

2025 WISCONSIN MASTER CHEESEMAKERS

The Center for Dairy Research (CDR) and Dairy Farmers of Wisconsin (DFW) are excited to announce the 2025 graduating class of the Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker® program. This year's class includes seven new and two returning Master cheesemakers.

"Each new class of graduates confirms the value of the Master Cheesemaker program to our state and the Wisconsin dairy industry," said John Jaeggi, program coordinator. "The Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker® program is the only one of its kind in the United States, which further strengthens Wisconsin's reputation as the premier cheesemaking state."

To be eligible for the Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker® program, cheesemakers must be licensed Wisconsin cheesemakers for at least 10 years. Before applicants are accepted into the program, they are required to complete CDR's Advanced Cheesemaking Short Course and one other workshop of their choice. In addition, applicants undergo a plant visit where they lead a walk-through of their facility and must pass an oral exam.

Once they are accepted into the program, participants complete a list of courses and an intensive exam. In addition, the cheeses they are being certified in are graded for flavor, composition and microbial analysis—this is done three times before they can graduate as a Master cheesemaker. All said, it takes about three years to complete, and, in the end, once successful, the cheesemaker earns the honor and respect of becoming a Master cheesemaker as well as the right to use the Master Mark® on their products.

Please join **CDR** and **DFW** in recognizing the **2025 WISCONSIN MASTER CHEESEMAKERS**.

KEN CAROTHERS © *New Master*

Agropur, Little Chute

Certified Master: Mozzarella



Ken Carothers has always been driven by a passion for learning and improving his craft. In 2010, he started a part-time sanitation position at Agropur's plant in Little Chute. From there, he transferred to the intake department and then onto production where he started to help make cheese. In 2012, Carothers earned his Wisconsin cheesemaker license. As part of that process, he took a cheesemaking course.

"I found the course very interesting," Carothers said. "It ignited a spark. I wanted to learn more about what goes into cheesemaking. I started to see that it's more of an art than just a repetitive process."

Soon after obtaining his Wisconsin cheesemaker license, he moved into a supervisory role at Agropur, obtained a pasteurizer license, and started taking short courses at CDR.



"I was just trying to continuously grow my knowledge base throughout the years," Carothers said. "It was kind of nice taking that approach. I could learn new things in class and then apply them right away in the plant."

Carothers didn't necessarily set out to be a Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker®, but as he moved up in the ➡



What's Inside:

- ◆ CDR Developed Jade Beverage, page 9
- ◆ CDR Welcomes New Staff, page 10
- ◆ DBIA Report for Specialty Cheesemakers, page 11

industry and continued taking those CDR short courses, he saw that the title of Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker® was a possibility.

“Probably year seven or eight [at Agropur], I realized it wasn’t that far out of reach anymore,” he said. “That’s when I started to make sure I’d have the required courses to be accepted into the program.”

Fast forward several years, and Carothers is a brand-new Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker® with a certification in Mozzarella.

“It’s a proud accomplishment. It’s something I don’t take lightly,” he said. “It’s not something that they just hand out.”

Carothers has continued to grow in the industry. He is now an operational excellence manager, meaning that he provides technical support to several Agropur plants to help guide them through all the challenges with process and cheesemaking.

One of those plants is a new cheesemaking plant that Agropur opened in 2023 in Little Chute. It produces string and stick Mozzarella cheese. Carothers said the learning required to complete the Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker® program is especially helpful and relevant as plants become more automated.

“As we continue to progress with technology and automation, it’s harder to fully understand everything that goes into cheesemaking,” he said. “Here [at the Little Chute plant], we don’t see the cheese until it pretty much hits the brine... With automation there can be some lack of understanding, and I think the Master program helps reinforce what goes into cheesemaking.”

The knowledge and expertise of the Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker® program has already helped the Little Chute plant. In 2024, the first year that the plant produced string cheese, Carothers and his mentor and Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker®, Tom Blauert, entered their string cheese into the 2024 World Championship Cheese Contest. They were pleasantly surprised to win first and second places in the string cheese category.

“At the time, we were more curious as to where we would land. We just kind of wanted to get a baseline,” Carothers said. “Then we got the result. That was a proud plant accomplishment.”

ROBERT GARVES *◉ New Master*

LaClare Creamery, Malone
Certified Master: Chèvre



Robert Garves is only the second Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker® to earn a Master Medal in Chèvre. (Scott Erickson, formerly of Bass Lake Creamery, was the first).



Garves is manager of the hard cheese plant at LaClare Creamery, which features a retail space, an outdoor education area complete with goats, and a modern goat cheese plant. Garves, who got his start making Italian-style cheeses, said Chèvre has become one of his favorite cheeses.

