



# Legacy & Leadership

**George Crave** is president of Crave Brothers Farmstead Cheese LLC, Waterloo, Wisconsin, where he oversees plant management and cheese production. He is a licensed cheesemaker and has traveled to Italy, France and Switzerland to study cheesemaking and affinage.

Crave and his three brothers own Crave Brothers Dairy Farm along with three members of the next generation. For more than 20 years Crave was in charge of the dairy herd and milk quality at Crave Brothers Dairy Farm. In 2001, he and his wife, Debbie, began managing the building and development of Crave Brothers Farmstead Cheese and in 2002, the farmstead cheese factory was completed and cheese production began.

Crave is a 1978 graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Madison Farm & Industry Short Course. He served on the Council for Agricultural Research, Extension & Teaching (CARET) for the UW-Madison College of Agriculture & Life Sciences, and is a founding member of the Professional Dairy Producers of Wisconsin.

Crave also is a member of the Wisconsin Cheese Makers Association and the Wisconsin Specialty Cheese Institute. He and his brothers were recognized in 2008 as World Dairy Expo Dairymen of the Year and in 2010 by the Wisconsin Dairy Business Association as Advocates of the Year. Crave Brothers Farm hosted the 2009 Wisconsin Farm Technology Days, a three-day outdoor farm show with 80,000 attendees. In 2017, Crave Brothers Farm and Crave Brothers Farmstead Cheese were selected as the Wisconsin Family Business of the Year. In 2018, Crave was inducted into the *Guilde Internationale Des Fromagers*.

Crave is a 4-H leader and member of Holy Family Catholic Church. He and Debbie have three children — Patrick, Brian and Roseanne.

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

**A** I have always believed that the dairy industry — the cow-milking industry and the processing side — are essential. It is reassuring to know that people are choosing to buy dairy products during these crazy times. We all know that dairy is a healthy, necessary part of our diets.

**Q** What are some of the benefits and possible challenges that come with running a family business?

**A** For me, the benefit is that I worked with mostly my family, day in and day out, for our first 20 years at the dairy farm. Now, as our cheese business has expanded, we have the next generation of family involved in all areas of our diverse business, along with key employees who have been with us for many years. It is gratifying.

The challenge is transferring leadership and equity to the next generation. We have been working with consultants to help us with this transfer.

**Q** What is a valuable business insight you feel your generation has passed on to the next?

**A** We hear a lot about legacy. I feel the best way to transfer our knowledge, wisdom, leadership and values to the next generation — which includes family and non-family leaders — is to have them work alongside me in all aspects of the business. This means working and meeting about the business decisions such as sales, wages, pricing and general plant governance and values. We have very few closed-door meetings. Key people need to know what is coming next. It needs to be lived and visible in all of our actions for our family and employees.

**Q** What is one characteristic that you believe every leader should possess?

**A** My style is being a servant leader — or maybe call me a “player coach.” I’m out on the floor helping and coaching where it’s needed every day.

I feel a leader has to be able to visualize what will be needed from day-to-day activities or issues, and also see the longer-range issues or opportunities that may help the company. A leader needs to then be able to communicate to the staff or team what needs to be done. A true leader is committed every day; one cannot say, “I’m not leading today.” It takes a lot of energy, and it takes calm confidence.

You never really know what you will face each day. I just know that I need to be ready when the day starts.

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

**A** Price fluctuation. I can’t understand how a highly perishable product like milk can be considered a commodity whose price discovery is at the Chicago Mercantile Exchange. The real challenge is regulations as they pertain to milk marketing. These federal regulations make it difficult for a processor to have an agreement with its milk suppliers to offer a set price for a set volume of milk. How refreshing and transparent it would be to have an agreed upon price and volume for a six- to 12-month period. I cannot think of another industry outside of agriculture (our essential food growing system) that operates in such an archaic pricing system.

I also see a continued pressure on our farm production practices regarding issues like climate change. The entire industry will benefit by aligning with one science-based story. Tell the truth — we have a fantastic story to share.

**Q** They say “you learn from your mistakes” .... please share an example where this was relevant for you?

**A** That’s what they say. Let me tell you, I have made my share of mistakes, and what I finally learned is that I don’t have to figure it all out by myself. I have access to any expert that can help me answer any question I may have or problem I face. So ask. The biggest mistake you can make is not recognizing a problem or ignoring a problem.

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

**A** My first experience was feeding calves and milking cows as a child. That is when I really learned to work and to work smart. Now with 20 years of making cheese, I really enjoy working with my wife, Debbie, and my entire team at the cheese plant. We have created some innovative products that I’m very proud of. I do enjoy traveling to different trade shows and sales meetings to have that one-on-one with the customer. We have met so many good friends working in the cheese business. When I’m on the road, I always try to fit in a visit at a food store or cheese plant and at least one farm visit, maybe two.

**Q** How have communication methods evolved over the years, and what have you and your company done to adapt?

**A** When Debbie and I started the cheese factory, we had slow internet (dial up) from our kitchen table. With better internet, social media and Zoom, we can market and sell every day. We have a great story, but I really don’t like to call it a story. I tell our customers these are our actions. We share our recipes and farming methods in real time with Facebook and social media. It’s amazing to me that when we share these things, people are actually out there “following us.” Now with Zoom calls and virtual sales meetings, they do work, and it will be interesting to see how fast trade shows come back. I do miss getting out and visiting one-on-one with our buyers. I miss hosting customers at our farm and cheese factory.

**Q** What, in your opinion, does the dairy industry need to do to attract the next generation of leaders?

**A** The dairy industry and the entire food industry, particularly the farmer producers to the production line workers, need to be paid and compensated for the essential work that they are performing. If we can attract outstanding production workers, attracting leaders will be much easier. The last thing any leader wants to deal with is always having labor and staffing issues. Our essential dairy business needs to get a fair share of the consumer dollar so that all areas of our industry can prosper.

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

**A** Anyone that has met me knows that I don’t pretend very well. I say it as I see it. It’s how I was raised, and I carry my convictions and actions straight forward and run with them every day for my family, my staff and my customers. I come to work and put on my hairnet and boots like everyone on my team. I go out on the floor and make cheese for two or three hours; I check in with everyone in the building before I even think of going to the office. Our motto is, “Don’t let your teammate fail; if they fail, we all fail.” Habits mean consistency and that is what I try to show in every conversation I have. CMN