



# Steiner Cheese, America's Oldest Continually Operating Cheese Company, Celebrates 175 Years, 'Eyes' Expansion

**S**teiner Cheese – the country's longest continually running cheese company – just marked its 175 anniversary and is gearing up for future expansion and a major branding push.

The company's legacy dates back to 1833 when a young Swiss immigrant named Jacob Steiner settled in the Ohio Valley and began a cheese-making venture.

Three weeks ago, Steiner Cheese hosted its 175th birthday celebration – a two-day event featuring cheese-making contests and demonstrations.

A lot of our customers have stories to tell – memories of coming to the cheese house with their parents and grandparents, getting their special little slice of Saturday night cheese, said James Sommer, president and co-owner of Steiner Cheese.

Sommer and his wife, both Ohio natives, purchased the company three-and-a-half years ago. On January 1, 2008, longtime Ohio Swiss cheese maker Stanley Mullet came on board as co-owner and general manager.

Steiner Cheese is the country's oldest continuously operated cheese company, according to Sommer.

I'm sure there may have been cheese companies before us, but Steiner Cheese still goes on today, Sommer said. The Steiner family had been closely associated with the company until just recently; the widow of the last remaining family member, Dorothy Steiner, continues to visit the plant.

The company's long lineage also applies to its customers and milk suppliers.

"We have milk farmers tell us they've been sending milk to Steiner Cheese for 35 years," Sommer said.

Currently, Steiner Cheese has 375 milk producers – all Amish milk suppliers except one.

"Every last drop of milk that we receive still comes in canned form," Sommer said. "We think there's something that adds to the taste and flavor of our cheese by using canned milk."

Milk is shipped from small farms throughout Ohio, western Pennsylvania and eastern Indiana. Because some locations are too far from the production facility for milk to be delivered in cans, Steiner Cheese constructed a milk transfer station in Celina, OH. The station is about 190 miles from company headquarters in Baltic.

"Milk comes in locally, dumped and then travels back to Baltic by tanker truck. But these farmers are all Steiner farmers – we're not buying

milk from co-ops," Sommer said.

"We're very grateful for the relationship we have with our farmers," he continued. "We try to do everything possible to help them – testing cattle, providing services and selling supplies back to them. It's definitely a two-way street, and we don't take those guys for granted."

Steiner Cheese manufactures 260,000 pounds of cheese every month at the company's 29,000 square-foot production facility in Baltic.

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—James Sommer

Although Steiner Cheese offers other styles like Cheddar, Muenster, Provolone, Butter Cheese and Colby under its private label brand, the company manufactures exclusively Swiss in six different varieties: Mild, Aged, Lacey, Creamy, Smoked and Baby Swiss.

Products are available at Steiner Cheese retail locations, online, and through nationwide retail and food-service distribution, with accounts as far flung as Puerto Rico.

In all its various operations, Steiner Cheese currently employs 32 workers, including co-owner and head cheese maker Stanley Mullet.

"He's the hands-on guy. You give me a pliers and I'll use it to butter my toast," Sommer said. "I'm the guy with the dream and I know where I want to take the company; he's the hands-on guy responsible for getting the cheese made."

"If it weren't for him, we wouldn't be half as far along as we are today," Sommer continued.

#### **Sacrificing Standard Weight**

#### **Packaging For Taste & Flavor**

When James Sommer bought Steiner Cheese almost four years ago, he said there were necessary changes needed to modernize the plant in order to sell products to a higher level of distributors.

"Like everything else, it's all about companies consolidating. In order to do business with larger and larger conglomerates, you have to become larger yourself to provide the services customers need," Sommer said.

But the one thing we refused to change was the Steiner cheese recipe and the family's time-honored manufacturing techniques, he said.

In today's cheese industry, the push is on for standardized weights, Sommer said. When cheese is sold at large grocery stores, retailers want exact-weight cuts.

"That way, they don't have to label each individual piece of cheese. There's a sticker on the shelf saying how much the cheese costs with a bar code and boom – it's out the door," Sommer said.

So there's a big push for Swiss manufacturers to get the eyes smaller, he said. In the old days, Swiss cheese had eyes that were nickel- or quarter-sized. Today, Swiss manufacturers are pressured to get one dime-sized eye in a sandwich-cut slice.

"That way, the cheese is easier to slice and achieve precision weight if you just have one little hole," Sommer said. "But we've tried to resist that as much as possible."

The recipe Steiner Cheese uses – with stronger starters, cultures and a higher cook temperature – leads to larger, more frequent eyes, Sommer said.

"Some Swiss cheese companies come right out and tell you they make their Swiss so it packages well," he said. "At Steiner, we make our cheese so it tastes the best."

That's why you don't see a lot of our cheese in precision-weight packages, he continued.

"It goes out in sandwich cuts and foodservice because we're after the eyes and the great taste," Sommer said.

#### **Swiss A Natural Comfort Food**

America's Swiss cheese industry has seen some exciting changes over the past five to 10 years, with no new

"whizz-bang" technology behind the increase in sales, Sommer said.

"The amount of Swiss cheese consumed per capita keeps going up, he said. Ten years ago, could you walk into a McDonald's, Wendy's or Arby's and get real cheese on your sandwich? No," he said.

As Americans become a little more health-conscious, they're becoming more aware of what they're putting in their bodies and turning to wholesome cheese, Sommer said.

"So because of that, Swiss cheese has become a staple people will continue to eat, no matter how bad the economy gets," he said. "Right now, we're sold out."

#### **New Retail Locations Part Of Overall Branding Initiative**

Next May, Steiner Cheese will break ground on a new facility that will include a retail store, cut-and-wrap operation, form room and cold storage area. Construction is slated to be complete by winter 2009.

"What is going to make us successful 20, 40, 50 years from now? Branding our product," Sommer said. "Part of that is getting it out in front of the consumer."

Holmes County is the state's largest tourist area, and the new retail store will be situated directly in the heart of visitor activity.

"It's not that we can't sell cheese through distributors and we have to put up another store to sell it," Sommer said. "It's all part of branding our product."

Last August, Steiner Cheese opened another 2,000 square-foot retail store – roughly one hour south of Baltic.

For more information, contact Steiner Cheese at (888) 897-5505 or visit [www.steinercheese.com](http://www.steinercheese.com). r



James Sommer, president and co-owner, and Dorothy Steiner, the last remaining original family member at Steiner Cheese, host the 175 year anniversary celebration last month.