

From Brink Of Failure To Slated Expansion, Milton Creamery's Success Rides Prairie Breeze

By Scott Graf*

Milton, IA—In the spring of 2008, Rufus Musser was worried he might have to change careers. His tiny cheese factory, located in one of the most remote parts of Iowa, was on the brink of failure. Musser was having trouble getting traction in an already competitive market.

Not to mention, milk prices were nearly twice what he'd planned on. Though his venture was only two years old, Musser wondered if he'd soon have to close the doors.

"You'd wake up at night and go look out the window and you see bears behind all the bushes," Musser says.

"And you think everyone of them has a cub, that they're out to get you. In the back of your mind you're trying to look at options of what's the next step, life after cheese," he continued.

But Musser and his head cheese maker, son Galen, tried to remain optimistic. The two were working on a new specialty cheese they hoped would turn their struggling business around.

And it would. In a little over a year, rather than preparing to close their doors, the Mussers would be planning their first expansion.

The beginnings

Milton Creamery opened in 2006. Mennonite Rufus Musser had moved his family from Pennsylvania about 15 years earlier and had since been farming near the southeast Iowa town of Milton.

In 2002, he was approached by several local Amish farmers who were looking for an outlet to sell their milk. And they were willing to invest.

Musser decided he was interested and spent the next several years learning as much about cheesemaking as he could. He attended seminars at Iowa State University and the University of Wisconsin-River Falls.

When the local extension service would offer sessions on value-added dairy, he'd attend. He took notes while touring cheese factories in Iowa and Wisconsin.

In May of 2006, Musser made his first batch of cheese as a professional. The new cheese maker started his business slowly, using only about 10 percent of the factory's capacity to make primarily Cheddar curds.

From the onset, the family could see getting their business off the ground was going to be a struggle. While Rufus tried to peddle curds for \$4.25 a pound at farmer's markets in some of the region's larger cities, input prices were skyrocketing. Musser says his initial business model had accounted for milk prices of about \$13.00 per hundredweight. As milk edged closer to \$20, Musser

knew something would have to change.

"We saw that we were going to have to get moving real fast on specialty cheeses to make any difference," he says. "Or we'd be down the drain because we just had too much overhead for curds and Cheddar cheeses."

The Mussers called on consultant Neville McNaughton for help. His advice was to use alpine-style cultures in the factory's Cheddar formulations, requiring little change in make procedures.

"We wanted to get them out of the 40-pound block Cheddar mold, which was what they were doing," McNaughton says. "When you're a very small plant making 40-pound block Cheddar, it's very hard to compete."

A 16-Year-Old Cheese Maker

While his business was getting off the ground, Rufus was grooming son Galen to take over the cheesemaking duties.

Galen was finished with this eighth-grade Mennonite education and was working with an older brother on the family farm.

But by February 2007, when Galen was just 16, Rufus deemed his son ready to become the primary cheese maker.

By handing over production responsibilities, Rufus' goal was to spend more time marketing and delivering his family's cheeses. (The factory has just two other full-time employees, including Rufus' wife Jane who oversees the factory store.)

McNaughton says the Mussers aren't hindered by their lack of higher education. Rather, he's been impressed with their business savvy, specifically their impeccable record keeping.

"I would say they may have the best records of any cheese plant that I work for," McNaughton says. "Every day they load the details from their make sheet on to an Excel spreadsheet. And any time they have a question they can send me those makesheets and say 'Let's have a look at this and this and do some analysis for us'. And we can give them good feedback. I don't have very many people that go to that trouble."

Prairie Breeze

With their consultant's help, the Mussers focused on a cheese they would later call "Prairie Breeze." (McNaughton describes it as a hybrid alpine Cheddar that's extremely sweet.)

Not long after production began on the new cheese, Rufus and Galen knew they had something unique.

But their optimism over their new cheese was overshadowed by the fact the rest of the business continued to struggle.



Cheese maker Galen Musser, 18, stirs salt into a batch of cheese curds at Milton Creamery.

Retailers were slow to order their Cheddars and Colbys, and walk-in traffic at the rural factory store wasn't nearly enough to turn a profit. After only two years, time was running out on the Mussers' business.