“It seems like it’s a very simple cheese to make – it’s basically milk and a little bit of rennet and then you hang it up and wait,” Garves said. However, he also pointed out that any small change in milk temperature or slight adjustment to culture can have a big impact on the cheese. “To make the same cheese every time is difficult, and to make the high-quality cheese that we do here is extremely difficult,” he said. ➡

When Garves started working at LaClare Creamery, he was mentored by Katie Fuhrman, one of LaClare Creamery’s founding cheesemakers and the creator of their award-winning Chandoka. “She was the one who taught me how to make goat cheese,” Garves said. “She showed me the differences between cow and goat cheeses, the cultures we use, the things we’re looking for.”

LaClare Creamery has won numerous awards for its Chèvre, which comes in a variety of different flavors and formats. “It’s basically a blank canvas,” Garves said. “You can add whatever flavorings you want to it.” Some of their most popular flavors are garlic and herb and blueberry vanilla. “It’s almost like cheesecake, it’s very sweet,” Garves said of the blueberry vanilla flavor.

As a cheesemaker, Garves enjoys tinkering and fine tuning the different variables. “The things I find most interesting are how the cultures and rennet work,” he said. “The chemistry of cheesemaking is really fascinating.” ➡

However, he added, his absolute favorite part of making cheese is watching people eat it. “When I see people try our cheese and they say, “Oh, this is really good,’ that’s really rewarding,” he said.

Garves started his career in cheese at the Park Cheese plant, now owned by BelGioioso Cheese. When Garves worked there, he had the opportunity to work alongside Wisconsin Master Cheesemakers® like Steve Hurd.

“When I was early in my career there, Steve was getting his first Masters, and I got to witness him go through the program,” Garves said. “I thought, ‘One day I’m going to do that.’”

Garves said he learned a lot going through the Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker® program. One highlight was the Advanced Cheesemaking Short Course at CDR, which includes a critical thinking exercise. “I really enjoyed that because it went over the problems that you run into everyday in the plant,” he said. “It was about dealing with those issues and learning to think on your feet. You only have a certain amount of time to change things because once the cheesemaking process is started you can’t stop it.”

Garves said it is a “huge accomplishment” to earn the title of Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker®. “I’ve always admired all of the Masters, and I’ve worked with a few of them over the years,” he said. “They’ve always seemed like the smartest people I’ve known; the way they can talk about cultures, fats, proteins and the interaction between them ... I really admire that.”

MICHAEL GREEN ◉ *New Master*

Arena Cheese, Arena
Certified Master: Gouda



Michael Green’s interest in cheesemaking started when he accepted a position as plant manager at a cheese production facility in Platteville. The plant was struggling with cheese defects.

“I realized that I really needed to understand the whole process of making cheese,” Green said. “In 18 months, we took our defect rate down to less than 1%...That’s where the



Front row: Michael Green, Marieke Penterman, Gerard Knaus, Robert Garves
Back row: Jeremy Werdeo, Ken Carothers, Rob Stellrecht, John Schmid, Ken Kane

passion for cheese came from – looking at how to make a very consistent product with the seasonal variability that we see in our milk supply.”

In his career in the dairy industry, Green has worked in processed cheese, whey processing, and, of course, cheesemaking in several different capacities. He also served as a food safety consultant for the expansion and renovation of Babcock Hall, the home of CDR.



In 2022, Green accepted the position of general manager at Arena Cheese, which is known as the home of Colby Jack cheese. There he works closely with Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker® Bill Hanson who owns Arena Cheese. Green’s path through the dairy industry continues as he joins the state’s elite cheesemakers with a Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker® certification in Gouda.

“We use open vats and a stirred curd process [for Gouda],” he said. “You can make it other ways but the stirred curd process, when it comes to Gouda, is really a traditional process. It’s very hands-on and intensive – you’re not a machine operator. The cheese is changing, and you’re integrated into the make process.”

When asked what it means to him to earn the title of Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker®, Green said it feels like he’s finally arrived after so much hard work in the industry. “Some ➡

have referred to it as a PhD for cheese, but, for me, the thirst for knowledge is still there,” he said. “As a cheesemaker, you’re never going to stop learning.”

Green said one of the valuable benefits of the Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker® program is that it provides a path for cheesemakers to get better.

“We have people following behind us, and the best way is to lead by example,” he said. “We have to pass this knowledge on because if we don’t, our industry will suffer.”

Green said that at Arena Cheese, they work to actively support learning. The plant works to develop and support its multicultural cheesemakers to help them earn Wisconsin cheesemaker licenses. In addition, Arena Cheese has other employees who are working toward the goal of applying for, and ultimately graduating from, the Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker® program.

“We have a very deliberate education process here at Arena, and the industry needs that,” Green said. He added that education in the dairy industry is as important as ever as more cheese plants are becoming highly automated.

