



Seymour Dairy Products

Looking to Get Back in the Black

by Making the Blues

After the cheese plant in Seymour closed in 1996, many attempts have been made to re-start the plant with an equal amount of failures.

Now it appears there are clear skies ahead with a stable ownership, veteran cheese makers and a Blue-veined cheese that everyone involved says is unique to the market.

"To say it was a humble beginning is an understatement," said Mike Brennenstuhl, president and chief executive officer for Seymour Dairy Products, Inc. (SDPI). "But we've come a long way in a year."

Nothing solidified the company as much as the formation of a solid ownership team in Samir Suleiman and Al Burmeister.

Armed with Brennenstuhl, a veteran cheese maker who has won the US Championship Cheese Contest,

and Heinke thought they could take the cheese to market.

"We lost out on some really good accounts, because I just didn't feel we had the right flavor profile," Brennenstuhl said. "Now that we got it where we want it, we're going to go knocking on some doors," Heinke added."

Ader Käse

That creation is what Seymour Dairy is calling its signature cheese—Ader Käse, Ader meaning vein, Käse meaning cheese in German.

"The Ader Käse is a recipe that I developed along with the WCDR," Brennenstuhl said. "It is very unique and we're calling it a German-style."

Brennenstuhl said the cheese reminds him of a Cambozola or a Montagnolo-like German cheese. "It's more of an European-style Blue as opposed to the mainstream Blue

to a Gorgonzola, Brennenstuhl said. It can be shredded on salads, sliced for crackers and served with wine.

Finally the company is manufacturing and curing the Ader Käse for an Ader Käse Reserve, an aged version of the company's signature cheese. "It's got a nine-month minimum curing time and will serve those with a very preferred taste," Brennenstuhl said.

"We need to do some volume in the industrial markets with the Blue Crest to offset some of the specialty retail production of the Ader Käse," Heinke said.

Once production for the industrial markets takes off, the company then hopes to focus on the production for the retail market.

"With steady production for the foodservice industry, we then hope to get into the retail market by getting three or four really good customers where we can move 10,000 to 20,000 pounds of cheese to the retail shelves each month," Brennenstuhl said.

Brennenstuhl said that 70 percent of the Blue currently being manufactured in the US is used in the foodservice and industrial industries.

"There is a lot of opportunity out there on the retail side of things," he said. "We set out to produce a highly specialized, premium-type Blue cheese for the retail arena."

Production

Due to the previous ownership problems, Brennenstuhl and Heinke have understandably taken a slow and steady approach to production.

"We started with just a 7,000 pound vat. Now we have three vats and milk silos, we've definitely taken slow, subtle, calculated steps but along the way we've secured a couple of good customers and the future is really bright."

Brennenstuhl said the company really got lucky when it hired Rob Richter as plant manager. Richter has several years of manufacturing Blue-veined cheeses.

SDPI is currently manufacturing about 10,000 to 20,000 pounds of cheese a week. The company expects to be producing as much as 40,000 pounds a week before mid-March, Brennenstuhl said.

"The size of the plant gives us the capacity to do well over seven million pounds of Blue cheese a year," Heinke said.

The company is producing all cheese in 6.5-pound random weight wheels; exact weight four, eight and 16-ounce wedges and wheels; and in the near future, crumble cups on the retail side. On the foodservice side, the company is manufacturing four/five pound crumble and 50 pound industrial crumble cases.

The company developed a branded label but isn't opposed to doing private label packaging for retailers.

"We're actually making private label cheese with our organic-certified Blue cheeses," he said.

Seymour Dairy believes with its four different cheeses it can serve almost any retail outlet.

"On a price point perspective we'll be competitive on the Danish Blue Crest and the Green Crest in the mainstream stores, yet appeal to the higher upscale specialty stores with the Ader Käses," Brennenstuhl said.

Because the company is basically entering a new Blue cheese flavor into an existing marketplace, Heinke knows it will take time for consumers to adapt their palate.

"It's going to take a year to year and a half to get people to know the name and the taste. We're going to have to do demos to get people to try this product. It will sell itself once they do," Heinke said.

Brennenstuhl said certain retailers are already preparing to advance the consumers' threshold.

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—Mike Brennenstuhl



and Jon Heinke, the company's sales and marketing manager, the management team knew the company had the basis for a solid foundation; one that was needed if the company was to prosper in the competitive Blue cheese industry.

"I had meetings with about 13 to 15 broker and buying companies and asked them one simple question: 'We have a facility to produce a specialty cheese, what are you not getting that you wish you could?', Brennenstuhl said. "The predominant response was Blue cheese."

Set on entering the Blue cheese market, Brennenstuhl and Heinke worked on differentiating their cheese with those on the market.

"There are a few really good Blue cheeses on the market today. We knew we could make that cheese but we wanted to establish a point of difference in the industry in terms of type and a unique flavor profile," Brennenstuhl said.

Loaded with over 30 years of cheesemaking experience, a perfunctory knowledge of existing Blue cheeses, a strong German heritage and a desire for uniqueness, Brennenstuhl headed to Madison, WI, to work with the Wisconsin Center for Dairy Research (WCDR) to design a new Blue cheese flavor.

Brennenstuhl said he ran trial after trial over a three-month period and finally got to a point where he

cheeses you are currently seeing on store shelves."

"All of the ingredients we use for the Ader Käse, excluding the milk, are imported," Brennenstuhl said.

SDPI's milk supply comes from farmers in northeast Wisconsin.

The Ader Käse is mild, slightly creamy with notes of earthiness and mushroom flavor...very much like the cheeses from Europe, Brennenstuhl said. "Not pungent and it cleans up very well."

Balancing Volume With Quality

Under the belief that you don't put all your eggs in one basket, the company had to have enough volume in markets other than just retail.

"We knew it would take some time to get some retail accounts that would be significant enough to keep our operation on the growth plan we adopted," Heinke said.

In order to satisfy other markets, Seymour Dairy designed three other Blue cheeses, two that are more in line with traditional Blue cheese.

The company's Blue Crest is a Danish-style cheese that is more similar to traditional whole milk Blue cheese, Brennenstuhl said.

"It will do real well in the industrial, foodservice markets as it has a sharp taste that will serve those with crumble interests," he continued.

In addition, Seymour Dairy manufactures an Italian-style Blue cheese called Green Crest. It is very similar

"They (retailers) don't want their customers to see the difference immediately," Brennenstuhl said. "They want a gradual change to ultimately provide a point of difference and help grow the Blue cheese business for them."

Heinke and Brennenstuhl realize it takes more than great taste in the competitive Blue cheese marketplace.

"At the end of the day it is a very competitive market, so we need to find the right customer that really sees that we have a unique product that they may need to pay a little more for," Brennenstuhl said. "And we can complement that with a more traditional flavor as well."

"I think we've put together a real solid business plan as far as knowing what we need to do as a company; as far as matching the volume with plant capacity and in getting into the retail side," Brennenstuhl said.

After a few years of battles, the two now know the sky is the limit. And, for Seymour Dairy Products, the color of the sky is all shades Blue.

For more information on Seymour Dairy Products, call 920-833-2900. •