

## Nasonville Modernizing Operations To Take Its Unique Feta Products To Retail

Marshfield, WI—To balance production, Nasonville Dairy is targeting the retail market by expanding its Feta line and introducing new products that are unique to that cheese category.

Nasonville Dairy started heading toward retail offerings a few years ago, but really noticed the importance when the coronavirus hit and nearly shut down the foodservice industry.

“We found out that we were too heavy in foodservice the hard way. Our white tablecloth business shut down almost immediately,” said Ken Heiman, who with his brothers, Kim and Kelvin, owned the three-generation cheesemaking operation.

We always knew we were going to get into retail, Heiman said. We always wanted to have proper balance between foodservice, retail and industrial production.

“We simply have been too focused on the foodservice channel. When that business shut down, we were stuck for a while,” Heiman said. “Our Cheddar cheese sales were still going gangbusters, but when it came to Feta or other specialty products, we had a large reduction of sales.”

Heiman says the retail business is very difficult and the current situation doesn't lend to easier times.

“Retail is tough,” Heiman said. “I can see why we didn't go there before. It requires people who live in that world. We now have three experienced people doing what I was trying to do besides my regular duties around here. We realized that a sales department was a requirement rather than an expense,” he said.

He said it has been hard to decide where the company should be at this moment, and when to introduce new products into the marketplace.

“Right now no one wants to take on anything new. It's a dif-

ficult time. You have to be different. Same-old, same-old just won't cut it.”

Currently, Nasonville offers retail operations crumbled, diced and cubed Feta under their new Cafe Olympia brand in, Heiman admits, “kind of what every one else does” styles.

To differentiate Nasonville's Feta, Heiman said the company will be introducing new products in 2021 that are unique from what their competitors are doing.

“We think we can do things a little different. We've come up with a different breed of cat. We are doing the same stuff as our competitors, and that's just fighting for place on a shelf. But we do have some new ideas for products that are far superior and convenient.”

While he said it was a little too early to talk about some of the new products, Heiman did talk about a new product that is being used heavily in China.

“Snow Feta is seeing great results over in China. It's more like a powdered Feta that is sprinkled, replacing traditionally Parmesan toppings and on pizzas.”

### Cheese Production

Nasonville processes about 1.5 million pounds of milk per day from 186 patrons near its Marshfield, WI, facility.

The company produces about 46 million pounds of cheese a year; 60 percent of it is made into Cheddar.

“We exist in the Cheddar market because it's a large volume that can be used and it comes in very handy when you have to put it in storage,” said Ken Heiman. “It balances our production.”

Kim Heiman said competing in the Cheddar market is no easy task.

“If we are on the same road as the large plants out west or the new Michigan plant, we'll be road kill,” he remarked.

He said being small, working

off tables, and working in distinct profiles allows the company to be leaner and quicker.

“They have the most modern plants in the world, but they can't switch into making a number of different products like we can, they can make Cheddar or they can make Mozzarella, but that's all they can do.”

### Expansion Necessary

After creating efficiencies to its Feta production a few years ago, Nasonville Dairy recently completed an upgrade to its Feta packaging line with future expansion of its Cheddar and over 40 other flavors of cheese.

The expansion allowed the company to make more efficient the flow of its current operation.

“As with older plants, expansions occurred where and when production wouldn't be interrupted,” said Kim Heiman. “You couldn't afford the downtime. You just kept adding on. But ultimately the workflow created wasn't the most efficient and your cheese may have had to take a few laps around the plant before finding a good spot.”

Adding the new packaging line and brine system helped us make the retail decision and we'll become far more efficient,” said Ken Heiman. “We are a Loos Machine robot from completion. And then we are on to the next one.”

The “next one” is a plan to eventually house new 50,000-pound cheese vats, which will focus on its Cheddar and flavored cheeses.

Kim Heiman said the company plans to add new finishing tables that needed modernizing, larger vats to reduce the number of makes in a day, as well as when Feta demand is lower.

“Feta typically is slower in December and winter months,” Ken Heiman said. “The new vats will allow us to put more into the Cheddar side during those months.”