“In some plants they have become machine operators, and they don’t understand what’s going on in the vat,” he said. “We have a lot of automation to help us, but we’re still cheesemakers – we still need to know what’s going on.”

It is because of this and other reasons that Green likes the hands-on approach to cheesemaking that Arena Cheese is known for.

“We learn every day,” he said. “Ultimately, we have the best job in the world. We get to take Mother Nature’s perfect food – milk – and decide what it gets to be when it grows up. That’s the wonder of being a cheesemaker – it’s a blend of science mixed in with a little bit of art and creativity.”

MARIEKE PENTERMAN *New Master*

Marieke® Gouda, Thorp
Certified Master: Gouda



When Marieke Penterman left the Netherlands to build a new life in Wisconsin, she brought with her deep farming roots and a craving for the Gouda she’d loved since childhood.

“I missed it more than I expected,” she admitted. “One night, I heard a cow calving in the barn and in that moment, I thought, ‘Why not make it myself?’ And that was the beginning of something much bigger than I ever imagined.”

Fast forward 18 years, and Marieke, founder and owner of Marieke® Gouda, has earned together with her team, close to 300 awards and counting. Now, Marieke joins the elite ranks of Wisconsin Master Cheesemakers®, proudly certified in Gouda. She’s only the fourth woman ever to earn this title, a distinction she doesn’t take lightly.

“It’s an honor,” Marieke said. “And a testament to what happens when you surround yourself with good people and good milk.”

But, when Marieke first started making cheese, she had a major hurdle. “There was just one tiny problem,” she laughed. “I had no idea how to make cheese!”



After some research, Marieke found the Dairy Business Innovation Center (DBIC). After pitching her idea, they gave her consulting hours, a solid business plan, and a few choice contacts in the industry. They also told her she’d need a cheesemaker license.

“Apparently, Wisconsin is the only state on planet Earth that requires one,” Marieke joked. “So, I thought, ‘Great!’ But really, it was the best thing that could have happened.”

Marieke dove in, enrolling in a short course and completing a basic cheesemaking program. She apprenticed under Virgil Schunk, a now retired award-winning cheesemaker in nearby Augusta. Marieke also returned to the Netherlands to learn hands-on Gouda cheesemaking at small farmstead creameries. By October 2006, she held her Wisconsin cheesemaker license. Back on the farm, Rolf Penterman and his family had finished building a small creamery, and Marieke got to work.

“At first, it was just Martha, Kim and me,” she said. “Martha had been one of our milkers, but she kept asking to make cheese. I said, ‘Martha, I’m only going to be making a little bit of cheese. There probably won’t be much to do,’” she laughed. “Little did I know it would be a lot of work. I’m so glad she and Kim were persistent and grateful that Rolf was always there if needed.”

Just weeks after making her first batch of cheese in November 2006, Norm Monsen, her contact at DBIC, encouraged her to enter the 2007 U.S. Championship Cheese Contest. Marieke and her small team submitted three cheeses and Marieke’s Foenegreek Gouda took top honors in the flavored Gouda category. ➡

“That really put us on the map,” Marieke said. “It was surreal.”

From there, the momentum never stopped. Marieke opened a small retail store in Thorp and expanded the creamery. Then, by 2013, they had moved into their current location, which includes a farm, cheesemaking plant, aging facility, retail store, and café all under one roof.

“The educational piece is huge for us,” Marieke said. “We get about 150,000 visitors a year. People come to see how we milk the cows, cuddle with calves, and taste the Gouda. It’s a chance to learn in a relaxed, fun atmosphere.”

As for earning her Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker® title, Marieke said the journey was anything but easy.

“It was humbling,” she admitted. “You need persistence, dedication, and an incredible team. They gave me the time and space to focus on becoming a Master. I couldn’t have done it without them.”

JOHN SCHMID *◉ New Master* Nasonville Dairy, Marshfield Certified Master: Cheddar, Monterey Jack



John Schmid is a proud fourth-generation cheesemaker. His great-grandfather, Joseph Schmid, immigrated from Switzerland to the U.S. more than 100 years ago bringing with him the traditions of Swiss cheesemaking. He began the Schmid Cheese Company in the 1920’s and grew his business to ultimately owning and operating over 30 cheese plants.



His grandfather, John F. Schmid, also followed in the family tradition, owning and operating plants in Southern Wisconsin. Schmid’s mother, Janice Norwood, is retired from Lactalis American Group and his uncle, Steve Tollers, is a retired Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker®. Finally, his father, the late John J. Schmid Sr., was an award-winning cheesemaker.

“In 1995, my father received the award of first runner up Grand Champion at the U.S. Championship Cheese Contest for his goat milk entry,” Schmid remembered. “I was 18 at that time and I remember going to visit my dad and working with him at the cheese plant. He was a great teacher, and I was able to learn from him how to make different types of goat milk cheeses. Those are great memories.”

