



# Legacy & Leadership

**Robert Wills** is a Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker certified in Cheddar and Butterkäse and has been the owner of Cedar Grove Cheese, Plain, Wisconsin, since 1989. Prior to that, Wills was an instructor and researcher in Agricultural and Applied Economics at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. In 2011, he opened Clock Shadow Creamery in Milwaukee, one of the first urban cheese factories in the United States.

Wills holds a B.A. in International Relations from American University and a Ph.D. in Economics and a J.D. from UW-Madison. He and his wife live on the west side of Madison, halfway between his factories. He has three adult children — Bo works at the Milwaukee plant.

**Q** As a pioneer of the “urban cheese factory” concept in Wisconsin, how does this set you apart among the many award winning cheesemakers in the state?

**A** I have always sought ways to counter mass-market cheese. Cheese should be of a place and for a place. If we get milk from farms that all buy their feed from the same sources — things like cotton seed or remnants from production of biodiesel or hybrid corn — then the milk no longer captures its provenance. Similarly, if we make cheese that is designed to appeal to the broadest audience, then it cannot reflect either its source or the local culture of the people who are eating it.

By setting up a small factory in a city that had never had access to its own cheese, we have been able to customize our production to the community and the requests of local chefs. Part of our milk comes from the zoo. We also collect milk from the state fair and from ex-urban farmers. The cheese we make is not just unusual because it is derived from somewhere exotic. Instead, it is unique in being designed for local tastes and uses.

A challenge to local production is having enough volume to keep unit costs under control. In Plain, where there are 800 people, we could never develop a cheese that targeted just that community. So, rural factories tend to make a product that can fill more generic niches. By being in Milwaukee, and close to Chicago, we have a big enough market potential to make our targeted cheese products commercially viable.

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

**A** The first couple years were tough ones in the industry. Around us, farms and factories folded like so many block liners. Initially those exits created opportunities for us to grow. But about two years in, we faced the first of several blows that shook our confidence and finances.

We were selling cheese to a larger company that since has pushed on to become an industry “leader.” As the market made a downturn, that company canceled all its orders — over 70% of all our sales. Milk kept coming in. I stacked cheese to the roof of the cooler. Milk checks were due and it all was about to tumble. A month later, the company put in a small order, unloaded a bunch of unwrapped cheese (mostly varieties that we didn’t even make) and took a credit against the sale. We learned two lessons. Never be dependent on a single customer, and look out for vulture businesses that grow at the expense of others.

But the most important lesson we learned from that episode came because of a cold call to Forest Kubly at Swiss Colony. Forest said that the industry needed to keep small companies who could make specialties. He cleared out our inventory and gave us years of producing Kreme Kaese to replace cheese that the Colony had been importing. Forest saved my company. He also taught us that there was an important role that we could play in the industry. It turned out that most people in the cheese industry are more like Forest Kubly than the honored industrialist.

**Q** You have been involved in a lot of mentoring and resource sharing with up-and-coming cheesemakers. Why do you feel it is important to have this type of collaboration, and how does it help to boost the success of the entire cheese industry?

**A** From Forest Kubly, we learned the importance and rewards of passing it on. We view ourselves as an incubator for other businesses, whether farmers who become cheese marketers or independent cheesemakers. The incubator role enables us to teach and learn. Our orbit of sibling companies fills more market needs and makes more things possible for chefs and consumers than we could possibly do on our own. It enables us to use our facility more efficiently.

**Q** What is one cheese contest award you were particularly proud to receive and why?

**A** Before Uplands Cheese took the American Cheese Society competition’s Best of Show with a cheese made at our plant, I did not enter many contests. I was not confident that the criteria for judging reflected what we were attempting to produce. Since then, Cedar Grove Cheese and Clock Shadow have won a plethora of awards, as have many of our other partners. Just before the pandemic, we received our first perfect judging score for our Bratwurst flavored Chees-E-Que — a Brazilian-style grilling cheese typically cooked over a hibachi. This multicultural mashup seemed to be a pretty good representation of our business.

I am equally proud of two awards recognizing efforts that benefit the industry. One was an award from the American Cheese Society for work on a food safety Best Practices guide for artisan cheesemakers. The other was a Heroes award from the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program (NC-SARE). These recognize our belief that business responsibility goes beyond the product.

**Q** How has thinking outside the box served you well in establishing your company?

**A** Thinking outside the box for me is just solving other people’s problems.

I must emphasize that I did not establish Cedar Grove Cheese. Others’ foresight and risk-taking made our adventures possible. In 1878, Lemuel Cooper, a German immigrant farmer, hired a Swiss cheesemaker to start one of the first factories in Southwest Wisconsin outside Plain. It seems likely that the cheesemaker was one of many recruited by WD Hoard as he proselytized for the dairy industry as a solution to Wisconsin’s agriculture woes. Ferdie Nachreiner made ours the first plant in the state to eliminate can milk by buying all the patrons’ bulk tanks, and one of the first small plants to have a grade A receiving station and help others qualify for the federal milk marketing order. For 32 years, their legacy has been my responsibility.

In our salad days, our vision was to make Cedar Grove Cheese a mecca of creativity and resilience. There we would hone our skills and collaborate with our friends, customers, suppliers and other cheese fanatics. Seasoned cheesemakers would attract eager newbies. I had the hubris to believe that our business could provide an example of how a small business could thrive in a market increasingly dominated by multinational behemoths.

**Q** What is an example of a trend that you were at the forefront of in the industry, whether it be a product, service, packaging, etc?

**A** Cedar Grove Cheese is probably best known as the first company to promise not to buy milk from cows treated with recombinant growth hormones. My research work at the University of Wisconsin had indicated that the technology was not likely to financially benefit farmers and was potentially detrimental to milk quality or the health of cows. rBGH was not welcomed by consumers who found the genetic engineering unnatural, religiously prohibited or potentially unhealthy. Since neither our patrons nor our consumers were supportive of injecting cows with growth hormone to increase milk production, it was easy to create a market.

Cedar Grove Cheese was a leader in organic cheese production and grass-based dairy. I no longer remember all of the science that I was immersed in at the time, but the overall lesson continues to guide us as we try to buy milk largely from smaller farms who graze their animals, select breeds with more solids, keep the animals longer and do not stress their cows to get more production.

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

**A** A couple years back, a young couple from South Africa did a Wisconsin tour, spending about a month at our factory before moving on to others. They were cramming before taking over the family cheese business. I stared through a worm hole at the optimism and naivety and energy of 30 years ago. What could I share?

I gave some practical business advice. And, I shared some personal musings.

I am proud of what has been accomplished. I am embarrassed for my failures as a manager and as a partner. The years were filled with accomplishments, friendships and rewards. The years were filled with doubts, fears, insecurities and loneliness. Not everyone can, or should be expected to, handle that. I did not handle it well.

I tried, in the most encouraging way, to warn the youngsters that their undertaking would test them personally and as a couple. My former in-laws had futilely given me a similar warning. Today, I have a great life. I am blessed and value my ongoing relationship above everything else. But I am sad to be completely estranged from the person whose dream this was, the person whose frantic chain of cold calls led to Forest Kubly. CMN