

MADE IN AMERICA

# The Big Cheese

## Wisconsin family produces giant Cheddar wheels

By Pam Grout

**EVERY CHEESE** that Kerry Henning makes has a story behind it, especially the mammoth Cheddar wheels that weigh up to 12,000 pounds.

Henning—one of 51 master cheesemakers in the United States—works at his family-owned factory in Kiel, Wis. (pop. 3,738), overseeing production of Colbys, Monterey Jacks and the gigantic Cheddar wheels that are a trademark of Henning's Wisconsin Cheese.

"We're the only cheesemaker left that still makes the big wheels," says Henning, 52, who owns the factory with his father Everett, 79; brother Kert, 51; and sister Kay Schmitz, 58.

"As a small family operation, we knew we had to find a niche," Kerry adds. "We sat down as a family and decided the mammoth wheels would be our competitive edge."

Most Henning's cheese wheels weigh under 75 pounds and measure 14½ inches or less in diameter. However, the company also produces attention-grabbing wheels weighing 2,000 to 3,000 pounds and with a diameter of up to 53 inches—typically ordered for store openings and



Giant Cheddar wheels are the signature of Henning's Wisconsin Cheese, founded by Otto Henning (left) in 1914 in Kiel, Wis. At right: Curds are mixed with salt and spices.



special celebrations. One 12,000-pounder was so large that Central Market in Houston, Texas, couldn't fit the wheel through its receiving doors.

"We tried to tell them," Kerry says with a chuckle. "But those Texans can be stubborn. They eventually had to remove the plate glass windows out front" to carry the wheel inside.

Cheesemaking begins at Henning's with fresh, raw milk that is pasteurized, cooled and turned into cheese curds with various enzymes and starter cultures. After draining the liquid whey, the curds reach a 44-foot stainless steel table with a spider-like arm that rotates down the table as salt and spices are added.

For smaller wheels, the curds are fed into cheese hoops that are pressed to squeeze out the remaining whey before drying in a cooler and later being dipped in protective wax.

"The mammoth wheels are made the same as the smaller wheels, but it takes a lot more patience," Kerry says of those weighing 2,000 pounds or larger.

Formed in custom-made, slatted wooden boxes, "the big wheels take longer to cool and they need more pressure to push out the whey. You just can't rush it."

The wait is worth it, though. "The big wheels just taste better," Kerry says. "There's something about the slower rate that enhances flavor development."

Patience is a virtue that Kerry has developed during 30 years as a cheesemaker. He's devoted years to perfecting two dozen new cheese flavors, such as blueberry and mango fire Cheddar, Habañero Jack and an aged heritage Peppercorn Cheddar that has earned national and international awards.

"Unlike cooks who can sample their work right away, I have to wait for the cheese to age," Kerry says. "The very earliest I can learn if an experiment succeeds is one month."

Because the family began specializing in mammoth wheels beginning in the early 1980s, Henning's factory today is much larger than the one first operated in 1914 by Kerry's grandfather Otto Henning. In 1967, the family built a new factory, which since has been upgraded and

Henning's is operated by three generations: (from left) Mindy Ausloos, Kerry Henning, Kay Schmitz, Everett Henning, Rebekah Henschel and Kert Henning.



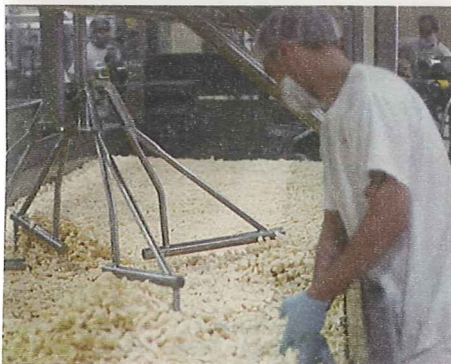
COURTESY OF HENNING'S WISCONSIN CHEESE

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expanded three times and features a museum with antique cheesemaking equipment and a retail store where shoppers can buy fresh curds and watch the cheesemaking process.

"My grandfather would have loved what we're doing," Kay says. "This was always his vision, a place to show people how cheese is made."

Otto's son, Everett, assumed management of the business in 1963 when rural Wisconsin was dotted with 1,500 cheese factories, compared with 125 today. Family members attribute Henning's survival to their strong backs and "plain old stubbornness."



"Cheesemaking takes long hours," explains Everett, whose granddaughters Mindy Ausloos, 35, and Rebekah Henschel, 24, represent the fourth generation in the business.

Together, the family makes 12,000 pounds of custom cheese daily, including wheels that are waxed, boxed, aged and shipped to specialty grocers and delis across the nation. But they aren't resting on their Cheddar wheels.

"There are so many nuances in making cheese," Kerry says. "Even after 30 years, we've just touched the tip of the iceberg." ★

## Mastering Cheese

Created in 1994, the Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker program is the only certification of its kind in the nation. Open to active licensed Wisconsin cheesemakers with at least 10 years experience, the three-year advanced training program is administered by the Center for Dairy Research at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Once certified, a cheesemaker can label his or her cheese as having been made by a Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker, ensuring its quality.