Schmid now joins his uncle among the ranks of Wisconsin Master Cheesemakers® with certifications in Cheddar and Monterey Jack. His mother, who earned multiple awards for her Italian cheese over the years, was his mentor for the program.

“My mother became a leader in the industry,” he said. “She also instilled my work ethic that I have today and always reminds me that the work is never done and cheesemakers don’t get sick.”

Schmid is no slouch himself with about 30 years of cheesemaking experience. During his career, he estimates that he’s made about 30 to 35 different varieties of cheese.

“I love everything about cheesemaking,” he said. “I love the day-to-day challenge... It’s not just a matter of flipping on a switch and doing the same things over and over; it’s making the adjustments as the milk and equipment change.”

Given his experience and background in the industry, Schmid felt pretty confident when he applied for the Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker® program. “When I entered, I thought I knew a lot, but I quickly realized I had a lot to learn,” he said. Specifically, Schmid said he has a lot of cheesemaking knowledge that has been passed down from generation to generation, however, he didn’t know a lot of the science behind cheesemaking.

“With the Master program, you learn the chemistry behind cheesemaking,” Schmid said. “I had that ‘aha’ moment at CDR. We were talking about how rennet works in the cheesemaking process – it cleaves off the casein micelles and I went, ‘Really? Huh?’ And just having that ‘aha’ moment made me realize how much I had to learn.”

Schmid also found the final exam very challenging. The Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker® test is an open book, written exam, and each answer must be backed up with a source. Schmid estimates that he spent about 100 hours on it. “I worked on my exam at home late into the evening hours for several weeks before completing it,” he said.

Overall, Schmid is very appreciative of all of those who came before him in the industry and helped him over the years. He’s also especially thankful for Wisconsin’s dairy farmers.

“Wisconsin has the best milk in the nation,” he said. “Without that milk, I couldn’t make a good high-quality product... I can’t thank the dairy farmers enough for what they do.” ➡

ROB STELLRECHT • *New Master*

Burnett Dairy Cooperative, Grantsburg
Certified Master: Cheddar, Mozzarella



When Rob Stellrecht graduated from high school, he wasn't quite sure what he wanted to do for a career. He worked part time at Burnett Dairy Cooperative and thought he'd just stay there until he decided his next step.

"I thought, 'I just want a job until I find what I want to do,'" Stellrecht remembered. "And it's been over 38 years now and I do really like what I do."

Now, Stellrecht joins the state's elite group of cheesemakers as a Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker® with certifications in



Cheddar and Mozzarella. After earning his cheesemaker license in 2001, he spent the first part of his career at Burnett Dairy Cooperative working as a janitor, then in the makeroom, string department, shred department, as a CIP operator, and then milk intake. About four years ago, he moved into a research and development role where, among other duties, he has helped develop new products like Patria® Mozzarella – Burnett Dairy Cooperative's line of premium shredded cheeses.

"That's really taking off," Stellrecht said. "We do part skim, whole milk, a blend of part skim and Provolone, part skim and whole milk and we're also working on a Cheddar blend, which is really for the East Coast lovers."

The process of developing the Patria® Mozzarella shredded cheeses included a lot of sensory and evaluation work. "We did hundreds and hundreds of pizza bakes," Stellrecht said. "We were looking for oiling off, blistering color and quantity, and shred identity. We evaluated the shelf life and how different components impact the cheese."

The Patria® Mozzarella shredded cheese is known for low browning, creamy flavor, as well as a long stretch. "There were times when I've tested pizzas and the stretch goes as far as I can reach," he said. "It would be over 40 inches, and I'd say, 'I can't go any farther!'"

Stellrecht enjoys the cheesemaking part of his job as well. "I like that it's complex," he said. "You can never make the same vat of cheese twice... It's a living piece of cheese."

Now, as a Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker®, he also wants to use his training to mentor other employees at Burnett Dairy

Cooperative. Stellrecht said when he first started in the plant, the cheesemaking process wasn't really explained to him. He wants to change that. "We need to teach our employees: Why do you add rennet? Why do you add cultures? Why does this vat cook to 102°F and this one is 116°F? You're bettering not only yourself and your co-workers but your company," he said.

Stellrecht would like to follow the example set by his mentor Gurmeet Singh, Chief Technology and Quality Officer at Burnett Dairy Cooperative. "He doesn't just answer you; he'll explain why he answered the way he did, or he will talk about why the cheese is performing the way it is and what to do differently – he's just super good at being a boss, a mentor and a co-worker."

As a Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker®, Stellrecht admitted that he was hesitant at first about going through the program. "Now, being on this end of it, I'm really glad that I did it," he said. "It's packed with information and knowledge."

