



Salad Dressing Magnate Litehouse Foods To Manufacture Idaho Bleu For Retail Marketplace

Litehouse Foods, made famous by its Bleu Cheese salad dressing, is expanding into the cheese sector with the manufacture of its Idaho Bleu Cheese crumbles here in Sandpoint, ID.

The company actually began production of its Idaho Bleu here about a year ago in January 2002. Prior to that, Sorrento Lactalis supplied Litehouse with Blue cheese for its dressings. When the Sorrento plant in Salmon, ID, closed, Litehouse purchased the used cheesemaking equipment and leased the old Pend Oreille Cheese Factory in Sandpoint.

In 2001, veteran cheese maker and former Salmon plant manager Ralph Stuart joined Litehouse as manager of its Sandpoint facility.

Over the past year, the company has been making just under 1 million pounds of kosher Idaho

Bleu for its award-winning salad dressing. It receives its milk from Inland Northwest Dairies, as well as a number of local suppliers within a 60-mile radius. The milk is pooled in Spokane, WA, then shipped to the plant.

"We felt that the best way to control the overall quality of the dressing was to vertically integrate," Stuart said.

As of Jan. 1, 2003, Litehouse Idaho Bleu Cheese crumbles in 4-ounce packs will be available on retail shelves nationwide. According to the company, its primary strength is in the produce department.

"Our intent is to merchandise the Idaho Bleu Cheese Crumbles in the produce department, where consumers already know our name and products," said Roxie Lowther, director of business development for Litehouse Foods.

"We hope to have a niche market that is consistent with the quality we've established with our salad dressings," Stuart added.

Previously, the cheese was only available on the facility's on-site retail store. Stuart said over the next year, the company hopes to produce a half-million pounds of kosher Idaho Bleu for the retail industry.

"Our ultimate goal is to meet our consumers' needs with a high quality product, and provide jobs for the community of Sandpoint," Stuart said.

With eight full-time employees, Stuart said the transition from buying cheese for the company's salad dressing to making cheese was relatively smooth.

"We can truly count our blessings over the past year," he said.

The Litehouse legacy can be traced back to 1882, but it wasn't until after the Second World War that founder Ed Hawkins Sr. stumbled upon the idea that would make the company famous.

At the time, Hawkins was a chef in Spokane, WA. His employer was complaining about the inferior dressing they served on their salads and Hawkins' solution was a blend of m a y o n n a i s e , spices, crumbled blue cheese and buttermilk.

A decade later, Hawkins and his wife bought a restaurant on Lake Pend Oreille in Hope, ID, and christened it The Litehouse Restaurant.

Shortly after opening, patrons would arrive at the front door with empty jars to fill with Hawkin's Bleu Cheese dressing.

By 1962, the Hawkins family gathered just enough money to manufacture jars of Bleu Cheese and Thousand Island dressings. The dressings were sold at Roger's Thrift in nearby Sandpoint.

During the late 1970s, the family purchased its current manufacturing plant in Sandpoint. A few



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years later, the flavor and packaging options for the salad dressing line increased and a foodservice division was added.

The 1990s brought the largest growth years, as Litehouse became the exclusive salad dressing for the newly-created Sam's Club produce department.

Packaged salad was introduced to retail stores, and some of the



first salad kits included dressing packed by Litehouse.

In 1997, the company merged with Chadalee Farms of Lowell, MI. Established circa 1893, Chadalee Farms had a strong background in foodservice and horseradish items.

After Stuart joined Litehouse four years later, the company became one of the largest suppliers of Kosher Bleu Cheese in the US. •

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