Realizing that, Rufus decided to take a leap of faith. He knew his plant's survival would hinge on his new specialty line. And with a nine-month aging process required for Prairie Breeze, he had to move quickly. While McNaughton won-

dered if his Mennonite clients were getting ahead of themselves, the Mussers ramped up production of Prairie Breeze.

"If we're gonna make it work, we've got to get production up on that cheese and try to run with it," Rufus recalls of his thought process at the time. "So that was part of the darkest hour. We were trying to build inventory so that we have something to take to market. So we've got to get enough production there that if it is

•See Milton Creamery, p. 13



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Milton Creamery

(Continued from p. 11)

something, then we have enough to help pay the bills.”

Good News from Green Bay

Fast forward to March of this year. The US Championship Cheese Contest was approaching and for the first time Milton Creamery would have an entry.

McNaughton had urged the Mussers to enter Prairie Breeze in hopes of placing, thereby getting distributors’ attention. Rufus agreed, thinking it would also be a good opportunity to see how well his cheese stacked up against the best in the business.

“We were definitely intimidated,” Musser says. “These folks know cheese, have been doing cheese all their lives. These are third generation cheese makers and they have all kinds of tricks up their sleeves.”

Busy with the day-to-day operations at the factory, the Mussers decided to stay home and send their cheese to Wisconsin. While the contest took place, the Mussers made cheese.

Rufus says all was normal until he went to the factory around 5:00 in the morning on the day after the winners were announced.

He checked e-mails and found two that were out of the ordinary. Each offered congratulations on Milton Creamery’s first place win in Category 42: Open Class Hard Cheeses.

“I was going in circles,” Rufus recalls. “I got Galen in and said ‘Look at the e-mails, check this out!’ Then I called the wife and said ‘You won’t believe this one.’”

The son, who’d just turned 18, says he was “tickled” with the news and hoped it would make marketing his cheese easier. McNaughton, the

consultant, says that will undoubtedly be the case.

Though he questioned their decision at the time, he now feels the Mussers were right to ramp up production of Prairie Breeze when they did.

McNaughton says the award means Milton Creamery will go from a business on shaky ground, to one that has a very bright future.

“It just puts a lot of things over the top,” he says. “It’s gonna get them into these places so much easier than it did before. That blue ribbon really counts for something.”

In Need of Expansion

After the contest, the Mussers again increased production of Prairie Breeze. And with good reason. Orders from distributors and sales at the factory store have doubled since the award.

Rufus says marketing efforts have been more successful and he’s spending more time on deliveries. On a trip in May, Rufus loaded the family’s 2002 Dodge van with 2,000 pounds of cheese for a delivery to Minneapolis. He makes similar trips to St. Louis and Kansas City.

Through Chicago-based European Imports, Prairie Breeze is being sold in 28 states. Musser hopes to soon crack the lucrative East Coast market and build sales in California. He says demand for Prairie Breeze, which retails for \$12 to \$15 per pound, is driving his business.

“It’s hard to tell where we’d be without (the award),” Rufus says. “At the same time, it’s a cheese that has tremendous potential in the market. For high quality, the flavor profile, the price point.

“It’s all coming into place as being a cheese at the right time, with the economy the way it is,” Rufus continued.

The uptick in business has led to two good problems for the company: There isn’t enough aging space and the Mussers are shorthanded.

A refrigerated semi-trailer will serve as a temporary fix for the all-of-a-sudden inadequate aging area. (Construction on a permanent solution is expected to start later this year.)

And the hiring of two new employees, preferably from the local Mennonite community, is also in the works.

Even with the recent production increases, Rufus says his family’s factory can turn out about four times the amount of cheese it’s making this summer.

In the meantime, Galen says he and his father won’t experiment with any new cheese.

Instead, they’ll continue to focus on Prairie Breeze, while tweaking several other specialty cheeses like Prairie Rose and Prairie Sunshine.

