

Cost & Labor Deter Producers From Making Specialty-Cut Cheddar, Despite Retail Demand

Madison—The cost and labor involved in producing traditional hooped Cheddar has caused many cheese companies to abandon the process, despite consumer appreciation and demand for specialty bandaged and waxed daisies, midgets or gems.

Only a handful of US companies continue to make specialty-cut Cheddar, and most in limited production. Those who do, however, have recently earned tremendous acclaim for their products.

Just last month, Fiscalini Farms of Modesto, CA, won the Wyke Farms Trophy for best Extra Mature Traditional Cheddar at London's 2007 World Cheese Awards – the first time an overseas Cheddar won big over Great Britain.

And last summer, Cabot Creamery Cooperative of Montpelier, VT, took Best of Show at the 2006 American Cheese Society (ACS) Cheese Contest with Cabot Clothbound Cheddar.

There are several standard shapes and weight ranges of domestic Cheddars; the most frequently used packs are midgets, flats and longhorns.

Daisies – ranging from 20 to 22 pounds – were previously sold at the National Cheese Exchange. Trading rules at the Wisconsin Cheese Exchange, which later became the National Cheese Exchange, were eliminated in 1971 because trading had become practically non-existent.

New rules became effective July 16, 1971.

Cabot Creamery offers a full line of specialty-cut Cheddar, including hand-waxed bricks/blocks in 4-ounce, 8-ounce, 1-pound, 2-pound and 3-pound sizes; traditional cheesecloth wheels in 38-pound and 3-pound sizes; and more than a half-dozen flavored Cheddar selections in random-weight deli bars and bulk 10-pound and 42-pound sizes.

Also headquartered in Vermont, the Grafton Village Cheese Company of Grafton, VT, manufactures 23-pound daisy wheels, 2-pound longhorns and 3-pound gem wheels.

Because these styles require special molds and slightly different handling, the manufacturing process is much more involved, said Wendy Brewer, sales and marketing manager for Grafton Village Cheese.

"Any time you do anything to a Cheddar above and beyond its original production form adds labor and in turn, value," Brewer said.

There's also a sales and marketing cost-factor which needs to be considered, Brewer continued.

Grafton Village also has a few unique "specialty" finished retail sizes like the 4-ounce bar and 8-ounce wheel – both cut down from 2-pound longhorns.

"We cut the cheese to size and Cryovac seal or hand-wax the different varieties," Brewer said. "We use

different colored waxes to distinguish the cheese. Everything is done by hand at Grafton."

In the Midwest, Henning's Wisconsin Cheese in Kiel, WI, currently manufactures most sizes of traditional Cheddar: 3-pound gems, 5-pound favorites, 12-pound midgets, 13-pound longhorns, 21-pound daisies, 37-pound flats and 75-pound Cheddars.

Henning's also specializes in mammoth Cheddar available in 150-, 300-, 500-, 1,000-, 3,000-, 5,000-, 10,000-, and 12,000-pound varieties.

Owner and Master Cheese Maker Kerry Henning said using this method of manufacture is absolutely more labor-intensive.

"We do traditional matting of the cheese to begin with – hoops are filled and dressed manually, then the cheese is pressed overnight," Henning said. "The next morning, the cheese is removed from the hoop and put in special drying rooms."

After a rind is formed, the cheese is waxed and placed in wooden boxes, Henning said.

According to Jed Davis, Cabot's director of marketing, production steps prior to the final curd stage can be similar to blocks and barrels, but from the forming of the curds through preparation of cheese for aging, the effort is dramatically increased.

"For example, for our wheels, the Cheddar requires more than half-a-dozen additional steps compared to creating traditional blocks, including everything from prep time to ready the hoops with the cheesecloth, to redressing the wheels after initial pressing, to the turning of the wheels after formation," he said.

In the West, Fiscalini Cheese produces English-style, clothbound Cheddar in 40-pound blocks and 60-pound wheels, using traditional, old-world methods that include stacking and milling.

This process requires an additional two or three hours of labor, said owner John Fiscalini. The company also makes Cheddar in small batches – 1,200 gallons of milk resulting in between 800 and 900 pounds of cheese – fully utilizing the labor of two employees to make a single batch.

"We feel that our flavor is a truly wonderful experience of what genuine Cheddar should be, with exquisite balance," Fiscalini said.

"Our texture is much different than most American Cheddars in that it is drier (less water) and therefore more crumbly," he said.

"Ours will not slice nicely for deli use in a commercial slicer – it must be sliced by hand. This is the texture we want, and is due to both the moisture content and the traditional Cheddaring method," Fiscalini said.

