



Kiel, WI—Henning's Cheese celebrated 100 years of cheesemaking heritage earlier this year doing it the way the company always has done it—honoring tradition and adding flavor.

Kert Henning said he was happy to have his father, Everett, still enjoying the role of patriarch of the family and the successes of the business.

"It's great having Dad here and watching and enjoying all this," said Kert Henning at the February 1, anniversary celebration. "He's able to enjoy what we have now and the work it took to get here."

Henning's Cheese has celebrated its anniversary every decade, but Everett said he might suggest changing that.

"It's great seeing everyone. Some of these patrons have been around since I was a young man. In 10 years, I don't know. I think we should have them every five," said Everett Henning.

"I have always taken a great deal of pride in the traditional cheese; I guess that's where we have always tried to excel. But those flavors, it's fun when one really catches hold."

Kerry Henning,
Henning's Cheese

Everett Henning took over the operation in 1963. Back then, Kerry Henning said, his father might have been making about 750,000 pounds of cheese a year.

Kerry said he thought about 30 patrons supplied the company with approximately 7.5 million pounds of milk.

When Kerry came back to the plant in 1981, Henning's Cheese boosted its production up to about 1 million pounds of cheese, still with those 30 patrons.

Today, Henning's makes just over 3 million pounds of cheese a year, again with 30 patrons.

"It just goes to show you what proper farm care and animal husbandry can do. We've got the same amount of patrons and three times the milk. And it's quality milk. Much cleaner than when I was a boy," Kerry said.

Kerry said he still looks at the old photographs and recalls memories of the issues his grandfather and father had to deal with.

"You have a greater appreciation for what the technology cre-

ated," Kerry said. "While a lot of things have changed in terms of milk quality and food safety, we still are doing a lot of the things the way they did it 100 years ago."

Traditional Styles With Flavors

Henning's makes four types of cheese: Cheddar, Colby and Monterey Jack and a little Mozzarella. But over the course of the last three years, Kerry said the biggest growth area has been the different flavors, mostly in the Cheddars.

"I have always taken a great deal of pride in the traditional cheese; I guess that's where we have always tried to excel," Kerry said. "But those flavors, it's fun when one really catches hold."

The trick, he and brother Kert say, is that you have to start with making a good Cheddar.

"We picked up some cheese from out of state, just to try it. We couldn't even get past the flavor of the Cheddar," Kerry said. "Just adding flavors won't help to cover a bad-tasting Cheddar. It's very important to make a good piece of Cheddar day in and day out."

Kert agreed that the company's buyers are looking for quality cheese with complementing flavors.

"We have had plenty of compliments on tasting the entire cheese," Kert said. "It's not just the blueberries in our Blueberry Cobbler, it's not just the heat in our Mango Fire, you can taste the Cheddar and the flavors in the cheese at the same time."

Kerry is a Master Cheese Maker, certified in Cheddar, Colby and Monterey Jack.

"Through my training and past experience, it's drilled into your head, the cheese flavor needs to come through. And the spicy and ingredients are just a complement to the natural cheese flavor," Kerry said.

Kerry said it's easy to get carried away with some of the flavors and spices. "Some are so overwhelming, they dominate, but it's so important to get the good cheese base. Otherwise, even if you don't pick up the flavor of the cheese, at least it doesn't distract say with a real acid or bitter Cheddar cheese."

A lot of the flavors the company has introduced, including the four styles of pepper cheese, have come from requests from their customers and buyers.

"It's been fun over the last few years, coming up with different ideas. It's not so much my wisdom, it's listening to what others have to say," Kerry said. "Then giving me enough time to figure it out.

Sometimes it doesn't happen overnight. It could be a two to three year process."

One of those instances was with a buyer from Michigan who asked Henning to make a cheese using Michigan blueberries.

"What are the issues with fruit? When you add fruit, you're adding sugar. Typically that makes the cheeses very crumbly and short. I didn't want to go down that road," Kerry explained.

Kert said that project took three years before finally finding a profile that Kerry was happy with.

"When Kerry puts as much effort into the cheese as he does,

doesn't matter, if it has Hatch in it and if you're making it, I know it's going to be good'," Kert said. "I thought, this must be one very special pepper or we're doing something right."

They make Hatch peppers from January through March for sale June through August. Kert said that would give the cheese a chance to age.

