



CHEESE MARKET NEWS®

Retail WATCH

NEWS & MARKETING IDEAS TO HELP SELL MORE CHEESE

Masters Gallery Foods celebrates 35 years of meeting customer needs

By Kate Sander

PLYMOUTH, Wis. — This year marks the 35th anniversary of cheese supplier Masters Gallery Foods Inc. Founded in 1974 by Leonard “Butch” Gentine as World Wide Sales Inc., the company has grown from a small brokerage firm handling bulk cheese and other food items and operating from a simple office in downtown Plymouth, Wis., to a company with a multi-acre campus and a modern production facility featuring numerous packaging lines for private label retail and food service/deli customers throughout the country.

In addition, Masters Gallery Foods recently marked the 20th anniversary of the opening of its packaging and distribution facility, which received a significant expansion this spring.

With this latest expansion, the company now has about 300 employees and offers cheeses ranging in size from 4 to 32-ounce retail shreds and chunks, 5 to 15-pound shreds and dice, and 5 to 10-pound Cryovac prints for food service. The company has never strayed from its bulk cheese roots and also offers current and aged 40 to 640-pound blocks of American styles, plus hard and soft Italian style cheeses for industrial use.

Yet despite its size and scale, don’t expect Masters Gallery Foods to make a lot of noise about its achievements. While the company is celebrating its anniversaries with an open house for employees and their families, in terms of corporate culture Masters Gallery Foods likes to be a quieter company, going about its business providing top quality cheese and strong customer service without a lot of fanfare.

The company spends a great deal of its efforts building one-on-one supplier and customer relationships. Consistent, quality cheese for its customers and a focus on service keeps customers coming back, the company’s executives say.

“We have strong purchasing agreements,” says Jeff Giffin, president and CEO, Masters Gallery Foods. “We work with some of the finest cheesemaking plants in the U.S.”

Notably, that includes being the sole marketer of Aged Cheddar from the Land O’Lakes plant in Kiel, Wis., which has won numerous awards over the

years. More recently, Masters Gallery Foods entered into a multi-year marketing agreement with Green Meadows Foods LLC to purchase all of the cheese at its new Hull, Iowa, plant that began production late last year.

The company has numerous other supplier relationships as well, and because it continues to grow, the company always is looking to expand with other quality suppliers, Giffin says. While he won’t say the company never buys a spot load of cheese, it’s rare because consistency is so critical to customers. Particularly for customers who are

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buying cheese for use in various applications where consistency of melting and flavor are critical, the consistent supplier relationships work to their advantage.

“We evaluate products from multiple plants to determine what’s best for a customer,” Giffin says. “While we’re not cheesemakers, we have knowledge of cheesemaking and how to change product subtly.”

One of the highlights of the expanded cheese facility is a new dedicated space for research and development, including a full test kitchen. For the first time, the company has what it considers to be a proper environment to bring customers to evaluate products.

“At the end of the day, we focus on solutions to a customer’s problem, and we needed to invest in the infrastructure, invest in the facility so they could see the commitment we’ve made to provide solutions,” Giffin says.

• **Customer service is key**

The company comes by its focus on



PLANT OFFICE — Masters Gallery Foods operates a modern production facility in Plymouth, Wis. An expansion of the facility was completed earlier this year.

quality and customer service naturally. In fact, for awhile it seemed that was the company’s greatest asset in a turbulent time.

The late 1980s and early 1990s were a time of major transition for the company. Butch Gentine was building the business and like every young company there were ups and downs as the company worked to find its niches.

“My dad was an entrepreneur — some ideas worked well and some were simply ahead of their time,” says Jeff Gentine, executive vice president, Masters Gallery Foods.

“Jeff’s dad brought in a lot of innovation,” Giffin says.

