

Widmer's Cheese Celebrates 100 Years Of Cheesemaking Excellence

Theresa, WI—Award-winning cheese company Widmer's Cheese Cellars here is celebrating 100 years in business this year, marking both the company's legacy as well as having an eye on the future.

Joe Widmer is the company's third-generation owner, and talks with great pride about his family's history both before the Theresa factory was acquired by his grandparents and the 100 years since then.

John Widmer, Joe's grandfather, immigrated to Wisconsin from Switzerland in 1905, and worked as a cheese maker at another plant in Dodge county, WI, before acquiring the company's current plant in Theresa in 1922.

Back in those days, the local population was heavily German, and the market for a surface-ripened cheese like Brick was high, Joe Widmer related. So Widmer's Cheese, like many other cheese factories in the area, started out making traditional Brick cheese, as well as Cheddar cheese.

The company started making traditional stirred-curd Colby sometime in about the 1940s, Joe noted.

Today, the market for the traditional foil-wrapped Brick isn't nearly as great as it once was, and the company sells considerably

more mild Brick cheese than the surface-ripened aged variety, Widmer noted. But the aged variety is making a comeback as consumers' tastes are much more adventurous these days.

The company still makes Brick cheese much the same way as it has for the past 100 years, using the same type of open vats that Joe's grandfather used, and also still using the same well-worn five-pound bricks that his grandfather used to press the whey from the cheese after it has been placed in the forms.

Widmer's Cheese is the only US cheese company that still uses bricks in the Brick cheesemaking process, Joe pointed out.

Like many members of family-owned Wisconsin cheese factories, Joe Widmer grew up above the factory. He began working there at a very young age, and helped out at the factory every day before and after grade school and high school.

But Widmer left the business, temporarily, after high school. "I'm sick of cheese and I'm sick of school," he recalled telling his father. He went to work on the railroad for two years, "pounding spikes and everything."

After that time away from the family business, Widmer enrolled at Moraine Park Technical Col-

lege in Fond du Lac, WI, where he got his degree in food science. He returned to the family business in 1978, "and I've been here ever since."

Cheddar And Cold Pack Varieties

In the Cheddar category, Widmer's Cheese is known for quite a few aged variations, Joe noted, including one-year, two-year, four-year, six-year, eight-year, 10-year, 12-year, and 15-year.

The company sees a lot of upside in the specialty Cheddar category, but "there's a lot of competition out there."

The newest product at Widmer's Cheese is Matterhorn Alpine Cheddar, which Joe said uses the same cultures as the company's award-winning Homestead Cheddar, but with added Alpine cultures. The company began experimenting with trial batches for Matterhorn in early 2019, and kept tweaking the recipe "until we got what we wanted"

"It just makes a fantastic flavor," he said. The Matterhorn name is

taken from the mountain in the Alps that straddles the border between Switzerland and Italy, harkening back to Joe's grandfather, who was a native of Switzerland.

Another relatively new product line for Widmer's Cheese is cold pack cheese food. Joe started working with Phil Lindemann of Pine River Pre-Pack, Newton, WI, in about 2001, after meeting him at the International Dairy-Deli-Bakery Association (IDDBA) show in Minneapolis.

Widmer was walking the aisles at the show when he ran across Phil

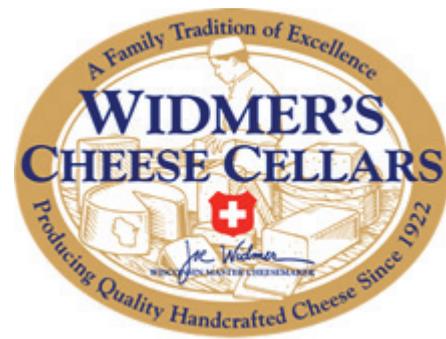
and Mary Lindemann, owners of Pine River Pre-Pack, and they had their line of cold pack cheese foods there. He asked Phil if anybody had ever made a

Brick cold pack before, and when Phil said no, Joe decided to send him some aged Brick.

Initially, they experimented with just the aged Brick, and it was "very strong," and there's only a limited number of people that would eat it, Joe explained.

So Phil suggested mixing the Brick with Cheddar, "and it's a hit," Joe said.

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Widmer's Turns 100

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In addition to the Aged Brick Cold Pack, Pine River also makes Jalapeno Brick and Green Olive Brick Cold Pack cheeses for Widmer's Cheese.

Cold pack cheeses aren't the only flavored varieties offered by Widmer's Cheese. The company also makes Caraway and Jalapeno Pepper Brick cheeses; Jalapeno, Garden Vegetable and Caraway Colby; and Jalapeno Cheddar.