When asked if he might return to the program to get certified in more cheeses, Stellrecht didn't hesitate. "I've already filled out the application," he said.

JEREMY WERDEO • *New Master*

Sartori, Plymouth
Certified Master: Cheddar, Parmesan



Jeremy Werdeo started his career in the dairy industry at Sartori working second shift cleaning up the cheese plant.

"If someone was to tell me 22 years ago when I started at Sartori that I was potentially on a path to become a Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker®, I would've said, 'You're full of it,'" Werdeo laughed. "It's kind of been a crazy journey, but I appreciate everything that Sartori has done for my cheesemaking career."



In his 22 years at Sartori, Werdeo moved around and worked in a variety of different areas. Overall, he is appreciative of the experience, which has allowed him to see the company's operations from several different perspectives.

Werdeo's journey continues as he earned Master Medals in Cheddar and Parmesan. ➔

Cheddar is a newer cheese for Sartori, a company well-known as a maker of Italian-style cheeses, and as their first Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker® in Cheddar, he feels like he is continuing that history. “Parmesan has been a Sartori staple for a long time, so to carry on the legacy of all the great cheesemakers who have come before me through Sartori is kind of nice,” Werdeo said.

At Sartori, Werdeo has a number of different duties and responsibilities, but he really enjoys the challenges that occur day in and day out as part of his work in the cheese plant. “Every day, new milk is coming in... The components are always different. We have different farms, different mixtures, different breeds, and different feeds,” Werdeo said. “I have to be able to think on the fly to make cheese. I have to be able to do all sorts of things to make a consistent product. That’s what I like about it.”

Among other duties, Werdeo also works closely with the research and development team to help bring new cheeses to life. “It’s taking their ideas and putting it into action with our equipment and scaling up,” he said.

The Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker® program is well represented at Sartori. Currently, three Sartori employees are active Master cheesemakers: Ken Kane, Pam Hodgson, and Werdeo. Hodgson served as Werdeo’s mentor as he worked through the program. Werdeo added that Kane, who is his supervisor, was very helpful as well.

“They’re very good at allowing me free reign but also pulling me back,” Werdeo said. “They’ve fostered my career from day one when I got my cheesemaker license.”

He added that Hodgson recently told him she knew he’d be a candidate for the Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker® program after watching him neatly fold empty salt bags before discarding them. “She said she could tell I was detail oriented, and that’s what you’ve got to do when making cheese,” he said. “You’ve got to pay attention to the details, and you have to be able to look into everything you’re doing.”

Overall, Werdeo said he is honored to join his colleagues in the Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker® program. “To me it’s very humbling,” he said. “To be mentioned in the same breath as these men and women in the industry is pretty crazy. I’m not sure if this will ever truly sink in.”



KEN KANE ◉ *Returning Master* Sartori, Plymouth Certified Master: Asiago, Cheddar



In 2005, Ken Kane was installing commercial swimming pools in Florida when a friend from Wisconsin called and said the cheese plant where he worked was hiring.

“I was looking for some stability, and I was like, cheese seems to be pretty stable,” Kane said. “I also wanted to get back up to Wisconsin. So, I ended up at Sartori and kind of found my life’s work.”

He started in sanitation and over time moved around trying his hand at this and that. “I did every job in the plant... and worked different jobs with varying levels of responsibility, and, ultimately, was in a role that had the cheesemaker title attached to it.”



It was his early work alongside Wisconsin Master Cheesemakers® Mark Gustafson and Pam Hodgson that piqued his interest. Gustafson also served as Kane’s mentor the first time he went through the program.

“We did a lot of experimental cheeses, which I was running the tables for or making cheese for,” Kane said. “It was really engaging to see our transition from a lot of hard-style Parmesans to new cheeses like MontAmoré® and BellaVitano®. That kind of innovation was really rewarding to be a part of.”

Sartori is known for its flavored cheeses and unique takes on classic cheeses, and Kane said his goal is to earn Master Medals for each of them. This year, Kane has added Asiago and Cheddar to his list of Master certifications. Previously, he earned certifications in Parmesan and Romano.

“I still have a couple more cheeses that I want to Master in,” he said. “I’m just really proud of the product we make, of the farmers, and I’m really proud of the people here... So, anything that I can contribute to the cheeses that we make day in and day out – that’s really what I want to do.”

Kane is currently the plant manager of the West Main Creamery, which is Sartori’s original cheese plant in Plymouth. ➡

“We’ve been continually pushing the envelope on flavor and performance for a long time,” Kane said. “We’re not just making a Parmesan. We make several different flavor profiles of Parmesan. We’re also making several different Romanos and we’re asking, ‘Is it a table cheese? Is it an additive? What is it?’ This process allows us to learn and develop and think about the next thing.”

