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On fire! Queso Mama, Gordo's brands heat up the growing queso category

By Rena Archwamety

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — In a retail category that has almost doubled in size since 2019 and was highly rated by consumers as a “food that makes them happy” in a recent nationwide survey, queso cheese dip has become a mainstream hit across the country both as a snack and in recipes. And within this category, refrigerated quesos from Queso Mama and Gordo's trademarked brands have grown exponentially over the past few years, appealing to those looking for fresher, better-tasting and cleaner-label snacks.

Chairmans Foods, which owns both Queso Mama and Gordo's brands, commissioned a survey of more than 1,400 consumers last November to see just how people are “quesoing.”

“It revealed how people felt about the category and brands and confirmed our beliefs that people definitely see queso as a ‘fun food,’” says Dan Setlak, general manager, Gordo's Retail & Foodservice. “It's an engaging category. People crave it, love it and are particular about their choices, not unlike how consumers feel about their ice cream.”

Some of the highlights of the survey included:

- Quality matters — 87% of queso consumers said real dairy ingredients are important.
- Frequent buyers — 75% of queso consumers said they bought queso at least once every three weeks.
- Popular at parties — 49% of queso consumers indicated they serve queso as a party food at least four times a year, and 22% serve it as a party food seven or more times per year.

Leigh Vickery, founder of Queso Mama, notes the brand has a “very strong, loyal and vocal” customer base that is clear in communicating their feelings about “when they want” and “how they want” their refrigerated queso.

“I love that we have built the brand to be collaborative. Customers feel open to talk with us, and I pay attention to what they tell me in emails and social media, and how they're creating their own recipes with it,” she says. “Queso is becoming more and more

of a staple than an indulgence. Our customers tell us they keep Queso Mama in the refrigerator all the time. Because of its clean label and high-quality ingredients, people feel good about offering it as an afternoon snack — and often I hear parents say ‘it's what gets my kids to eat their broccoli.’ I'm paying attention to and also

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QUESO MAMA

educating them on all the ways you can use it in recipes, not just Tex-Mex.”

• National growth

Texas-based Vickery first introduced her refrigerated queso dips to fill a niche that had been missing on store shelves.

Vickery also was paying attention to the early days of what now has become a macrotrend: clean labels for all foods. She knew the market was missing “fun foods” for consumers with a discerning palate and desire to stay away from artificial ingredients. She developed a recipe for a clean-label white refrigerated queso with green chile — a flavor profile brand new to the market. She took her ideas and prototypes to Whole Foods Market headquarters, which saw the opportunity and picked up her new products. As the company grew quickly, adding Costco, Target and other large customers, Vickery turned to Chairmans to build a relationship that has continued to grow since those early years.

“I saw a hole in the market that would be fun to build a brand around, and Whole Foods gave me a shot,” Vickery says. “I was very early to market — perhaps too early — but I beat out a lot of competitors along the way. I had the luxury of growing organically and staying really focused on the customer as a small business and was able to build our fan base slowly without the pressures larger



Photo courtesy of Chairmans Foods

CLEAN LABEL — Queso Mama founder Leigh Vickery says she first introduced her refrigerated white queso products in 2009 as a fresher, clean-label alternative to the highly processed, “glow in the dark” shelf-stable products on the market. Her products can be found in hundreds of Costco, Target, Whole Foods Markets and beyond, with more information at <https://quesomama.com>.

corporations face to return certain sales numbers within a few quarters.”

Originally branded “Leigh Oliver's,” the brand now known as “Queso Mama” quickly received another break, this time in the foodservice market, around 10 years ago when the Dallas Cowboys requested the queso on menu items such as a cheese steak sandwich and gourmet pulled pork nachos at its new stadium.

