

MAKERS AND MONGERS

Inside the minds (and rinds) of the cheese world's brightest



From boots to Master Cheesemaker, Steve Stettler builds a lasting Decatur Dairy legacy

By Christina Paschen

BRODHEAD, Wis. — At Decatur Dairy, cheesemaking isn't just a career for Steve Stettler — it's something he's been doing for nearly as long as he can remember.

"They put me in boots as soon as they could put me in boots," he says of starting in cheesemaking at 5 years old.

That early start set the course for a lifetime in cheese, one rooted in family tradition and shaped by decades of hands-on work, industry relationships and a willingness to evolve.

Stettler's father began making cheese in 1955, eventually building a business that handled about 30,000 pounds of milk from 27 farms. When Steve stepped in, he saw both opportunity and responsibility — not just to grow the business, but to do it the right way.

Today, Decatur Dairy processes about 600,000 pounds of milk a day from 51 farms.

"What's contributed to that success," Stettler says, comes down to "a good group of farmers and good advice over the years by individuals met in the industry."

"It's about meeting great people. I deal with good business people and marketers finding a niche for our product," he adds.

• Growth rooted in relationships

Growth at Decatur hasn't been rushed. Instead, it's been shaped by demand and relationships built over

time.

"We've been fortunate to have slow growth," Stettler says. "We were encouraged to grow by our buyers. As far as sales and growth, it's been a good relationship."

That growth has led to four plant additions, expanded production and a broader portfolio of cheeses. But even as the business has scaled, Stettler has remained deeply involved in the day-to-day work.

On any given day, he might be in the make room, the vat deck or the tables working alongside his team to ensure everything is running as it should.

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• Tradition meets innovation

That hands-on approach extends to product development, where Stettler has leaned on both instinct and collaboration. Over the years, Decatur has developed a range of cheeses, including its signature Swiss-lace cheese, Stettler Swiss.

Lacy Swiss gets its name because, when sliced, its ivory-colored inter-



Photo courtesy of Decatur Dairy

SIGNATURE CHEESE — Steve Stettler handles Stettler Swiss at a table at Decatur Dairy in Brodhead, Wisconsin, a product he developed using whole milk and three different cultures to create a mild, creamy Swiss-style cheese with a distinctive lacy texture.

rior resembles lace. According to Dairy Farmers of Wisconsin's www.wisconsincheese.com site, it features smaller, more numerous holes than traditional Swiss-style cheeses and is made in the United States using low-fat milk rather than whole milk or cream, resulting in a lighter texture and a nutty flavor with lower calories and sodium than classic Swiss varieties.

Stettler Swiss is unique in that it's made with whole milk and three different cultures, according to Stettler. The result is "a mild, creamy Swiss cheese" that melts nicely, says Decatur's website.

"People who don't eat Swiss will eat Stettler Swiss," says Stettler.

Innovation, however, hasn't happened in isolation. Stettler credits partnerships — particularly with the Center for Dairy Research (CDR) — as instrumental in the growth and progress of some of his products.

"There are a lot of tools available now to make a better product that weren't available in 1982," he says, referring to CDR's classes and part-

nership opportunities to performing make projects and test runs in CDR's production facilities. "You have to use those tools."

And the CDR staff is an essential part of the process. Stettler says the CDR professionals specializing in cultures have a lot of helpful technical knowledge and can provide helpful advice "on how to create flavors and better products."

From developing Havarti to now experimenting with String cheese, those resources have helped Decatur stay competitive while maintaining quality.

• Focus on quality

That focus on quality is perhaps most visible in Decatur's top honors earned through the years, including at the 2026 World Championship Cheese Contest. Its Muenster earned first and third place; Decatur Dairy Havarti and Dill Havarti swept categories; Oaxaca cheese curds earned first place; and Muenster cheese curds earned third place.

For Decatur Dairy, cheese curds

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Photo courtesy of Decatur Dairy

IN PRODUCTION — Steve Stettler stands next to a cart of cheese blocks at Decatur Dairy in Brodhead, Wisconsin, part of the steady flow through the plant.

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STETTLER

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are one of their most well-known and purchased items. Its cheese curds won best of class in the 2022 and 2024 World Championship Cheese contests.

For Stettler, curds are more than a product — they're a point of pride. His commitment to making the highest-quality cheese curds led to him introducing cheese curds as one of the cheeses in the Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker program.

Stettler is a Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker specializing in seven varieties including Brick, Cheddar, Farmers, Havarti, Muenster, Swiss and Cheese Curds.

“The whole world has changed from local people visiting our store to people traveling from hundreds of miles away to seek us out.”

Steve Stettler

The Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker Program is an advanced education and certification program for experienced cheesemakers, jointly sponsored by CDR, UW-Madison Extension and Dairy Farmers of Wisconsin. To qualify, cheesemakers must hold a Wisconsin cheesemaker's license and have at least 10 years of experience working in a Wisconsin plant, along with participation in a rigorous quality assurance process that includes plant and product inspections. It's the only program of its kind in the United States, and is designed to elevate cheesemaking standards, add value through the “Master Cheesemaker” designation and strengthen the competitiveness of Wisconsin-made cheese in national and global markets.

“That program is so strong right now,” he says. “People will look for your cheeses if you're a Master Cheesemaker.”

• Preserving cheesemaking history

Stettler's commitment to preserving and strengthening cheese making extends beyond Decatur Dairy. He is actively involved with the National Historic Cheesemaking Center Museum in Monroe, Wisconsin, where he currently serves as president.

The organization is dedicated to preserving the history of cheesemaking in Wisconsin through artifacts, education and storytelling. A key part of that mission is capturing cheesemakers' experiences on film, ensuring their stories are documented for future generations.

“The goal is to get more participation,” Stettler says. “We're trying to preserve history.”

He emphasizes that the center is focused on inclusion and accessibility across the industry.

“It's open to any cheesemaking story anyone wants to tell,” he says. “It doesn't matter where you're from.”

Through his volunteer work and outreach, Stettler has met people across the cheese industry he otherwise would not have encountered — many of whom have become close friends. For him, the effort is about honoring the people behind the craft as much as the cheese itself.

• A destination for cheese lovers

That same network of relationships — and a growing appreciation for artisan cheesemaking — has helped raise Decatur Dairy's profile well beyond rural Wisconsin. The dairy has since become a destination,

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Steve Stettler

drawing customers from across the region and beyond.

“The whole world has changed from local people visiting our store to people traveling from hundreds of



Photo courtesy of Decatur Dairy

MASTER CRAFTSMANSHIP — Steve Stettler remains hands-on in the plant, handling blocks of cheese at Decatur Dairy in Brodhead, Wisconsin.

miles away to seek us out,” Stettler says.

What once was a small counter near the whey tank serving a handful of local customers each day has grown into a retail operation welcoming hundreds — sometimes up to 1,000 — visitors daily.

“A lot of people want good cheese,” he says. “They're curious and seek us out.”

Even with industry recognition — including earning the Wisconsin Cheese Makers Association Life Member Award in 2016, volunteering 26 consecutive years at the U.S. and World Championship Cheese Contests and earning the contest's Eggebrecht award for outstanding contest volunteers in 2026 — Stettler measures success in simpler terms.

“At the end of the day, walking out of the factory, if someone says ‘Thank you for what you do,’ it makes it all worth it,” he says.

For Stettler, it always comes back to the people — the farmers, the employees, the customers and the

broader cheese community.

“If you ask any cheesemaker, it's the people you deal with who make you who you are,” he says. **CMN**

Know a standout cheesemaker or cheesemonger?

Email Christina at cpaschen@cheesemarketnews.com

