

By Alex Schnabelrauch

Customer Spotlight: Green Cedar Dairy

A Family Dairy Business, Minus the Cows

Like many of our farm stories, the major themes of this piece are hard work, unshakable character and an intense focus on family. But, unlike the norm, its subject lives in urban Dearborn, spent his childhood in Lebanon and gets his milk from a stainless steel bulk tank.

Samir Harb – family man, entrepreneur and owner of Green Cedar Dairy – has never, in fact, set foot on a dairy farm. Yet, appreciates and admires dairy farmers more than most, saying, “Like dairy farmers, when the cows are working, we’re working. We work on holidays and Saturdays to keep our business afloat and to satisfy the needs of our customers. MMPA members provide us with high quality milk to make our products; we also want to turn out a superior quality product for our customers.”

The only Middle Eastern dairy product processor in the state, Samir has carved out his place in the Middle Eastern capitol of the country, fulfilling a need for “tastes like back home” products. Along with his wife (Amal), sons (Sam and Weesam) and daughter (Farah), Samir is working to continue his own family business investing long hours and tireless effort to forge his own family legacy.

Capitalizing on a Niche Market

Specializing in a host of Middle Eastern cheese and yogurt products, Green Cedar Dairy ships products to 50 stores and customers throughout the state.



Above: Holding one of Green Cedar Dairy’s most popular products, shanina (a buttermilk yogurt drink), owner Samir Harb knows the joys and struggles of keeping a family dairy business afloat.

“We deliver products to Wayne and Macomb counties five days a week. Most of our customers are smaller ethnic markets and bakeries like Greenland Market, Dearborn Fresh Supermarket and Papaya Fruit Market. People know and like that our products come from local milk and are manufactured locally,” Samir explains with a smile.

One of his sons, Sam, elaborates, “We have a great reputation with local consumers looking for Middle Eastern dairy products. We hear, on a consistent basis, that our products remind our customers of the yogurt or cheese they would eat back home in the Middle East. We’re filling a huge need and demand among first, second and third generation immigrants looking for the tastes of home.”

While they might not be household product names for many MMPA members, Green Cedar Dairy’s products include: shanina (a buttermilk yogurt drink), laban (plain yogurt), labneh (creamy yogurt spread), ackawi cheese (white and salty), chives cheese and nabulsi cheese (boiled with black caraway seeds). In addition, the company imports an assortment of European cheeses for resale.

Buying milk exclusively from MMPA since 2007, Green Cedar Dairy offloads 90,000 pounds of milk and 3,250 pounds of milk powder from Constantine each month. From customer service to milk quality, Samir loyally sticks with MMPA as his only milk and milk powder supplier.

Jack of Many Trades

While his vast knowledge and depth of experience in dairy processing may be deceiving, Samir's experience with Green Cedar Dairy, before 1999, was strictly as a consumer. But nearly 15 years ago, after owning six other businesses ranging from a fish market to car dealership, the company's previous owner convinced Samir to purchase the six-year-old dairy.

"I graduated from Shell Oil Company, and I tried a variety of businesses before purchasing the dairy. But I've realized that you've got to like your job. This company allows me to work with my family and share ideas and opinions on a day-to-day business," Samir grins.

Since taking over the Green Cedar Dairy, business has been booming. Cheese production has doubled, reaching the current 1,000 pound weekly output. Yogurt production has skyrocketed from 100 to 450 cases of yogurt each week. Products and packaging have been adjusted to cater to consumers' taste buds and preferences and the product seal has been totally overhauled. In 2005, Samir strategically relocated the business to provide easier access to nearby highways. Originally a hospital storage building, he retrofitted the current building, updating piping and layout to meet Grade A facility regulations. Since the move, automation has been a company priority, as the Harbs attempt to reduce the labor costs and quality control issues associated with labor-intensive processing.

Any outsider would consider the company's growth and updated facilities incredibly impressive and a prime example of entrepreneurial success. But Samir, too humble and hard working to succumb to pride, shrugs, saying, "I just try to remember that the bad times won't stay forever. Sometimes the economy will be down and we need to watch things. Other times, it's

up and we can make changes and updates. I just try to be patient and, as long as I have bread on the table for my family, it's a good day."

Family First

The patriarch of the family and business owner, getting beneath the surface of Samir's story wasn't easy. But after their father left the room, Samir's sons confirmed what the interviewee himself never would. "He's the hardest working man I've ever met. He takes dedication to a whole new level, and we can't ever get him to take a vacation, even during the slow months. We grew up looking to him as a model of hard work and, someday, we hope to take over the family business. But we may end up retiring before he does," Weesam jokes.

Employing his two sons, wife (part-time) and two nephews, Samir enjoys being able to take care of his family while involving them in the business. Family, responsibility and an honest day's work are the forces driving his six-day-a-week schedule and reluctance to take a break. Even after all the hours, effort and sweat, Samir is quick to give credit to his family of employees.

His nephew, Hassan Hachem, adds, "My uncle never says we work 'for' him. He always affirms that we work 'with' him. Here, you're treated like a person who can add value



Sam, Amal, Samir, Farah and Weesam Harb (left to right) stand outside Green Cedar Dairy in Dearborn – the only Middle Eastern dairy processor in the state.

to the business. Not just a number or paycheck. That's the family business difference."

Deford or Dearborn. Dairy farmers or dairy processors. Family businesses share a common bond. MMPA is proud to share that bond with local businesses like Green Cedar Dairy, committed to supplying customers with nothing less than the best.

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