

## NEWS / BUSINESS

## Masters Gallery Foods celebrates 50th anniversary as it reflects on private label growth

By Rena Archwamety

**PLYMOUTH, Wis.** — Masters Gallery Foods, a leading national supplier of cheese for private label retail, foodservice and industrial use, is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year. President and CEO Jeff Gentine, second-generation leader of the company, says this is a major milestone, knowing the history and various challenges the company has faced over past decades to continue to grow and reach its current level of success.

“I’ve kind of grown up in the business. Multigenerational companies, though there are several in our area, statistically are very rare,” Gentine says.

Gentine’s father, Leonard “Butch” Gentine, decided to leave his family’s business, Sargento, in 1974 to found his own cheese brokerage firm, Worldwide Sales Inc. His company specialized in the purchase, aging and distribution of bulk cheese to industrial customers.

In the mid-1980s, private label or store brand products were found only in the largest grocery chains. However, Butch Gentine envisioned the rise of private label if stores could offer product in upscale packaging, at the same or better quality than national brands.

His company, renamed Masters Gallery Foods in 1988, opened its first manufacturing facility in 1989 in Plymouth, Wisconsin, producing the first reclosable shred packaging for private label shredded cheese.

Gentine recalls a newspaper reporter coming to tour Masters Gallery’s plant when it opened in 1989 and asking his dad about his plans and vision for the future.

“He said he really didn’t have ‘any sort of grand plan’ for the future. Of course that wasn’t true — he was an entrepreneur. I just think he was more concerned with getting the new plant off the ground successfully,” Gentine says. “He may not have envisioned us getting to the size we are now, but he certainly didn’t lack in confidence.”

The business was doing well when Butch Gentine passed away suddenly in 1991 at age 48. Jeff Gentine notes that his dad’s passing could have crippled the company, but there were enough strong people within the management team who were able to steer the company through this challenging transition.

“Thankfully, my father knew to surround himself with aces,” he adds.

At the time, Gentine was in college, and he later worked for a grocery wholesaler in Richmond, Virginia, before returning to help with the family business in 1996.

“I felt somewhat of an obligation to return, plus it’s not an opportunity that everybody gets. My father made the bold move of starting his own business, and he didn’t get to see the job through. There was a sense of duty to

help the company move forward and realize his vision,” Gentine says.

As demand for private label really took off in the 2000s, Masters Gallery experienced rapid growth. The plant expanded several times, and the company added a second facility in Oostburg, Wisconsin, in 2018.

“Consumers were embracing private label — it was no longer considered a less expensive, not-as-good alternative,” Gentine says. “Within the cheese category, private label spread to more and more items, not just Cheddar and Mozzarella shreds. Today, retailers want their customers to find almost

anything they need within their store brand programs.”

