



Burnett Dairy Uses Past Projections, Future Expectations of Sales Growth To Double Plant Size, Add Innovative Equipment

In its 37-year history, Burnett Dairy Cooperative's recipe for success has been taking it slow and making a good product. That is still the plan despite a recent expansion that doubled the size of its cheesemaking operations.

Dale Olson, general manager of the cooperative said the co-op added 20,000 square feet to the cheese plant, doubling the production facility. In addition, the building that had previously been the make room is now a shrink packaging area.

That area will also be used for shredding. "Shreds are an area we would like to expand on in the years to come...it's been good for us. It's hard not to be in the Italian cheese business and not shred," Olson said. "You need to be able to offer those types of products."

"You can have the finest equipment but people are still the key to any successful operation."

—Dale Olson,
general manager, Burnett
Dairy Cooperative

Burnett Dairy started planning the expansion about three years ago. In August of 2001 the co-op broke ground and it was already making cheese in July, 2002.

Burnett's cheese sales throughout the years and future projections gave the co-op's farmer board enough assurance to go ahead with the expansion, although the board pondered an expansion that would take them through five years, 15 years or 20 years, Olson said.

"We looked at our procurement and that has really been good. And we're at the point where we just couldn't run any more milk."

Olson said they looked at the projections and decided to expand for 20 years down the road.

With this expansion Olson said he's pretty well set for a while. "Basically we built a plant that would allow us to double our production from where we were now."

Currently, the cooperative runs 700,000 pounds of milk seven days a week.

"For the most part we have put ourself in pretty good position to increase production every year for the next 20-plus years," Olson said.

Olson said the cooperative added four new 45,000-pound Scherping Systems vats, a Stoelting salting/finishing table, and a Johnson Industries International molder.

In addition, Burnett completely refinished the brine room area, doubling its size. Burnett also added a new milk pasteurizer which runs about 50,000 pounds of milk an hour, and a new separator. Finally, Burnett completely redid their starter room and added new starter tanks.

"Pretty much the whole thing was improved. Basically the new make room from the get-go from the high well lighted walls to an all new air handling system."

One of the items that Olson was extremely excited about was the addition of D.R. Tech's EZ Whey Cheese Belt.

Olson said the most important thing he was looking for in the belt was control of the cheese.

He wanted a belt that offered more control of the whey, the pH, the temperature and other variables much like a traditional make table or a cheese vat.

Olson said the cheese that is made in the EZ Whey Cheese Belt is far more consistent with fewer variables. "It gives us a little more forgiveness."

Olson stressed the belt was not built to increase the speed of production.

"The belt probably allows you to make cheese more the old fashioned way. You don't need to run this belt fast. We like to take some extra time so we slow (the belt) down, take that extra time and make a good a piece of cheese," he said.

Burnett Dairy was going to purchase two of the EZ Whey Cheese Belts, but found out that the one was exceeding all expectations, so they settled on the one for now.

The belt is currently making the company's Mozzarella, Provolone and String cheese.

"They built it too good," Olson said. "We found out we can run pretty well on the one right now. It's doing more than we thought it could do," he continued.

Olson said that at some point they will be putting another one in. "I won't think twice about buying the same thing."

D.R. Tech customized the cheese belt with a great deal of input of Olson and the other cheese makers in the plant. "There had to be a lot of talk. We had to make sure we were understanding each other and

what our final goal was," Olson said.

Burnett Dairy has a rich tradition of experienced and award winning cheese makers to draw input from in helping to create the cheese belt.

Olson has been working for the cooperative since 1966. It was Olson, back in 1988, who was the last US cheese maker to be named the World Championship cheese makers; he won the prestigious award for a String cheese.

But Olson was quick to say that the cheesemaking process involves a number of dedicated people.

"You can have the finest equipment but people are still the key to any successful operation."

"It may not be a great year for the farmers but it all starts there. They should be proud of the awards. And so too should the haulers, intake people, everyone associated with the cheesemaking program. It takes a lot to make a real fine piece of cheese," Olson said.

"The cheese we turn into the contest is what we want to give to our customers out in our stores," Olson continued.

Burnett Dairy is quite accustomed to awards. In this year's 2003 United States Championship Cheese Contest, cooperative cheese makers Rob Stellrecht and Steven Tollers took first and second, respectively, in String cheese and Earl Wilson, a second-place finish and Jeff Moody a top five finish in the Mozzarella. Over the years, Bruce Willis has won a number of awards for the cooperative as well.

Olson said he has good quality cheese makers who have worked at Burnett for up to 30 years.

"They take a great deal of interest and pride in making quality, uniformed cheese," Olson said.

That uniformity is very important, Olson said. "Whether it's Provolone, Mozzarella, or Cheddar or Colby, especially when you make it for a customer for the East Coast, West Coast or here in the Midwest, you want to make the cheese the way they want it uniformly."

Burnett Dairy makes Mozzarella, Provolone, String cheese and about 5 percent of production goes into American-type cheese.

Burnett Dairy markets include the majority going into foodservice but the retail end of it has been growing quite a bit.

"We're pretty happy with the growth of our cheeses, particularly String cheese in the deli department," Olson said.

Markets include in New England in foodservice, Ohio, Tennessee, Kentucky, West Virginia, California, Washington, North and South Dakota, Texas and Wisconsin, Illinois and Minnesota.

"There are still quite a few states we'd like to get into but we're very happy with our growth, and our customers are very happy with the quality."

Burnett hopes to continue growing by primarily expanding its String cheese sales and continuing a steady growth on its Mozzarella and Provolone sales.

"For the most part the customers we deal with are looking for a special product. Our customers compete against the big chains. They have to have the same uniqueness, some niche. They probably are going to charge a little more but they want to build a demand through quality and



Burnett Dairy uses D.R. Tech's EZ Whey Cheese Belt to make their award-winning cheeses.

that is what we try to do with our cheese."

Burnett sells its biggest share of cheese through distributors.

Burnett Dairy has 205 dairy farms in the cooperative. Producers average 80 cows per farm, Olson said, ranging from 40 to about 600 cows.

The procurement area has expanded to about 70 miles and includes Minnesota and Wisconsin.

Burnett Dairy Cooperative was formed in the 1960's when Wood River Coop Creamery and Bransted Coop Creamery merged.

At that time, the cooperative had about 40,000 pounds of milk to process and decided Mozzarella had the right growth pattern.

Olson thought Burnett Dairy was one of the first, if not the first, cooperative to make Mozzarella and Provolone in Wisconsin.

"You look at the growth of Mozzarella. It's been unreal. It's been excellent."

With those projections in the 1960s to make Mozzarella, Burnett hopes it's latest projection to expand will be as visionary. But as Olson said, their ultimate goal "is to make really good cheese and to grow a little bit at a time." •