As a Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker®, Kane said he is very proud to be a part of the greater Wisconsin cheese industry.

“I was never a farmer, but I can understand and love the product that our farmers provide,” Kane said. “I can turn it into something else that everyone enjoys. I think that’s just phenomenal.”

Kane said he also appreciates the Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker® program for providing a career path and a long-term goal for new cheesemakers.

“It’s something I talk to new team members about if they are looking to be a cheesemaker,” Kane said. “The road is long, but it’s very rewarding ... It’s something tangible that you can aspire to.”

GERARD KNAUS *Returning Master* Weyauwega Star Dairy, Weyauwega Certified Master: Gouda, Havarti



This year, Gerard Knaus earned his ninth and tenth certifications in the Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker® program. Only two other Wisconsin Master Cheesemakers® – Bruce Workman and Brian Jackson – have earned 10 or more certifications. Knaus’s list of Master Medal cheeses are Brick, Cheddar, Colby, Feta, Monterey Jack, Muenster, Parmesan and Provolone. This year, he added Havarti and Gouda.

“My favorite out of all of these is the Gouda,” Knaus said. “It’s such a nice creamy, flavorful, buttery taste – it’s just phenomenal ... You can have Cheese Curds or String cheese all day long, but you take a chunk of Gouda and let it warm up so it gets nice and smooshy and soft, and it just melts in your mouth.”



A lifelong cheesemaker, Knaus started working in his family’s cheese plant when he was just 14. At 20, he earned his Wisconsin cheesemaker license. The Knaus family has owned and operated

Weyauwega Star Dairy for four generations, and they make more than 40 different types of cheese. Knaus describes his role

as a little bit of everything. “From picking up milk to taking samples to making cheese to warehousing, maintenance, electrical, everything, I do everything,” he said. “Whatever’s got to be done, we do it all in house.”

Of course, his favorite role is cheesemaker. “I get out of bed, and I think, ‘Hey, what am I going to make today?’ It’s the greatest feeling when I walk into the plant; it’s like a studio: you walk in and you’ve got all this equipment, and you’ve got all these forms, and you can do whatever you want,” he said. “I’m like a kid in a candy store; that’s what it feels like.”

One aspect of cheesemaking that Knaus enjoys is using the knowledge he has gained over the years. He has had several mentors over the course of his career and his mentor for the program this time around was Steve Funk. He enjoys taking that knowledge and making high-quality cheese that meets consumer and customer expectations.

“What I find interesting about cheesemaking is what you can do with it,” Knaus said. “What you can do with all the knowledge that you’ve generated through the years of cheesemaking to make a better product, a more flexible product for the consumer for what they want to do.” And Knaus isn’t slowing down anytime soon. He is always looking to improve as a cheesemaker and broaden his skills.

“In the near future, I’m going to try and make Limburger and aged Brick,” Knaus said. “That’s my next ultimate goal that I want to work on ... I’ve got ideas on how to make them, and I think I’ve got a pretty close recipe.”

Knaus also pointed out that he’s incredibly grateful for his wife’s support over his many years as a cheesemaker. “I’m going into the cheese plant at all hours of the night to make cheese, and she puts up with it,” he said. “She’s always been there for me, and I couldn’t have done it without her.” 🌟



FROM CONCEPT TO REALITY: CDR-DEVELOPED JADE BEVERAGE, FEATURED BY DMI AT DAIRY FORUM 2025

A delightful coffee-flavored, dairy-based beverage developed at the Center for Dairy Research (CDR) took center stage earlier this year at Dairy Forum 2025, hosted by the International Dairy Foods Association in San Antonio, Texas. This prestigious event gathers over 1,000 industry leaders to push the boundaries of innovation, foster collaboration, and pave the way for limitless success in the dairy sector.

Pratishtha Verma, Dairy Ingredients & Applications Specialist at CDR, led the coffee-flavored, dairy based



beverage project as well as the development of a dry mix powder, both developed in collaboration with Dairy Management Inc. (DMI). The Dairy Products and Processing Technology (DPPT) team at CDR worked closely with DMI to transform their visionary concepts into reality.

One of the featured innovations, Jade Beverage—a name given by DMI—embodies three key concepts primed for commercialization. This cappuccino-inspired nutritional dairy shake is designed specifically for women, offering a mere 100 calories per serving while packing an impressive 15 grams of protein with no added sugars, and is lactose free. It is also free from any artificial flavors, artificial colors and artificial sweeteners. The rich, inviting color of Jade comes naturally from the coffee used in its formulation, providing approximately half the caffeine of a standard cup of coffee.



