



Pine River Pre-Pack Finds Success In Private Label, High-End Flavors; New Warehouse, Production Facility In Design Stage

Newton, WI—Pine River Pre-Pack, Inc., owned and operated by the Lindemann family, whose dairy traditions date back to the 19th century, is nationally recognized for its quality Cheddar-based cold pack cheese.

Since the company was first incorporated almost 50 years ago by founder Philip C. Lindemann, it has earned numerous awards for its products, and enjoyed continuous, controlled growth.

In 1999, the company earned the Wisconsin Grand Master Cheese Maker Award in the Wisconsin State Fair Governor's Sweepstakes Cheese contest, the highest award in that contest, for its Horseradish cold pack spread.

Pine-River also earned three gold medals in World Championship Cheese Contests, two gold medals in US Championship Cheese Contests, and two first place wins in American Cheese Society (ACS) competitions.

To help meet demand, Pine River is hoping to add another warehouse, designed to eventually enable a new production facility, said marketing associate Mary Lindemann. Ground-breaking is slated some time in the next year or two.

The design will help incorporate HACCP programs, plant security – all the things the government likes to see in place these days, Lindemann said.

Under the direction of longtime cheese maker Harold Patzke, Pine

River makes two types of cheese spread – cold pack and snack spread. They are distinguished by methods of mixing and ingredients, and both products are packaged fresh in poly tubs with high-speed filling, sealing and labeling machines.

Pine River cold pack products are made by blending custom Grade A Wisconsin natural Cheddar – aged nine months or more – with cream and other dairy ingredients. The components are processed until smooth, then various herbs, spices or nuts are added – straight from the grinder into retail cups.

Containers range from consumer sizes for home use – six- to 32-ounce tubs – to institutional portions of 10- or 30-pound buckets for restaurant and deli use.

Pine River Pre-Pack utilizes both artificial ingredients and preservatives. Due to the high moisture content of cold pack cheese, preservatives are necessary and keep quality at an optimal level, Lindemann said.

"We strive to use the best ingredients available, but we're not opposed to using preservatives because they keep it the best," she said.

The company also offers classic stoneware crocks and almond-covered cheese logs.

"Crocks are a seasonal item; they represent a small percentage of cold pack across the country," Lindemann said. "There's an efficiency in packing cups versus crocks. We like to be

efficient with our packaging, and focus on the cups."

Quality doesn't have anything to do with packaging, she said. Crocks are more popular during the holidays, and lend themselves to the gift industry. It doesn't necessarily mean it's a higher end product – it's a nice gift, especially for corporate gift-giving, Lindemann continued.

Price-wise, the same amount of cheese is about three times more expensive if packaged in crocks as opposed to plastic cups, she said.

Latest Trends: Flavors, Private Label

The biggest trend in cold pack over the past few years has been demand for higher-end spreads and private label manufacture, Lindemann said.

"Cold pack itself is a higher end product, as opposed to a pasteurized cheese spread," she said.

Cheese is supplied by "a reputable Wisconsin Cheddar cheese factory," Lindemann said, and both branded and private label distribution is nationwide. Cold pack products are also stocked by gourmet shops and regional retailers, she continued. About half of total production is private label.

A minimum of 1,000 pounds and a two week lead time are required for all private label orders.

Delis, cheese shops and marketers are inventing new flavor combinations like Horseradish-Bacon and Spinach-Onion, and they're asking Pine River to make spreads from Provolone, Brick and Blue cheeses, Lindemann said.

Flavor trends are leaning towards spicier products – Habenero and Chipotle pepper. There's also been a call to make private label cold pack using specialized wines, Lindemann said. Wineries are requesting blends with their Pinot Grigio or blackberry wines, she said.

Flavors for branded Pine River cold pack spread include Sharp Cheddar, Garlic & Herb, Port Wine, Swiss & Almond, French Onion, Horseradish, Smokey Bacon and Jalapeno.

Along with cold pack spread and pasteurized snack cheese, Pine River also offers chocolates, sausage, snacks and other gift items.

Cold pack consumers run the gamut from college kids to grandparents, Lindemann said.

"I think it might depend on if they've been introduced to cheese spread as kids and they just keep buying it, or if they just buy it at Christmastime," she said. "It's very random."

Quality Cold Pack Is Hard To Find 'South Of Ohio'

The cold pack trend is regional as far as quality is concerned, Lindemann said.

"You can get cheese spreads in other parts of the country, but the quality isn't the same," she said. "It's usually a pasteurized version. Real, quality cold pack is hard to find once you get south of Ohio."

"We'd like to change that," she continued.

Our highest concentration of competition remains in Wisconsin, only because the best cheesemaking companies are right here, Lindemann said.

Pine River Pre-Pack does make a few cream cheese-based spreads, but that's not our focus, she said. We're a Cheddar-based cold pack company, and that's where we've enjoyed the most success.

However, we're not opposed to making a private label cream cheese spread in a special flavor, she continued.

A Small, Dedicated Team

Philip A. Lindemann, a licensed Wisconsin cheese grader, coordinates the purchasing of cheese and other manufacturing ingredients, and manages daily production and distribution. Barth Lindemann is in charge of warehouse operations, raw materials and accounting. Mary Lindemann coordinates plant tours, media events and in-store demonstrations, and administrative assistant Jody Kleppen handles customer service and product orders.

However, Pine River doesn't just have a few key people – they're all important, according to president Philip A. Lindemann. We have a small crew, and a lot of them have been here 15 years or more, he said.

"In the next five years, we'd like to see a controlled growth – keep growing and acquiring new customers – doing what we do. We are very happy with making the Cheddar-based cold pack. We've won a lot of awards in the last few years doing that, and we'd like to keep making a product that always tastes the same. You buy a cup this week and it will taste the same as a cup you buy in three months."

That just comes from a recipe we've really worked hard to balance the different ages of cheese, Lindemann said.

For more information, contact Pine River Pre-Pack, Inc. at (920) 726-4216 or visit www.pineriver.com. •