Cheese curds are also a significant business for Widmer's Cheese, Joe said. More and more restaurants are buying and breading them and then deep-frying them. Widmer's makes Cheddar curds, as well as Brick curds, "which nobody else makes."

Joe credits his father, John Widmer, for coming up with the idea for the Brick cheese curds, which are cube-shaped as opposed to the random shapes of most traditional curds. His father would take Brick cheese, the day it's made, after it's been pressed, and cut it up and salt it, "and it turned out to be a hit." Demand was low initially, "but now we can hardly keep up."

In addition to its products being sold by retailers around the US, the company's factory in Theresa also features a small retail store, which sells the company's products as well as products from other cheese makers and additional food and related items. The factory and

store are located just two miles from Interstate 41, and so it tends to be pretty busy during the summer tourist season, Joe said.

Third And Fourth Generations

Joe Widmer represents the third generation in the family business, following in the footsteps of his grandfather, John Widmer, as well as his father, also John Widmer, and uncles Ralph and James Widmer. His father and uncles all worked at the family's cheese factory and they all passed the art of cheesemaking on to Joe.

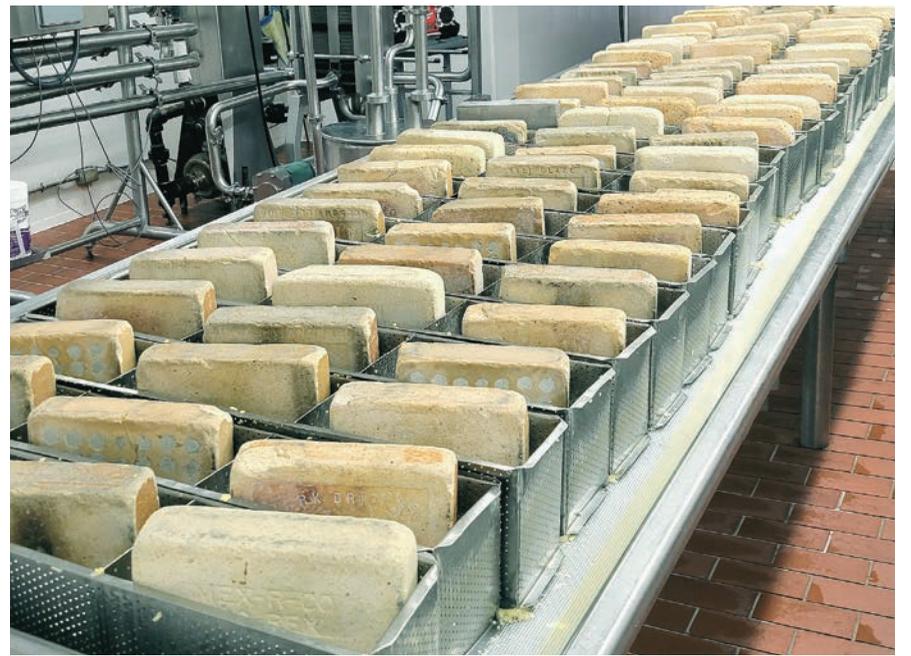
And now the fourth generation of the Widmer family is involved in the business. Joe's son, Joey, is working at the plant, and has "a lot of responsibility for a young guy." Joey Widmer returned to the family business six or seven years ago, after receiving a Master's Degree in business. He is also a licensed cheese maker.

Widmer's Cheese has expanded twice in the last 20 years, in 2004 and then again in 2015, adding space for packaging, mail order and also cooler space, but the factory is kind of land-locked, so room for further expansion is limited.

Joe Widmer is optimistic about the future.

"I try to stay as optimistic as I can," Joe remarked, while noting that the type of cheese factory he operates is becoming rarer and rarer.

Widmer also appreciates all the support he has received over



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the years from the University of Wisconsin Center for Dairy Research (CDR), the Wisconsin Master Cheese Maker Program, Dairy Farmers of Wisconsin, and the Wisconsin Cheese Makers Association — all the organizations that "keep the state on top of things."

Widmer has gone through the Wisconsin Master Cheese Maker program twice, and holds certifications for Brick, Colby and Cheddar cheeses. He was a member of the second Wisconsin Master Cheese Maker class, receiving certifications in Brick and Colby cheeses — two Wisconsin originals — in 1998.

Widmer's Cheese has also received numerous awards for its cheeses over the years. Just last weekend, the company's Mild Brick cheese was declared champion of Milwaukee Magazine's Big Cheese Bracket, in which 16 cheeses from across Wisconsin were pitted against each other in a March Madness-style showdown, with each available for a tasting at local Sendik's stores.

Widmer's Mild Brick topped Terrific Trio from Renard's Cheese in the finals of the Big Cheese Bracket.

For more information about Widmer's Cheese Cellars, visit www.widmerscheese.com.

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