



# Legacy & Leadership

**Ken Heiman** is the oldest of three brothers, all of whom are involved in Nasonville Dairy Inc., Marshfield, Wisconsin. He serves as the secretary/general manager of the company. With his brothers, as well as other family members, Heiman also operates Heiman Brothers, Heiman Trucking, Nasonville Mail Order, Weber's Farm Store and Heiman Holsteins.

Heiman is a Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker certified in four cheese varieties. This certification, as well as assisting with managing a 500-cow dairy farm, has laid a foundation for his role having served on the boards of both the Wisconsin Cheese Makers Association (WCMA) and Dairy Farmers of Wisconsin (DFW). He also has served on the boards of the Central Wisconsin Cheese & Butter Makers Association and Marshfield Clinic Foundation.

Heiman along with his wife, Joellen, three children and grandchildren all have homes within just a few miles of the cheese plant outside of Marshfield. Though he holds a degree in architectural design, Heiman says most of his education on the job was handed down from his father, Arnie Heiman, along with multiple classes and collaboration efforts through the Center for Dairy Research at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Heiman was selected as the 2017 Life Member by WCMA, and he also is a member of the Dairy Business Association, International Dairy, Deli, Bakery Association, the Marshfield Area Chamber of Commerce & Industry, Marshfield FFA Alumni and Specialty Food Association.

**Q** Can you talk about the unique aspects of running a business with your siblings? What are some of the advantages to working with family?

**A** If you are lucky enough to have family that can work together day after day, it can be one of the greatest strengths your company can hold. When you realize that the family members all have different and unique strengths (be that from production to maintenance to transportation to bookkeeping and everything in between), it allows you to expand the workload to every part of the business. It also adds layers of control measures at various points that in the end allow better oversight and coverage of the business as a whole. More importantly, it is easier to see the employee "buy in" when they see that even the owners of the company are out on the plant floor or in the milk truck and even changing the garbage. We try not to expect anything from our employees that we ourselves would not do. Does working with family day in and day out have its moments? You bet. We may not always agree — difficulties come and go — but in the end, we have to do what is best for the company and our families. Looking at the next generation, one can only hope they can handle it in the same way.

**Q** How has the cheese industry been able to keep pace with demand over the years even as the number of producers has declined?

**A** Although the number of farms has decreased, the sizes of those remaining and herd numbers have increased. Overall farm

management practices have changed, and this has led to a higher volume of milk per cow and a general increase in quality of milk from the farms. The real limiting factor on how much milk comes into a cheese plant from the farms is simply how much milk one can process in a day.

**Q** Throughout the pandemic, how has Nasonville Dairy pivoted to meet increased demand and new protocols for food safety (i.e., pre-slicing cheese rather than sending blocks to delis, etc.)?

**A** The pandemic brought on a completely new way of looking at operations of the cheese plant — from employee safety to production. Nasonville always thought that we had kept our employees safe at work, but a pandemic virus is all new water to work with. Face masks and plexiglass dividers became more commonplace. There became an urgency to increase frequency of visiting the hand-wash stations, changing gloves and masks, and we really had to dial in on pre-screening measures (like adding thermometer scans at employee entrances for temperature checks and making sure sick employees were home resting and not working). As for production, we found ourselves pushed further into the retail sector as the foodservice side was hit pretty hard in the beginning with restaurants shutting down, schools moving to remote learning, businesses transitioning to working from home, etc. Our customers were in need of more pre-packaged, ready-to-use cheese that was ready to take directly to the store shelf for personal consumption. We certainly bumped up our relationships with conversion plants to help with this as well as added new equipment for better efficiency on what we could accomplish in-house.

**Q** How has your Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker certification helped you to hone your craft over time?

**A** The Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker certification has made our four masters work harder at creating new cheese products. While the certification emphasizes quality of a cheese product, it also has an added layer of creation. Our masters work hard to create new cheese items that fit specific needs or uses a customer is looking for. The Master's Mark on your product really has many layers. It brings in consumers that search that out knowing they will get a quality product, it gives buyers a source for new items (forms, styles, uses), and maybe more importantly, it gives other cheesemakers something to aspire to and a reason to continually hone their craft.

**Q** Since you became licensed at 16, what is one of the most remarkable changes in cheesemaking you have experienced during your time in the industry?

**A** In the last 50-plus years, one of the most remarkable changes to come about is the consistency the ingredients have brought to the making of cheese. First, think about the quality of milk from the farm, then how the cultures used today have kept us on track to making the best cheese products in the world. Then you add in the rennets, salts and cleaning chemicals of the day — it's amazing. When you add to that the University of Wisconsin Center for Dairy Research, you have more than my father would have ever hoped for.

**Q** How have you developed creative thinking within yourself and encouraged it in others?

**A** As cheesemakers, we have always had the main staples — the Cheddar, Colby, Monterey Jack, Feta and so on. One thing we are passionate about is the ever-expanding opportunities of new flavors, new blends, new outlooks. I'm not sure if it's creative thinking or just the idea of not wanting or willing to rest. Either way you look at it, we are (almost) always willing to try something new that someone brings to us and says, "Hey, what do you think of mixing this?" This is how we reach the niche markets, and when our employees see these products on the store shelf, there is a pride there. There's the "Hey, I made that." That's where it comes full circle — and that's where the seed is planted.

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

**A** Mistakes are a thing you always try to keep to a minimum, but they will happen. It is what you do with what you have learned from those mishaps. One of the products created at Nasonville was the rBST-free Blue Marble Jack. Our first few attempts resulted in no veining and color; I kid you not, it was smurf-blue through and through! Needless to say, we were able to learn A LOT from that situation and fix the issue with a group effort. We ended up with a fun story to tell and a lot of knowledge besides.

**Q** Please discuss the benefits of collaboration among industry leaders versus the need to "protect your brand."

**A** The dairy industry is one that prides itself on the ability to help one another out — from supplies to production to consulting. We all have our trade secrets, but we are always there to help each other out. When we open up and talk about what has or hasn't worked, we find out similar issues that may need further investigating or just a simple troubleshooting measure we might have been overlooking. We are not all masters in every cheese imaginable. A prime example is at food shows. When we are approached by buyers looking for a specific need or style of cheese, we can say, "We don't make that here, but let me tell you who does an amazing job at it." We can also direct them to the DFW website where they can filter for their own results. When we source from one another, we are letting our customers know that we believe in the dairy industry and we believe in our friends' products. We are only hurting ourselves by refusing to look to those that may already hold some of the keys.

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

**A** I think the biggest habit we need to promote is that we all need each other in the food chain. Quality is a family tradition that will protect and promote you, your company and your customers. This must go without fail if your name or brand is to be protected and grow in the world today. **CMN**