



# Despite Expansion to 11 Million Pounds Of Blue Cheese, Seymour Dairy Remains An Artisan Operation

## Fiscally Responsible Approach Helps Company Become One Of The Largest Blue Cheese Makers In US

Seymour, WI—To most Wisconsinites, Seymour, WI, is known as the “home of the hamburger.”

But last Sunday, as Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker put it, “it is known as the home of the Blue cheeseburger.”

Fortunately for the city of Seymour, there is going to be a lot more Blue cheese to put on those cheeseburgers.

Seymour Dairy will be taking its production up to 11 million pounds a year, from over 6 million pounds it produced last year.

The \$2.5-million-plus expansion was needed to make the company more efficient and more competitive, said Mike Brennenstuhl, president and CEO of Seymour Dairy.

“The expansion was needed to continue to meet the needs of our customers,” Brennenstuhl said. “Not only the ones we have now, but also the customers that we’ll have in the future.”

There’s roughly 83 million pounds of Blue cheese made in the US every year, 70 percent of which basically goes into foodservice, says Brennenstuhl.

“We probably have 10-15 percent of the market. I think the Blue cheese market continues to grow about 6 percent a year. We’re just trying to get a bigger piece of the pie each year,” he said.

Started in 2004, Seymour Dairy initially had no customers, no orders, and no cheese production to speak of. What it did have was a cheese plant and a dream.

**“Looking at our turnout today and the facility, you may just think that we won the Super Bowl. No, what we really did was just have a successful draft. Everything we’ve done up to now is just sustainable. Now we need to be successful.”**

—Mike Brennenstuhl,  
Seymour Dairy

“Six years ago we felt we had a skill and a product we wanted to make and one that we thought customers would want to buy,” Bren-

nenstuhl said. “We thought we could improve the quality of cheese being made not only in Wisconsin but in the Blue cheese industry.”

The company has grown steadily over the years, with the last expansion taking place in 2008.

“Before this project, we ran about 200,000 pounds of milk a day,” Brennenstuhl said. “Now the plant will run more than 300,000 pounds of milk a day.”

All of the milk comes from Family Dairies USA members, most of it within 50 miles of the plant. Seymour Dairy wants the direct farm milk so its cheese is consistent.

Brennenstuhl has been happy with the progress and the ability to improve to the point where the company could make 11 million pounds of cheese.

Eleven million pounds of Blue cheese, “that’s still small in the grand scheme of things, but for an artisan Blue cheese manufacturer that is huge. We won’t do that this year, but we’re ready,” he said.

John Umhoefer, executive director of the Wisconsin Cheese Makers Association (WCMA), served as a sort of master of ceremonies during the grand opening celebration.

“What you have here are a couple of gentlemen (Mike Brennenstuhl and Dr. Samir Suleiman) who took a risk, a business risk,” Umhoefer said.

He noted the number of expansions the company has had through the years.

“Seymour Dairy has grown again and we’re here to cut another ribbon,” Umhoefer said. “They have become one of the largest Blue cheese plants in the United States. All from nothing in six years. Pretty amazing.”

## Fiscally Responsible, Plant

### Versatility, Quality Commitment

The pride Seymour Dairy employees displayed was pretty evident during the ceremonies.

You might have even sensed that a burden was lifted.

“We’re starting to get newer stuff around here. Our new equipment will enhance productivity, attitudes and quality,” Brennenstuhl said.

He said the company never operated equipment that was junk. And it never sacrificed quality. But he also said the company always had to be fiscally responsible.

“When we come to work now we see a plant that is beautiful in our eyes. We’re not a big corporate giant. We have nice new equipment to make cheese, but to be fiscally responsible, it’s not all new, but it is well taken care of and it will make

the best quality cheese we can make.”

At the end of the day, Brennenstuhl said a big part of the reason the company has been successful is that it took a calm, slow approach.

“We maximized the amount of money that we had. We’ve slowly grown our customer base,” he explained.

The Seymour facility is large; in fact, Brennenstuhl often jokes that in the early days he could have easily played tennis in many areas of the plant.

Today that size allows the company a great deal of versatility.

“We are fortunate that our plant, with the size that it is, we can be a

wine/cheese shops they’re not as worried about pricing on products.”

He said the company is focusing more on that venue than trying to be the mass supplier.

“Not that we don’t want to be, but when you get down to it, small companies like ours don’t always have those abilities,” Brennenstuhl remarked. “Still, we can talk to everyone. It helps us to be able to offer a diversified product line of quality cheese.”

## Expansion Includes Whey Room, Warehouse, Kusel Rotators

The phrase “fiscal responsibility” is used quite a bit around Seymour Dairy. A good example of that is the



Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker cuts the ribbon during grand opening ceremonies early this week. In the photo from left to right are: Seymour employee Clyde Van Vuren; Seymour Dairy owner Dr. Samir Suleiman; Walker; Mike Brennenstuhl, Rob Richter of Seymour Dairy, John Umhoefer of the Wisconsin Cheese Makers Association and Katie Vanden Langenberg, Seymour Dairy.

player in the industrial market, a player in foodservice market and a player in the specialty retail end of it.”