"We lose the mass market deli user, but we provide flavor," he continued.

Texture, Flavor Differences

Most cheese makers acknowledge flavor and texture variances between block and hooped Cheddar.

Especially with wheels, Davis stressed. It's often difficult to get as thorough a pressing as for blocks, resulting in a more open cheese body.

"Texture can also be quite noticeably different, especially if comparing a natural rind Cheddar to a traditional block, where expelled moisture versus retained moisture, respectively, can lead to swings on the crumbly/creamy scale," Davis said.

Henning also agreed that flavor and texture differences exist between traditional Cheddar manufacture and commercially made styles.

"Traditional matting tends to have flavor and texture differences than cheese made in a DMC and then put through a block tower," he said.

At Grafton Village, cheese is cut from 40-pound blocks and 2-pound longhorns into 10-pound, 5-pound, 3-pound, 2-pound, 1-pound, 8-ounce and 4-ounce pieces.

"When Cheddar is cut, we do not allow it to sit around for very long before it's finished off with a Cryovac seal or waxed," Brewer said.

"It should be sealed tight from the air as quickly as possible to deter any changes to the texture or flavor from taking place," she said. "There is not a change in taste or texture if this happens."

Steve Lindemann, marketing director for Northern Wisconsin Produce Company of Manitowoc, WI, said because aged, bandaged cheese tends to mold easily, deli staffers often complain.

"Some people who know cheese know you get a bit of mold on the surface," Lindemann said. "But they don't want to pay for mold."

Only in America does one find this kind of complaint, Fiscalini said.

"We expect our foods to be perfect in every aspect. We yearn for yesterday's produce with no sprays, yet we condemn fruits with worm damage. We want bandaged Cheddar, which is 'mold-ripened,' yet we want no mold," Fiscalini said.

As we educate the consumer and the cheese buyer, hopefully we will find fewer complaints, even though the amount of mold in our Cheddar remains at the same level, he said.

"The problem is that a retailer buys a wheel expecting 60 pounds of cheese, but must trim some of it off, therefore experiencing a 'paper loss' of profit," Fiscalini said.

"This is a real concern, and both the cheese maker and the retailer must find some common ground for the actual loss of cheese," he said.

Cost-Effective For Cheese Makers?

Does added cost and labor ultimately outweigh the benefits of producing

specialty-cut Cheddar? According to Dan Strongin, managing partner and owner of consulting firm Edible Solutions, the problem is not cost efficiency – it's trying to solve a modern problem with a 1950s solution.

"After years of making consistent but unexciting cheese, and constantly lowering prices to remain competitive, the American cheese industry is in enough trouble as it is," Strongin said.

Bigger factories, cheaper ways to make cheese, cutting the same old stuff differently, are failed ideas, Strongin said.

"We will do anything but make a more flavorful, delicious cheese it seems," he continued. "What is needed is a fundamental change to focus on flavor and quality, not on tricks."

Retailers Prefer Smaller Sizes For Ease Of Handling, Larger For Cost

When it comes to handling cheese at the retail level, cheese makers say some retailers prefer smaller pieces for convenience and display purposes, while others choose larger blocks to cut costs.

"A lot of the buyers for retail and foodservice found it got to be a price war and it's just easier to cut a 40-pound block than buy a naturally-bandage-style Cheddar," said Northern Wisconsin's Steve Lindemann.

"I find there's a quality difference in the flavor and the make is more intensive," Lindemann said.

We find that retailers like most of their cheese under 75 pounds for the ease of it, Henning said.

"But they like the bigger ones for the marketing edge it gives them," he continued.

Cabot's Jed Davis said smaller pieces of cheese – sizes that don't require additional handling prior to sales – offer convenience for retailers.

"The can also offer convenience to the consumer that knows what she wants and is looking for a more grab-and-go shopping experience," Davis said.

"For retailers, whether they offer a hands-on, cut-to-order option or not, smaller sizes also provide as many – if not more – options for creative merchandising, presentation and display," Davis said.

"Finally, the smaller sizes can create attractive retail pricing options for both retailers and consumers," he continued.

Grafton's Wendy Brewer said there are many small, independent retailers, as well as large chain store retailers and cooperative markets, who prefer to cut and wrap.

"This economy of scale plays a factor in allowing the retailer a choice of purchasing larger blocks and adding their own labor to cut and wrap the cheese," she said.

"This is also a great way for the retailer/cheesemonger to have more contact with the consumer, answer