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Gilman Cheese eyes new innovation, growth while retaining human touch

By Rena Archwamety

GILMAN, Wis. — Gilman Cheese, a manufacturer of clean label, shelf-stable processed cheese, is looking at 2021 as a year of stabilization as the company continues to grow. Having doubled its workforce this last year, the company also is investing in its people as well as reaching out to existing and potential customers with a larger sales and marketing presence.

“This year is about stabilization for us. We’re going to implement processes and policies to make sure we’ll improve on-time, in-full delivery, improve cost structure and improve our cheese procurement. Ensuring the engagement of our employees also is a big one,” says Gilman Cheese CFO Dave Schafer. “If we deliver there, profitability and revenue will follow suit. We’re taking the approach that if we improve internally, this will drive our revenue and margin improvement.”

The company’s former owner, Tom Hand, transformed the company from a natural cheese plant to a national supplier of clean label processed cheese, supplying customers from retail snack and gift basket distributors to airlines and foodservice. Borgman Capital acquired Gilman Cheese in March 2019, and Schafer began his tenure as CFO in January 2020. Hand remains active on the company’s board of directors.

“In 2020, with everything that happened, we had to essentially redefine who we were and what we were doing,” Schafer says of leading the company through the pandemic. “Our traditional top 10 customers were likely going to be significantly lower in terms of volume and revenue. We also began growing rapidly in 2020 — top line revenue grew 56%.”

A second shift was added last spring, and Gilman’s workforce doubled from 130 to 260 people. From 2019 to 2020, the company increased from processing 18 million pounds to 27 million pounds of cheese annually, and this year the forecast is between 34-36 million pounds.

• New opportunities

In addition to the added workforce and capacity, Gilman Cheese has transitioned a lot of its line this past year to natural cheese conversion for customers who don’t want to convert

and package these cheeses in their own plants. Gilman also added a 3-ounce credit card size of its own product for gift packs and introduced new Monterey Jack and ghost pepper flavors for its processed cheese, which have done very well this past year.

“We have innovation at both ends. On the cook end is flavor profiles, consistency and functionality of the cheese. On the other is packaging, materials, sizes and shapes,” Schafer says. “Those are just a few of the innovations that are going to drive growth this year, especially the new flavor profiles.”

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Additionally, the company is starting to explore more opportunities with vending and convenience store companies, as well as expanding its presence in school feeding programs and correctional institutions.

“We feel that channel will really take off for us, where people want to have grab-and-go options,” Schafer says. “Our cheese is a much healthier option than a candy bar. One ounce of our cheese is equal to a 1-ounce serving of protein.”

To help better serve its existing customers and attract new business, Gilman Cheese this past year has focused on expanding and improving its



Photo courtesy of Gilman Cheese

SHAPES AND SIZES — Gilman Cheese specializes in clean label, shelf-stable processed cheeses in a variety of sizes and flavors. Its products are focused on customers seeking snack-sized, specialty cheese flavors and can be found anywhere from airlines to high-end gift baskets.

sales and marketing presence. Schafer notes that historically, the company has focused more on word-of-mouth and less on external communication. Now in an effort to “get the Gilman story out there,” Schafer notes the company is advertising in magazines and newsletters, has greatly increased its social media presence and is in the process of automating more of its communications to ensure it stays in front of its customers with existing or new products. The company also is redeveloping and planning to relaunch a new and improved website in the near future.

“We’re developing specific sales plans within specific channels,” he adds. “Airlines are different from foodservice or government, and all require a different marketing and sales plan to do this right.”

Gilman Cheese has found a niche among customers who want the functionality of an extended shelf-life, processed cheese along with a clean label and specialty product.

“We’re not looking to be commodity cheese producers — we’re a specialty cheese, for customers who want more quality and don’t want additives and fillers,” Schafer notes. “We’re clean label and have extended shelf lives, and a lot of higher-end gift manufacturers like that.”

Another aspect of Gilman Cheese that customers appreciate is its responsiveness and ability to develop custom solutions, including packages and taste profiles tailor-made to what

they require. The company also has retained many of its manual processes, allowing for more flexibility.

“We do smaller sizes very well, which is hard for a lot of people to do,” Schafer says. “Our production process is more manual and allows us to do it better. It affects how flexible we can be, adding the human touch to inspecting and packaging. It is very manually labor intensive, and I think we will continue to innovate but try not to lose that human touch on the floor. I feel it is so important to maintain quality.”