Beyond its indulgent taste, Jade stands out for its exceptional nutritional quality, sourced from dairy's natural 80:20 casein-to-whey protein ratio. Dairy proteins are among the highest-quality sources of essential amino acids, boasting a Protein Digestibility Corrected Amino Acid Score (PDCAAS) of 1.00—the gold standard for protein quality. More recently, a new, more accurate method for measuring protein quality, the Digestible Indispensable Amino Acid Score (DIAAS), has further reinforced dairy's superiority. This method ranks dairy proteins among the best available, confirming their exceptional nutritional value. Whey protein, known

for its rapid absorption, supports muscle recovery, while casein delivers a sustained release of amino acids, making Jade an excellent choice for both nourishment and performance.

Industry expert Donna Berry, founder of Dairy & Food Communications and a seasoned tracker of consumer trends for over 25 years, attended Dairy Forum and shared her enthusiastic review on her blog Berry on Dairy. "It is delicious!" she wrote. "I want to buy it now!"

In addition to Jade, Verma worked closely with DMI and developed a ready-to-mix whey protein powder featuring 24 grams of protein per serving, enriched with prebiotics and probiotics to support digestive health.

"CDR was a great partner," said Hari Meletharayil, DMI Vice President-Product Research. "They were very collaborative, listened to our objectives, and delivered a great tasting prototype that met our new product concept guardrails. The entire process was very turnkey and we look forward to working with them again."

CDR continues to play a crucial role in advancing the Wisconsin and U.S. dairy industry through research, innovation, and technical expertise. As a leading center for dairy product development, CDR specializes in applied research, process optimization, and troubleshooting for product and manufacturing challenges. With extensive knowledge in dairy science and processing, CDR provides technical support to navigate formulation complexities and production hurdles, helping bring innovative dairy concepts to reality.

If you are interested in learning more about either of these prototypes or working on a project with the CDR Dairy Products and Processing Technology (DPPT) team, contact Daniel Wilbanks at dwilbanks@cdr.wisc.edu or Pratishtha Verma at pverma@cdr.wisc.edu. 🌸



CDR WELCOMES NEW STAFF

Elisa Ale, Postdoctoral Researcher

Elisa completed her PhD at Universidad Nacional del Litoral in Santa Fe, Argentina in 2018. She worked as a research scientist at CONICET (Argentina) after completing her doctoral thesis where she worked on a variety of projects related to EPS production in yogurt and beverages. Elisa visited CDR several years ago as a visiting scholar investigating EPS in yogurt. Now, as a postdoctoral researcher at CDR, Elisa works with the Cheese Research group (Rodrigo and Rani) as well as DPPT (Daniel) to lead research projects related to cheese and yogurt.



Maggie Becher, Assistant Coordinator, Cheese Industry & Applications Group

Maggie earned a PhD in Food Science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison where her project focused on different techniques to extend the performance shelf-life of both string cheese and fresh cheese curds. As an undergraduate student at South Dakota State University, she worked at the Davis Dairy plant making cheese and ice cream. Maggie has also had two internships; one at Valley Queen Cheese Factory in quality assurance, and the other at Schreiber Foods in research and development. At CDR, Maggie coordinates cheesemaking trials with industry clients and assists with graduate student trials.



Tom Blihovde, Cheesemaker

Tom comes to CDR with more than nine years of experience working in the dairy industry. He has worked for CROPP Cooperative (Organic Valley) at their facilities in Chaseburg and Cashton, Wisconsin as well as at their plant in McMinnville, Oregon. Tom also has an undergraduate degree from the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. As a cheesemaker at CDR, he assists with all aspects of cheesemaking and is involved with cheese trials and troubleshooting.



Ayushi Kapoor, Postdoctoral Researcher

Ayushi joined CDR in August, as a postdoctoral researcher in the Dairy Products and Processing Technologies group. Ayushi finished up her PhD at the Indian Institute of Technology Roorkee, India. In Roorkee, Ayushi worked on separation and characterization of bovine



milk fat globule components. In her role as postdoctoral researcher at CDR, Ayushi will work with CDR staff and graduate students in the area of dairy ingredients, processing, and cultured milks.

Nick Larsen, Cheesemaker

Nick comes to CDR with several years of experience in the dairy industry, working at Burnett Dairy Cooperative and White Hill Cheese. As a cheesemaker, he has experience making Swiss and American styles of cheese. In addition to a cheesemaking license, he has a pasteurizer certification. At Burnett Dairy Cooperative, he served as a master operator; running all aspects of the plant from intake through cheesemaking and packaging and also running the whey plant. At CDR, he assists with all aspects of cheesemaking and is involved with cheese trials and troubleshooting.



Jeremy Lindloff, Pilot Plant Manager

Jeremy has 25 years of food manufacturing experience in food safety/quality and operations management. He has worked with American, Italian, and processed cheeses, as well as dairy products, low acid canned foods, acidified foods, frozen foods, and animal food. He earned an undergraduate degree in food science from the University of Wisconsin-River Falls. At CDR, Jeremy manages day-to-day operations of CDR's licensed pilot plant working closely with staff to schedule trials and ensure that equipment and processes are operating efficiently.



