maker, Francois Capt, Old Europe's current general manager, to spearhead the conversion of the 50,000 square-foot milk bottling plant into a state-of-the-art cheese making facility.

"It was very exciting to be heading the production of a brand new company," Francois says. "The plant was located in an old milk processing facility, and lots of changes had to be made to convert it into a cheese plant. We installed huge vats and molding machines and started the long process of training employees that had never even seen these types of cheese before."

Within a few years of trial and error, Francois determined that French-style Brie and Camembert would work best in the U.S. market, as only two other U.S.-based cheese manufacturers were producing these types of cheeses.

Old Europe Cheese has experienced 3-10 percent growth each year since it began in 1988, and remains one of the top specialty cheese manufacturers in the United States, now producing several types of Brie, Camembert, Gouda, Edam, Fontina and Manchego. The plant produced 6.5 million pounds of

cheese last year and had sales of about \$20 million. In 2007, they sold 12 percent of all the Brie sold in the U.S.

"Brie is our most popular cheese so we like to keep a higher percentage of Brie on hand," Francois says. "There are still only three major manufacturers of Brie in the U.S. Our sales are currently 50 percent soft cheese—which is both Brie and Camembert—and 50 percent semi-soft cheese."

The company's reputation for high quality, great tasting cheese is reflected in the floor-to-ceiling award-lined wall of their meeting room, filled with accolades dating from their early cheese making days to today.

"This year we got two new awards at the American Cheese Championship—first place with our Brie with herbs and third place with our Smoked Gouda," Francois says. "It all starts with good quality milk. If you have that, you can make high quality cheese and the awards follow."

Quality Milk = Award-winning Cheese

MMPA is the sole milk supplier to Old Europe Cheese. When ILAS purchased the plant in the late 80s, MMPA was the main supplier for the then McDonald bottling plant, and routes had already been established to haul local milk to the plant. Old Europe's staff first tested the milk and determined it to be of cheese making quality.

"This is when we decided to buy all of our milk from MMPA

and we've been doing so ever since," Francois says. "We have a very good working relationship with MMPA."

"We have enjoyed being a supplier to Old Europe ever since they began operations in Benton Harbor," MMPA's Director of Manufactured Sales and Plant Operations Clay Galarneau says. "They have been a very consistent and reliable home for our milk and cream for many years."

Research into cheese making processes has determined that milk with low Pre Incubated Bacteria counts (PI) and a low Somatic Cell Count (SCC) yields higher quality and higher volumes of cheese. About 10 years ago, Francois talked to MMPA's Director of Member Services Gary Trimner about lowering PI counts in the milk shipped to Old Europe Cheese.

"The PI count shows the level of bacteria and has to do with cleanliness," Francois says. "A high PI count indicates that something is not being cleaned properly, which increases the risk of contamination and may lead to an aftertaste, oxidation or rancidity."

MMPA reiterated the importance of low PI counts with the dairy farms supplying the cheese plant. MMPA members responded and Old Europe Cheese has noticed an improvement in PI levels of incoming milk.

"In our business you have to be very strict," Francois says. "We appreciate MMPA for all of their hard work to give us good quality milk."

Francois explains that, in addition to low PI levels, it is important that each shipment of milk be consistent not only in bacteriological quality, but also in butterfat and protein. Old Europe Cheese's milk supply always comes from local farms and therefore its consistency in butterfat and protein is assured.

Consistency matters in quality milking routines as well as quality cheese making. Francois notes that, with soft cheeses like Brie, processes, storage time and handling all contribute to the overall quality of the cheese.

"It's very easy to sell good cheese, but its quality must be consistent," Francois says. "The cheese maker follows the same recipe in the same manner each time. By doing this, the end product is very consistent. In addition, the age of the cheese really matters. We make no more than a maximum of 2-3 months' inventory."

While seasonal farm labor generally occurs in the summer, the cheese plant needs additional help just before the end of the year, when consumers are more likely to buy Brie for gifts and entertaining.

"This is a seasonal business," Francois says. "We sell more cheese at the end of the year, especially soft cheeses, which have a shelf life of 60 days."

An extra 10-15 employees are hired during that time period, in addition to the plant's regular 50 full time employees. Even though the temporary workers know their assignment is short term, Francois says it's always difficult letting them go when the busy season is over.

"Although Brie is a challenging cheese to produce, our production team knows how to make it very well," Francois says. "They are a very good, dedicated group. For example, the high humidity content makes producing soft cheeses more difficult due to the possibility of bacterial contamination. The process must be tightly controlled and monitored in order to get the same quality results."

Despite the American consumer's ongoing love affair with antibacterial products, some foods—like cheese and yogurt—still require beneficial bacteria to flavor, age and keep them safe.

Old Europe Cheese only uses certain types of bacteria to make their cheeses. Keeping the beneficial bacteria in while keeping bad bacteria out requires careful product handling by every employee involved in the cheese-making process.

Product samples are taken from every batch of cheese and at every step of the production process. The



samples are tested in the plant's on-site lab to ensure no harmful bacteria has made its way into the cheese itself. Since many production processes require employees to use their hands, such as hand-turning the cheese and hand packing it into molds, keeping everything in the plant clean and sterile is very important.

"We train everybody to know that everything has to be perfectly clean," Francois says. "Employees must disinfect their hands every 20 minutes."