“Somebody high up in the organization had it at a party and said, ‘I want this in the new stadium.’ I was driving carpool for my middle-school son when I got the phone call from them,” Vickery says. “To be honest, I thought it was a friend pranking me, and I didn't believe they were really the Dallas Cowboys at first. Then I realized this was a real call. He explained how he found out about it and asked if we make it in foodservice. To be clear, I had no idea how to pack our product in the large sizes they needed, but I faked my way through the call, immediately called my friends at Chairmans and said, ‘Please tell me you can do this.’ And of course, they could and have for a decade or more.”

While Queso Mama started with retail and later added foodservice, the Gordo's brand was founded more than

15 years ago by the Sweat family and their family foodservice business in Atlanta who noticed many of their ingredient offerings — meats, cheeses and spices sold to restaurants in the Southeast — were being used by their restaurant customers to make queso cheese dip.

Founder and creator Ward “Gordo” Sweat picked a favorite family recipe for the cheese dip and brought it to retail and foodservice. It was an immediate success regionally, and now it is in more than 15,000 stores. Gordo's is now the No. 1 refrigerated queso cheese dip in the country, Setlak says.

Gordo's came under Chairmans' portfolio in May 2021. Between Gordo's and Queso Mama, Chairmans Foods notes it has two very complementary brands and is clearly committed to quality, refrigerated queso which quickly is expanding in markets across the country.

“They're the backbone for these brands to become truly national,” Vickery says of Chairmans, adding that Queso Mama has tripled in size over the past couple of years. “Chairmans has been committed to queso, building relationships with consumers and key accounts and growing the

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queso category. And furthermore, Gordo's, Chairmans and Queso Mama share similar values and cultures. It's how a true partnership is supposed to work. It's a joy, both the growth and momentum we have now as well as the great people we get to work with each day."

• Appeal and potential

Both Queso Mama and Gordo's products are premium-quality, refrigerated queso lines started by small businesses. Gordo's leverages the dairy Real Seal on its products, and Queso Mama highlights its ultra-clean, gluten-free ingredient list.

"The entire Chairmans Foods team has a passion for and takes great pride in creating great-tasting, quality products. The opportunity to invest in these two complementary and well-loved consumer brands in a growing category makes this an exciting time in our company," Setlak says.

"I think part of queso's appeal is that it can be used both in recipes as a key ingredient — a topping on enchiladas, burritos or even as the secret ingredient in the ultimate mac and cheese — but also used in substantial snacking that makes people feel good about what they are feeding themselves and their friends and families," he adds. "We've also developed a lot of recipes in-house and shared them on social media, which helps fuel consumer passion."

Gordo's queso cheese dip line, which primarily is sold in the Southeast Mid-Atlantic and Midwest but available nationally, includes original, mild jalapeno and hot varieties as its main flavors, with more varieties set to launch before the end of the year.

Vickery notes Queso Mama has been successful at Costco, Whole Foods, Target stores and more, particularly in the Midwest and Southwest, as well as in the Northeast and Pacific Northwest markets. With Chairmans' additional capacity, the brand now also is poised to expand to markets along the West Coast and East Coast.

Queso Mama's core line includes the original green chile and a spicier roasted jalapeno variety. The brand plans to launch at least one exciting new flavor very soon.

"Part of the strength of both Queso Mama and Gordo's is our loyalty to our customers and theirs with us — we focus on the customer and bring new ideas to them as well as include them on where we're headed," Vickery says. "Like family-founded Chairmans Foods itself, both these brands are family-founded, family-driven, with the consumer in mind, not corporate-created brands with no soul or story. There are real people behind them that have worked passionately and tirelessly for years with a commitment to making great-tasting products. I

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QUESO MAMA

think that authenticity shines through because we believe in our work, and it's helping us get to the next level. This simple truth is actually a very strong part of our success. We're real people; we want to feed you, and we get a lot of joy out of doing it." CMN



Photo courtesy of Chairmans Foods

FAMILY RECIPE — The creators of Gordo's Cheese Dip originally owned a foodservice business and humbly created the product for retail using a family-favorite, restaurant-style recipe. Today, Gordo's is sold in more than 15,000 stores, has the No. 1 share position and continues to expand across the country. For more information, visit <https://gordosdips.com>.

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