

Topp Company Acquires Taylor Cheese; Rolling Out Brand To Pacific Northwest

Weyauwega, WI—Topp Company is preparing to introduce a branded cheese line to the Pacific Northwest and will utilize its recent purchase of Taylor Cheese to sell more Wisconsin cheese to grocery and specialty cheese stores who want the state's large variety of cheese.

Topp Company is a customer-oriented distributor of cheese, butter, and yogurt products for the dairy, deli, retail, and foodservice industry, primarily to the Pacific Northwest.

This summer, Topp Company purchased the cut and wrap operations of Taylor Cheese to prepare and sell sliced and exact weight Wisconsin cheese under the Topp Company cheese line.

"I can't sell enough Wisconsin cheese out there," said Jason Topp, president of Topp Company. "Consumers appreciate the large selection of unique cheese."

The goal, Topp said, is to start regionally, where the company already has a successful footprint and then slowly expand with different offerings and opportunities.

"There is a lot to be said when building a brand. You do it a little smarter as opposed to a little harder," Topp said. "We're going to pick and choose our spots where we feel there is a need in the category, both on the deli side and the dairy side, and try to expand smartly."

The acquisition of Taylor Cheese won't affect current operations and may even broaden the sales of their customers.

"The acquisition offers us more flexibility to take care of our current clients, as well as continuing to enhance the services that Taylor Cheese has run successfully for many years," Topp said.

He said in today's conversion industry, smaller cheese companies are finding it more difficult to get their conversion needs fulfilled.

"You look at the players in the industry. They are huge," Topp said. "If companies can't match their minimum order, they get dropped. It's really rough for them. But it's an opportunity for us."

This is Topp's first venture into conversion. Previous to the acquisition, everything the company bought was converted to size.

"We are able to pivot and change rapidly. Having the ability to convert for our own needs, as well as continuing to care for our customers, who have their own unique challenges, was very appealing."

Branded Products

Started in 1981 by Jason Topp's father, Larry Topp, the company has grown to sell nearly 1,000 items through its distribution services and facility in Missoula, MT.

The plan is to buy product from those cheese companies utilizing Topp's new cut and wrap operations in Weyauwega, WI, and sell that to the Pacific Northwest.

"That makes sense, doesn't it? We have great Wisconsin cheese companies using our conversion services already. Now we can cut and wrap their cheese and sell it to our partners in the Pacific Northwest," Topp said.

Topp said his company buys a lot of cheese from Wisconsin, consolidates it and ships it to Montana where it is sold to grocery stores and restaurants.

"Whoever wants to buy great Wisconsin cheese," he said.

With the branded item, we are trying to position ourselves some-



Topp Company recently purchased the cut and wrap operations of Taylor Cheese, which among other things, will help introduce a branded line of, primarily, Wisconsin Cheese to the Pacific Northwest. **Above:** Jason Topp (left), Topp Company and Robert Ehrenberg of Taylor Cheese.

where between private label and super premium label, Topp said.

"We will be somewhere between those price points," Topp said. "That's where we are going to find our success."

Topp envisions selling primarily to smaller independent stores.

"But if the larger chains call, we are ready, willing, and able to fill their order," he said.

Topp said his company is always looking for small and regional distributors who understand and share the unique challenges of being in that segment of the industry.

"With the size of our company, we can be incredibly flexible with our offering and what we do day to day, week to week," Topp said. "With the smaller independents we are going to come in with a real nice price point and be a mid-tier, between a premium item and a private label."

Topp described his company's cross dock programs with a couple of different grocery warehouses where smaller stores could get specialty cheeses.

"There are a lot of great cheese makers out there. They are doing a great job. But they can't match the offerings you find in Wisconsin," Topp said. "I like to take care of our customers. I want to provide great cheese, great value and service."

National Rolled Butter Program

Topp will learn to build a brand for its cheese through a national distribution of their branded Amish Country Rolled Butter.

The two-pound rolled whey cream butter has been a great item for the company, he said.

"We started selling it about 12 years ago. Consumers are interested in trying new items. It's a very unique item for the butter category," Topp said. "We've learned a lot, a lot that will come in handy as we continue with our new product introductions."

Topp said his butter customers are also the targets for the branded cheese products as well.

"We have great partners. We are always trying to grow that business," Topp said. "We have about

a 28 percent ACV (all commodity value) across the country. But for the other stores we have 100 percent fill."

Changes at Taylor Cheese

Taylor Cheese was started in the late 1950s by Lowell "Abe" Taylor to service the largest grocery store chain in the US.

In the 1960s, Ed Wohlt partnered with Taylor and his son Jim Taylor as the company shifted to a cut and wrap operation. In 1992, Robert Ehrenberg became part owner with Jim Taylor and the two continued growing the company.

"The transition went well. It was a relief to find someone who is committed to the tradition and values of Taylor Cheese," Ehrenberg said. "Jason and his team are committed to the families of workers here, with an eye on growing the business."

"We've inherited a great team here at Taylor Cheese," Topp said. "Bob kept this place in great shape to where we transitioned without a hiccup. It's an honor to carry on Bob's legacy. It is something we are really proud of."

Still, Topp Company will increase and upgrade services when and wherever necessary.

"We're still getting acclimated to understanding how the plant works best. Looking at the things we do best and other areas on what we don't do as well," Topp said.

He said he plans to play to the strengths of the company with an ear to his customers' needs.

"We want to offer full-line capabilities. It's going to be custom blends, smaller runs. That's the niche."

Convenience is still the main trend at grocery stores and any enhancements at Taylor Cheese will follow the trends, Topp said.

"Capacity is limited here," Topp said. "That's kind of intentional. We don't want to be doing 5-pound runs all day. Ultimately the goal is simply do the best we can with our current customers and then let's give them the most value and best service we can and then we'll slowly expand from there."

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