Bacteria are only one concern when making cheese. Using the wrong kind of mold could also pose problems. Once the soft cheeses are formed into a shape

and have settled, a special type of mold is sprayed on them to create the signature rind found on them. Introduction of a different strain of mold could mean contamination of an entire batch of cheese.

"The curing room is filled with cheese which is allowed to age for ten days, after which the cheese is packed, and then the curing room is cleaned completely," Francois says.

Third-party auditors visit the plant annually to ensure safe food handling processes are being followed.

"Third party audits are very important, and many customers are now asking for them, especially the large grocery chains," Francois explains. "Some of the larger chains do their own audits. These audits force us to stay at peak performance because we know that we could easily lose that customer if what they see does not meet their standards."

Customers requiring audits and documentation of processes and safe handling are becoming the norm in the dairy industry and among most food manufacturers. With nearly 100 customers, Francois says the plant is spending more time documenting the fact they are making a safe product.

"Our strength is tied to the fact that we're flexible and we never tell the customer 'No.' We will work all day and all night, if necessary, to fill an order," Francois says.

Committed to Customer Service

About 14 months ago, lightning struck in the middle of the night, starting a fire in the plant's wax room, incinerating the entire semi-soft packaging room and leaving heavy smoke damage throughout the plant.

"That big fire on April 9 of last year completely destroyed our wax room," Francois recalls. "We lost 80,000 lbs of cheese and the Michigan Department of Agriculture closed the plant. We felt

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Across the north central region of the United States, farm fields vary in the number of seeds in the weed seed bank. Remember that one velvetleaf plant seeding out in a corn or soybean field produces 800 or more seeds, so spreading 20 tons of dairy manure with velvetleaf seed will be less of a problem than a scattering of velvetleaf plants going to seed across the field.

One way to reduce weed seed numbers in manure is to store the manure before spreading. Storing manure reduces weed seed viability (seeds are no longer capable of germinating). In one study, stockpiling manure for three months decreased weed seed viability by 60 percent or more. The warm temperatures and the ammonia gas and uric acid generated in the stack contribute to weed seed decay over time. Similarly, high temperatures in compost piles kill weed seeds. Seed of some weed species will be killed after seven days at 130 degrees F;

seed of some tougher weed species requires 30 days or more at 145 degrees F to be killed. Weed seeds will survive in any cool spots in the compost pile. This is why compost must be turned periodically—to break down the organic materials and to expose weed seeds to high temperatures.

Manure and compost applications provide many benefits to the soil and to the crop. Feed is pelleted or ensiled, feed passes through livestock digestive systems, and various manure storage regimes are available. All of these steps take a toll on weed seed viability. Managing weeds in manured and composted fields requires timely weed control tactics, just as it does in non-manured fields. Always monitor manured fields for new weed species, especially when livestock feed is brought in from out of the area. Good weed management by the farmer will prevent weeds from competing with

the crop, and the crop will benefit from the additional nutrients and improved soil quality provided by the manure.

You can learn more from the recently published “Integrated Weed Management: Fine Tuning the System” (E-3065). You may order it from the MSU Extension bulletin office at www.emdc.msue.msu.edu. One chapter of this bulletin is devoted to manure and compost in integrated weed management systems.

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compelled to start up production as soon as possible in order to satisfy the demands of our customers.”

Employees pitched in to get the plant up and running in record time, losing no pay in the interim. They worked day and night alongside an outside company specializing in fire restoration, cleaning everything in order to be able to reopen quickly. Thanks to their tireless efforts, the plant was closed for only four days, and was able to open one week after the fire.

“We spent whatever money we needed to in order to supply our customers; we didn’t wait for the insurance company to tell us what to replace,” Francois explains of the plant’s quick recovery. “The insurance company was pleased that we went ahead and got the plant up and running. Good insurance is an absolute necessity.”

A good relationship with the Michigan Department of

Agriculture along with the impressive show of determination to get the plant up and running quickly paid off for Old Europe Cheese.

“The director of ILAS, Spain, found it hard to believe that the Department of Agriculture came out on a Sunday to help get us up and running,” Francois says.

Dealing with Economic Downturns

Consumers’ shopping habits tend to shift to basic staples during recessionary times. While Francois admits the current market is tougher than in past years, he has added new product lines to keep sales volume up. The new lines include: Brie Light, which has 50 percent less fat than regular Brie and Triple Cream Brie, which contains 70 percent butterfat.

Brie is our signature cheese. There’s a good market in this country, although perhaps it’s not as strong this year as it has been in past

years.” Francois says. “My goal is still optimistic—to do as well as we did last year.”

Old Europe Cheese manufactures cheese under its own label, Reny Picot, as well as for various private-label companies. The Reny Picot brand can be found at Sam’s Club, some Kroger stores, Stop and Shop, Price Chopper, Martin’s and Albertsons. Old Europe Cheeses are also distributed through Sysco Foods, Lipari, U.S. Food Service and DPI.

“Old Europe makes some very unique and flavorful cheeses that are great for snacking and enjoying with friends,” Clay says. “I enjoy having customers like Old Europe that can turn our members’ milk into such great tasting foods.”

For recipes and more information on Old Europe Cheese, visit their Web site at www.oldeuropecheese.com