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Foremost Farms has built reputation on quality and customization over 25 years

By Rena Archwamety

BARABOO, Wis. — Foremost Farms USA, which last year celebrated the cooperative's 25th anniversary, has built its reputation over the years as a provider of quality cheeses for foodservice, conversion and private labels. Foremost Farms also is known for its customization, working with its customers to bring their ideas to reality.

"We have a flexible approach and work with a number of our customers on developing products unique to them. Customization can be in the product, delivery format, application performance or service level," says Declan Roche, senior vice president and chief commercial officer, Foremost Farms USA.

Foremost Farms was formed in 1995 with the consolidation of Golden Guernsey and Wisconsin Dairies cooperatives, soon followed by the acquisition of Morning Glory Farms. Today there are about 1,000 member farms, mostly throughout Wisconsin and Michigan as well as some in southeast Minnesota, northeast Iowa, northern Illinois, northern Indiana and northwest Ohio. Foremost has a dairy campus in Greenville, Michigan, while the other nine processing plants, plus its headquarters, are in Wisconsin. The headquarters will be moving from Baraboo to Middleton, Wisconsin, around mid-2022. Foremost Farms employs about 1,000 people and produces approximately 500 million pounds of cheese a year.

"We have less plants and fewer farms, but twice the amount of milk as there was in 1995," Roche says, noting farmers have applied the sciences of feed nutrition and breeding to enhance milk productivity.

In addition to expanded milk production, Foremost Farms over the years has expanded its portfolio. The 500 million pounds of cheese produced each year leaves about 250 million pounds of whey solids, used primarily for whey protein concentrate 34% (WPC-34) and permeate.

"We supply major global brands in infant formula. Foremost always has been known for high-quality, infant-grade WPC-34," Roche says.

Foremost Farms also processes some fluid milk, including Class I, as well as butter for private label brands.

"Italian cheeses by nature are a little lower in fat, so there is excess cream that goes to our butter plant in Reedsburg (Wisconsin)," Roche says. "We've built a robust butter business out of the Reedsburg plant. It's the perfect complement to our Italian cheese production."

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Declan Roche
FOREMOST FARMS USA

• Cheese

Cheese remains Foremost Farms' bread and butter, and it is best known for its aged Cheddars as well as its Italian-style cheeses. Roche notes about 70% of the co-op's cheese production is relatively fresh Italian, such as Mozzarella and Provolone that are used on the industrial level or converted into slices or retail shreds. The remaining 30% is American-style cheese, primarily Cheddar, as well as others like Colby and Monterey Jack. Foremost Farms is working on a portfolio expansion of these as well as Hispanic-style cheeses that have been growing in demand in foodservice markets.

"Our Italian and Provolone cheeses are very highly regarded in certain parts of the country," Roche says, adding that in addition to the Foremost Farms USA brand, the premium 1950-127 brand, which includes both Italian and American styles, has a loyal following among customers.

"Owner-operator pizza operations in the East and Northeast know this brand for its performance characteristics," he says, adding that Foremost Farms is looking to grow this significant portion of its business. "We were



Photo courtesy of Foremost Farms USA

DIVERSE PRODUCT LINE — Foremost Farms produces approximately 500 million pounds of cheese a year under the Foremost Farms USA and premium 1950-127 brands. It also produces butter and whey products.

just out at the Pizza Expo in Las Vegas and had people from all over the country come up to us — especially from the West Coast — and ask, 'Where can we get this cheese? It's the best we've tasted!'

"Its characteristic, especially for pizza, is its melt and stretch," Roche adds of 1950-127 performance cheeses. "They want 12 inches or more of stretch, and ours has this beautiful, long stretch. It's made of very high-quality milk coming from our farms, which we're very proud of. Our focused manufacturing processes, from the milk quality to the cultures to how we treat the cheese during the process while it is being made, is specifically designed for performance."

In addition to these staple cheeses, Roche says Foremost Farms continues to innovate and is developing an aged Muenster as well as a new Gouda and a portfolio of Mexican cheeses for the foodservice sector.

"We're going to start sampling in the near future. Our focus is on delivering taste and performance. The Gouda, for example, will be a uniquely American aged Gouda, with its own individual taste, texture and appearance," he says.

Many of Foremost Farms' cheese varieties, as well as its ingredients, have won top awards over the past year. Mild Cheddar and Aged Cheddar from its Marshfield, Wisconsin, plant won Grand Champion awards at this year's Illinois State Fair, while its Mild Cheddar also won first in its class at this summer's Wisconsin State Fair.

At the recent 2021 World Dairy Expo, Smoked Provolone made in Foremost Farm's Appleton, Wisconsin, plant placed first in its class, while Non Smoked Provolone from the Clayton, Wisconsin, plant placed third. Foremost Farms also won first and second place for its WPC-34 and third for nonfat dry milk made at its ingredients plant in Sparta, Wisconsin.

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• Sustainability

As customers are looking for high-quality, high-performing cheeses, they also are increasingly looking for partners in sustainability. Roche says Foremost Farms has a number of joint initiatives underway with its customers who are looking to promote the sustainable nature of their products.

"More and more larger, multinational customers are asking for that. It's all about responsible sourcing, commitment of resources, farms and how we go about turning words into action," Roche says. "It's something

Turn to FOREMOST FARMS, page 9

RetailWATCH

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FOREMOST FARMS

Continued from page 7

I think will be asked more and more of the dairy industry going forward: ‘What are you doing or willing to do for sustainability?’ It’s truly a partnership.”

The cooperative looks at improvements in sustainability both at the farm and manufacturing level and has been engaged in this for quite some time, Roche notes. Foremost Farms has a joint venture with Schreiber Foods in Richland Center, Wisconsin, to convert waste from both plants to renewable energy. It also partners with the National Dairy FARM Environmental Stewardship Program, is a founding partner in Newtrient LLC — which helps dairies with manure management — and has adopted the Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy’s Stewardship Commitment.

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Last month, Foremost Farms’ board of directors announced a new committee to provide oversight of the cooperative’s sustainability and environmental stewardship strategies and other related activities. The new Sustainability Committee reaffirms Foremost Farms’ longstanding commitment to sustainable practices and its dedication to continue building and evolving its environmental stewardship standards. In addition to the committee, a Sustainability Council, made up of the co-op’s executive leadership team members and cross-functional employees, will take a proactive approach to environmental stewardship, health and safety, community engagement and other factors.

• **Change and growth**

Over the past year as the COVID-19 pandemic drove spikes in retail and a collapse in foodservice demand, Roche says Foremost Farms went with the bumps and bruises that came along with the unpredictable times. However, the co-op never got to a point where it had to shut down a plant.

“We weathered it better because we are diversified,” Roche says. “The actual coming out of COVID is a lot longer and more challenging than going into it. It’s all about adaptability, flexibility and servicing our customers the best we can. So far, we’ve been successful.”

As Foremost Farms kept its plants running and customer demand satisfied, the executive team also made sure to thank its employees, going around to the plants to host cookouts and show appreciation.

“The pleasing thing about it all was that everyone pulled together, with our farms, employees and plants,” Roche says. **CMN**



Photo courtesy of Foremost Farms USA

PEAK PERFORMANCE — Foremost Farms USA, which specializes in Italian- and American-style cheeses for foodservice, conversion and private label, is known for working with its customers to provide customized products, delivery formats, application performance and service level.

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