

By Dale McDonald

CHEESE WHIZ

Bob Laffranchi built a booming cheese company before he began dairying

Spend some time at the Loleta Cheese Factory and you can see what makes a booming business boom. There's a reason 30,000 people stop in each year, and it begins with a broad selection of top quality cheeses, all of which can be sampled. The employees are gracious, the outdoor gardens are beautiful, and you can watch the cheese being made through giant windows. Bob Laffranchi obviously knows cheese, but he also understands the value of entertainment.

The retail store may only gross 10% of the year's sales, but it's at the heart of Laffranchi's success.

Relationships. "I love to be in the store and interact with my customers," he says. "It gives me a connection in our business climate." The fact is, customers are very aware because of the information age we live in. With television and Internet, knowledge has just exploded. If you want a close relationship with your customers you have to listen to them, and this is what they are telling me.

"They want to know how we get the milk. They want to see cows grazing in pastures. They want to know about stewardship of the land, and they want to know about animal husbandry and about hormones. We get asked about these things all the time at the store.

"The next big thing is GMOs. They are asking if we use foods that are genetically modified. We have to choose not to use these foods because of our customer base. We don't get to choose, because they already have chosen for us."

The dairies. For years, Laffranchi purchased milk that originated on local dairies in the Loleta, Calif., area. However, the local creamery was growing and there was a limited amount of milk available. He realized if he truly wanted to grow his business, he would have to contribute to the area's milk supply.

"The problem is that geographically, we are a long way from other milk producing areas," he explains. "So to continue growing, we would have to freight milk in, making cheese, and freight it out again. I decided I didn't want to support the trucking industry quite to that extent."

So Laffranchi, who grew up on a dairy, acquired his first dairy in 1998, which now includes 500 cows, 85% of which are Jerseys. In 2003 he acquired a second dairy, which he is building up to 250 cows, all Holsteins.

At the big dairy, the cows produce over 3,000 gallons per day in summer. Being pasture-based Jerseys, they produce a fine, creamy yellow milk, that yields unique flavors. The base feed is from the pasture, but he also brings in alfalfa hay from southern Oregon, and adds locally produced corn silage and grass/clover silage. Corn, barley, cotton seed, and canola round out the ration, which is constantly adjusted by a consulting nutritionist.

"The Jersey herd is very important to us," he says. "As a small cheese maker, the high protein and high yield from that milk matters a lot. Jersey milk yields 12.5 lbs. of cheese. The Holsteins yield 10%. We need those Holsteins, though, because they produce milk that is pure white, an essential requirement for our popular Queso Fresco cheeses."

Quality. Laffranchi also uses his two dairies as a quality control measure. His goal is to produce somatic cell counts that range from 175,000 to 225,000. He also wants milk with specific ratios between butterfat and protein.

"With top quality milk we can produce our style of hand-crafted cheese," he says. "We don't have automation...in fact we are not modern at all by contemporary standards. We can't produce a million pounds of cheese per day like the big guys, so we don't even try to compete with them. It never pays to try and be something you are not. So we chose moderate to slow cultures that produce finer flavors than fast cultures. The cheese determines what we do next, not the clock. If the culture is slower today, we wait. If they are faster, we pick up the pace and move things along more quickly."

Like his cultures, Laffranchi has grown the business slowly and carefully, to the point where the Loleta Cheese Factory produces about 2.7 million pounds per year. His wife, Carol, is who he credits with putting them on the map.

Marketing. "The first thing she did was focus on marketing the place warm-feeling and clean. Then she focused on hiring the best people who represent us well. She advertised in tourist publications, then moved to local TV and radio. She also donates a lot of our production to build local relationships. Finally we added billboards to serve as constant reminders we are here. "Now we finally are adding a website, www.loletacheese.com, so our customers can shop here from their homes."

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