



Women in Leadership



Their voices, ideas and vision for the future of cheese and dairy.

Lynn Giacomini Stray, Jill Giacomini Basch & Diana Giacomini Hagan are co-owners and chief operating officer, chief marketing officer and chief financial officer, respectively, of Point Reyes Farmstead Cheese Co., Point Reyes Station, California.

In an industry with continuous innovation, what inspires you to think creatively and foster creativity among your employees?

Our employees are our biggest asset, so fostering an open-minded, inclusive environment is one of our highest priorities. We are lucky to have the greatest staff who work so hard to help achieve our shared goal of producing the best quality, handcrafted, award-winning cheeses. Every single team member contributes to the magic — from our dairy crew taking care of the land and cows, the cheesemakers focused on product quality and food safety, the folks in our packaging, sales and distribution departments who ensure our customers are always happy, the finance team overseeing our bottom line and our hospitality staff who tell our story to cheese lovers that come for a visit. We owe a lot to them, so creating a healthy work environment where everyone knows they can bring their ideas and suggestions forward is the goal. Propelling our company forward through enhanced sustainable farming practices, exciting new products, unique educational experiences and even improved processes, workflows and systems ... innovation always begins with the team.

What is a key industry insight you'd share with yourself 10 years ago if you could?

Invest the time in setting your mission and values in order to define exactly what you want your brand to represent in the marketplace. This work will forever be your north star when you encounter obstacles in your path to success and give you the confidence to not let other industry folk tell you how to run your business. Nothing beats the confidence of knowing what you're about.

Is there a product or service you were involved with launching at your company that you're particularly proud of?

We are very transparent with the sustainable farming methods and business practices that make our company successful. This approach is both good for the environment and our bottom line. The dairy farm (our HQ) has been in our family since 1959, so being stewards of the land in order for it to pay dividends to the health and well-being of our animals has always been top of mind. We operate a robust renewable energy program that includes a methane digester on the farm and a roof-top solar system at our Petaluma production facility. We maintain a focus on resource conservation with water reclamation and recycling programs as well as no-till drilling to prevent soil erosion in our pastures. We use all biodegradable packaging in our retail shipments. These are just a few of the many examples of our commitment to sustainability — and yes, they absolutely make us proud.

We work hard for our success — directly supporting our bottom line, the livelihoods of our employees and the economic health of our local community. Additionally, our success enables our ongoing ability to promote charitable efforts that benefit our staff, our neighbors and our beliefs.

Our Cheese Cares program is the embodiment of this commitment — how we leverage our platform through promotional fundraising, in-kind donations, matching programs, event sponsorships, and annual giving to support organizations that share our values and represent causes we believe are important and worthy.

What leadership style do you feel has garnered a positive response throughout your career?

As Co-CEOs, our goal is to create a work environment that supports women with strong leadership, work/life balance and opportunities for growth. We're mothers ourselves and understand firsthand the challenges of growing a career while raising children. Having a woman's perspective on the struggle to enhance personal and professional development at the same time is our super power, and it starts with being empathetic to our employees' wants and needs — while balancing the needs of the company, of course. Throughout our 23 years in business, we have many success stories of women in production roles who have progressed their careers into supervisory and management positions. As much as delivering happiness to our customers through cheese is fulfilling, there's nothing more rewarding than seeing our female team members

build confidence and independence through advancement in the company. Women helping women, as modeled expertly by our own mother, is what it's all about.

What is a strategy you've utilized to make sure you, and other women in your company, are heard?

As a WBENC-certified (validation that a business is at least 51% owned, controlled, operated and managed by a woman or women), women-owned company, we are proud to have a team of over 60% females (not counting our gorgeous bovines who work hard for us every day producing the best quality milk to make our award-winning cheeses). We see the benefits of having both strong women leaders and team members to offer their expertise, share innovative ideas, implement new and improved practices, teach by example and train with heart. The ladies of Point Reyes Farmstead Cheese are empowered to make decisions and be part of the strategic conversation — all while maintaining a necessary focus on work/life balance.

"As co-owners and co-leaders, my sisters and I are so proud to have met the rigorous criteria of WBENC to become a certified Women's Business Enterprise, and thankful to the organization for all they do to support women-owned businesses. WBENC certification will open sales opportunities with government and institutional organizations that have diversity and inclusion purchasing policies. More importantly, the certification highlights our commitment to diversity, employee empowerment and progressive policies towards inclusion," says Jill Giacomini Basch, CMO.

"Our focus is to create a work environment that supports women with work/life balance, strong leadership and opportunities for growth. As a family business, we contribute to the economy and our local community with a woman's perspective on enhancing personal and professional development. We care about the big things and little things in life, understanding that women wear many hats. Over 55% of our workforce are women, and we lead by example," says Lynn Giacomini Stray, COO.

"We are also especially proud to be in the good company of other WBENC-certified businesses, and we look forward to being active participants in the organization by contributing to the support of other businesses led by women. Our inclusion in this group honors the

legacy of strong women in our family history that pushed us to become the leaders that we are today," says Diana Giacomini Hagan, CFO.

Please comment on being part of a female-run business in a male-dominated industry. What unique opportunities or challenges has this presented?

When we first got started we traveled the country visiting distributors and retailers, introducing ourselves and our intent to build a world-class cheese company. The doubters were plenty (and plenty loud) because we didn't have specific experience in cheese, food science or even as dairy farmers (that was our parents), and we definitely couldn't build a credible brand with just one cheese, let alone a Blue. That was 23 years ago ... and thanks to the mentorship and faith of many women in the industry (here's to you Peggy Smith, Sue Conley, Mary Keehn, Allison Hooper and Cathy Strange, among others) we defied the naysayers. Looking back, we can't help but ponder: Would a trio of brothers from a multi-generational agricultural background, with rock-solid business experience, be questioned like we were back in 2000? No, they would be heralded for their ambition and risk-averse entrepreneurship.

How can the industry motivate the next generation of women to pursue a career in dairy?

Show them that it IS possible to be successful! We encourage all women-owned startups to reach out for advice and get a mentor (or three!). We were lucky enough to be mentored by some of the greats in our artisan cheese industry, which put us on the right track for success.

Do you believe the cheese/dairy industry as a whole is supportive of women?

The artisan cheese industry in the U.S. has evolved under the guidance and inspiration of many incredible women on both the producer and retail sides. Through encouraging professional development and making room at the table for young women that share in the passion for the products, we wholeheartedly subscribe to paying forward a culture of mentorship and inspiration. CMN