Father and son also plan on attending next month’s American Cheese Society Conference in Austin, TX, and will enter Prairie Breeze in the ACS competition. ¶

**Iowa native Scott Graf is a North Carolina-based public radio reporter and freelance writer.*

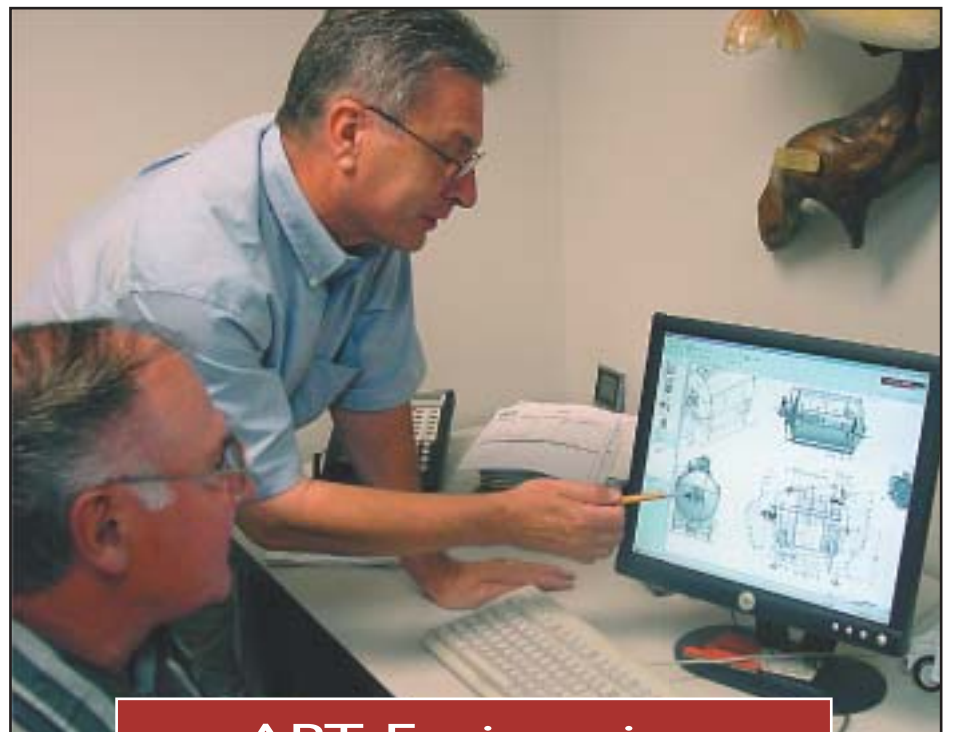
Senate Appropriations Bill Includes \$1 Million For Cornell To Develop New Dairy Policy Proposals

Washington—The Senate Appropriations Committee recently approved \$1 million for Cornell University to research and develop new agricultural policies to help grow New York’s dairy economy, US Sens. Charles E. Schumer and Kirsten Gillibrand, both New York Democrats, announced this week.

Cornell University will receive \$1 million in livestock and dairy policy special research grants to develop new proposals for the US Department of Agriculture and Congress to put in place and help grow the US agricultural sector.

“We continue to see cycles of boom and bust in the dairy market and the safety net in place to help dairy farmers hasn’t changed in years, even though the price of milk continues to climb in the supermarket,” Gillibrand said. “These federal dollars will give Cornell University the resources it needs to research and develop new ideas and new policies to help get New York’s dairy economy back on track and growing again.

At a time when New York’s dairy farmers are struggling, we need Cornell’s help more than ever, Schumer said. ¶

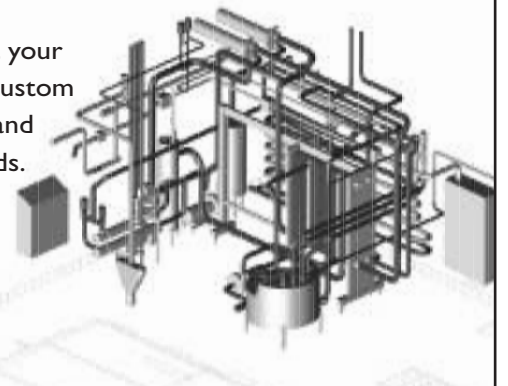


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