The biggest thing Brennenstuhl and the company are trying to do is to grow the plant to make it more profitable.

“We want to produce high end Blue cheese. To create a name for ourselves. To be the very best Blue cheese in the US,” Brennenstuhl said. “We don’t drive to be the highest volume manufacturer of Blue, that just kind of comes along with it.”

Brennenstuhl said that while the company remains focused on being an all-service supplier, he believes the cheese produced at the plant probably best fits the specialty cheese shops.

“The retail market is very competitive. There is so much investment needed to maintain retail presence,” Brennenstuhl said. “That is more about money than quality. When you get into the real high end

company’s practice of hand-flipping its Blue cheese wheels.

Envision employing people to rotate 5,000 wheels of cheese, six times a day. Now envision that when the room may get up to 95 percent humidity.

Seymour Dairy purchased 10 Kusel rotating systems that automatically rotate Seymour’s cheese wheels.

“The Kusel rotators allow us to increase our dairy output about 35 percent,” Brennenstuhl said. “They enhance quality in that we used to hand-flip everything. It was hard on people, it wasn’t a nice job.”

In general, the Kusel rotators were just a part of the new hot room which was fully automated.

Seymour Dairy designed its own brine system. The company added an ultrafiltration system to make 34 percent whey protein concentrate and has been on food grade status since July 18.

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## Seymour Dairy Hosts

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While the company added the new equipment, Brennenstuhl said the cheese makers at the company still use traditional skills in creating the cheese.

“Our cheese makers are trained to be able to give the attention to the cheese. That is what makes us unique. We now have a blend of some automation but we still allow enough room in our cheesemaking techniques to let the people use their skills to make it better.”

Bear in mind, Seymour Dairy had a plant. They didn't have any vats, no pasteurizer. They had nothing.

“We carried it from the very beginning to what it is now, in excess of 6 million pounds of Blue cheese a year.”

The addition of an 11,000 square foot warehouse enables the company to take that step up to 11 million pounds.

“It's important to us to be able to have the cheese stay in-house,” Brennenstuhl said. “100 percent of the cheese stays here for curing. We feel you lose control of the quality if you aren't watching it. Any number of things could happen. We do more things with how we cure cheese than most people do.”

Brennenstuhl says the last thing he does at the end of the day is to walk through the plant and say good night to all the cheeses, making sure all is well with climate and temperature control.

“So we celebrate,” Brennenstuhl said. “We celebrate the expansion of equipment that we have installed that will not only make us more higher quality cheeses, but make us more efficient and make us more competitive.”

### Product Line

Seymour Dairy produces six different Blue cheese products: Blue Crest, which is described as a “modern interpretation” of a classic, Danish-style Blue; an Italian-style Dolce Gorgonzola; Ader Kase, which is crafted in the tradition of fine German cheese makers; Ader Kase Reserve, an aged Blue; Crocker Hills Organic Blue; and a Signature Aged Special Reserve.

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—Mike Brennenstuhl

Seymour Dairy has also partnered with Red Barn Family Farms recently to create Weinlese, a signature Wisconsin Cheddar Blue Cheese. German for “vintage,” Weinlese is made by Brennenstuhl using the milk from Red Barn.

### The Future

After investing every penny they've made in this plant, Brennenstuhl says it's time to turn sustainable into successful.

“Looking at our turnout today and the facility, you may just think that we won the Super Bowl,” Brennenstuhl said. “No, what we really did was just have a successful draft. We've got a team now. We've got the players, the puzzle pieces put together. And now it is up to the team to make it all happen. Now is when we have to take this investment to be productive and make some money. Everything we've done up to now is just sustainable. Now we need to be successful.” r

## Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker Takes Tour Of Seymour Dairy



While taking a tour of the newly expanded Seymour Dairy, Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker (right) and Mike Brennenstuhl, president and CEO, take a break and sample some of the company's Blue cheese.

**Seymour, WI**—Seymour Dairy has a new consumer. Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker toured the newly expanded cheese plant this past Sunday and attracted a great deal of area media with him.

While much of his talk focused on job creation, Walker did touch on the economic impact Wisconsin's ag industry brings to the state.

Seymour Dairy's investment and commitment to the city will have an impact on the community of \$1.5 million. Walker said.

“Over the last five years of this industry, we've seen \$2.5 billion in investment in new technology and expansion like we are going to see today,” Walker pointed out before touring the cheese plant.

“Almost half of all specialty cheeses are from Wisconsin. There's a reason for that,” Walker continued. “We have a fine tradition of

excellence in cheese makers here and across the state. Because of that excellence, we lead the world when it comes to award-winning cheese. That is why our exports are doing so well. That is why people want more of our cheese.”

Walker expects expansions like Seymour's will spur on production growth in the state. He even went so far as to predict the state would take the milk production crown back from California.

“You're going to see production from about 7 million to 11 million pounds of cheese from this site. Because of that commitment to quality you're going to see cheese makers and our dairies grow in the state of Wisconsin.”

We're thrilled about Seymour Dairy but also the fact that this is a growing trend in Wisconsin, Walker said.

# Mould Rotators

Kusel Mould Rotators are excellent examples of how we customize our equipment to your exact requirements.

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