

Lamagna Cheese Finding Success Making Milk-Based, Organic Ricotta

Company Adds Stoelting Enclosed Vats For Higher Yields, Better Consistency, Improved Conditions

Verona, PA—A family-owned, East Coast Italian-style cheese operation recently swapped out its traditional cheese vats with enclosed machines, resulting in more consistent products and higher yield.

Known for its Ricotta, Lamagna Cheese Company, Inc. is headquartered in a 80,000-square-foot facility in Verona, PA, a small suburb just outside Pittsburgh. The company currently has about 20 employees on staff.

“Some of the more national brands – particularly the ones in the Midwest – are whey-based Ricotta, which are grittier and not as flavorful as a milk-based product.”

—Mike Lamagna,
Lamagna Cheese

Lamagna Cheese is owned and operated by the four Lamagna brothers – Mike, Rudy, Kirk and Chris. The brothers have been running the company since about 1980.

Lamagna Cheese was originally founded in 1928 by John Lamagna, who started selling his cheese door to door.

Although Lamagna is known for its high-quality Ricotta, the brand also includes Feta, Mozzarella, Brick, Provolone, Swiss, imported and grated Romano and Parmesan, and Cheddar.

The company sources the bulk of its milk from Turner Dairy in western Pennsylvania. It also receives organic milk from Natural Dairy and Organic Valley.

In all, Lamagna Cheese processes about 15,000 gallons of milk daily.

Lamagna makes its own brand of cheese, and manufactures both conventional and organic dairy products for the private label and industrial markets.

“We make 30-pound bags of industrial Ricotta for frozen food manufacturers,” Mike Lamagna said. “That’s roughly 20 percent of our business.”

The manufacturing of organic dairy items makes up about 15 percent of total production, and 5 percent of products are private label sales. The remaining 60 percent is branded Lamagna cheese.

Organic Valley, a private label

client of Lamagna Cheese, sells its products nationwide. Another client is headquartered in the Midwest, and the rest of the company’s private label clients are within a couple hundred miles of Pittsburgh.

Milk Versus Whey-Based Ricotta

Lamagna manufactures an all-milk Ricotta rather than a whey-based version, which the company said is tastier but more expensive to produce.

“We make an all-milk Ricotta, and a lot of our competition goes the cheaper route with a whey-based Ricotta,” Lamagna said.

“Some of the more national brands are whey-based Ricotta, which are grittier and not as flavorful as a milk-based product,” he said.

Milk-based Ricotta is about 30 percent more expensive compared to a whey-based version, Lamagna said.

Lamagna’s Organic Ricotta is twice the cost of conventional Ricotta, but effective marketing campaigns have helped boost sales in recent years.

Ricotta Being Used As An Ingredient

Over the past few years, Lamagna said he’s witnessed more prepared food applications using Ricotta cheese.

“Ricotta’s main uses are definitely lasagna, ravioli and manicotti,” he said. “A lot of people aren’t taking the time to make them at home – they’re buying them prepared and frozen.”

The demand for organic Ricotta in both retail and industrial markets has also increased, Lamagna said, and their business is becoming more national and less regional.

Cheese under the Lamagna family brand is sold at retail and foodservice locations primarily along the East Coast.

We’re available in Wal-Marts from Maine to Florida, and as far west as Illinois, Lamagna said.

Consumer taste on the East Coast is much more Ricotta-friendly, according to Lamagna.

“In the Midwest, people eat more bratwurst and more German food. I went to the University of Wisconsin-Madison years ago, and Italian food is not nearly as prevalent as it is on the East Coast, especially in the home,” he said.

Population migration is causing demand for Italian-style cheeses to spread, Lamagna said, with the company enjoying more sales in the southern United States than years prior.

“But still, selling Ricotta in the South is like trying to sell grits in the North,” he said. “The people just

aren’t used to it, and don’t know what to do with it.”

Swapping Out For Enclosed Styles

The first of three enclosed cheese vats – a 16,000 pound prototype – arrived at Lamagna Cheese in November 2010. Two 20,000 pound vats were installed last August. The company swapped out three old vats for the new styles, but opted to retain one open cheese vat. Now that things have gone so well, the company is thinking about removing the last remaining open vat.

“They really gained some floor space back while increasing production capacity,” said Tom Gumpert of Stoelting. “They used to have 10,000 pound open vats, they put 56,000 pounds of vat production in about half the space.”

“I researched enclosed vats for about two years, and Stoelting was the one who wanted to work with me on it,” Lamagna said.

His goal was to find an enclosed vat that would reduce the manual labor associated with his current production.

“Mike had the idea for making cheese in an enclosed vat,” said Gumpert. “He knew how he made cheese but he wanted to modify the enclosed vat to make his style of cheese. We looked at how they currently made cheese and tried to replicate what they were doing.”

He said it was the Stoelting engineering group that came up with a design for the interior of the vat but it was the Lamagna team that came up with a method for directly injecting steam into the vat.

“It’s really a clever design work,” Gumpert said.

Benefits of the Enclosed Vat

Ricotta cheese is made through direct acidification – Lamagna Cheese uses vinegar for this process.

Coagulation then occurs at high heat, so the company adds steam until the milk reaches about 180 degrees and the curd forms.

Gumpert said the company was doing everything by hand.

“It was a lot of back-breaking work. They filled the vat manually, hand-pumped the vinegar, hand stirred the vat and unloaded the vat by hand.”

Besides reducing the labor, Lamagna wanted a more consistent, uniform product.

“Because it’s automated, it’s more consistent with the amount of added ingredients,” Mike Lamagna said. “Right now, it appears cheese yields will also be higher.”

Gumpert said the vat is strictly designed for milk-based Ricotta applications and will be marketed to other manufacturers.

“As far as I know, our company may be the first one making whole milk Ricotta cheese using enclosed vats,” Mike Lamagna said.

According to Lamagna, the benefits of using an enclosed cheese vat include a cleaner production environment and increased consistency.

“Again, they used to have to climb into the open vats and hand scour those things,” Gumpert said. “Now, to be able to push a button and the vat would be CIP’d. What a savings in time. Think about the thoroughness in cleaning. And the labor savings,” Gumpert said.

Gumpert said it was one of those projects that was very fulfilling.

“When we were there during the initial stages of our design, we went there and when you have six or seven open top vats being heated to 180 degrees, it was like a sauna in there.”

Mike Lamagna and his team are very happy with the new conditions of the plant and the consistency of the product.

“We couldn’t be happier,” Lamagna said. “It’s a good thing all the way around.”

For more information, visit www.lamagnacheese.com or call (412) 828-6112. **FR**



Mike, Rudy, Kirk and Chris Lamagna stand in front of their new Stoelting vats while steam comes off their last open vat. Lamagna Cheese and Stoelting recently design an enclosed vat specifically made for the company’s milk-based Ricotta. The new vats have worked so well, the cheese company is looking to stop production in the open vat entirely.