

Frozen Food Age

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Cheese Wars

California takes on Wisconsin for top honors as America's cheese capital, benefiting retailers and consumers in a 'friendly competition.'

By [Alan Robinson, Editor](#)

California and Wisconsin have staked out their turf in a friendly rivalry over who is the top dog, or "top cow" in this case, in America.

Wisconsin, which has billed itself as "America's Dairyland" for quite some time feels it is the clear-cut winner in this battle of the bovine—especially when it comes to cheese—whereas California points out it has lot of land, lots of cows and a whole bunch of cheese consumers, being it's the nation's most populous state.

Who's the winner in this "Cheese War?" Clearly, cheese-loving consumers throughout the land and the retailers who stock the cheese shelves and deli departments on their behalf.

Even on the simplest of terms—the cultural landscapes—it's pretty much a draw. Besides being "America's Dairyland," Wisconsin is also known worldwide for the Green Bay Packers and its Cheeseheads—fans who wear big cheese slices on their heads!

California, however, can easily counter with the fact that it is, by far, the nation's leading wine producer. So, in a wine-and-cheese consumer universe, it seems pretty obvious that California can give Wisconsin a real run for its (cheese) money.

Got Milk?

Cheese promotion in both states falls under the auspices of statewide, industry promotion boards. Wisconsin and its "Wisconsin Cheese" campaign come under the Madison-based Wisconsin Milk Marketing Board (WMMB). The California Milk Advisory Board in South San Francisco spearheads cheese marketing in California.

"We look at this as a friendly competition," says Bill Drew, vice president of marketing services, Wisconsin Milk Marketing Board (WMMB). He explains that Wisconsin has been at this for quite some time and has widespread support throughout the state.

"Our dairy farmers have agreed to a 15-cent check-off per every hundred weight of dairy cattle," says Drew. "Ten cents of that go to the state's dairy farmers and five cents goes to the national dairy board."

The dairy check-off was implemented in 1983. "Ninety percent of the milk produced in Wisconsin goes to making cheese," says Drew.

The California Milk Advisory Board is a bit more officious as it is "an instrumentality" of the State of California Department of Food and Agriculture.

California points out that it is the nation's largest farming state, producing more than 250 commercial food and fiber commodities, and dairy farming is the largest of these commodity groups. California has been the nation's largest milk producer since 1993 and is also the country's leading producer of butter, ice cream, nonfat dry milk and whey protein.

It does concede it is the second largest cheese producer.

The state has more than 2,000 "dairy families," living on and operating dairy farms that house 1.7 million milk cows.

California's growing dairy business includes dairy farms and their suppliers, in addition to dairy processors and manufacturers, along with dairy products wholesalers, retailers and foodservice suppliers.

In 2005, California produced a fifth of the nation's milk and cheese and this share is projected to continue growing in the coming decade.

The dairy industry has a big economic impact too, producing \$6.1 billion in sales in 2004, according to an

economic impact study sponsored by the Milk Advisory Board in 2005.

"The milk that leaves the dairy farm flows into society to become value-added products that create jobs and revenues in local communities," says the Advisory Board.

The study also noted that state's dairy business had an economic impact of \$47 billion and generated 434,200 full-time jobs within California in 2004.

"California's dairy industry began a period of rapid growth in the 1970s that continues today," says the Advisory Board. "Shifting demographics and changing tastes have played a great role in this growth, resulting in a wider variety of dairy products and increased growth in certain product categories.

Cheese is California's fastest growing dairy product and 48% of the state's milk supply goes to cheese productions," the Advisory Board points out. "In the period between 1990 and 2005, California cheese production grew by 248 percent, from 614 million to 2.14 billion pounds. California's more than 50 cheesemakers produce 250 different varieties and styles of cheese. Operations range from small producers famous for their handmade cheeses to some of the country's largest cheese plants."

Wisconsin has an equally impressive array of statistics, but the main thrust of the WMMB is promotion and education, says Drew.

"Our progressive retail cheese promotions continue to move the needle, increasing not only sales of Wisconsin cheese but also boosting sales performance for the entire cheese category," says Drew.

"We have five regional marketing managers who call on supermarket chains to promote our products," he says. "We also sponsor seminars and tastings, and provide information and data to the industry and to consumers about cheese and cheese production."