"It allows Kerry to fill up a schedule when it's a little slower. Our new spices and flavors is an ever-changing thing that just keeps evolving," Kert said.

If Henning's stuck to the traditional wheels of cheese, about 60



Henning's Cheese makes 3 million pounds of cheese a year all hand flipped in the traditional manner of cheesemaking.

he isn't going to settle for anything less than the best. His standards are very high. Maybe too high. He really puts a lot of pride into each piece of cheese," Kert said.

Hatch Pepper Cheese

Another example of a customer making a request is the company's latest offering, Hatch Pepper Heritage cheese.

Hatch chili peppers are grown in Hatch Valley in an area stretching the Rio Grande in New Mexico.

"I had never heard of the chili before when I was watching some food show and they were trying to make the best Hatch pepper burger," Kerry said. "Next thing I know I hear Hatch this and Hatch that. A couple of months later at the IDDBA show, someone comes up and asks, 'can you make a Hatch pepper cheese?' That was enough for me."

Kert said the reputation of the company's other cheese was enough for that buyer to pre-book 40,000 pounds of Hatch Pepper cheese.

"Kerry hadn't even sourced the pepper. Hadn't even tasted the pepper. The customer said, 'it

percent of the production would be in the non-flavors.

"Our flavor-styles make up about 40 percent of our production," Kerry said. "We get so many compliments on them. And, frankly, you still have to pay the bills and if you want to grow and stay in business you have to adapt to what the customers are looking for."

Kerry said the company always weighs out what people ask for.

"We get some requests for cheese with nuts and other things," Kerry said. "We don't want nuts in the plant for allergen reasons. We ask ourselves, how does it fit into our total production? There are a lot of things that factor into it."

Mammoth

Henning's Cheese is the last cheese factory in the US that is making cheese wheels larger than 75 pounds. The company manufactures wheels as small as 12 pounds or as large as 12,000 pounds, known as mammoths.

"Stores have always enjoyed the big cheeses from flats to 75-pound

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wheels to our mammoths," Kert said. "As other companies got out of it, we got in and kept filling that niche up."

Kerry said mammoths were never going to be the biggest chunk of business, but it has moved a fair amount of cheese over the years.

But that mammoth business has been threatened lately, the brothers said.

"Everything keeps changing. The mammoths have been slowing down with the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA)," Kerry said. "Unless it's Parmesan, the state inspectors don't want to see cheese out of refrigeration."

Kert agreed, "Any cheese out of refrigeration is no good, they say. We lost some of our biggest mammoths accounts because of this invalid theory that Cheddar needs to be constantly refrigerated."

Kert said that the Wisconsin Milk Marketing Board and the Wisconsin Center for Dairy Research have run a number of studies proving Cheddar cheese is perfectly fine out of refrigeration for a few hours.

"The WMMB has worked with CDR and they should have the results back from that soon. They are going to take those results to the government and show them how safe the product is out of refrigeration. Once that comes, we

expect our big mammoths accounts coming back."

Family Tradition

Henning's Cheese is a fourth-generation family business.

Otto and Norma Henning purchased a cheese factory in 1914. Everett and his late wife Jellane took over the business in 1963. Since then, three of their kids, Kay, Kerry and Kert, and now grandchildren Mindy and Rebekah and Josh continue the tradition.

"There's nothing like family to share the passion with," Kert said. "But they better come back with their whole heart. That's the passion our Dad had and that's the passion that we have. If your heart's not into it, you're not going to put the care behind it that will allow you to carry on the family tradition."

Kerry said passion and commitment to working hard will be required of the next generation.

"I will be giving them every bit of knowledge that I can possibly share with them so that their journey through this cheesemaking experience," Kerry said.

Kerry will also warn his family about the temptation to change and get bigger.

"We've changed but we've never changed from our roots. A lot of companies abandon their roots. Big doesn't always mean better, if you do what you do and you do it well. Keep doing what you do,"



Kert Henning stands next to a 1,200-pound mammoth Cheddar. Hennings Cheese is the last US cheese company making mammoths. Sales of mammoths have slowed due to what Hennings says is misinformation about the refrigeration of mammoths during events.

Kerry said. "Don't follow the path of striving to get bigger, because it doesn't always mean better. We have a lot of pride in what we are doing. Be happy. Keep it manageable."

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