Fromagination to expand online presence, continue local focus
By Rena Archwamety

MADISON, Wis. — Fromagination has gained a reputation as a world-class emporium of high-quality Wisconsin artisan cheeses, drawing large Saturday morning crowds during farmers’ market season as well as many visitors throughout the year at its storefront on the Madison, Wis., Capitol Square.

“Our location has worked out well, though it took a while for people to figure out food shopping on the square when there was not a farmers’ market,” says owner Ken Monteleone, who opened Fromagination in the fall of 2007 in the heart of downtown Madison. “But during the past seven years, we have really become a destination. It’s word of mouth — when company or relatives come from out of town, we’re on people’s checklist. We’re on the radar as a special destination when they’re in Madison. We get people from all over the world stopping in.”

Visitors who had a great in-store experience often become a cheese-of-the-month member or order from Fromagination throughout the year. And as this long-distance fan base grows, Monteleone is looking to improve the store’s website and expand its online presence.

“Even though it took a while for people to figure out the website, we’ve gained a reputation as a world-class experience and tell the stories of its artisans. Fromagination is showcasing the new cheese created by Wisconsin cheesemakers Willi Lehner of Bleu Mont Dairy, Chris Roelli of Roelli Cheese Haus, Bob Wills of Cedar Grove Cheese Co. and newcomer Bill Anderson (a former cheesemonger at Cedar Grove Cheese Co. and Bill Anderson of Crème de la Coulée Ar-

Fromagination has worked with cheesemakers to introduce new creations, such as one of its recent collaborations with four Wisconsin cheesemakers. Willi Lehner of Bleu Mont Dairy, Chris Roelli of Roelli Cheese Haus, Bob Wills of Cedar Grove Cheese Co. and newcomer Bill Anderson of Crème de la Coulée Artisan Cheese Co. recently partnered to create an Alpine-style cheese, “Willi,” which debuted and placed second in its class at the 2013 American Cheese Society Competition that was held last summer in Madison.

Fromagination is showcasing the new cheese as a limited offering this spring.

“There’s more and more of an effort from cheesemakers working together to craft new products,” Monteleone says.

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“We’ve had our storefront for seven years, and people have come from all over the nation,” he says. “Evolving our website is a big part of our initiative in 2014-2015, as opposed to opening another brick and mortar store. On our website we’re adding more and more products, and a lot of the cheeses you see in our store now are available online. Companion items to cheese also are now available.”

Monteleone says over the last year, Fromagination also has worked on doing more branding and working with both cheese and non-cheese artisans to come up with exclusive products, including artwork, ceramics and limited-edition cheeses.

“TASTE OF WISCONSIN — Cheesemonger Gabe Millette-Bell arranges a display of cheeses and samples from Roelli Cheese Haus, Shullsburg, Wis. Fromagination specializes in local artisan cheeses, accompaniments and gifts, though it sells some products from other parts of the United States and abroad. Fromagination is looking to improve its online presence, continue local focus.”

Local focus
As it has from the beginning, Fromagination continues its focus on promoting local products, though it also carries some non-local cheeses and companion products.

Monteleone notes that the ratio of local to non-local products can change with the season, but with everything the store aims to select full-flavored, traditionally-made products with a story behind them. Fromagination also values long-term, personal partnerships with its vendors.

“In spring and summer months it’s easy to do all-Wisconsin cheeses,” Monteleone says. “It’s a little more difficult in winter months, so we complement our selection with cheeses outside Wisconsin first, and then for the holidays we sprinkle in cheeses from outside the U.S. But our focus first and foremost is local.”

Condition and quality control are advantages for cheeses that have fewer miles to travel, as well as the ability to form close relationships with and convey the stories of local cheesemakers.

Monteleone says he would rather work directly with 300 producers than five distributors.

“Our goal is long-term partnerships with the people we work with,” Monteleone says. “We get to visit their farms, see their passion and take it back to the store. I have found this is very hard to do with those who are a distance away, especially in other parts of the world.”

As Fromagination looks forward to expanding its online presence to reach more customers nationwide, it will add elements to its website to continue offering its online customers a “local” experience and tell the stories of its artisans.

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Litehouse Foods launches Feta crumbles

SANDPOINT, Idaho — Litehouse Foods recently announced that it has launched new Litehouse Feta Cheese Crumbles, now available in the produce department of grocery stores.

The company notes it wanted the new Litehouse Feta Cheese Crumbles to be not only being convenient but also more in line with where consumers are shopping, but they still want to create something different. They don't have a lot of time for grocery shopping, but they do have a lot of time for good food. This is Litehouse's response to the market, and they are excited to bring something new to the table that will allow consumers to experience the flavors of the Mediterranean in a convenient package.

Clothbound Cheddar wins Georgia contest

ATLANTA — Tim Young, an Elberton, Ga., farmer, cheesemaker and local food advocate, took home the grand prize from the 2014 Flavor of Georgia Food Product Contest in March.

Young became known as an artisan state, he says. Wisconsin has been producing artisan cheeses for decades and has become a beacon for other states. New York and California are following Wisconsin's lead in developing their own artisan cheese industries.

Clothbound Cheddar is a traditional method of assembling cheese, where the cheese is cut into small pieces and then stacked to allow the cheese to cure. This method helps to develop unique flavors and textures that are not possible with other methods of cheese making.

The cheese was one of 35 Georgia products selected as finalists in the contest. The products were selected from more than 125 entries from across the state — one of the largest contest fields in the competition's history.

Young hopes that his Flavor of Georgia win will bring attention to Georgia's burgeoning artisan cheese industry. For more information about the Nature's Harmony Farm and its cheeses visit www.naturesharmonyfarm.com.