Current WMMB promotions include:

- Halloween pizza and nachos promotion in partnership with Fleischmann's Yeast and Chinet tableware. A three-page FSI will drop on Oct. 8 in more than 35 million households nationwide. It comes with a \$1 coupon for Chinet plates with any \$3 purchase of Wisconsin cheese that features the Wisconsin cheese "Pride" logo on the label. The FSI also contains several kid-friendly pizza and nacho recipes. Chef Jim Coleman will showcase these recipes on his PBS cooking show, "Flavors of America."
- Holiday season promotions gets underway Nov. 5 when Carr's Crackers and Gallo Sonoma Reserve Wine join WMMB in launching a FSI circulating to 38 million American households. The FSI will include up to eight coupons for brands of cheese from Wisconsin. The promotion will be supported in-store with a holiday tips guide including recipes, pairing ideas and savings offers good on wine, cheese, crackers and deli meats. The holiday tips guide will be distributed on over 17,000 Carr's shippers, Gallo carton-rider POP and deli counter cards.
- WMMB kicks off a Super Bowl promotion in January with New York Style Bagel Crisps and Pita Chips, offering consumers a chance to win a \$2,000 Best Buy gift card and \$100,000 in cash. Contest details will be described in a FSI circulating to 46.5 million households on Jan. 14, 2007. The FSI will also offers coupons for New York style products, plus up to five brands of cheese from Wisconsin in each of the 43 markets. Merchandising support includes counter cards and Bagel Crisps displays with recipes for Super Bowl party entertaining and an instant coupon good for \$2 off the purchase of any Wisconsin Cheese featuring the Pride logo with purchase of two packages of New York Style Bagel Crisps or Pita Chips.

Neutral Territory

Both "cheese teams" staked out their territory at the recent Dairy-Deli-Bake trade show event in Orlando, Fla., the annual cheese and other goodies showcase sponsored annually by the International Dairy-Deli-Bakery Association (IDDBA), which, interestingly, also happens to be based in Madison, Wis.

That show had its particular "backstory" as it had originally been scheduled for New Orleans but had to be relocated to Orlando after Hurricane Katrina roared through New Orleans and the Gulf Coast in August 2005.

WMMB had the prime exhibition space at the entryway to the show. WMMB also sponsored the show's major off-site networking event in a nearby Orlando restaurant. CMAB countered with a major exhibit space of its own—featuring pizzas and other foods made with California cheese—as an anchor exhibit flanked by a number of individual company booths.

Among them was Party Cheese Inc., Alamo, Calif., a startup launched by Joelle Rhodes.

"We have a very fun, unique and great-tasting line of cheeses, consisting of three flavors: Mama Mia, Martini Madness, and Mexican Jumping Bean," says Rhodes. "Party Cheese is also a Real California Cheese, which is made from happy cows. We are all-natural and RBST-free. We are also certified kosher."

Rhodes and her husband both have deep roots in food. "My grandfather was an executive chef and my husband's parents opened one of the oldest pizza places in Danville, Calif., over 26 years ago, and it's now owned and operated by my husband's brother," she explains.

"We both grew up in and around restaurants and great food all our lives," says Rhodes.

Party Cheese first came to the market in August 2005 in California. "In the spring of this year (2006), we moved into the Pacific Northwest and launched there," says Rhodes, who is vice president, sales and marketing

"We are currently in California, Oregon, Washington, Utah, Montana and Arizona," she adds. "For the holiday season this year, we will be in over 20 states in the United States and also in Canada. We can be found in many small specialty stores along with mid- to large-size retailers."

Party Cheese's corporate offices are in Alamo, while its cheese is produced in a cheese factory in Willows, Calif.

Decatur Dairy Goes South of the Border

Decatur Dairy Inc., Brodhead, Wis., nestled in the rolling hills of Green County in the southern part of the state is offering a taste of Mexico with its new Queso Blanco.

Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker Steve Stettler captures the essence of this traditional Hispanic cheese by using only the finest Wisconsin ingredients and the highest standards of cheese production.

Traditionally used to top tacos, enchiladas, salads and soups, Queso Blanco is a fresh cheese with a crumbly texture and slightly tangy taste.

Wisconsin Says:

- Its cheesemakers produced more than 2.4 billion pounds of cheese in 2005, once again claiming its position as the nation's leading cheese producer.
- Produced more than 26% of the nation's total cheese in 2005.
- Has led the nation in cheese production since 1910.
- Continues to be the leading producer of American cheese varieties, including Cheddar, Colby and Monterey Jack.

California Says:

- It has been the nation's leading dairy state since 1993, when it surpassed Wisconsin in milk production.
- Ranked No. 1 in the production of total milk, butter, ice cream, nonfat dry milk, Mozzarella cheese and whey protein concentrate.
- Leads the nation in total milk production. In 2005, it produced a record 37.5 million pounds of milk—21% of the nation's milk supply.
- Has more than 2,000 dairy families that handle 1.75 million milk cows. One out of every five dairy cows lives in California. Average size of a dairy herd in 2005 was 860 cows.

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