### Feta Production

Nasonville has been making Feta cheese since 1986.

“We started making a vat or two a week and it just kept growing,” Ken Heiman said.

The company went through a major expansion to its existing Feta operation back in 2016.

At the time, according to plan, production was to increase 10 percent from 20 million pounds.

Getting acclimated to the new system, losing an account, and with packaging struggles, Nasonville's production briefly fell during the first year of the new operation.

“We were accustomed to making Feta into a full vat of 23,000 pounds of milk at a time,” Kim Heiman said. “It was kind of a

struggle to get back the flavor profile we had when we began making 1,000 pounds of milk in a bascine each time.”

Feta production is back up to 400,000 pounds of milk a day and is growing and it's flavors that are driving the growth.

“The flavor side of Feta is growing because it is really still a salad cheese. So getting the peppercorns and the lemon peppers and being able to add condiments into an already really good flavor profile on our Feta has been important.”

While most of the production has gone to distributors and wholesalers for the restaurant industry, Ken Heiman said the company hopes the retail industry balances the production.

“The Feta market will continue to grow. That's a credit to not only us but a credit to our competitors as well. We have some really good competitors making really good product who have grown the market. 'Cause if they aren't, the consumer may well give up on Feta entirely.”

Nasonville farmed-out a lot of their packaging. This expansion brought it in-house. And the new brine system increased the brine space, Kim Heiman said.

“We were doing things too labor intensive. We would actually take our slabs of Feta, put them into brine, put them into cooler, we take them back out, back and forth and it got too much.”

The new brine systems is really a newly refurbished system made by Fiberglass Solutions, Inc., out of Green Bay.

“The guys at Fiberglass Solutions are a great young team. We're happy to work with them. They did a great job. They stuck around and made adjustments whenever we asked. And they stood behind their product.”

### Transcending Flavor Trends

About a third of all the cheese produced at Nasonville goes into the “everything under the sun” category, Ken Heiman said.

The two brothers admit that they wonder why they themselves make so many different cheeses.

“That's the uniqueness we have to have to survive when you're competing against other companies who can produce it faster and larger,” Kim Heiman said. “We have to be smaller and far quicker to adjust to our buyers' needs.”

The company makes 42 flavor varieties of cheese.

“One of the things we do understand and we do real well is the ability to offer more robust flavors,” Ken Heiman said. “We can't compete in the traditional Cheddar category. We don't do that. We make



Brothers Ken Heiman (left) and Kim Heiman are two of the three owners at Nasonville Dairy. The company is known for their many different varieties and flavors of cheese. Upgrades and expansion of the company's Feta operations balances the company's offerings that now include retail.

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Cheddar unusual. We have it do something.”

Some of the varieties include Spinach & Artichoke Jack cheese, Buffalo Wing, and Blue Marble.

We have the ability to switch into a lot of different flavors with a lot of uniqueness, Kim Heiman said.

“It’s being able to utilize what you have and the ability to offer a full product line. Buyers want variety and we want to serve them with all their needs,” Kim Heiman said.

“We jokingly say our cheeses are weird,” Ken Heiman said. “They’re really not. They’re different than the traditional, we admit that. But they are newly crafted to meet the changing dynamic of the consumers’ households.”

Kim Heiman said the consumer is changing. “Young adults are marrying later if they marry at all. Families are different than they were. The dynamics of a family, which are the consumers, are totally different. What are they looking for? They are looking for something with flavor and spice.”

### The Heat Is On

Kim Heiman said that 86 percent or more of their overall expense goes into the cost of the raw product - milk.

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—Ken Heiman,  
Nasonville Dairy

“Knowing that number allows us to project out what we’ll need. We’re trying to make the biggest profit out of that 86 percent as we can, making a cheese that gets the most dollar out of that milk,” Kim Heiman said.

A lot of that percentage of milk is going into pepper cheeses.

“We have every pepper under the Scoville scale,” Kim Heiman said.

The company makes cheese from the very hot, Carolina reapers, ghost peppers, scorpion peppers to the milder habanero, jalapeno to the not-hot bell peppers.

