



# Legacy & Leadership

**Hans Epprecht** is the founder of Great Lakes Cheese, a natural and processed cheese manufacturer and packager. Epprecht, a Swiss immigrant, was sponsored by a cheesemaker in 1948 to come to Ohio where he learned the cheese manufacturing process. He then went on to serve in the U.S. Army intelligence group, marry and hone his salesmanship as a milkman. He purchased a single food stall in the Northern Ohio Food Terminal in 1958 and Great Lakes Cheese got its start as a cheese distributor to delis.

Epprecht oversaw Great Lakes Cheese's tremendous growth into cheese packaging and manufacturing, numerous expansions and the acquisition of four additional facilities. Today, Great Lakes Cheese has eight facilities and more than 3,000 employee-owners. Epprecht retired in 1999, but continues to serve on the Great Lakes Cheese board of directors.

Epprecht has been a committed member of the dairy industry, serving on the International Dairy Foods Association board and New York Cheesemakers Association board. Epprecht has three children, John, Heidi and Kurt, all of whom work for Great Lakes Cheese. He has seven grandchildren, three of whom work for the company, and three great-grandchildren.

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.

tations coming to market, like almond "milk" and plant-based cheeses. The imitations are, in many cases, cheaper to produce than dairy and, as a result, the companies can invest more in marketing to capture the consumers' attention.

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

**A** I see two big challenges facing the dairy industry. First, the low prices at the farm level caused in part by the recent trade issues. The second challenge is the dairy imi-

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

**A** Item number one is hard work. Luckily, when you love what you do, working

hard comes naturally. Especially in the early days, we all wore many hats. Finding the right people and motivating them to do the best job possible was essential to our success. Also, we were constantly looking for opportunities to grow the company, be that through acquisitions or organic growth. We had to be ready to seize those opportunities when they presented themselves.

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Hans Epprecht

**Q** What has been your favorite thing about working in the cheese and dairy industry?

**A** The people. I remember when we used to do business on a handshake. It was, and in many ways still is, an industry based on trust. Unlike many other industries, we have a respect for each other, both on the supply side and the sales side. We enjoy the direct connection with one another. Great Lakes Cheese has many supplier and sales relationships that go back 30 or more years. We see each other as honest and sincere partners working together for the good of the whole.

Hans Epprecht

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

**A** First and foremost is the Employee Stock Ownership Plan. The ESOP shows the family's commitment to the business and encourages employees to develop a similar commitment. The ESOP tells

employees, "You own a piece of the action here." Our success is an all-around effort by everyone. When an issue comes up, employees are not limited by their position or title; they do what it takes to get the job done. Other key concepts include developing trust and forming relationships with our partners and a constant reinvestment in new equipment and new technology. It is also a huge advantage to be privately held in this capintensive business.

**Q** What advice do you have for adapting in an ever-evolving marketplace?

**A** Listen carefully to the consumers. It is a fine line, but you have to segregate fad from reality. Adjust your business and make investments based on trends, not fads.

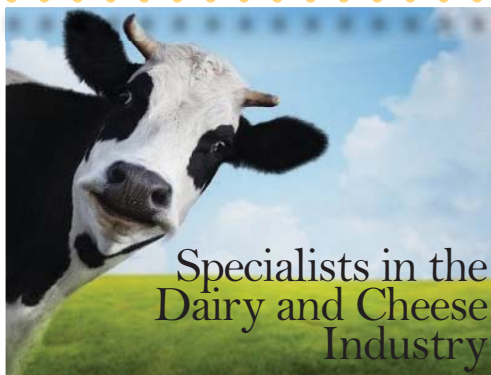
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**Q** What would you cite as an example of a time where your company showed innovation and leadership in the dairy marketplace?

**A** Private label products have dramatically expanded their market share since Great Lakes Cheese first started. We have attempted to be an active driving force in gaining the consumers' confidence by offering the best quality products at lower prices. While private label suppliers have historically acted as a follower to the brands, we are now starting to lead. This includes offering innovative new packaging and products to our consumers, like our recent launch of semi-rigid slice packages in the United States. CMN

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