



Legacy & Leadership

Ken Neumeier was born and raised in Green Bay, Wisconsin. Neumeier always has embodied the aptitude of a strong leader. He was one of the founding members of the Holmen Jaycees where he served as president for three years because he felt it was important to give back to his community. When it comes to the dairy industry, his father, Eugene Neumeier, paved the way for him to join the “cheese world” back in 1971. He quickly became the second generation of Neumeiers to receive a W.D.A. American Cheese Grader’s license in 1973 — No. 724.

He has held numerous positions throughout his career: a formulator, a supervisor, a plant manager, a procurement and sales manager, and a cheese judge. He now is finishing his career as the founder and CEO of Wisconsin Aging & Grading Cheese (WAG), a high-end aging and grading cheese company that he started in 2000 in Northeast Wisconsin, which now is being led by one of his daughters, third-generation Licensed Wisconsin Cheese Grader Kate Neumeier Clarke. Along with Kate, he also is part owner of Integrity Cheese Packing of Wisconsin located in Kaukauna, Wisconsin, which opened in 2018.

Neumeier has mentored numerous individuals throughout his career to receive their cheese grading license, teaching them never to compromise on what they stand for and what they represent. He’s never been short of words when it comes to his passion about cheese. With more than 50 years in the cheese industry, he continues to promote the dairy industry by proudly supporting farmers and cheesemakers, and he has inspired others to strive for the best quality product while working with integrity and passion.

cheese. We help others with their private label Aged Cheddars and also launched our own brand of Aged Cheddars, Wisconsin Grader’s Reserve and 724 Wisconsin Select, which was named after my grader’s license number. I’ve helped with cheese quality and its consistency/repeatability. We cater to the area of the country that the cheese is shipping to, such as supplying the East Coast, West Coast and the Midwest with what their different flavor preferences are.

are knowledgeable and passionate people who share similar interests with me. There are very technical people in our industry, and because of that we can create quality cheese. High-end cheese isn’t made on accident.

Q When you founded WAG, what need did you recognize in the industry for a reputable and quality cheese grader?

A Consistency — identifying customers’ needs and not floundering on cheese quality. Always making sure cheese was graded and evaluated before going to customers. Making sure cheese was aging in high-end warehouses. Not floundering on what you promise to provide for a customer. Letting the cheese speak for itself and not allowing markets to dictate quality.

Q Please elaborate on how aging and grading services can make Cheddar “taste like more?”

A To procure cheese for the specific customer, determine their flavor/cheese preferences — which sometimes they don’t know — in order to find their gold standard so they are successful. “Taste like more” cheese will exemplify a consistent full flavor, texture, aroma and appearance. To consistently achieve that, we work with the cheesemakers to let them know analytics on a

specific day or vat that aged well, and we work to repeat that.

Q Can you please elaborate on your “trier for hire” service and how this works?

A It entails hiring WAG to grade and evaluate a product that they want to know more about, whether it’s cheese they’ve aged or one they’ve purchased from someone. It also entails helping an individual or company know more what they bought or are interested in buying. We let them know if that specific cheese will shred, chunk, slice, and/or if it makes Wisconsin Grade A. We will identify customers’ wants, needs and desires, and we grade the cheese as if we were employed by them.

Q What is an example of a cheese trend that you were at the forefront of in the industry?

A Aged Cheddar has become a specialty cheese and not just a commodity

Q What valuable business insight do you feel is necessary to pass on?

A Consistently treat others the way you want to be treated. Making sure to know cheese, know and have a relationship with the cheese factories, and always have the knowledge on what your customers’ needs are. Have a vision and keep your eye on it and don’t let yourself stray from it. Always make sure employees have the tools they need to succeed, and put people in positions they will excel at. A leader without a serving heart is just a boss.

Q How have you developed creative thinking within yourself and encouraged it in others?

A When thinking out of the box, there are not stupid answers or stupid questions. Some fall in that category, but I’ll never admit it. Just because no one has ever done it doesn’t mean it’s not the thing to do. Do something different to set yourself apart. Offer something that others can’t, and make sure that people truly understand that you get what you pay for.

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

A The people. We have people who really care about what they do. They

Q How have communications methods evolved over the years, and what have you done to adapt?

A Technology advancements have been substantial. Email and smartphones weren’t around in the ’70s, ’80s or ’90s. Communication through these tools has required quicker responses and requires timely replies, as well as expediency and time. Letters took days, and now emails take minutes. You can now connect and reach more people a lot more easily.

Q What, in your opinion, does the dairy industry need to do to attract the next generation of leaders?

A Find individuals that are passionate in what they do, can lead from within and who think outside of the box. They will need to be creative and strive to be the first of something. Stay innovative. Identify and ask the questions of what the next generation likes. Offer them choices. Sometimes people don’t know what they like until they try it.

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

A Yes, openly communicate your vision and put people in positions that they will succeed in. Surround yourself with people who are as good as or better than you, and you’ll be successful in life. Maintain consistency in yourself, and be proud of what you can produce. Push to be the person you want to be, and never give up. **CMN**