

Leprino Foods and MMPA: 20 Years of Cooperation

Each time you sink your teeth into a cheesy pizza, chances are that delicious mozzarella cheese was created right here in Michigan made with MMPA member milk at one of two Leprino cheese plants in the state.

Since its formation in 1916, MMPA has worked tirelessly to fulfill its mission “to market MMPA members’ milk to the greatest advantage possible.” This year marks the 20th anniversary of one such effort—MMPA’s long running relationship with Leprino Foods—one that created a market for MMPA members’ milk where there once was none.

“The arrangement with Leprino Foods enabled MMPA to partner with a company that’s associated with a thriving market,” MMPA’s Director of Milk Sales Carl Rasch says. “Their business is tied to the pizza industry, which has been a growing market.”

The Leprino-MMPA arrangement was highlighted in the November 1989 *Michigan Milk Messenger*, along with a story about rising cheese consumption which correctly predicted: “All market indications show ‘cheese-craze’ is not a short-term phenomenon. Food service laboratories continue

to funnel millions of dollars into cheese research. In the future, consumers can only expect to see more cheese products on grocery shelves.”

Before Leprino’s Allendale plant was constructed, there wasn’t much of a local market for milk produced on the west side of Michigan. Back then, haulers would pick up milk from MMPA members, take it to a pump over station, and pump it off onto another milk tanker that transported milk to markets as far away as Detroit. While members contract with their individual haulers who haul their milk, MMPA picked up the expense to move the milk from pump over stations to other markets where there was a demand for the milk.

“The Allendale plant created a market for the milk where the milk was being produced,” Carl says. “It costs money to haul milk. By shipping milk to Leprino’s Allendale plant, we were able to reduce hauling expenses for the cooperative. We were also able to

close four pump over stations.”

Milk hauler Owen Sneden remembers when he and his father ran one of MMPA’s pump over stations in Hudsonville. The Snedens owned one of the milk hauling companies that used to carry milk from the pump over station to dairy plants in Detroit. He says that even though the closing of the pump station initially caused them to tighten their belts, the Snedens were able to reduce their workforce and fleet, as well as wear and tear on their equipment.

Owen and local dairy farmers agree that Leprino Foods’ Allendale plant has done much for the local community, providing



Above and opposite page: Leprino Foods’ Allendale plant today.

Right: The November 1989 *Messenger* featured the opening of the plant.

jobs and a market for locally produced milk.

“The whole town of Allendale benefits from Leprino being here,” MMPA dairy producer Mike Potgeter says. “The plant provides jobs for our friends and families and a lot of local farms benefit from fertilizing their crops with sludge from the plant’s water treatment facility.”

Today, Leprino Foods’ Allendale plant employs 250 people who help produce nearly 100 million pounds of cheese and 60 million pounds of Grade A whey powder each year. The plant, which sits on 65 acres, processes approximately 2.5 million pounds of raw milk daily, mostly from MMPA dairy farms in the local area.

“We make mozzarella cheese—all different types with different performance criteria for customers,” Jim Whitney, Leprino Foods Allendale Plant Manager says. “What’s great is that Leprino has the technology to satisfy our customers’ unique needs.”

Mozzarella cheese may be the only variety of cheese produced at the Allendale plant, but the types, sizes and packaging of the cheese vary from customer to customer. For instance, some customers want their cheese to have a certain amount of stretch, others want a different color, and some prefer something in between.

“Customers today have a higher level of expectation than ever before—from a performance standpoint as well as quality and consistency,” Jim says, noting it’s important that the cheese plant receives milk which is consistent, predictable and of good quality. “The milk ties directly into that because you can’t make good cheese without good quality milk.”

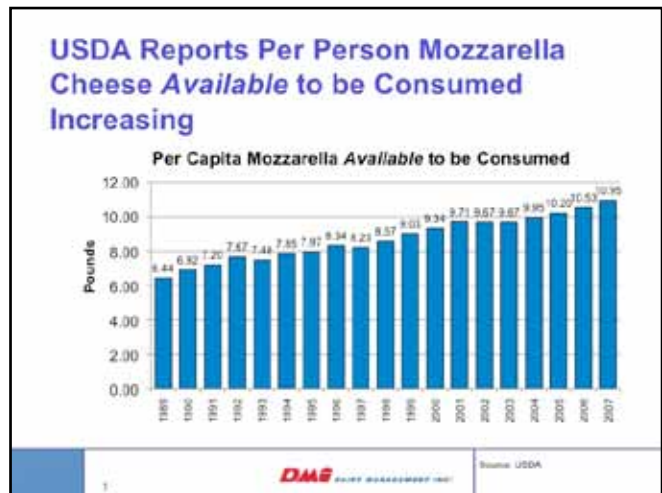
Both Carl and Jim agree MMPA and Leprino Foods

have maintained a good working relationship, which developed through 20 years of cooperation between the two companies. Business between MMPA and Leprino has grown from approximately 600 million pounds of milk in 1989 to just over 1 billion pounds of milk in annual receipts, says Carl.

“It’s been a beneficial arrangement for us over the last 20 years,” Carl says. “The arrival of Leprino in Michigan afforded MMPA an opportunity to diversify the mix of markets utilized to balance member milk supplies.”

Leprino Foods also

makes mozzarella cheese at their plant in Remus, Mich., which they took over from MMPA two years prior to completion of the Allendale facility. At the Remus plant, Leprino Foods converted MMPA’s cheddar cheese operation into a mozzarella cheese plant, which helped fill the growing demand for mozzarella cheese sticks.



Mozzarella cheese production and consumption has risen over the past 20 years.

