



Legacy & Leadership

Richard Guggisberg is president of Guggisberg Cheese, Millersburg, Ohio.

As the son of Swiss immigrants who moved to Holmes County, Ohio, in the late 1940s, he started learning from his father, who was a Master Cheese Maker, at a very young age. At just 4 years old, Guggisberg began scraping the cheese cloths and eventually obtained every job from picking up milk from 28 dairy farms every morning before school to coming in and helping to make cheese.

Working closely alongside his father, he gained the experience he used to help develop and eventually perfect his line of award-winning cheese, including Guggisberg's Baby Swiss.

As a former president and current board member of the Ohio Swiss Cheese Association, Guggisberg continues his involvement in the community and works to keep up with the constant challenges and changes within the cheesemaking industry. Due to his efforts, Guggisberg Cheese remains one of the top five Swiss cheesemaking facilities in the United States.

Guggisberg still lives in Holmes County with his wife, Anne, and enjoys spending time outdoors with his four daughters and five grandsons.

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

A Frankly, I haven't done anything else in my career. I think our biggest challenge is going from a family-run business to a more corporate structure so we can manage the growth.

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

A The biggest advantage is you've got that emotional and personal attachment. You have an extra incentive to have your company succeed through good times and bad. One of the nicest benefits is the fun and gratification to make award-winning cheese. With our United States grand champion win in both 2019 and four years earlier in 2015, all the people who have been with us for so many years, including and especially our milk producers, felt a sense of accomplishment. We all have a great sense of pride in the awards, and that is gratifying to see.

Q What advice would you give someone going into a leadership position for the first time?

A Learn to listen before you speak. Take advantage of being surrounded by hard-working people who have made a long-term commitment to your company. They possess a valuable work ethic and

are very good at what they do. You are never too old to have a mentor.

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

A You have to have a lot of humility and listen to the people around you when they have advice. You can never let pride or ego get in the way of making good decisions.

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

A There are forces out there that are anti-dairy. It is confusing that they push for all natural yet I can't think of any product more nutritious and natural than milk and milk products. We need to continue to get the message out on the benefits of how nutritious dairy products are. That message seemed to get lost, and we need to find it again. There are so many cutting-edge, sustainable practices dairy farmers and plants are executing that don't get noticed. We need to put that out there. Pound for pound, dairy still offers top nutritional value.

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

A You have to do what you say you are going to do or you lose credibility. Your actions need to follow your promises.

We strive for quality and consistency. If you focus on quality, the profits will come. You need to value and maintain the trust your customers invest in you. We work side by side with our QA/QC team to keep everything on point.

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

A Look to the future. Recently, we have gone through some expansion plans and we picked equipment that was best suited for our products. We needed to make this significant investment and move toward automation since labor is such a competitive market. It also gave us a lot of process control. You have to believe in your company and what you are doing.

Q How do you encourage creative thinking within your organization?

A Have open communication within your company. We encourage open and creative thinking both in meeting formats as well as individual formats. You find things that have worked well over the years yet you still need to look to the next generation to "do their own thing and find their own groove" to reflect what they are good at and what they can give back in their own way to enhance and grow the organization.

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

A Sales. We knew we had a good product but getting it into the consumer's mouth was a challenge. We overcame that obstacle by finding a fantastic salesperson that brought his knowledge of sales and building a network that has grown the business brick by brick. Without sales, you can't grow the business. And without happy customers, you can't grow sales.

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

A The people. It is a different breed of person. We need to keep the interest of the younger generation to keep this industry moving along. Other countries face the same obstacle. It is hard to attract new talent that possesses a deep love and care for what they are producing.

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

A We have been trying to answer that question for a long time. We're facing rapid changes at retail as grocery store chains keep buying up one another. We all need to stay in touch with our customers and be willing to adapt to what they need and want on every level as the landscape constantly changes.

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

A Last year when we got the U.S. Championship, it was incredible how much more publicity came our way compared to four years earlier. It is pretty obvious this is due to the internet and social media. I give the Swiss all the respect in the world, but it continues to be a personal pinnacle for me to have Guggisberg's Swiss take top honors each year.

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

A Tastes are changing. The younger generation is curious about the origin of their food and want to take responsibility for their choices. The interest in cheese is there, but we need to encourage internships at local schools, participate in FFA and ag groups and even get better connected with students in microbiology classes. We consistently try to get students into our plant to see the work that goes on in our lab. It is hard to compete with high tech jobs, but we have to capitalize on the younger generation's interest in getting back to the basics. CMN