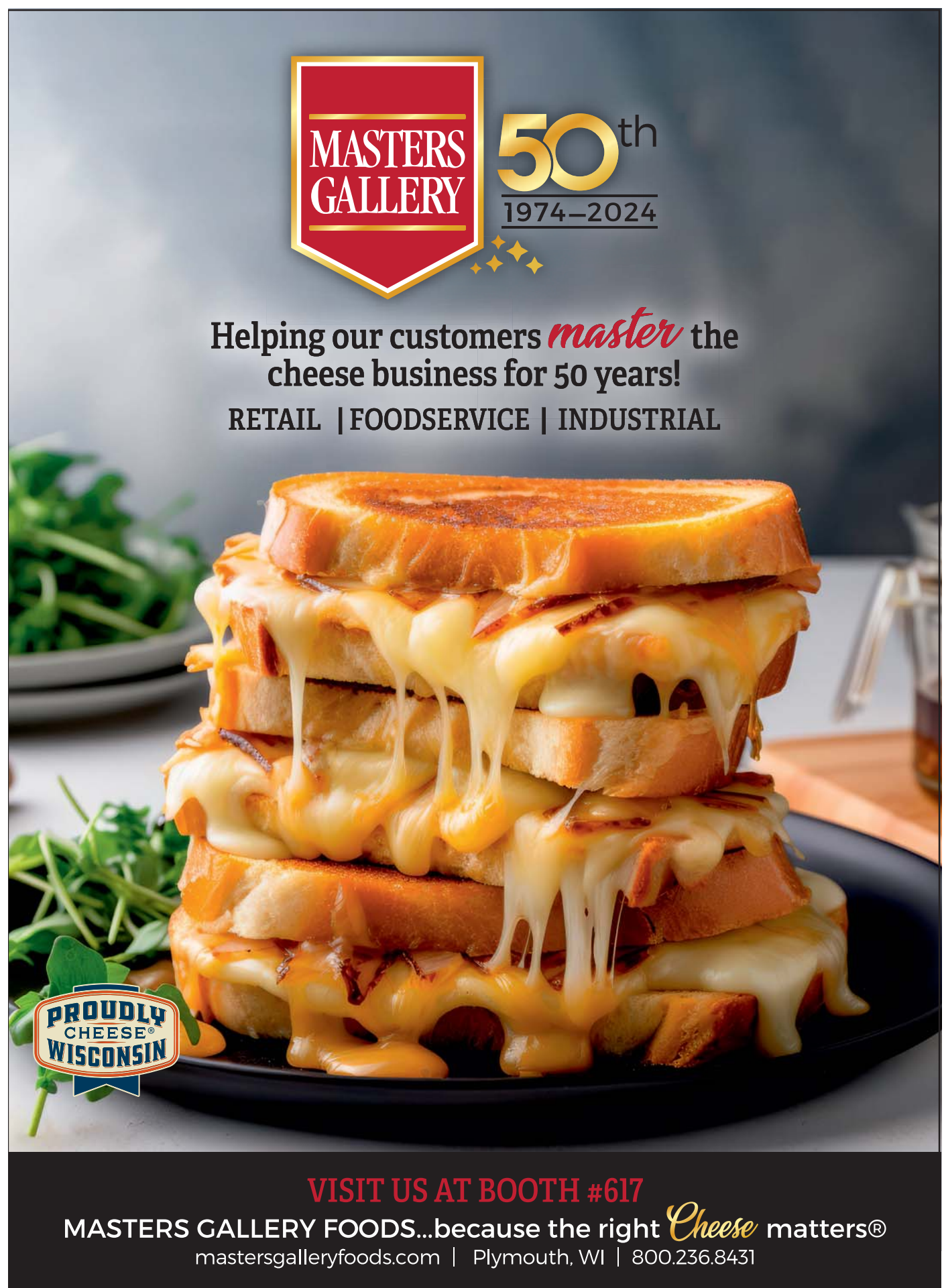
Gentine notes that while private label growth has begun to level out, the company is looking at additional frontiers for growth and expansion, such as increasing its export business.

Today, Masters Gallery employs more than 1,000 people and markets more than 750 million pounds of cheese each year.

“Our employees are the key to our success. We’re fortunate to have many that have been with us over 20 years, including some who worked alongside my father,” Gentine says.

The company also prides itself on maintaining strong, long-term relationships with customers and suppliers.

“We have longstanding relationships with our customers, many of which we’ve been servicing for years,” Gentine says. “We really don’t give our customers any reason to switch suppliers. We’re not perfect, but in general our customers don’t worry about poor quality or customer service. We’re willing to change their orders up until the truck leaves our dock. We can’t always say ‘yes,’ but we try really hard to say ‘yes,’ and that’s just in our DNA — it goes right back to my dad.” CMN



The advertisement features a central image of a stack of three grilled cheese sandwiches on a black plate, with melted cheese dripping down the sides. To the left of the sandwiches is a small logo that reads "PROUDLY CHEESE WISCONSIN". Above the sandwiches is the Masters Gallery logo, which consists of a red shield with "MASTERS GALLERY" in white text, and to its right, "50th" in large gold letters with "1974-2024" below it. The background is a dark, slightly blurred kitchen setting.

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