



CHEESE MARKET NEWS®

Retail WATCH

NEWS & MARKETING IDEAS TO HELP SELL MORE CHEESE

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.



Photo by Rena Archwamety/Cheese Market News

TEAM EFFORT — "Willi," an Alpine-style 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 Bill Anderson of Crème de la Coulée Artisan Cheese Co., is available this spring from Fromagination as a limited-supply offering.

"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.

"There's more and more of an effort from cheesemakers working together to craft new products."

Ken Monteleone
FROMAGINATION

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 (a former cheesemonger at Fromagination) of Crème de la Coulée Artisan Cheese Co. recently partnered to create a new American original 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. "They only made 15 wheels (of Willi), and we got the majority of them. A lot of times cheesemakers experiment but don't make enough to distribute nationally. We want people to come in and discover what's going on at Wisconsin at all levels."



Photo by Rena Archwamety/Cheese Market News

TASTE OF WISCONSIN — Cheesemonger Gabe Milliette-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.

• 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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"We will eventually have videos online. When we go out to visit our producers, we will tell the story behind the cheese with video," Monteleone says. "The new site will allow consumers not only to buy cheese but also to take in our expertise on what best pairs with it, like this Wisconsin cracker or that Wisconsin beer. We will take them through the whole experience they would get in-store."

• Artisan state

Monteleone says in addition to the growth of his business over the past seven years, he also has seen a growth in Wisconsin's reputation for its artisan cheeses.

"What has happened in the last seven years, Wisconsin really has become known as an artisan state," he says. "It has taken the past 15-20 years to evolve. At one time it was known more as a commodity cheese than a specialty cheese state."

Award-winning cheesemakers, such as Uplands Cheese from Dodgeville, Wis., helped to start that renaissance, and there has been growing excitement around Wisconsin cheesemakers now on a national level, Monteleone says. People increasingly are becoming familiar with different varieties of Wisconsin artisan cheeses, and what Napa Valley has become for wine, Madison and its surrounding area are becoming for cheese and beer, he adds.

"A lot of that has to do with all the events that take place in Wisconsin. We now have a very strong infrastructure around artisan cheese," he says, referencing events like the Wisconsin Cheese

Originals Festival, the American Cheese Society Conference and the World Championship Cheese Contest, all held in Madison over the past year, as well as several beer and cheese festivals held across Wisconsin throughout the year. He also credits television shows such as PBS's "Wisconsin Foodie," which help to showcase Wisconsin food artisans and prompt customers to look for certain items.

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Ken Monteleone
FROMAGINATION

"Right now Wisconsin is a really exciting place to be, and we're just a small part of its food scene. I'm excited to see the momentum as it builds," Monteleone says, pointing to established cheesemakers such as Carr Valley Cheese's Sid Cook and Edelweiss Creamery's Bruce Workman, as well as young artisans such as new Uplands Cheese owner Andy Hatch, who are both passing down traditions and introducing new ideas. "People are viewing Wisconsin as a place to become innovative, and we are becoming part of that food landscape." CMN

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 product to be located next to the salad makings at the store.

"We listened to consumers and know they don't have a lot of time for grocery shopping, but they still want to create delicious and healthy meals for their families," says Margi Gunter, brand

manager, Litehouse Foods. "This produce Feta meets the demands of consumers by not only being convenient but also rBST- and gluten-free."

Gunter adds that the product also meets the needs of retailers with specialized packaging that allows for both horizontal and vertical placement for a better product billboard.

Litehouse Feta Cheese Crumbles are available in 4-ounce tubs. For more information, visit www.LitehouseFoods.com. CMN

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.

The annual contest, conducted by the University of Georgia Center for Agribusiness and Economic Development, is a chance for food businesses to showcase their new products.

Young owns Nature's Harmony Farm, and his grand-prize-winning Georgia Gold Clothbound Cheddar is made from milk produced by the farm's herd of Jersey dairy cows.

The cheese is handcrafted and aged for six to 12 months in the farm's cheese caves.

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. CMN

Cabot will launch Community Tour May 17

CABOT, Vt.—Cabot Creamery Cooperative will launch its 2014 Cabot Community Tour May 17 with a kickoff event in Jacksonville, Fla.

The first Cabot Community Tour, which launched in May 2012, was a two-month-long celebration that included dozens of events in cities and towns along the East Coast, from Miami to Portland, Maine, each celebrating the virtues of unified communities, volunteerism and the International Year of Cooperatives.

"Our first Community Tour was a resounding success, and we are extremely excited to launch a brand new tour in 2014," says Roberta MacDonald, Cabot's senior vice president of marketing. "In 2012, we collaborated with 182 partner organizations along the tour route, attracted more than 50,000 attendees to our 23 events, traveled 2,300 miles in 57 days and reached millions by traditional and social media outreach. We believe that strong, healthy and unified communities make for a better world, and the tour is a perfect way to spread our positive message to a wide audience. This year, we hope to reach even more people as we visit cities including Savannah, Charleston, Raleigh, Washington D.C., Philadelphia and New York."

The 2014 Community Tour begins at noon May 17 with a kickoff event in partnership with Habitat for Humanity of

Jacksonville Inc. HabiJax will recognize the homebuyers, sponsors and builders participating in Home Builders Blitz 2014, to be held June 9-14. Twenty-five new homes will be built, and 25 owner-occupied homes will receive critical home repairs during the week with the help of 1,100 volunteers.

The Cabot Farmers' Gratitude Grille, a state-of-the-art mobile kitchen, also will be on hand to prepare complimentary meals for the volunteers. The Gratitude Grille will travel the entire distance of the 2014 Community Tour, providing fresh, healthy meals to volunteer groups at pre-planned events each day.

After the Jacksonville event, the 2014 Community Tour heads north along the East Coast Greenway—a 2,900-mile traffic-free path linking East Coast cities from Florida to Maine—stopping in 31 cities and towns along the way. The 1,000-mile trek will include teams of cyclists, a caravan of volunteers and the Cabot Farmers' Gratitude Grille. The tour concludes June 21 in New York City with a grand finale celebration at Adventures New York in Central Park.

A tour schedule is available at cabotcommunitytour.com. In addition to Cabot, sponsors of the 2014 Community Tour include AARP Create the Good, East Coast Greenway, HandOn Network, Marriott and National Life Group. CMN



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