



Legacy & Leadership

Ken Meyers is president and CEO of Allied Dairy Products Inc. and its wholly owned subsidiaries MCT Dairies Inc., Trugman-Nash LLC and Bella Pak Inc.

Meyers has been actively involved in the dairy industry for more than 38 years and was one of the co-founders of Alpine Lace, now owned by Land O'Lakes. From 1985 to 1997, he served as vice president and corporate secretary at Alpine Lace and was president of Alpine Lace's Cheese Trading Division. In 1998, Meyers led the successful management buyout of Alpine Lace's Cheese Trading Division and formed MCT Dairies Inc. as an independent cheese distributing, trading, import and export company. In addition to his role as CEO, Meyers also is responsible for global sourcing, export sales, domestic trading, import logistics and hedging services.

In 2013, Ken re-entered the retail branding arena by introducing Old Croc, presently the fastest-growing specialty Cheddar in the country via Trugman-Nash LLC, a company acquired in July 2010 by Allied Dairy Products, which also owns MCT Dairies.

Meyers graduated from Newark Academy in 1978 and received his bachelor's degree in economics from the University of Rhode Island in 1982. He is a member and has sat on the board of several industry associations, including the Cheese Importers Association of America, International Dairy Foods Association, Vistage, the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, National Dairy Board, Dairy Management Inc. and the Wisconsin Cheese Makers Association. He also served two terms on the Agricultural Technical Advisory Committee for Trade for animal and animal products.

Q How is the coronavirus pandemic affecting marketing messaging and positioning for dairy products?

A Specialty cheese has seen a silver lining in the pandemic as consumers are treating themselves by way of cooking at home, experimenting with charcuterie boards and generally consuming dairy for its natural nutritional benefits.

Q As a key importer of dairy products since 1983, how have you kept your finger on the pulse of the international market to assist your customers with import and export needs?

A Being an active participant, we are always receiving quotations providing pricing reports from around the world as well as production and consumption data. Although we have not been able to personally visit during COVID, Zoom and other tools have allowed us to keep in touch with our vendors and customers regularly.

Q What are some of the key quality aspects you seek out when making decisions on selecting cheeses for import, aging or financing?

A Quality and reliability of vendor choice is tantamount. We cannot allow ourselves to work with unreliable or lower-quality suppliers; our reputation is at stake as well as consumer safety. Food Safety Modernization Act requirements set a high bar for maintaining proper quality assurance/quality control protocols internally. We have also installed Trace Gains software to assist in managing our quality control.

Q You have been importing Australian cheese since 1948 — what are some of the qualities of Australian cheeses that attracted you to making them a key aspect of your business?

A Trugman-Nash has been importing from Australia since 1948. We purchased the company several years ago. At that time, we realized the heritage, quality and composition of Australian cheese was extremely high quality and unknown to the U.S. consumer. So, we took what was originally an ingredient importer and created our Old Croc brand using a special recipe for aging Cheddar. The Australian dairy industry is, by nature, a pasture-based, grass-fed system. We realized organic and keto, as well as the grass-fed market, were underserved and on the rise. Most importantly, the cheeses' sweet Cheddar flavor really comes through by way of our aging and grading program.

Q When you brought Old Croc to the United States, Australian Cheddars on U.S. retail shelves were scarce. What about this brand made you confident it would resonate with U.S. consumers?

A We knew that imported European Cheddars were doing well in the United States. Our flavor profile and natural attributes, grass-fed/pasture-raised, aged flavor, etc., all lent themselves to a base of consumers. Add the fact that we have the largest market access from Australia, which allowed us to invest in our Old Croc Australian Cheddar brand. All of this gave us a point of differentiation from the many European Union brands present at the store level. Specialty cheese consumers love to try new products, especially those that deliver their promise.

The key factors are: grass-fed/pasture-raised, non-GMO ingredients, and the flavor and body of our Old World recipe due to lower moisture, lactate crystallization and delicious flavor development over time.

Q MCT Dairies now is offering vegan cheese alternatives as well. Why did you feel it was important to add this option to your product line up?

A MCT is by nature a dairy ingredient supplier. We have over the years delved into other ingredients our customers use in order to provide better service and additional offerings. The advent of plant-based foods becoming greater has brought opportunities to supply our current customer base as they are trying to take advantage of this up-and-coming channel.

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

A Our team has always viewed themselves as self-starters; we have a culture of problem solving, finding solutions for our customers' needs. Finding solutions is what we are best at and, hence, forces us to think outside the barn.

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 Being a founder of Alpine Lace Brands, we were the originator of the lowfat/low-salt cheese market.

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

A The people. We are blessed that we work in an industry where competitors are friends and we all work together for the good of the industry, knowing we are selling the most nutritious natural product.

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

A We have always been early adopters of technology. Being a smaller company compared to many co-ops and others in the industry, we have believed that systems were the best way for us to compete. Being nimble allows us to provide better service to our customers by streamlining our processes and thus better communications.

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

A By fostering an open environment for communicating with our team, we have always been able to create open dialogue to assist in making our business systems better, our goals attainable and accountability to bring success. We live by the "Big Boy" principle: Do what's right, advise early and often on any issues so we can better address them when they occur and provide more options for corrective actions if needed. **CMN**