

New Management At Chalet Cheese Sees Opportunity For Swiss, Limburger, New Styles

Myron Olson Retires, Co-op Names Three To Key Operation Positions

Monroe, WI—With the recent retirement of Myron Olson, the Chalet Cheese Cooperative is under new management.

Jamie Fahrney, who started at Chalet in 1978 and earned his cheesemaking license in 1985, has been named plant operations manager. Fahrney is a Master Cheese Maker, having earned his certification in Baby Swiss and Brick.

Mike Hlubek, formerly of Zimmerman Cheese, has been named plant business manager in charge of running the financial aspects of the cheesemaking business, while Michelle Hanson has been hired as the company's office manager.

Olson told the cooperative of his plans to retire earlier in the year. His last day was August 31.

"We're a team. We have owners, our patrons, that want to see the business successful," Hlubek said. "We have us in a management role who are discovering each other's strengths, and we have a staff that contributes to the success of this business. It's truly a team effort forward."

Fahrney credits Olson with the smooth transition, saying Olson has been grooming him for his new role for over 10 years.

"He saw something in me that even I didn't see in myself when I first started working here in 1978," Fahrney said. "The board saw how successful Myron and I have been over the last 30 years. It's been a natural step."

Chalet Cheese Cooperative was established in 1885. Currently the

cooperative has 16 patrons that supply more milk to the operation than the 52 patrons in the early 1970s. The cooperative owns two cheese plants near Monroe, WI, in Green county.

"We have 16 total farms from which all of our milk comes from," Hanson commented. "The co-op owns, lock, stock and barrel, the whole process of the operation."

All of their patrons are within a 15-mile radius of the two cheese plants. Nearly 30 percent of the milk supplied to the operation is Brown Swiss milk, which is higher in protein.

"Our patrons take a great deal of pride here at the plant," Hanson said. "They care about what they're doing on the farm and how it translates here. They want to keep this plant open because they take pride in what they help to create."

Home of Limburger, Swiss Awards
More than anything, Chalet Cheese is known as the only cheese plant in the United States to manufacture Limburger cheese.

"We'll continue to make Limburger," Hlubek said. "But most of our awards and our acclaim has been in our Baby Swiss and Swiss manufacture. But Limburger is a nice thing to talk about. It puts our name out there, but we need to talk more and familiarize the industry more about our award-winning Swiss products as well."

Hlubek's role is to keep the business going forward. He sees a lot of opportunities to add new products, introduce existing products to new customers and new ways to market the co-op's products.

"It's one thing to continue doing what we do, but we also want to



The new management team at Chalet Cheese Cooperative sees opportunities for new products and for existing products that include Limburger, Brick, Swiss and Baby Swiss. In the photo left to right: Mike Hlubek, Michelle Hanson and Jamie Fahrney.

look at other avenues," Hlubek said. "We're exploring modifications to our existing products that will give us another cheese offering to our current and potential customers."

Hlubek said he doesn't want to completely change the makeup of the product line, but says there are little things the company can do to grow the business while respecting the tradition.

"We have to look at three different avenues," Hlubek said. "First, we have to look at what we currently have for customers and what other things we can offer them. Then you also have to look at the customers that aren't buying from us and find out why. Finally, we have to look at the social media aspect. We need to have a better presence on social media where we can tell our story."

Hlubek asked what consumers are looking for in today's cheese industry, then answered his own question by saying they're looking for a small, artisanal cheeses.

"They're looking for a unique product, which we have," Hlubek said. "We need to market that uniqueness. We need to keep telling our story."

Fahrney said there is a great deal of excitement at the plant.

"We have some stuff cooking for different kinds of cheeses," Fahrney said. "Everyone wants to see what the future brings. I think we have some things coming down the road that will create even more excitement."

Olson Leaves Co-op In Great Shape
Myron Olson had been working at Chalet Cheese since 1970, taking over the cheesemaking operations from the late Albert Deppeler.

Through the manufacture of Limburger, Olson became a bit of cheese celebrity and the face of Limburger cheese.

Fahrney says he's ready to pick up that "stinky cheese" moniker.

"It's something that Myron did more naturally than it will be for me," Fahrney said. "But if there is still interest in us, we'll do it. It's free publicity, after all."

Olson said one of his greatest personal accomplishments was the growth of his successor.

"I'm very proud of Jamie. He was just a kid in high school, much like myself when I was young. He was very teachable. All of his accomplishments. What he did, with learning to make Baby Swiss, he caught on very quickly. I played a role that I'm proud of but in the end, he dedicated himself," Olson said. "I feel that area is in very good hands."

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Mike Hlubek,
Chalet Cheese Co-op

Olson also said while leading the co-op they always made quality cheese, "the best in our class", and offered a good, fair price.

"We've had a good run. We've been a real strong co-op. They'll have to make some decisions with expansion, but the co-op managers are, I think, willing to grow, and I think they have the right crew in there to do it."

Olson also credited his wife, Geri, the co-op's long-time office manager.

"She's been my right-hand person there for 26 years," Olson said of his wife. "She's been as much importance to that factory as I have." Together, with a great bunch of people, we have been able to run that factory, Olson said.

Olson said it was time to retire and let the next group in there. But he was proud of his time.

"The factory is in good shape. We make great cheese. We're up 30 to 35 percent production, we worked with great people and the tradition of Chalet lives on," Olson said. "That's all I ever wanted."

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