



# Legacy & Leadership

**Ron Buholzer** is a master cheesemaker in Feta and Brick since 1999 and president at Klondike Cheese Co. With his two brothers Dave and Steve, Ron grew up living above the family cheese factory as part of the third generation of the Buholzer family, which started with grandpa Ernest coming over from Switzerland in 1913 and beginning with a local co-op making cheese in 1925.

Ron Buholzer has served on many boards of directors in the industry, including the Wisconsin Cheese Makers Association (WCMA), Wisconsin Specialty Cheese Institute, Southwestern Wisconsin Cheese Makers Association and Foreign Type Cheesemakers Association Laboratory. Currently he is on the board for Woodford State Bank. His knowledge and passion for the business goes beyond these organizations, and he is always willing to help the dairy industry any way he can.

Buholzer has been awarded the Life Member honor from WCMA and has been a judge in the Swiss Cheese Awards in Switzerland.

Today Klondike Cheese Co. still stands on the same ground as it originated from in the early 1900s. Buholzer has been an integral part of each of the plant expansions. The company now includes the fourth generation of Buholzers learning from him and his longtime industry experiences. Currently Klondike Cheese Co. produces Feta, Greek yogurt and reduced-fat sour cream under the Odyssey brand. Brick, Muenster and Havarti cheeses are labeled under the Buholzer Brothers brand.

What motivates and helps company leaders in growing their businesses? What attitudes and approaches have been fostered throughout the careers of successful business executives? Cheese Market News is pleased to profile industry trailblazers in our “Legacy & Leadership” segment, a conversation with industry visionaries who have helped propel the industry forward.

This segment explores the thinking of these executives so that aspiring dairy industry leaders may reflect and assess their own perspectives and capabilities as they build their own legacies.

**Q** *What advice would you give someone going into a leadership position for the first time?*

**A** Listen to what your people are saying. Give positive encouragement. Encourage networking with peers.

**Q** *What is the biggest challenge facing the dairy industry today?*

**A** I feel labor is a significant issue. It reaches from the farm all the way to the consumer ... people to milk the cows, processing plant personnel, truck drivers in the distribution system. Some of the labor shortage has been relieved with automation, but I have a concern that we are not going to have enough qualified technicians to service the equipment.

**Q** *Have you fostered certain habits throughout your career that have encouraged/promoted your company’s success?*

**A** I don’t know if you would call it a habit but I am a plant person. I do a lot of walking through the plant to observe how things are working. I believe it is nice to say hi to people and let them know they are appreciated. I also am able to find out if they are having a problem with some piece of equipment. We are blessed to have a wonderful group of people who do very little complaining. Sometimes you see someone struggling to accomplish a task and you can work with them and figure out a better solution to make their life easier.

**Q** *What was an obstacle you faced for your business and how did you overcome it?*

**A** Staffing the Muenster/Havarti production department. It is hard work and a hot environment. This caused us to build a fully mechanized production plant.

**Q** *They say “you learn from your mistakes” ... please share an example where this was relevant for you.*

**A** “I can’t afford to save that much money.” This relates to everything from equipment to ingredients. Through the years we have found that investing in higher quality pays dividends in the long run.

**Q** *What are some of the key concepts that have supported the long-term success of your company?*

**A** Quality and service. There is no shortage of people making the same things you make. Strive to make your product the best it can be and above all be consistent. Customers don’t like surprises. Also try to supply the highest level of service reasonably possible. Be flexible and do your best to help a customer through an order mistake, shortage or a quality issue.

**Q** *Please discuss the benefits of collaboration among industry leaders versus the need to “protect your brand.”*

**A** Collaboration is important for the health of the entire industry. With all the regulatory and environmental issues facing the industry, we need to work together to keep each other informed of issues and solutions we have experienced.

**Q** *What are the most important decisions you have made as a leader of your company?*

**A** First I must say that we are a family business and big decisions are made as a group. Nothing goes forward until there is buy in from all members. The decision to make Feta cheese would rank at the top of the list. This venture was so successful it created a need to be able to produce more cheese so we purchased an Alma Coagulator (continuous cheesemaking machine). Building a plant to make Greek-style yogurt and building a fully mechanized Muenster/Havarti plant have all been huge decisions that we spent many hours discussing before pulling the trigger. CMN

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