

Ohio's Middlefield Original Cheese Finds Unexpected Market For Paneer

Middlefield, OH—Amish-run Middlefield Original Cheese Cooperative here has adopted and embraced the innovation required for a new and novel niche – supplying Paneer cheese to a growing, fast-casual Indian restaurant chain.

Paneer is a fresh cheese commonly used in Indian cooking and a staple ingredient at Indian restaurants. Middlefield began making Paneer a few years ago when a Pittsburgh, PA-based business concern launched a chain of Choolaah Indian BBQ fast-casual restaurants.

Choolaah is the vision of co-CEO's Raji Sankar and Randhir Sethi of Pittsburgh's Wholesome International, which is also a franchisee to popular Five Guys Burgers & Fries.

The concept is similar to Chipotle, but features fresh, traditional Indian cuisine.

"This is a fast-casual dining experience not only unique to our market, but to the entire category," Sankar said.

Choolaah's mission is to deliver delicious food people love to eat, know is good for them, and want to return for, Sankar said. To that end, we never stop evolving.

Current restaurant locations include Orange Village, OH; Pittsburgh and Anderson, PA; and Sterling, VA. Locations which are temporarily closed due to the pandemic are located in King of Prussia, PA and Fairfax, VA.

"They want to expand big time," said Noah Miller, lead cheese

maker at Middlefield Original Cheese.

"These people from India came over and taught us how to make Paneer," Miller said. "In India, they make it using a small kettle over a fire, put it on a skewer and press it with a rock."

"We had quite a time learning how to make Paneer," he continued. "Someone's grandfather from Europe also came over and gave us more information, so it was a learning experience."

The cheese has no salt or flavor until it's marinated and put on a skewer, Miller said.

Paneer doesn't melt, so you can fry it in a pan or barbecue it – a very unique cheese.

Choolaah opened its first flagship restaurant in Cleveland, in 2014, and has purchased Middlefield Original paneer

ever since.

Middlefield cooperative is overseen by a five-person board of directors, all of whom are farmers. The company makes cheese five days a week, taking in milk six out of seven days.

Traditional Cheddar remains the company's biggest seller, followed closely by smoked and flavored Cheddar and Monterey Jack varieties. Smaller scale styles include Colby, Colby Jack and Swiss.

Middlefield Original sells its products to specialty retail stores throughout northeastern Ohio and western Pennsylvania through four distribution companies.



Amish-run Middlefield Cheese has almost completely recovered from the shutdown last March, reigniting partnerships with distributors and cut-and-wrap operations. At least 20 percent of the company's total cheese production goes to foodservice sales.

It also sells cheese to Laubscher Cheese Company, Inc. of Mercer, PA, a cut and wrap operation.

"They take the cheese we don't sell through our distributors," Miller said, which accounts for roughly 40 percent of total production.

COVID-19 Hits Foodservice Sales

Prior to the pandemic, Middlefield Original was working towards a reachable goal to expand its distribution to nearby states like Michigan and Indiana.

March hit, and since at least 20 percent of our cheese goes to foodservice – restaurants and schools shut down – we were left with big orders being cancelled overnight, Miller said.

"Everything came to a halt," he said. "Even our cut-and-wrap partner shut down."

With cheese stocks piling up at the plant, Middlefield was able to source a cheese buyer in Florida.

"He bought all of our cheese, but at a cheap price," Miller continued.

Then the milk started flowing into here, and we were flooded with milk, making cheese sometimes six days a week, he said.

"We were working almost 24 hours a day, but milk was cheap and the cheese was cheap," Miller said. "We kept going and didn't have to shut down."

Things changed for the better on July 6, when Middlefield Original resumed its partnership with Laubscher. Several weeks later, the cheese company was back where it was before March.

"Our distributors say the orders are coming back," Miller said. "It's slow, but they're returning."

Regarding public and worker safety, CDC guidelines were followed at Middlefield's on-site retail store, but social distancing in the plant was difficult to implement.

"These people from India came over and taught us how to make Paneer."

—Noah Miller, Middlefield Original Cheese

"I wrote up a procedure log tracking the health of our employees," Miller continued. "We want to be respectful and follow the rules as much as possible. So far, no one's tested positive. We're very lucky."

The Middlefield Cheese Amish community includes about 3,000 families, and Miller said he's not losing sleep over another shutdown. We're going to live our lives and put our trust in the good Lord, he continued.

The company will soldier on towards its goal of expansion, focusing stronger on the retail market, Miller said. We're making products straight off the farm, many of which are certified organic and made using grass-fed milk, taking care to offer sustainable cheeses and help protect the environment.

"Our goal is to sustain small family farms, getting a better price for milk so these farmers can make a living at home," Miller continued.

For more information on Middlefield Original Cheese, call 440-632-5567.

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