Rex Nario, Administrative Assistant

Rex has extensive experience in higher education administrations. He worked at various universities in California, and he started working at UW-Madison at the Wisconsin Union. In his role at CDR, he supports the various administrative needs of the Center such as package shipping/handling, travel coordination, and employee onboarding coordination. He enjoys martial arts, learning languages, and traveling when not at work.



Ashutos Parhi, Postdoctoral Researcher

Ashutos completed his PhD in Biological and Agricultural Engineering with specialization in Food Engineering, food processing, and packaging from Washington State University (WSU) in 2021. Since then, he has worked as a Postdoctoral Fellow at both Utah State University and WSU, Pullman



where he worked on a variety of projects related to biobased and biodegradable food packaging, rheological behavior of feed materials (to dryers), flowability of dairy powders, tribological behavior of dairy products and sliceability of cheese. At CDR, Ashutos will work with the Cheese Research group to lead research projects related to cheese chemistry, texture and functionality.

Yectli Tahuilan, Assistant Coordinator, DPPT

Yectli has several years of experience in the dairy industry, including quality assurance/process roles with Danone Mexico. She also worked as a quality account manager at SIG North America Region. Prior to her work at Danone and SIG, Yectli graduated with a BSc in Food Engineering from Tecnológico de Monterrey Campus in Queretaro, Mexico. At CDR, Yectli works with clients and assists in coordinating DPPT trials.



Ryne VanStippen, Financial Specialist

As a financial specialist at CDR, Ryne handles invoices, cost transfers, check deposits, purchasing approvals, and a host of other financial reporting tasks. He graduated from UW-Milwaukee in 2013 with two degrees in Finance and IT Management. Ryne has more than seven years of experience in the manufacturing industry, including dairy packaging and cardboard displays all the way up to circuit boards and transistors. He is an avid golfer and plays in volleyball and baseball leagues. 🌟



DBIA REPORT OFFERS VALUABLE INSIGHTS FOR SPECIALTY CHEESEMAKERS

Specialty cheesemakers can grow their market share through consumer education, sampling and trial size products, and creative promotional campaigns, according to a new report released by the Dairy Business Innovation Alliance (DBIA). A full analysis is available online at bit.ly/dbiaspecialtycheese.



Dairy Business Innovation Alliance

“This report gives specialty cheesemakers a clear, actionable roadmap to better connect with curious consumers and turn interest into sales,” said Rebekah Sweeney, Senior Director of Programs & Policy for the Wisconsin Cheese Makers Association (WCMA), which administers the DBIA in partnership with the Center for Dairy Research (CDR). “By embracing strategies like sampling, smart promotions, and storytelling, cheesemakers can grow their market share and strengthen their brands.”

WCMA and CDR partnered with market intelligence firm Ipsos to conduct a survey in fall 2024 and produce the report. The final document reveals a wealth of valuable insights, including:

- 🌟 Sampling opportunities and trial sizes are key to encouraging consumer exploration within the specialty cheese category.
- 🌟 One-third of Americans say sales and promotions are the top avenue of increasing their specialty cheese consumption, making discounts and promotions especially important.

- 🌟 Over 40 percent of specialty cheese consumers indicated that education displayed on packaging, social media, and other online avenues would encourage them to consume specialty cheese more often and branch out beyond familiar varieties.

“This report offers artisanal cheesemakers invaluable insights into key factors that fuel the purchasing decisions made by consumers of specialty cheeses. We believe these insights will empower them to refine their product development and marketing strategies for even greater success,” said Tom Guerin, CDR Assistant Director.

The new report advances DBIA’s mission to support small and mid-size dairy processors across its 11-state service area of Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin.

The DBIA is supported by funding from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and was created in the 2018 federal Farm Bill. Since then, the Alliance has awarded over \$20 million in more than 250 grants to small and medium-sized dairy businesses. 🌟



Upcoming CDR Trainings

The Center for Dairy Research is here to help with dairy processing training. Below is a listing of upcoming CDR short courses and other training opportunities. Registration opens for Fall Short Courses July 16th.

Cheesemaking Fundamentals – September 9-10

Dairy Ingredient Fundamentals – September 16

Dairy Protein Beverage Applications – September 17-18

Advanced Cheesemaking | Italian Varieties – September 23-25

Advanced Sanitation – October 7-8

Environmental Monitoring – October 9

Cheese Grading & Evaluation – October 21-23

Advanced Cheesemaking | Artisan Varieties – October 28-30

World of Cheese from Pasture to Plate – November 11-14

For the latest information or to register visit | cdr.wisc.edu/education



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