“Right now the hottest thing out there would match the flavors of Thailand,” Ken Heiman said.

That many different flavors of cheese often hinders the business

from automating, however, Kim Heiman said.

“We have to be able to switch into products because that’s what gives us the ability to sell,” he said. “It kind of prevents us from bringing in some of the automation. We can’t utilize it. It would be great to have some of the latest automation these guys are offering, but it would prevent us from being who we are.”

### Trend or Fad

Nasonville has a healthy export business, sending Feta, Cheddar and those many varieties to China, Japan, Korea, Saudi Arabia and other markets around the world.

“The Chinese market is changing,” said Ken Heiman. “They are putting a lot more protein into their diets. They would order a lot of unusual things, like salt-free Cheddar. They use it in their dishes and cooking, they blend it in as a protein source and add salt after to their taste.”

Besides the cheese products Nasonville manufactures, the company also is involved with products with health and religious claims.

The company manufactures cheese products that are Kosher certified, Non-GMO, organic and Omega-3 enhanced. On the fluid side, Nasonville offers kefir drinks and A2A2 milk products.

“Our buyers come to us for the variability. When people think of weird, people think of Nasonville. We may be the only people crazy enough to try anything,” Ken Heiman said.

Today’s consumer is driving all of these new trends, said Kim Heiman. Or are they fads?

“Years ago, a trend would have a 20 year life,” Ken Heiman said. “That life is now five years or less from the day it was conceived to the day it dies.”

Whether they are trends or fads, Nasonville isn’t going to invest a lot of money or time in chasing it.

“We’re doing A2A2 milk because we have our bottling plant and our own farm that easily allows us to do it,” said Kim Heiman. “We started it with our own farms to prove it to ourselves.”

He said the farmer needs to be able to market their product better.

“From a dairy product standpoint, we have many ways to market our products, to differentiate ourselves. Styles, cuts, flavors, Kosher, Organic, but from a farmer’s standpoint they only had milk to market. A2A2 milk, non-GMO milk gives farmers a way to differentiate their product and a chance to increase their profit from it.”

Milk has a 21 day shelf life, Ken Heiman said. There is nothing you can do with it after that.

He said it’s these innovative products that will strengthen the economy of the milk supplier.

“Thirty percent of the people out there say they are lactose intolerant.



Adding a newly refurbished brine system, made and installed by Fiberglass Solutions, Inc., and a new packaging line has enabled Nasonville Dairy to become far more efficient.

erant. Whether they are or are not isn’t relevant. That number is reality.”

Ken Heiman said that dairy is too good and too healthy to lose market share to plant-based waters and juices due to these breeding or digestibility issues.

### History Of Nasonville Dairy

The current ownership team got its start working for their parents, Arnie and Rena Heiman, who sold the operation to the three boys in 1986.

The ownership team are brothers Ken, Kim and Kelvin Heiman and the next generation consists of six working at the plant.

“The family is scattered around the building,” said Ken Heiman. “We grew up in the business as our kids have. It’s all we knew. We’re still growing to the point where we are still vested in the business.”

We’ve been really fortunate, Mom and Dad put us into a great position here, Kim Heiman said.

“Just like our parents did, we try to make a good family work envi-

ronment, not only for our kids but for the employees as well,” Kim Heiman said.

Having a strong team in place also is important to the company’s success. That team consists of soon-to-be four Wisconsin Master Cheese Makers including Ken Heiman, Tom Torkelson, Brian Jackson, while Kirk Hansen is in the process of getting his Masters.

When the time comes, Kim Heiman said, the next generation has showed interest in continuing the tradition at Nasonville.

“We’ve allowed them to take a look at it, and they are into it. But we don’t know. They’ve niched out their area,” Kim Heiman said. “We believe we’ve made a saleable item and we continue to do that by these expansions.”

It’s important this business continues. For our family, our employees our farmers. We really do want to continue to be successful for them.

For more information, visit [www.Nasonvilledairy.com](http://www.Nasonvilledairy.com).

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