



North Hendren Finds Success After Changing Production from Commodity Styles to Award-Winning Blue-Veined Cheese

When Wisconsin agricultural leaders describe the importance of small cheese manufacturers to get out of the commodity market and move into a specialty market, perhaps the one dairy company the best represents that changing culture is located in the country near the rather-hard-to-find town of Willard, WI.

That is where you'll find North Hendren Cooperative Dairy.

North Hendren had been manufacturing its commodity cheeses for over 75 years before the company's cheese buyers dropped the news that they wouldn't be buying any more of North Hendren's commodity style cheeses.

"They said we could no longer compete on price," Gary Humboldt, manager of North Hendren Cooperative said.

Every place Humboldt called came the same reply: you need to be less expensive.

"I spent the next few weeks calling everyone I could think of that might be a possible buyer of our products," Humboldt said. "They all said they couldn't pay us anywhere near what we needed to keep the cheese plant going."

Armed with that knowledge, Humboldt took the lessons from Wisconsin agricultural leaders, such as the Wisconsin Milk Marketing Board and others, and started looking into other markets, particularly

on the East Coast.

"They told me that there was quite a good market for either Hispanic cheeses or Blue-vein."

With that, Humboldt and then cooperative board president Greg Heiman started looking into both the Hispanic and Blue cheese markets.

"All we were trying to do is somehow, some way to keep the plant operating."

Exploring both cheeses, Humboldt and Heiman decided to take to the board their recommendation to make Blue-veined cheese.

Humboldt said his only introduction to Blue-veined cheese was a salad dressing he tried admitting he didn't like it much.

Now he was going to ask his board to stop doing everything the co-op had been doing for 75 years and convert the operation to Blue-veined cheeses.

"We never even sold Blue cheese in our cheese store before we starting making it," Humboldt said. Now they were about to recommend a complete overhaul of their cheese plant to make Blue cheese.

Humboldt said the cooperative gave them 100 percent approval to spend \$1 million dollars on upgrading and converting the operation.

"It was rather incredible because we were moving from Cheddar, Colby, Monterey and some Pepper Jack to Blue-veined and that is quite a large step."

Barb Lucas has worn a number of different titles in her 33 years at North Hendren.

"We have very dedicated farmers who are very proud of this cheese plant. They didn't want to see it close," Lucas said.

"There were a lot of people who were not giving us much of a chance. We found the conversion to be not as easy as we thought. Our banker looked at it as a whole new venture, even though we made cheese for some 70 years."

The next step was to find some-

one not only who would sell their cheese but someone who also would build them a brand name.

"I would go out and tell the buyers that I was with North Hendren Cheese and they would say, 'Where's North Hendren Cheese?'"

Previous to making Blue cheese, the co-op's cheeses were cut and wrapped under someone else's brand.

"Our name was never out there in the real world," Humboldt said. "We had no brand and no reputation."

Humboldt said that building of a brand name attracted the co-op to DCI Cheese Company, Mayville, WI.

They talked to Wisconsin Milk Marketing Board and a few other marketers. It was Dallas Wuethrich, Grassland Dairy who suggested using DCI Cheese Company.

Currently the co-op runs five vats a day, five days a week. However, Humboldt said the co-op now produces enough milk to expand.

The co-op manufactures nearly 2 million pounds of cheese per year.

"We would like to expand sometime down the road," Humboldt said. "Right now we have the milk to run seven vats a day, five days a week. We just lack the room to make it."

Those future plans would mean moving the storage, packaging, crumbling facility located in nearby, Thorp, WI, to the location of the cheese plant.

"In the next couple of years, we would like to move everything under one roof," he said. "We would also increase production to roughly 3.2 million pounds of cheese a year."

And there would be plenty of room for expansion as the only land forms for miles and miles are a bluff and the Black River for which North Hendren uses as the brand for their cheese labels.

Today 35 patrons ship approximately 80,000 pounds of milk a day to the plant, all within a 25 mile radius of the cheese factory, Humboldt said.

"The largest patron ships about 7,000 pounds of milk a day while the smallest ships about 200 pounds," Humboldt said. "We're pretty tiny."

Being tiny as Humboldt said hardly keeps the company off the radar screen.

Over the last few years, North Hendren Cheese Co-op has earned some of the more prestigious awards for cheesemaking quality.

The first award came roughly a

year after their first batch of Blue cheese. That was in 2002, when Humboldt was named Grand Master of the Wisconsin State Fair.

The next year completed an accomplishment that might never be duplicated.

The co-op's Gorgonzola brought in the best of class in the 2003 U.S. Championship Cheese Contest in April. In July of that year they repeated the best in class at the Wisconsin State Fair.

In August the co-op's Blue cheese won at the American Cheese Society's blue-veined class. The contest was held in California.

Finally, the cooperative took the championship at the Wisconsin Dairy Products Association inaugural World Dairy Expo contest.

"Our farmers are very proud of the awards we've been getting here lately."

Humboldt came to North Hendren in 1986 as a supervisor, hired by then manager, Bob Schmidt.

Now nine years as manager of the co-op, Humboldt has over 30 years cheesemaking experience.

"From the quality of the milk they give us to the dedicated staff inside the plant. We're all spokes on a wheel. It's everyone together that makes this such a good product."

Lucas agreed, "This is truly a real team effort."

All the awards and accolades have added a great deal of pride not only to the farmers and workers, but, "our marketing staff tells us it has made their job much easier," Humboldt said.

The co-op sells six-pound and three-pound wheels; seven-ounce exact weight wedges; 50-pound; 5 pound; four-five pound and eight and four ounce cups of crumbles.

Humboldt said the two products sell evenly at 50 percent Blue and 50 percent Gorgonzola.

"It seems like the Gorg is increasing in sales all the time. And I think the awards help that a lot."

The co-op started in 1923 when 15 farmers decided to form the co-op, Lucas said.

Lucas' husband's grandfather was one of those original patrons.

"Some of the patrons that started the co-op, their grandkids still ship milk here," she said.

Hardly anyone would have thought that at that time 80 years ago, 15 patrons would eventually become perhaps the poster company of Wisconsin's changing cheese culture. To look, you'd have to find Willard, WI and the Blue River •

