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Whitehall Specialties' NewFields line innovates with plant-based solutions

By Rena Archwamety

WHITEHALL, Wis. — Whitehall Specialties, which long has been a leader in dairy-based and analogue cheese products for a variety of channels, recently has seen “explosive growth” in its NewFields plant-based division, which debuted in late 2019, as demand rises for plant-based options.

“NewFields plant-based products are in great demand. We see demand for our full range of plant-based flavors and formats, especially Cheddar, Parm and Moz,” says Steve Snyder, president and CEO, Whitehall Specialties.

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WHITEHALL SPECIALTIES

Currently the NewFields division is rolling out its Premier Line of plant-based cheese ingredients and products developed for customers across all channels with a focus on foodservice and industrial. Options in this line include Cheddar, Mozzarella, American, shredded and grated Parmesan, and Blue cheese-style flavors packaged in a wide range of formats and sizes to meet most commercial needs.

“This is something we’ve been working on for a long time. This notion of really rapid innovation is something we at Whitehall want to be known for,” Snyder says. “Before, there was the notion of if a customer wants something, we’ll do it. That’s different from innovating and leading. We’ve changed that paradigm and also innovated where we see a need.”

To help lead its product innovation, Whitehall Specialties last fall hired a new vice president of research and

development, Lisa O’Donnell, who has previous experience with Kerry and Kraft Food Ingredients.

“She’s the star of our show as far as formulation and leading a systematic approach to innovation,” Snyder says.

NewFields’ Premier Line appeals not only to customers specializing in plant-based products, but also mainstream restaurants and food and dairy manufacturers that wish to add this option to their menus and portfolios. According to the 2019 Good Food Institute Restaurant Scorecard, 58% of the top 100 foodservice chains in the United States offer plant-based or vegan menu options. Among NewFields’ offerings for the restaurant industry are Cheddar and American-style slices for burgers, Mozzarella-style shreds for pizza, Blue cheese flavored crumbles for salad dressings, shredded Parmesan-style products for salads and dried Parmesan-flavored ingredients for all applications that can benefit from enhanced savory and umami flavors.

By creating complex and balanced flavor profiles and combining ingredients in innovative ways to enhance mouthfeel and the overall flavor experience in applications such as pizza and pasta, NewFields has had success with its products, even during a particularly challenging year for foodservice.

“What we’ve seen is, despite the pandemic, healthy, better-for-you plant-based products in general continue their meteoric rise,” says Mike Danielson, president of health and nutrition division media relations. “With foodservice down, we’ve focused on comanufacturing and private label efforts. We have had a lot of partners coming to us and asking for our support to get into the plant-based realm.”

Even before the pandemic started, processed cheese, imitation, plant-based and analogue cheese products were gaining momentum in the private label category, Snyder notes, and Whitehall Specialties can help retailers add these to their portfolios, combined with service and support based on Whitehall’s decades of production, formulation and value leadership.

“We are on the cusp of a profound growth curve in the plant-based food sector and in private label cheese brands generally, as consumers reach for these offerings,” Snyder says.



Photo courtesy of Whitehall Specialties

FORMATS AND FLAVORS — Whitehall Specialties offers a full range of formats and flavors through its recently-launched NewFields plant-based division. The latest Premier Line of offerings is developed for customers across all channels, with a focus on foodservice and industrial. Options in this line include Cheddar, Mozzarella, American, shredded and grated Parmesan and Blue cheese-style flavors.

“Plant-based cheese is a brave new world now. It’s quite tasty,” he adds. “We believe we are better suited than anyone to be good here. We’ve spent over 20 years working on how to make imitation cheese taste good. It’s also important that we don’t alienate or misrepresent our dedication to the dairy side as well. We have long-term customers. We’re finding this really synergistic with them, some of the same customers interested in dairy.”

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In addition to its latest plant-based innovations in the NewFields division, Whitehall Specialties continues to innovate in its dairy-based, processed products. The company recently reformulated its MegaMelt low-cost/high-performance individually-wrapped

imitation dairy-based cheese slices. It also has introduced two different formulas of CreamEase, a cream cheese substitute designed for optimal taste and performance in both making and spreadable applications, from cheesecakes to bagels to sushi rolls.

Whitehall Specialties also developed some nimble innovations to help pivot along with shifting demand from foodservice to retail.

“We were almost overwhelmed by the retail explosion that occurred almost a year ago with the pandemic,” Snyder says. “We made some adjustments to de-bottleneck equipment. We had made investments the previous year to handle normal demand, but we had no way of anticipating the kind of increase we saw. We got innovative with new forms — things like club-size packs — that otherwise would have gone to the deli. We do a lot of dry products for pasta, and Parmesan went through the roof with everyone eating at home.”

In tandem with managing its supply pipeline, Whitehall Specialties focused on keeping its own employees safe and healthy with added COVID-19 protocols.

“We highly value our employees, and our first concern was their safety,” Snyder says. “We added a number of measures — temperature checking, mask wearing, social distancing,

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new clean-up roles, sanitation roles and signage. We really went above and beyond what was broadly done. There were additional expenses for the pandemic, but we were successful in maintaining a viable workforce. We didn't lay down any equipment due to attendance."

Whitehall Specialties also worked to build its interface with customers the best it could over the past year through virtual meetings and innovative tools to help with sampling and tastings. The company also invested further in its media and website presence, and had just expanded its web properties before the pandemic hit and made these tools even more essential.

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"With the onset of COVID and lack of travel, we have been stepping up to have more robust traditional social channels, which have become a bigger piece of what prospects are looking at," Danielson says. "The lack of trade shows really has stepped up the importance of the web to be a 24/7 virtual trade show."

The company has completely overhauled its website, creating two separate sites — www.Whitehall-Specialties.com and www.NewFieldsCheese.com — to better highlight and serve these two market segments. It also continues to look at new potential online strategies for marketing and sales.

In addition to its improved online presence, Whitehall Specialties has been building up its sales and brokerage coverage, adding several salespeople to help enhance its representation and putting in a new broker network program to help its brokers better serve its customers.

The company also is looking to leverage the quality reputation of Wisconsin cheese to pursue more international opportunities. Whitehall Specialties currently does most of its business in North, Central and South America, and now is exploring possibilities in Asia, the Middle East and the European Union.

"We're really a changed company. We've changed the focus in innovation, reinvestment in our people and in our community," Snyder says. "We can't be successful unless our people are engaged, and our communities we serve are engaged with us. We've made strong investments and are seeing really positive energy and synergy in our company." **CMN**



Photo courtesy of Whitehall Specialties

PASTA TOPPER — Whitehall Specialties saw overwhelming retail demand during the pandemic, including an increased need for Parmesan products with people eating at home more often.

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