

Mullins Cheese Doubles Production At Marshfield Facility To Balance Dairy Plants

Company Keeps Up With Latest Technologies, Including Massman Case Packers, Palletizers

Knowlton, WI—One of the largest proprietary plants in Wisconsin just keeps growing. And it specializes in producing nearly 100 different varieties of cheese.

Mullins Cheese has two facilities in central Wisconsin. The Knowlton facility runs 2.4 million pounds of milk a day. The Marshfield plant, which currently runs 1.6 million pounds, is being expanded to double its production.

Mullins purchased the Marshfield plant, known as Edelweiss Cheese, from Bongrain USA in 2003.

The Marshfield plant will add four new Stoelting blockformers to replace older models; upgrade the 640 line to an automated line; and add new Stoelting tables.

In addition, Mullins Cheese will also place a new Massman case packers and palletizer into the expansion.

Expanding One Plant To Take Advantage Of The Other

Mullins Cheese over the past decade has continually expanded its cheese operations.

Since 1988, when it got into the whey business, the company has added to its Knowlton facility evaporators, dryers, whey protein isolate fractionators and more recently a permeate facility.

“We’re doubling our milk production in Marshfield on the cheese side, because it will help us utilize the dryer space here on the whey side,” said Bill Mullins, who with his brother Don, own Mullins Cheese.

A standard practice of Mullins Cheese is to always build bigger than

current operations demand.

“When we first started, we made the evaporator almost twice as big as what we needed,” Mullins said. “We made a concerted effort to build our whey operation bigger than our cheese operation.”

But Mullins Cheese is not a whey company. On the contrary, this is a business company trying to get the most value out of its resources.

Adam Mullins is one of four sons of Don and Londa Mullins.

“Our overall goal is to get as much value out of that gallon of milk we bring into the door,” said Adam Mullins. “So we try to make a better grade of cheese. A better premium cheese like the Italian cheese. On the whey side, it’s making WPI rather than WPC. We’re always trying to get more bang for the buck.”

Extensive Cheese Product Line

When it comes to varieties, Baskin Robbins has nothing on Mullins Cheese. Nearly 90 cheese varieties are made in the two operations.

The company started out in the early 1970’s as strictly a Cheddar operation. Over the years, the business has branched out considerably.

The company currently makes nine semiloads or roughly 360,000 pounds of cheese a day. They run 24 hours a day, six days a week.

About five years ago, the company got into making Italian varieties which now make up about 30 percent of their production. All of the Italian varieties are made at their Knowlton facility.

“We started making Romano. Then we branched into Parmesan and Asiago, Provolone and even a little Mozz,” Bill Mullins said.

Adam Mullins said about 65 per-

cent of their production goes into American-type cheese. The Marshfield plant makes Muenster, Monterey Jack, Pepper Jack, Colby and other varieties.

“Both plants are capable of making every type of cheese we make, except the Italian styles that we do here in Knowlton,” Adam Mullins said.

Gouda and Edam are also made at Mullins Cheese.

“Mostly the American-styles in 640’s are made over in Marshfield and the Italian and other styles are made here in 40 pound block.”

In addition to all of those varieties, Mullins makes a reduced-fat and low fat variety.

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—Bill Mullins,
Mullins Cheese

“It’s a new item,” Bill Mullins said. “We make a reduced-fat Colby Jack, Jacko, pepper Jack. We have some customers that have added that to their line and they are doing quite well. It’s really taken off.”

The product mix on the whey side is slightly more concentrated. The evaporator business was their initial entry into the whey business.

In order to fill that first evaporator, they started collecting whey from other plants around the area.

They started condensing their whey and selling the solids off to other companies who had dryers.

“In 2001 we started fractionating proteins from the whey,” Bill Mullins said. “We sell the whey protein isolates to nutritional companies who make the health drinks and bars. It’s been very good for us.”

About five years ago, the company built a permeate plant adjacent to the plant in Knowlton.

The company makes about five semiloads of that permeate product and about a half of a semiload of whey protein a day, Bill Mullins said.

The Marshfield plant does not have any whey operations. Adam Mullins said they’ll concentrate over there and bring everything back to the Knowlton plant.

Keeping Up With Technology

Mullins Cheese uses a direct sales staff and have a few other marketers selling their cheese products.

The company does do some food-service but mostly the cheese goes into the retail marketplace.

In the early days, one of Mullins’ best customers was the old A&P Stores.

Bill Mullins said they sold a lot of Colby to A&P in 40 pound block. But when A&P was purchased, the new owners of A&P required the cheese to be made in 640 pound block, he said. At that time Mullins was not equipped for 640s and was suddenly out of that account.

“We scrambled for markets to sell our cheese. We had 30 days to find a new home for all of our product,” Bill Mullins said. They branched out and sold to many different buyers.

“That was a tremendous lesson. It taught us no one was too small a customer. Today we sell to approximately 65 cheese companies. From guys who order two pallets a week to those that order six semiloads a week.”

Today, Adam says the company runs about 70 percent block and 30 percent 640’s. Adjusting to the market demands and staying out in front of technology has been the key to upgrades over the years.

Today the company prides itself with keeping pace with technology. “Our growth here was quick,” Bill Mullins said. “We needed to upgrade our technology to better serve our customers and to handle all the new milk. As new technology came out, we kept on buying.”

Massman Case Packers and Palletizers Are Favored

Massman Automation Designs, LLC has provided innovative packaging solutions such as case packers, palletizers and case sealers for over 30 years to a wide variety of industries.

