



# Legacy & Leadership

**Errico Auricchio** is the founder and president of BelGioioso Cheese Inc., Green Bay, Wisconsin. Having moved from Italy to Wisconsin in 1979, his mission was to make great Italian cheeses using old-world craftsmanship and fresh, quality milk from Wisconsin.

Today, as many as 27 varieties of Classic Italian cheeses are produced and distributed nationwide and abroad. BelGioioso operates eight manufacturing plants, a converting and distribution facility and a large warehouse for aging. The company employs 700 people and purchases milk from more than 200 local Wisconsin dairy farms.

Auricchio has been successful in establishing BelGioioso as a leader within an industry that focuses first on quality. He also serves as a Trustee Emeritus for St. Norbert College and is a founding member of the Wisconsin Specialty Cheese Institute. He also currently is chairman of The Consortium for Common Food Names.

**Q** How is the dairy industry uniquely positioned as an essential industry to feed the nation and world during the COVID-19 crisis?

**A** Many safety measures proposed for other industries are measures we were already following. Many cheese plants are automated, with employees spread out so the manufacturing process is safer. Our specialty cheeses are manufactured differently than other cheeses, so we created a crisis management team that had a virus preparedness plan ready. We implemented many of the CDC recommendations like face masks, temperature monitoring and social distancing at our plants well before the suggested date.

**Q** What is the biggest challenge facing the dairy industry today?

**A** I know we have many challenges. On the operations side, it's the training and retaining of employees. On the marketing side, we have the challenge of the media touting private label as the answer to retailers' needs. Brands are important to the specialty cheese category; consumers and chefs want to know who is producing the cheese they are purchasing. Brands are an added comfort level for the end user, especially in times like this.

**Q** Please comment on the importance of accuracy, product quality and reputation to the longevity of a business.

**A** To stay in business, quality and longevity go hand in hand. If you want to last, you must put good, quality products on the market.

**Q** What are the most important decisions you made/have made as a leader of your company?

**A** We introduced a new brand to the market in 1993. I acquired the company and changed the name from Auricchio to BelGioioso, which at the time was a totally unknown brand.

**Q** How is managing a multi-generational family business a unique endeavor?

**A** The next generation needs to have the same passion for the business. Once you know they are interested in learning, you need to train them, and then the most difficult part is letting go of control.

**Q** How do you encourage creative thinking within your organization?

**A** Not everyone is a creative thinker, but if you support creative thinking within your organization, you may discover them. Many years ago, we started a companywide incentive program where employees offer suggestions to make their daily tasks more efficient. If the suggestion is implemented, they are assigned additional vacation time and a bonus.

**Q** How do you communicate your company's "core values" and encourage others to do the same?

**A** By example, not by orders. We don't have a mission statement, we have patience, and sometimes raising your voice a little communicates your point very well.

**Q** What was an obstacle you faced for your business and how did you overcome it?

**A** At first, milk producers did not have trust in the company, so it was hard to get milk; they did not know us and were skeptical. Through the hard work of our field people and our commitment to the region and producing quality cheeses, they eventually appreciated our partnership and the fairness of the incentives that we have in place.

**Q** What has been your favorite thing about working in the cheese and dairy industry?

**A** I love to go on sales calls with customers, hearing and seeing the positive response to what we have produced. We receive many complimentary letters and responses on a daily basis about our cheeses.

**Q** What advice do you have for adapting in an ever evolving marketplace?

**A** Listen to your customers when they suggest different products or packaging. Go to the trade shows and talk with your peers. Be open to getting input from customers, consumers, chefs, vendors and employees.

**Q** Please tell us about a favorite product or marketing campaign your company rolled out under your leadership. What made it special?

**A** Burrata is one of my favorite product launches. It is a delicate cheese that typically

only had a few days of shelf life. We were able to create a packaging option that increased the shelf life to 30 days and made this cheese available to a larger segment of the market. We have done many marketing campaigns throughout the years. When we changed names it was "The New Name, the Century Old Tradition" and "Patience is our Virtue," which promoted the aging and care of our Provolone and Parmesan cheeses. Each campaign we create tells a story of who we are and why our attention to detail is so important to the quality of our cheeses.

**Q** What would you cite as an example of a time where your company showed innovation and leadership in the dairy marketplace?

**A** We introduced many new products that have become successful, and being the first to market is always better than second. Our Fresh Mozzarella sliced log has been the most successful product we have done; the same outcome is hard to duplicate.

**Q** Please discuss the benefits of collaboration among industry leaders versus the need to protect your brand.

**A** There are issues in our industry that definitely have to be addressed with other industry leaders. The Wisconsin Cheese Makers Association, International Dairy Deli Bakery Association and Wisconsin Specialty Cheese Institute have all been important to the industry, providing a platform for industry leaders to collaborate and share issues. The Consortium for Common Food Names has been my most recent initiative where we have created a unified platform for the specialty food industry to fight against the naming rights challenge from the European Union.

**Q** Have you fostered certain habits throughout your career that have encouraged/promoted your company's success?

**A** Lead by example, always try to do things better and keep moving forward. **CMN**