

https://www.theameryfreepress.com/clayton_spotlight/foremost-farms-cheesemaking-and-so-much-more-for-the-community/article_81cd5ef8-25b2-11ee-9f39-c7129fe159e2.html

Foremost Farms: Cheesemaking and so much more for the community

By Raymond T. Rivard ray@sentinelmedia.net

Jul 22, 2023



Clayton's Foremost Farms.

Contributed

Since 1937, cheese has been central to the economy of Clayton.

In that year, the processing plant was established at 100 N. Main St., across the street from C Lake.

And while cheese has always been the plant's top product, Foremost Farms has taken the facility to new levels of production, since purchasing the plant in 1991.

As an example, the plant now processes 1.15 million pounds of milk per-day (nearly 420 million pounds per-year), and 50 million pounds of cheese per-year.

Those cheese products, according to plant manager Dan Becker, comes in many forms and tastes.

"The Clayton plant is very diversified," Becker said.

That diversified product list includes provolone, smoked provolone, reduced-fat provolone, mozzarella, high-fat mozzarella, whey protein, and other dairy ingredients.

Foremost Farms is also one of the largest dairy cooperatives in the United States.

With more than 80 employees, when fully-staffed, Becker said operations provide both rewards and challenges when it comes to getting the job done.

Foremost, as a world-class supplier of cheese, dairy products, and ingredients in national and international markets, sells "to companies representing some of the most trusted national brands for retail, such as deli and dairy cases, foodservice chains, and co-manufacturing companies," Becker said.

As operations manager, Becker said his job entails leading the plant teams and overseeing operations, quality, safety, food safety, engineering, and maintenance.

"The most rewarding thing, and why I lead people, is that I like to see people develop and grow," Becker said. "Seeing people develop and move on to become a manager or supervisor and seeing the lifelong learning – being part of that is pretty rewarding."

But there are challenges, as well.

"The most challenging part is the number of times people change careers, which is much higher in this day and age," he said.

Being among the best also brings its challenges, Becker said.

“Clayton’s plant has a unique challenge because there are so many dairy and food plants in the area, so there is competition.”

Part of the competition is to provide up-to-date facilities that not only allow for the production of quality products, but also attracts quality employees.

“Over the last three years, Foremost Farms has invested to shore up infrastructure, making it a more modern and efficient plant so we can be the employer of choice in the area,” Becker said.

Becker has been with Foremost Farms since August 2020, after having worked in Occupational Safety and Health as a consultant for municipalities.

Having gone back to school, Becker said, “It’s also rewarding to return to the dairy industry. I grew up on a farm, and my dad and grandpa both hauled milk. So, getting back into the dairy side has been rewarding.”

Being integral to the community is also an important aspect to the goals at Foremost.

Becker said, “We are one of the largest employers in town,” and as a cooperative owned by dairy farmers, Foremost Farms concentrates its donations and support toward agriculture and dairy-related organizations, local and state fairs, dairy breakfasts, and other on-farm events and first responders.

In that spirit, the organization annually supports Clayton Cheese Days.

The Foremost Farms’ Scholarship Foundation is primarily funded by the efforts of employees who manage fundraising events like the annual Cash for Cow-legs Golf Outing, awarding a total of \$42,000 annually to 14 recipients who are the children of member-owners and employees. Half of these scholarships are designated for those pursuing degrees or certifications in fields related to dairy or agriculture.

What does the future hold?

Becker said, “Over the last three years ... we are ensuring the plant’s infrastructure is good, so we are here to stay and be an employer of choice in the area.”

Becker said there are some openings at the plant, and that his work in making the business an employment destination is never done.

“Everyone is competing for employees, but our working conditions and compensation package make this an attractive choice,” he said.

For more information about Foremost and the Clayton plant, visit foremostfarms.com.