

Middlefield Cheese Challenges Imports With New Robust Ursario Swiss Varietal

Middlefield, OH—Middlefield Cheese, one of the country's largest manufacturers of Swiss cheese, is going head-to-head against Swiss imports with the launch of its new varietal, Ursario.

Middlefield Cheese is located about 45 miles east of Cleveland in Middlefield, OH. Hans Rothenbuhler, a master cheese maker from Switzerland, founded the company in 1956. Currently Hans' son, John Rothenbuhler, leads the operation.

Over the years, Middlefield has amassed dozens of awards and plenty of industry recognition.

Last year, Middlefield Cheese won Best of Class in the Baby Swiss Style category of the US Championship Cheese Contest with its Aarafalls Baby Swiss. Aarafalls also took Best of Class in 2011, and won third place in the 2012 World Championship Cheese Contest Baby Swiss category.

"We have had great success with our regular Swiss business. Middle-

field's goal every year is to place in the US Championship Cheese Contest or the World Championship Cheese Contest," said Corbin Kembel, quality advisor for Hans Rothenbuhler & Son, Inc.

"It is a yearly assessment on how we are doing," Kembel continued.

Middlefield Cheese currently makes six different varieties of Swiss cheese – Mild Swiss, Sharp Swiss, No Salt Swiss, Jungfrau – Baby-Eyed Swiss, Aarafalls – Baby Swiss, and Ursario – Robust Swiss.

Middlefield Cheese's latest brand, Ursario, was launched in May 2013.

"Our objective was to create a notable Swiss varietal that could compete against European Swiss. What I mean by 'compete' is creating a robust Swiss flavor that stands out among the crowd," Kembel said.

We also wanted to maintain our traditional methods for Swiss cheesemaking, which includes the eye formation, he said.



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"The initial market reaction for the cheese was very good, and it's slowly picking up steam," Kembel said. "The majority of people that taste it fall in love with it."

To give Ursario its distinct and secret robust flavor, Kembel said, "There are several differences in production."

Our Swiss is marketed nationally under the private brands of wholesalers and packers, and is sold under the Middlefield Cheese label primarily in Ohio, Kembel added.

New 'Robust' Variety In Bulk Swiss Production

Over the next five or 10 years, Middlefield Cheese would like to expand growth of its newest varieties, Ursario and Aarafalls, Kembel said. Adding new and artisanal styles of Swiss to bulk production is a strategy to both challenge imports and gain new customers.

Each block of Swiss made by Middlefield weighs about 200 pounds.

"We don't do any small-scale packaging. However, we do break our blocks down into smaller sizes called bulk cuts (profile cuts) to streamline slicing and packaging for co-packers, who in turn put the cheese into retail-size packaging," Kembel said.

Visitors to the Middlefield plant can purchase retail size packages, which are also available on the company's website, but the plant is "by no means a cut-and-wrap facility," Kembel said.

"We're a highly automated facility," Kembel said. "We strive to eliminate all human interaction with product, and focus our resources to accomplish this goal."

"When it comes to producing high quality Swiss – and especially safe Swiss – that's our motive," he said.

Middlefield Cheese works to source milk as close to its manufac-

turing facility as possible, choosing farmers with sustainable values and efficient operations, Kembel said.

Milk is sourced from Pennsylvania to Michigan, but the company tries to utilize Ohio dairy farms as much as possible, he said.

Swiss Industry Faces Challenges

Overall, Swiss production has been fairly stable over the past decade, Kembel said.

"Up until recently, we've come under some pricing pressure, and our costs for producing Swiss are a little bit higher than other varieties, so national competition is challenging," Kembel said.

"That's a headwind we've been facing over the past few years," he said. "I think we've weathered the storm fairly well, and we expect to see some growth in the next half-year or so."

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—Corbin Kembel,

Hans Rothenbuhler & Son

"Coming out with Ursario, as well as our highly-awarded Aarafalls Baby Swiss definitely helps things – having strong products to get behind," Kembel said.

"Our main concern is to deliver a good quality product to market, and do it consistently," he said. "I think we do that pretty well, and we encourage our competitors to do the same."

"That really builds the Swiss industry and gives it credibility. That's a win-win for everyone," Kembel continued.

Another major challenge for the US Swiss industry is consumer education, Kembel added.

"Some producers have gone to blind Swiss with no eyes and I think once you do that, you're one step closer to processed cheese," he said.

"That is one of the biggest hurdles we are up against because it undermines the integrity and identity of the product. If producers continue to supply 'sub-par' Swiss – with no eyes, for example – it destroys the identity and reputation of Swiss as a product category," he said.

Educating consumers on "real" Swiss cheese needs to be an industry-wide effort, Kembel said. What we can control is to put great Swiss out there, showing consumers what Swiss is really supposed to look and taste like.

For more information, visit www.middlefieldcheese.com.

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