The company name change happened due to an idea that didn’t come to fruition. Before specialty cheese really took off in the 1990s, Butch Gentine had the idea of marketing 8-ounce cuts of premier American-style cheeses in unique printed cartons under the name Masters Gallery Cheese Co., a subsidiary of World Wide Sales. While the project was eventually shelved, the name and image stuck, and in 1988 World Wide Sales became Masters Gallery Foods.

At about the same time, after years of having retail products co-packed, the company took a major leap forward and opened its first packaging and distribution facility.

“We had one line, a small staff and a big building,” Jeff Gentine says. But there were plans to fill it, and business gradually began to come on.

Then in 1991, tragedy struck. Jeff Gentine was in college when his father Butch passed away. Without their founder, the company’s management team had to determine where to take

the company next. Among his many legacies, though, Butch Gentine left with the company with a strong team.

“Butch always surrounded himself with good people. There was a hell of a team around here at the time of his death,” says Giffin, who was on the company’s management team along with others including Bernie Goldbach, who took the helm to weather the storm.

With a new plant and major transitions afoot, the early to mid-1990s weren’t easy years.

“It was really a time to stay the course, to be conservative,” Jeff Gentine says. “We weren’t in a position to make a lot of capital improvements.”

At the time, the company executives believed they couldn’t compete on price alone and survive; they knew they had to focus on value and service.

“It wasn’t possible to be a low-cost provider, so we focused on our customers, building a reputation as an organization which placed its focus squarely on service and quality,” Gentine says.

“We were very conscientious and diligent. Every order was important,” Giffin adds.

The experiences of those years stuck.

“Every order is still important today,” Giffin says.

• **Facility expansions allow for continued growth**

Throughout the 1990s, the company continued to gain customers and add lines as needed. Then in 2000, they undertook their first major plant expansion — doubling the facility from 40,000 square feet to 80,000 square

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feet, adding a second production room and a larger dry storage area to better accommodate the growing number of private label retail items the company was handling.

Beginning last year, the facility's size was once again doubled, with the addition of production and warehouse space that was reconfigured to better meet the company's needs.

"Some of the technology changes that have taken place no one envisioned early on, so our space layout needed to be modified to better incorporate new equipment," Giffin says.

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To that end, a new retail shred line with robotic palletizing is due this fall.

In addition to the new production and research and development space, the company also added separate shipping and receiving areas which have helped product flow immensely, Gentine says.

"With this second expansion, we took the opportunity to configure the plant design with an eye toward future expansions," Gentine adds. "The plant is now where we want it to be in terms of layout and flow, and we can easily add on if and when necessary."

The new plant will allow the company to continue meeting customers' needs.

Giffin notes that Masters Gallery Foods can provide the same types of products as name brands as well as custom blends and other products unique to their customers.

Giffin says the company was among the first private label manufacturers to supply its customers with zippers on shreds and chunks, and they continue to keep pace with changing consumer preferences.

"We're fast followers with a sprinkling of innovation," Giffin says.

The company's quality isn't noted by just its customers. At this year's U.S. Championship Cheese Contest, Masters Gallery Foods placed first and second in the Open Class Shredded Cheese category for its shredded reduced-fat Cheddar (first) and its finely shredded Parmesan (second). At last year's World Cheese Championship, the company took first place in the Open Class Flavored, Shredded category with its taco blend and first in the Snack Cheese category with its peggable cheese sticks.

In addition, the company continues

to invest in its employees, many of whom have been with the company since the plant opened in 1989.

"We're continuously investing in people, not just plants and equipment," Giffin says, noting that the company offers a free health care center for employees and other health-related benefits in addition to the more typical insurance coverage.

With space available, the company now plans to stay the course of gradual expansion, growing equally its industrial and aging programs, its food service/ingredient business and its retail packaging offerings.

"It's important to have some balance in each area and not lose sight of the customer's needs," Giffin says.

"We've worked hard, and just because we've gotten a bit bigger over the years, we can't forget what's gotten us to this point," Gentine adds. CMN



STORAGE SPACE — Masters Gallery Foods' finished goods cooler offers space for expanded production as the company continues to grow.



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