



# Legacy & Leadership

**John Epprecht** is a second-generation family owner and board member at Great Lakes Cheese Co. Inc., Hiram, Ohio. He started as a 17-year-old hourly employee in what was then his father's regional cheese business. Over 50 years of service, he held positions of increasing responsibility as the business grew to be a national player and industry leader. He is now a member of the company's board and chair of the Governance Committee. In his most recent role as vice president of strategic projects, Epprecht was responsible for overseeing critical initiatives such as plant and office construction, expansions and enhancements. He continues to be fiercely dedicated to doing what is right for all 4,000 employee-owners of Great Lakes Cheese and the many more to come in the future.

Throughout his career in the dairy industry, Epprecht has served as president of the U.S. Cheese Makers Association, chairman of the Wisconsin Cheese Makers Association's Recognition Committee and board member of the Huntington Regional Advisory Board. He is the current chairman of Geauga Growth Partnership, a local business organization in Geauga County, and board member of the Western Reserve Trust Co. He also received a Life Member award, WCMA's highest honor, from the association in 2019.

Epprecht is a family businessman with a strong emphasis on family. He lives in Geauga County with his beloved wife, Deb, and is happy to have his three children, Vicky, Lauren and Steven, close by. Steven and Lauren both work for Great Lakes Cheese. He is spending his retirement traveling and playing with his five grandchildren.

**Q** How did Great Lakes Cheese (GLC) grow under your leadership in terms of locations and product offerings?

**A** Along with a team of many talented leaders, we grew from a regional to a national distributor during my tenure. Each additional site brought along with it a unique expertise and strategic location. The investments evidenced our commitments to delivering quality products and unparalleled service to our customers. For example, when we acquired Adams and Cuba, we were able to vertically integrate and secure our supply of critical items: extra sharp New York Cheddar and pasta filata.

**Q** As a frequent award winner in industry competitions, what is it about GLC products that keep them consistently on top?

**A** There are two critical components to award-winning cheese: the finest milk and the best people. In New York, the dairy farmers continue to supply our Adams and Cuba plants with fresh, high-quality milk. Our teams take that milk and with skill and care convert it into consistently exceptional cheese. Of course, the teams need solid infrastructure to operate in. We have rebuilt Adams twice to provide it with new evaporators, vats and more. We're currently undergoing the largest investment in our company's history to replace the Cuba facility in Franklinville, New York. Additionally, we give employees the time to find the award-winning cheese. I've heard stories of teams looking through 100 lots to find the cheese to submit.

**Q** What are some of the advantages and possible challenges of working alongside family?

**A** With a family- and employee-owned company, we have the opportunity and responsibility to grow the business for generations. We can be both agile and patient. If we see an opportunity, we can move quickly and make decisions overnight. If there are market pressures, we are not forced to react immediately if it's not in our long-term interests to do so. Of course, working with family has its pros and cons, but we have been able to put the business and its employees above any so-called drama. The business and employees have been at the forefront of our lives for the past 50 years. Now we have the responsibility to bring our children, the next generation, into the business and reinforce the values of hard work, honesty and integrity.

**Q** You also treat your other employees "like family" — why was that philosophy important to your father and something the company has upheld over six decades?

**A** My dad is a true entrepreneur, and he would hop on the line and work alongside the team to get the job done. He didn't have any pretense around him about being the owner, which is why creating the Employee Stock Ownership Plan was such a clear choice. It's another way of demonstrating that we're in this together — we are building this business as one family, and we will all share in the rewards. We

have also spread the family culture through our longstanding friendships with employee-owners. Part of what makes Great Lakes Cheese special is the genuine care we have for each other. My siblings and I have been fortunate to build connections with many employee-owners, and we will continue to encourage future generations to do the same.

**Q** Why do you feel it's important to participate in industry contest auctions, and what other ways do you "give back" to the industry and your community?

**A** Industry contest auctions are vital in the continued growth of making our nation's cheese products better. It motivates cheesemakers to continually raise the bar, which in turn advances the whole industry. It is also an opportunity to support future dairy leaders through scholarships and education.

**Q** What valuable business insight do you feel is necessary to pass on?

**A** Integrity — this has been foundational to how we do business. While we have been tough on price and quality with our suppliers, we were always straight with them. We were clear on what we needed, followed through and paid on time. We recognize that we are only as good as our suppliers. The respect we have for our suppliers, many of whom we have been in business with for several decades, has been passed along from my dad to me to my brother and to our vice presidents working with them now.

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

**A** One of my big lessons learned is the importance of investing in state-of-the-art technology. Back in the 1980s, we hesitated in switching away from our slice technology. We even invested in rebuilding the outdated technology. We soon realized that the upfront investment in the newer technology would result in long-term savings and better service for our customers. We haven't wavered on fully evaluating the latest and greatest since.

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

**A** Always stay on the forefront. Whether it be snacking, organic or plant-based, we have taken steps to incorporate new formats and flavors into our portfolio quickly. This enables us to offer our customers a variety of options beyond the core offerings of chunks, shreds and slices.

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

**A** I remember when I would get into the office and sort through a stack of pink slips from phone messages. That wasn't so long ago, but the technology has changed dramatically. There was a beauty to the earlier days where the line between work and home was clear. In today's world of instant communication, that line has been completely blurred. Answers are expected in moments, not in hours. I fear for those having to operate in this world because everyone needs downtime. It will be a challenge for this next generation to figure out how to navigate the constant connection.

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

**A** We need to continue to emphasize the family ownership of many dairy businesses. Family businesses offer a family-friendly atmosphere and long-term job stability. There is job stability in dairy regardless of company ownership. As part of the nation's food system, our products provide essential nutrition that is in demand when the economy is up or down.

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

**A** Make sure that you take the high road. It's not always necessary to get in the dirt with people. Get issues resolved and move on. CMN