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• Investing in people

Schafer says he is proud of how the company and its employees worked this past year to continue operations while taking on the extra precautions necessary to help limit exposure to COVID-19. Since early March 2020,

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Gilman Cheese began implementing protocols such as temperature checks and sickness questionnaires before employees entered the plant. In addition to its mask policy, there were staggered breaks and lunches, limited contact between separate line teams and a pause in all vendor and customer visits. Taking these steps, the company experienced only one case of the illness that transferred within its facility. Employees were paid in full if they were sick or had to quarantine, even if they stayed home for months at a time.

“We are fortunate enough to be in Taylor County, Wisconsin, where the board of health was very involved and proactive,” Schafer says. “OSHA came in and reviewed our policy and practices, and we received a very favorable review from them.”

“We have really invested a lot in people. In today’s labor market, it’s really imperative not only to get people in the door, but to give them a fair wage and give them a voice.”

Dave Schafer
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Beyond COVID precautions, Gilman Cheese is committed to engaging with employees, listening to concerns and responding to their needs. Schafer explains that three times a year, the company conducts



Photo courtesy of Gilman Cheese

PERSONAL TOUCH — To allow for more flexible and customizable solutions, Gilman Cheese has kept many of its processes manual and has doubled its workforce this past year.

roundtable discussions where leaders meet with every single employee to ask, “What do we need to keep doing,” “What do we need to start doing” and “What do we need to stop doing?”

“We try to tackle the problems that mean most to the people who work on the floor every day. We’re constantly looking at ways to inno-

vate and make jobs easier and more efficient — listening if they need a conveyor here, or need to do this or that differently,” Schafer says. “We have really invested a lot in people. In today’s labor market, it’s really imperative not only to get people in the door, but to give them a fair wage and give them a voice.” **CMN**

Prairie Farms celebrates June Dairy Month with prizes, focus on environmental goals

EDWARDSVILLE, Ill. — During National Dairy Month in June, Prairie Farms is thanking its dairy farm families as well as focusing on its commitment to sustainability, which involves producing, processing and delivering dairy products in a manner that improves the state of the land, the lives of its employees, its animals, its communities, its partners and its consumers.

“I’m proud to say that our milk is a powerhouse beverage that’s produced using sustainable farming methods,” says Frank Doll, a Prairie Farms dairy farmer from Pocahtontas, Illinois. “I’m really happy that for June Dairy Month, these qualities about milk and how it’s made are being called out for everyone to see.”

Prairie Farms says its commitment to reducing environmental impact

means reusing and recycling are at every part of its farming, production and distribution process. Prairie Farms later this month will be releasing its first-ever public sustainability report, which will outline sustainable farming and plant initiatives supporting the U.S. Dairy Industry’s 2050 Environmental Stewardship Goals.

More information about Prairie Farms’ farm families and their sustainable farming practices, including a pair of videos, is available at www.prairiefarms.com/dairymonth. Visitors to this page also can enter a sweepstakes for a chance to win 10 weekly dairy prize packages that include \$100 toward Prairie Farms products in the form of \$5 gift coupons, valid for any combination of Prairie Farms and/or North Star brand products. **CMN**

Chobani launches ready-to-drink cold brew

NORWICH, N.Y. — Chobani is launching Chobani Coffee, ready-to-drink coffees crafted with single-origin cold brew that feature Chobani’s oat milks and dairy creamers.

“Nutrient dense Greek yogurt and coffee have long been a perfect pair, fueling our lives throughout the day,” says Peter McGuinness, president and chief operating officer, Chobani. “Chobani Coffee is crafted from single-origin 100% Arabica beans, geared for the passionate coffee drinker looking for cold-press brews who love the added taste of creamers made from farm fresh milk and oat milk.”

Chobani Coffee now is available in

four flavors: Cold Brew Pure Black; Cold Brew with Sweet Creamer and Cold Brew with Vanilla made from milk; and Cold Brew with Oat Milk.

Across the platform, the company says Chobani Coffee is made with natural ingredients, and no artificial flavors, sweeteners or preservatives. The oat milk and creamers in the cold brews are inspired by the company’s existing Chobani Oat and Chobani Coffee Creamer platforms.

Now available nationwide at grocery and retail stores, the suggested retail price for Chobani Coffee is \$4.49 per 32-ounce multi-serve.

For more information, visit www.chobani.com. **CMN**



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The Gilman Advantage

- Offer over 100 flavor profiles
- Offer any size varying from 0.75oz - 42lb
- Low minimums
- SQF Level III Certified

Our Most Requested Flavors

Cheddar

A blend of natural aged Cheddar cheeses gives this it’s one of a kind flavor

Jalapeno Pepper

An exciting blend of Monterey and Cheddar cheese and jalapeno peppers

Mozzarella

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Buffalo Wing Cheddar

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