Mullins Cheese was looking for a capacity upgrade to their case packer at Knowlton and had heard good things about Massman, Adam Mullins said.

“The new Massman packer is a direct replacement for an older machine,” Adam Mullins said. “It’s definitely a higher capacity unit. That

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Mullins Cheese

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was the main reason we changed. There was nothing wrong with the old one, it's just that we needed more capacity."

According to Adam Mullins, the company runs the machine to handle about 10 to 12 blocks a minute.

"When we're surging it can keep up, but basically we run about 600 blocks an hour."

Brad Hanke, the sales manager at Massman Automation, said Mullins is running about half the speed that the machine is capable.

"It can kick out as many as 25 40-pound block per minute," Hanke said.

Another thing that attracted Mullins to the Massman packer was the solid look of the machine.

"We thought it looked like a solid machine," Adam said. "It's geared a little differently. It's made with cams and cycles better. It looked like a solid machine and it's true."

Hanke said the company has over 20 case packers out in the industry.

"What we've heard from out in the field is the low cost of ownership, the robustness of the machine, the 24/7 production capability, and the uptime are the major benefits of the machine," Hanke said. "Many of those are surprised by how solid the

machine is."

The machine is heavily constructed with 3" x 3" tubular steel frame square tubing so the machine is built very heavy.

Typically, Adam would have some equipment that he'd have an idea to make it just a little better. But with the Massman case packer, Adam couldn't find anything he'd change.

"You'd think a 40-pound block is a 40-pound block, but it's not. The blocks come out of the tower a little differently every time. A quarter-inch taller here and a quarter-inch wider there. It used to cause us trouble," Adam said.

Massman's wraparound case packer is designed to package blocks of cheese that are inconsistent in height, Hanke said.

"The machine design can accept blocks that are taller than the case and still produce a square block," said Hanke.

As the cheese comes out of the tower, it is still pliable, Hanke said. The compression plates on the packer are able to form that cheese so that it is a nice square block.

"Massman built that solution right into the machine. We haven't really thought of anything we wanted to change about it." With minor adjustments it can handle those trouble blocks, Adam said.



Mullins Cheese recently put into two Massman case packers into its two cheese operations. The application pictured above has the cheese block being moved into the wraparound case after the collar is placed and formed. The case packer can load 25 40-pound blocks a minute.

"Basically the mechanical adjustments can be readily made with hand screws rather than getting a set of wrenches out. It's extremely adjustable both laterally and horizontally if the blocks are a little taller or wider. It sounds simple but it just means the world. The guys on the floor can make the necessary adjustments."

Being installed this month at the Marshfield facility is another Massman case packer as well as a Massman palletizer.

"We liked this one so much we bought another one just like it," Bill Mullins said. It will be the first Massman palletizer for Mullins Cheese.

"Overall, we are so satisfied with Massman that if they decided to make any other machines, we probably would take a good look at them," Adam Mullins said.

A Rich Tradition Of Cheesemaking

Mullins Cheese started on August 16, 1970. But it goes back much further than that. Bill and Don's grandfather, Mel, owned a number of facilities, the last one in the town of Ween near Edgar, WI.

Mel had three sons, Joe, Charles and John who all grew up in the cheese factory and eventually got into the business. On that fateful night in 1970, John Mullins and his wife Bernice purchased two cheese plants from Pauly Cheese.

In central Wisconsin in the late 1970's and early 1980's cheese facilities were abundant, yet they were getting old and they started closing. That was no different for the Pauly plants which were scheduled to close just 45 days before John Mullins purchased the plants.

"Dad got those plants on sale, and put us kids to work," said Bill Mullins. Those kids Bill, Don and Ray (who left the business in 1981), also grew up in cheese factories much like their parents.

In the early 1980's Mullins consolidated one of those plants (the old Riplinger Pauly plant) into the Knowlton plant. Bill Mullins believes the Knowlton facility is made up of 25 former central Wisconsin cheese plants.

"Back then, we were very growth

oriented. As time went on, we purchased other plants' milk routes and we grew the business."

At that time, Mullins Cheese was running 40,000 pounds of milk; 20,000 pounds in each plant.

"We started out at 40,000 and we're now going to be over 5 million," Bill Mullins said. "Now we produce more in one vat than they did back then," Adam said.

Mullins Cheese has 850 patrons within a 100 miles of the plants.

"The biggest one is probably in the 600 cow range and our smallest is probably 10," Bill Mullins said. "I bet we have a few that have been here since we bought the place."

About a decade ago, the company looked at other locations throughout the US but decided to stay in Wisconsin, Mullins confided.

"Wisconsin has the quality milk, a lot of good suppliers of machinery and technology. The infrastructure is here. The Upper Midwest still has the handle, it's the leader."

The Next Generation

Mary Mullins, Bill's wife, and Londa Mullins, Don's wife, also work at the cheese plants.

Don and Londa have four sons that all play important roles at the operations: Josh, Matt, Adam and Luke. Bill and his wife Mary have two sons, Ben and Andy, who are still in college.

"It's a different era, I guess. But just like my Dad and Bill, and my grandpa, we literally grew up in a cheese plant," Adam said. "We all have areas of expertise but overall we can step into each other's area should we have to. We've all learned from the bottom up."

While neither Bill or Don have any intention of retiring, Bill admits they are starting to take longer vacations.

"I don't know how things will shake out around here, but we're in pretty good hands with the kids," Bill Mullins said. "When push comes to shove, you have to treat this thing as a business."

According to Adam, it's not a concern of his or his brothers.

"You'd be surprised how well we all get along," Adam said. **■**



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