

# Henning's gets better with age

By Mike Mathes

Some things just get better with age. Take cheese, for example—the kind manufactured right here in rural Manitowoc County.

Henning's Cheese, in its fourth generation of family cheesemaking, is testament to the changing taste buds in today's society. At a time when people's taste buds are growing the need for more aged cheese, Henning's Cheese is literally bursting at the seams to find room.

The latest expansion at Henning's Cheese began with an August 2009 groundbreaking. Cheese varieties appealing to refined tastes cause the need for more aging. To be aged properly, cheese needs the right conditions and space. Hence, Henning's Cheese opted to grow its storage and aging space. In doing so, the company also hopes to build some efficiency and space for the remaining operations in the plant.

### What they wanted to be

"We had several ideas we were trying to deal with. We had to stop and think about what we wanted to be," Kert Henning said.

All of the expansion points back to growing the company's ability to produce cheese to meet today's new demands.

Kert and his sister, Kay Schmitz, both pointed to the expertise of their brother, Kerry, a Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker for that growth.

"Kerry's understanding of what it takes to properly dry and properly age cheese has led to this need—essentially more elbow room for our cheese to age," Kert said.

Today's cheese consumers are literally begging for more aged varieties of cheese. That requires space to properly age the product for two to five years and, in some cases, even longer.

Aging cheese takes space to accomplish in the proper environment. "Even when we give tours, people don't really grasp the concept that five-year-old cheddar has literally been on the cooled aging shelf for five years," Henning said.

### Specialty cheddars

Master Cheesemaker Kerry's insights into cheesemaking have also helped Henning's Cheese launch a whole series of new flavored cheddar cheeses.

A few quick samples at their Town of Schleswig factory store might surprise you at the flavors. You can find the likes of caramel, apple pie, blueberry cobbler and even a hot mango that sweetens your tongue on first taste, then livens your testbuds with a habañero zest as you swallow.

That's right, it isn't just your grandfather's cheddar any more.

The new cheesemaking processes introduced by the Master Cheesemaker



Three generations of family members at the heart of the Henning's Cheese business include Mindy Ausloos, left, Kay Schmitz, Everett Henning, Kerry Henning and Kert Henning. The business was founded by Everett's father, Otto Henning.



# Cheese

continued from page 1

have opened a wide world of cheese flavor.

As the need to produce that greater variety has blossomed, again it placed space demands on this family cheesemaking operation.

As an example, the new Peppercorn Cheddar, which won last year's United States Cheese Championship blue ribbon for flavored cheeses, requires a special drying, aging and curing process to bring out its flavor.

Henning's Cheese can only produce about 100 wheels at a time, with a four-month aging process.

"We have buyers wanting this great cheese, but are hesitant to offer it because we don't want to get into big backlog," Kert said. Adding the new drying cooler will help Henning's Cheese expand that business.

### Proper aging is vital

The cheesemaking family at Henning's Cheese understand that having the proper cooling and aging facilities is what eventually brings out the flavor in cheese.

As our cultural tastes for cheese have grown to desire more of the unique tastes of aged cheese, the room for properly storing those cheeses has grown proportionately.

"It's amazing when we are visited by people who have found us for the first time," Kay said. "They are taken aback by our two-year-old cheddar and how good it gets as it ages out."

And, now, as mentioned earlier, it's



much more than traditional Cheddar.

Flavorings with a Mediterranean twist entice the cheese lover. Perhaps they simply want something with a bit of garlic, dill, onion and chive or other flavor. It's likely that you can find it in the cheese section of your favorite grocery store. Or, better yet, make the trip out to Henning's Cheese on Point Creek Road, a mile north of County X.

You'll find all the varieties they make at their factory store. And, you'll find much more—a historical museum, a Wisconsin products gift shop, and specialty wines and beverages.

Those who have been there also know its one of the best places to get those fresh, squeaky cheese curds.

### Spreading the word

Henning's Cheese has worked hard to move its products beyond its humble rural Manitowoc County home.

Years of building up other markets have helped find consumers across the country that appreciate the quality Henning's Cheese offers.

Today, with the opportunity to connect directly to customers via the internet, Kay is embarking on new ways to redesign and update the Henning's Cheese website.

Consumers from afar can order their favorite varieties right through the website. "At first we didn't know if we would have enough business to warrant the online presence. But, it has been a good way to allow people to order cheese directly from us," she noted.

This year, the website really hopped around Christmas time, when Henning's Cheese got an unexpected boost on the NBC Today Show. Sonny Anderson from the Food Channel chose a three pound gem wheel of cheese from Henning's as one of the eight Wisconsin made products to show.

Although the Kiel area product only hit the screen for about 15 seconds, the exposure was enough to generate interest and orders from all around the country.

"It not only helped Henning's Cheese, but it's fair to say it helped others in Wisconsin as we shipped more gift boxes,

including other cheeses and sausages this year.

### Fourth generation

Kay, Kert and Kerry all have a prominent hand in running today's operation as third-generation cheesemakers in the Henning family. And, some of their children represent the fourth generation in the family business.

Their mentor is still a significant part of the Henning's Cheese operation. Everett, who took over the factory from his father, Otto, who passed away in 1963, remains active in the overall cheesemaking business.

He may not be turning the cheese any more, but his mind is still running through the books.

His offspring praise him for his foresight in keeping Henning's Cheese abreast of the changes in the cheesemaking industry.

"We are all grateful for Dad and his foresight to make changes the way we

Turn to **HENNING'S**/page 5

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# Henning's

continued from page 4

wanted to. Every time there was a significant change in the industry, like it or not, we made the changes," Kay said.

"Today, he still has his nose to the grindstone."

If it isn't keeping an eye on the accounting, it's helping in some other area.

One of Everett's passions is the development of the historical museum in the portion of the plant that was once the retail store.

His retirement and his children both give him the freedom to travel at his leisure to find those historical items at auctions or sales that help enhance the museum.

Combining the retail store, an opportunity to watch cheese being made and a living history of cheesemaking, the Henning family has grown their business beyond simple manufacturing.

In many ways, they have worked to create a unique "manufacturing tourism" outlet right here in southern Manitowoc County.

loads of product, billing retail outlets and customer relations.

As a Master Cheesemaker since 1999, Kerry's joy lies in the actual formation of new cheese formulas. "We are all his research group around here," his brother Kert joked.

Kert, who has been responsible for route and market development, has moved back inside the business, working to learn some of Kay's roles. He is also taking a more active role in the overall marketing of the company's products.

"It's really helped having Kert here," Kay noted. "Sometimes we are so busy getting our own things done, that we don't focus on the marketing. And, that's where we need to build our business."

Where Kert once toiled to build that business one store at a time along the routes, his daughter, Rebekah, is putting her marketing expertise to work on the road.

## Family remains active

Meanwhile, it's the group of third generation family members that provides the spark and energy in today's business.

Kay has been with the family business since she returned to Henning's Cheese in 1980. She refers to herself as a Jill of all trades, and literally has a hand in many of the aspects of the cheesemaking operation, from working to connect with farmer producers on through the accounting for the business.

Her daughter, Mindy Ausloos, has also been a part of the family business for the past 13 years, and has taken over the operation of the retail store. She also has responsibilities for preparing semi-

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